

Religious Matrix and Ecological Responsibility

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This cross-disciplinary article argues that the current ecological crisis can be partially traced to deeply ingrained Judeo-Christian attitudes toward nature which result from a late-Classical superimposition of Neo-Platonic dualism hostile to nature on the dominant Old Testament view of nature as existing solely for human use and having no intrinsic value. After a brief look at alternate cosmologies (Hindu and Jain) which appear overtly more conducive to ecological responsibility, the Christian tradition is examined for doctrinal foundation (the Incarnation) and popular imagery (the Birth Narrative and Mary as Earth-Mother) which might help us understand ourselves as inextricably part of nature and find the motivation to start acting as responsible tenants instead of global (or cosmic) parasites.

Like anthropologist Clifford Geertz and sociologist Andrew Greeley, I define religion broadly, as a culture system of symbols which are not merely categories for explaining the world but templates for shaping it. After developing an instrument to measure people's religious imagination by forcing them to choose between "warm" and "cold" God-images, such as Mother/Father, Master/Spouse, and Friend/King (1,2), Greeley has repeatedly demonstrated a statistically significant correlation between scores on this "Grace Scale" and a wide range of social, political, and interpersonal attitudes and behaviors of Americans (1-4). For years he worked primarily with the General Social Survey administered annually in the U.S. by the National Opinion Research Center. Most recently, however, he tested his hypotheses on two multi-nation data sets: the 1981 International Study of Values and the 1985, 1986, and 1987 International Social Survey Project (3). Again his findings, to be published in the forthcoming book, *The Sacramental Imagination*, confirm that religious imagery can be used as predictor variable of social and political choices (3). They also indicate (as they have in the earlier GSS analyses) that there is a measurable difference (which cannot be reduced to other, such as demographic, factors) between Protestant and Catholic ways of interpreting, understanding, and responding to current issues. "Images of God as 'friend' and 'mother'," Greeley notes, are indeed "statistically significant and reasonably important correlates of political and social attitudes and behaviors" (3).

Greeley's findings constitute an effective rebuttal to Lewis W. Moncrief and other critics of Lynn White who attack the historian's premise: the importance of religion as shaper of attitudes and institutions. In his much cited and discussed article, White (5) argues that the victory of the Judeo-Christian world-view over animism lies at the basis of the Western disregard for the environment by transforming "man in nature" into "man and nature." Moncrief (6) rejects models such as Max Weber's and White's for lack of empirical support. Greeley's research does provide such support, albeit coupled with nuanced religious imagery which allows distinctions *within* religious traditions.

Simply put, we view everything through the intellectual contact lenses of our largely preconscious world-view, which is in turn shaped to a greater or lesser extent by our religious traditions (not to be confused with religious institutions). It is quite possible consciously to reject any identification with institutional religion and still be influenced by the underlying structures and images. Hence, our preconscious attitudes toward the earth are at least in part a function of our religious matrix. In an essay dealing with the Jains of India, Diane Raines Ward (7) notes "the important role of culture and religion on the way that many people react to animals." Her

piece, published two months after I presented the original paper on which the present article is based, neatly illustrates the point I am trying to make: if we want to understand human behavior, we need to consider value-engendering and reality-creating traditions through which we interpret and construct what we consider our world.

Thus it is reasonable to assume that the tendency of people in the Western developed nations to refuse to address the current ecological crisis in more than a token manner is largely due to a unique way of looking at the relationship between humans and their world which can be traced to Hebrew and early Christian attitudes toward nature, and which separates into Catholic and Protestant versions after the Reformation. It is impossible to right a wrong unless we first realize that a wrong is being done. In contrast to Amer-indian beliefs, and religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Shinto, and others, the Judeo-Christian tradition appears to teach that the natural world has little or no value except for serving human needs. Obviously, I am not arguing that in practice humans do not also threaten the environment in those cultures, particularly if they seek to emulate Western aggressively competitive economic and technological approaches. No matter what their religion, humans have increasingly shaped the natural world to their will ever since the Neolithic transition to settled and eventually urban life. Based on Greeley's sociological findings, I do argue that understanding the religious matrix of a culture and recovering/utilizing those aspects which are in tune with ecological thinking can provide an important method of increasing environmental sensitivity.

The Hebrew image of Yahweh calling the cosmos, the earth, and all life forms, each species separately, into being out of nothing has traditionally been interpreted to posit two fundamental oppositions: (a) the opposition between Creator and creature, and (b) the opposition between humanity and nature.

As creatures, permanently placed below the angels and warned against pride, human beings see themselves as chosen by God but eternally barred from being God. Created in the divine image, they know themselves as radically different from the natural world, its minerals and plants and animals, all of which are provided for their use. The purpose of nature is to serve humanity, and the purpose of humanity is to serve God. According to Hebrew Scripture, human beings are charged with only one responsibility: to hear and obey the divine call. But exactly what is that call?

While the Noahite laws concerning meat-eating install humans as the supreme predators ("Every creature that is alive shall be yours to eat . . ." [Gen. 9:3]), they also reflect respect for life and discourage the inflicting of unnecessary physical pain by prohibiting the eating of parts of living animals (Gen. 9:4). Since blood is considered the seat of life, it must be drained from slaughtered animals before the meat may be eaten (cf. Lev. 19:26). Even today, the *shochet* (slaughterer, a religious functionary in the Jewish community who makes sure the animal is killed in a humane manner) pours the drained blood on the earth as it was once poured on or around the altar, for ultimately the earth and blood/life belong to God, not humans. The Ten Commandments deal exclusively with the rules of relating to God and fellow humans; countless additional provisions of Biblical law address minute aspects of the sanctification of individual and social daily life; none offer guidelines for our relationship with nature in which nature is seen as more than a resource, albeit one placed in our stewardship. Still, a passage which points in the direction of addressing nonhuman life forms in semi-egalitarian terms can be found in the Book of Job. In his despair and frustration at the uncomfoting comforters' insistence that his suffering is the result of sin, Job calls upon the beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish to testify that their souls are in the hand of God (Job 12:7-10). Reproaching Jonah, who is angered at God's failure to destroy Nineveh, the Lord expresses his concern not only for the people of the city but also the animals (Jonah 4: 11). In addition, despite the overall tendency to distinguish radically between human and nonhuman life, Rabbinic interpretation occasionally included concern for the well-being of an animal viewed as a creature capable of emotional reactions. In the Talmud, for example, the Scriptural injunction (Exod. 23:

19; 34: 26; Deut. 14: 21) against boiling a kid in the mother-goat's milk is interpreted in terms of not causing the mother double pain: first by the little one's death, and then by using her milk to prepare the meal (*Hullin* 105a). Hence the Jewish prohibition against mixing meat and dairy products.

The paucity of overt concern for nonhuman nature as intrinsically valuable in Jewish Scripture is even more pronounced in the New Testament. As recorded by the gospel writer, Jesus' central message of God as loving Father embraces humanity but is strangely silent on the issue of animals, plants, the earth itself. Stewardship still exists, but becomes irrelevant as early Christians anticipate the end of the world. The institutional Church develops within the context of the extreme philosophic dualism of the late Classical period. Following Plato, most serious pagan thinkers see the universe as split into evil matter and good spirit. While this way of thinking is profoundly at odds with the immanent God of the Incarnation, it nevertheless creeps into Christianity (initially via Paul and the writer of the Fourth Gospel) and results, at least for several centuries, in an almost total rejection of the material world. Nature is no longer neutral, as it has been among the Hebrews. According to Augustine and other writers of the Patristic period, post-Fall nature is evil, satanic, something to be subdued, domesticated, and controlled. Few, indeed, are Christians in a position of authority who would speak with Francis of Assisi of and to "my little sisters the birds." Saint Francis became an eloquent spokesman for the vast numbers of common people who had never quite abandoned the sacred groves of antiquity.

White (5) argues that the "whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity". He is correct, but *only* if we identify all of Christianity with the official teachings and theological treatises of the elite magisterium. Popular devotion continued ancient practices and modes of being in the world, and hence was intuitively more in tune with the kind of incarnational understanding of Christianity which can point the way out of our present predicament.

Contrast the official (non-Franciscan) model of the relationship of divinity, humanity, and nature with that of most Hindus:

The entire cosmos is seen as the manifestation of Brahman, the eternal source of all being from the physical through the organic and conscious to the divine. Each individual organism, whether locust or human, represents a link in an infinitely long cycle of successive incarnations of the divine. The purpose of all human life is the reunification with the universal source by realizing that what we call the human self or soul is in a mysterious way one with the cosmos and with God.

Hence, believers may take comfort in the presence of countless gods and goddesses, demigods and spirits who are always available to help in times of need. In addition to major and minor gods it is possible for people, animals, and ordinary objects to become imbued with divinity. The well-known (and by Westerners usually misunderstood) worship of the cow symbolizes not only gratitude for bovine gifts of dairy products but also reverence for Mother Earth herself, the source of all life and nourishment. Monkeys, snakes, and various plants are considered holy. Villages have sacred trees which must never be cut down. Mountains and rivers (particularly the Ganges) are considered divine. Unlike followers of the Judeo-Christian religions, Hindus (as well as most modern Buddhists) see themselves always in the presence of the Really Real; there is no sharp dividing line between the sacred and the profane, between humanity, nature, and divinity. Nature is not seen as an opponent to be vanquished, a resource to be exploited, but as the universal living mother to be cherished, a friend to be protected from injury.

The Hindu equivalent (in the sense of structuring conduct) of the Jewish Torah is called *dharma* which sets distinct duties for different classes, each of which is expected to play a specific role in the ideal society. The extent to which one's *dharma* is fulfilled determines one's *karma* in future incarnations. Besides the duties which come from the individual's class and station, general duties are also shared by all moral beings. These include courage, faith, honesty, nonviolence (in treating animals as well as humans), purity, self-control, and service.

The practice of nonviolence or non-injury to life (*ahimsa*) may have entered Hinduism via the teachings of the Jains, who have also continued to maintain their separate religious identity for at least two-and-a-half millennia and are generally considered spiritual descendants of the pre-Aryan (pre-Vedic) inhabitants of the Indus Valley. The Jains have such reverence for life that they do not engage in farming, lest they harm an earthworm or grasshopper. Ward (7) describes a contemporary charity bird hospital funded by Jains in Old Delhi, India, in which 20,000 vegetarian birds a year receive treatment. Significantly, the hospital is directed by a Hindu veterinarian. It is one of the paradoxes of the history of religious ideas that the concept of *ahimsa* emerged from the one major Indian thought system which is radically dualistic and sees good life (*jiva*) as imprisoned by evil matter (*ajiva*), much as the Gnostics, Neo-Platonists, and Manichaeans did during the formative centuries of the Christian faith. Still, while Hinduism and Jainism are diametrically opposed in their "world-view," neither feels threatened by the other.

While Judaism developed monotheism by *excluding* the primordial nature gods, and focusing on jealous, passionate, majestic, transcendent Yahweh, Hinduism did so by *assimilating* local deities into one of the great gods, and rival religions into sub-castes. Hinduism has no sense of heresy or idolatry, and until the twentieth century, religious persecution was almost unknown. Each person is free to worship divinity by any name, in any shape, as one as well as many, or not at all. While Westerners, particularly in the "high" (non-popular) cultural traditions, tend to perceive the universe in dualistic terms as a battle between matter and spirit, humanity and nature, good and evil, truth and lie, the sacred and the secular, Hindus envision the cosmic process as the growth of one mighty consciousness, the self-actualization of the divine which contains within itself all opposites and manifests itself in countless and often contradictory ways. Barbour (8) notes, "Only a false dichotomy places 'secular' over against 'sacred.' Secular existence is precisely the sphere of our religious responsibility." Hindus would understand. Nevertheless, we should not forget that India is also the home of extreme world- and life-negating asceticism; that the *Kama Sutra* exists side by side with the yogi who has renounced all earthly desires. In India, as in the West, popular culture seems closer to the earth and more in tune with the eternal rhythms of nature than the speculations of reformers, theologians, and philosophers.

McCarthy (9) discussed a regional meeting of the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology held August 25-28, 1988 at Madrid, Iowa. The conference was organized by a Lutheran seminary graduate and included (among others) Baptist, Catholic, Quaker, Lutheran, and Methodist lay participants and clergy. Evangelical Lutheran Bishop David Brown noted that many of the issues involved were difficult for the Western mind to grasp without a radical spiritual renewal, a vision of the world as God's body. Hence it is not surprising that keynote speaker Wes Jackson supported his claim that ecology is intrinsic to the Judeo-Christian tradition by recasting the Christian message in pantheistic terms, and reminding his audience that the earth is in the heavens, and that it is probably the only heaven we will get. This emphasis on divine immanence was in turn greeted with understandable unease by at least one of the participants.

Obviously, some of the ways of perceiving the world inherent in widely accepted interpretations of Christianity are indeed obstacles to the kind of holistic approach essential for becoming ecologically responsible. In addition, as a number of my students have said, they have been warned by their ministers to be wary of anyone using terms such as "global village," "spaceship earth," and "ecology" itself. These ideas, it seems, are viewed as associated with supposedly anti-Christian New Age "cults" in fundamentalist circles.

And yet we need not resort to pantheism, travel to the Orient, or reject Christianity in order to become ecologically sensitive. It is, paradoxically, precisely by pondering the implications of the *central* doctrine of Christianity, the Incarnation as God-in-the-World, the *humanation* (German *Menschwerdung*) of God, that a resolution seems possible. This

was attempted by Catholic Modernists around the turn of the century. While their teachings were officially condemned, more recently others, such as Teilhard de Chardin, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, and David Tracy have laid the theological foundation for a genuine, non-dualistic acceptance of the "sacramentality of the world," of God envisioned *both* transcendent *and* immanent.

On a simple, popularly accessible level, this means going to that long-ago stable in Bethlehem with its first (albeit non-Scriptural) witnesses to the birth of Jesus: the oxen and asses of legend and folklore. It is important to note that none of the four evangelists mention the presence of animals, and only Luke suggests a stable as the birthplace of Jesus by having Mary put the infant in a manger (2:7,16). Matthew places the Star of Bethlehem over a "house" (2: 9-11), and neither Mark nor John deal with the birth at all. Yet, one of the most persistent and powerful images of Christian tradition has been that of the holy family-Mom, Dad, and Baby-not in an elaborate bed and birthing chamber but in a *stable*, surrounded by cattle and mules and sheep!

This is a powerful image, an example of what contemporary theologians call a limit-metaphor which explodes our comfortable certainties: Jesus, God Incarnate, lying in hay intended for the stomachs of cows and donkeys. Christians should ask themselves why God chose (or allows us to believe that he chose) to enter the world in a stable? Anyone concerned with raising the ecological sensitivity of Westerners should inquire why the human imagination had the one born in a stable whom it would call God Incarnate. For the purposes of this argument it is irrelevant whether one is or is not a believer. What matters is that this story has touched everyone born into the Western cultural domain for at least fifteen centuries. The Christmas story can be unpacked to mean that God's birth from a woman was meant to embrace not only humans but all of nature, from the heavenly bodies (the Star of Bethlehem) through the assorted critters found in a stable - which would include the likes of mice and rats and flies and germs in addition to the official tenants - all the way to the grasses and grains used for feed, and the straw-covered soil of the stomped dirt floor. God-on-High has come down from beyond the clouds and the mountain-top, and henceforth will dwell *on and in* the earth. And so it is believed among Austrian peasants that on Christmas night animals are given the power to speak, and the Christ-rose blooms beneath the snow to celebrate the coming of the Savior. Limited by their own set of priorities, the gospel writers may not have recorded Jesus speaking of our responsibility toward nature; Jesus may never have addressed the issue; but none of this matters, since properly understood, the event of the Incarnation itself is incompatible with exploiting the earth. In Jesus, God became our friend, and the image of God-as-friend-of-humans should open up new possibilities for human beings to befriend nature.

Early and not so early theologians, their heads filled with dualistic preconceptions, failed to see the significance of the traditional popular embroideries upon Luke's Gospel and/or the un-named Q-source which seems to underlie both Matthew and Luke. They continued the Old Testament convention of placing nature at the bottom of a hierarchy of value, and, as stated above, re-interpreted this position almost exclusively in Neo-Platonic terms as material, evil, and even satanic, uninformed by the higher levels of rarefied spirituality and goodness. Meanwhile, popular culture not only continued to delight in its versions of the birth narrative, but added to Mary and Joseph a growing entourage of other saints, many of whom were baptized pagan nature deities, even as the Virgin herself assumed some of the characteristics of the Great Mother known by names such as Isis, Ishtar, and Gaia until she became, as she is portrayed in a fifteenth century wooden statue, now housed in the Paris Cluny Museum, the "Mother of the Living God" (10), a *vierge ouvrante*, her belly with hinged doors to conceal/reveal the image of the trinity within.

By now it should be obvious that the Western religious tradition does indeed contain the resources for developing an ecologically responsible ethic. Unfortunately, the images and stories which are the most

promising harbingers of this kind of re-vision are also the aspects of Christianity which found themselves under the most severe attack by Protestant iconoclasm and fear of idolatry. Somewhat like Hinduism, popular medieval Catholicism (despite Saint Augustine & Co.) assimilated and baptized pagan practices, feasts, and nature deities. Hence Saint Francis saw no contradiction between intense faith and his sense of kinship with "our sister, mother earth, the which sustains and keeps us. . ." (11) and Thomas Aquinas considered nature analogous to God. Luther and Calvin, on the other hand, emphasized the transcendence of God and the weakness of sinful humans in their natural state. Like Plato, Calvin called the body the prison of the soul. While he considered nature "good," in the sense of being God's creation, he expected the destruction of nature if people should cease to praise and worship God. The natural world, in this perspective, was a by-product of the church, a resource to be dominated by the elect. There was no room for Earth-Mother Mary sitting in a green meadow with flowers in her hair and a naked God-baby in her lap. Once again, God became primarily the stem judge and ruler who would eventually be transformed into the divine but aloof clockmaker of the Enlightenment, Max Weber's guiding spirit of capitalism, or His Awesome Majesty of a Karl Barth or Soren Kierkegaard.

Hence it is not surprising that there are still many Christian leaders, Catholic as well as Protestant, who for a variety of reasons resist the vision of God-in-nature. The recent silencing of Fr. Matthew Fox shows that eight decades after the excommunication of the Catholic Modernist theologian, George Tyrrell, Roman hard-liners continue to do battle against his kind of non-dualistic God/earth image. In 1903 this maverick priest anticipated James Lovelock's *Gaia*, when he wrote that the divine can be found where the human spirit draws its nourishment,

deep down where its roots and fibres are seen to spread out under the soil and make one continuous network with those of all finite spirits, the whole clinging to the breasts of that common mother-earth from whom, and in whom, they move and have their being. (12)

Others equate concern for non-human life with sentimental love for cute little pets, a straw man which can be easily discredited. In an editorial in the *Sooner Catholic*, Father David Monahan mentions the nature film *Gorillas in the Mist* with the same disdain as dog food for the diet-conscious-canine commercials and pet cemetery advertisements. He deplores what he considers the "nutty" tendency of contemporary Americans to "confer family privileges on beings formerly assigned to a doghouse or a cage," and sparrows, noting "what I detest is treating animals as human persons and human persons as animals" (13). From one point of view he is surely right, but I cannot help wondering how he would respond to the acclaimed Japanese Catholic novelist Shusaku Endo who sees the face of God in myna birds and dogs. Ultimately it will be precisely by considering all of humanity and the entire cosmos our family - in a nonsentimental and yet passionately caring way - that we may come to understand ourselves as inextricably part of nature, and find the motivation and strength to stop vandalizing the earth, to start acting as responsible tenants instead of parasites. As Lynn White noted, Saint Francis would have understood. In fact, I suspect he would feel right at home in that Old Delhi bird hospital, cheerfully preaching his message to Hindus, Jains, and feathered patients.

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