

CHAPTER 29

The Context of Eco-theology

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The phrase "I'm a tree-hugging Jesus freak," a self-description uttered recently by a Pentecostal environmentalist, demonstrates the complexity of contemporary eco-theology and religious ecological activism. For the past two decades or more, the combination of these two identities seemed unthinkable, for Christians were still struggling to articulate a response, much less a response that would appeal to Pentecostals, usually viewed as un-ecological. This chapter examines many of the historical and more contemporary contexts that shape what is now a rich eco-theological conversation. Although the chapter tries to give a broad international sense of the movement, it draws heavily upon the US context where a diverse and multi-faceted conversation about eco-theology has been going on for over three decades. Furthermore, while there are now ecological voices within all the major religious traditions, this chapter will primarily focus on Christianity as the context of eco-theology.

While there are many historical precedents that one could acknowledge leading into the contemporary environmental movement, such as Aldo Leopold's *Sand Country Almanac* (1949), most scholars agree it began in the 1960s, marked by a variety of publications that brought attention to the issues at hand. In fact, many historians of the movement date the birth of the modern environmental movement to Rachel Carson's 1962 paradigm-changing book *Silent Spring*, which detailed the damage wrought by pesticides throughout the ecological web. Garrett Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" (1968), a doomsday scenario about population growth, was published toward the end of the decade. Taken together, these two works exemplify the dominant concerns of the early movement – pesticides, pollution, and population. Also in the late sixties, Lynn White's infamous article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" appeared in *Science* (White 1967), in which White concluded that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt for the ecologic crisis." Certainly there were plenty more forces in the sixties that shaped the environmental movement, and to this we will return, but ideas alone do not produce social movements. It was in the sixties, however, that widespread activist and scholarly concern coalesced, and the response from Christian thinkers started to

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appear.¹ Before tracing some of the subsequent development of the movement, it is helpful to look back at the history of the concept of nature in Western thought, for it is the various religious/philosophical understandings of "nature" in the development of the Western world-view that shape the contemporary religious conversation about environmental issues.

The Western World-view and Nature

As did White, much scholarly attention focuses on certain biblical concepts such as to have dominion, to subdue, and the ideal relationship of humanity to nature, and on the corresponding interpretive issues that reappear again and again in theological and philosophical thought. It is in the two contradictory and contrasting Genesis creation stories that we can see the roots of very different understandings of the human/nature relationship. The priestly or P account in Genesis 1 presents a remote God who appears to create *ex nihilo*.² As the crowning point of Creation, God creates male and female in "their" image (as you can imagine, there is much debate over the plural pronoun for God). It is in Genesis 1:28 that the crucial verbs "subdue" and "have dominion" are found, and these which have occasioned a great deal of scholarship over their correct interpretation and application (Habel and Warst 2000).

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (RSV)

The second chapter of Genesis contains the Yahwist, or J, account. In this creation story, God is no longer remote but forms *adam*, or human-earth creature, out of adamah, the dust and clay of the earth, before there are plants and other living things. As one scholar phrases it, here is a God that gets "her" hands dirty.³ In this second account, the animals are created as helpmates to Adam, and when that is insufficient, Eve is created out of Adam's rib. The order of creation and its implications are quite different between the two stories. The first represents creation as insufficient until humans are created at the top of the hierarchy; the second shows Adam as insufficient until he is joined both by the living beings, from plants to animals, and then by Eve, or woman. In the third chapter, which contains the curse (Genesis 3:14-19) that accompanies the expulsion from the Garden, other aspects of the human/nature relationship are presented: the land may be hostile and humans will struggle to obtain food, women and animals are separated and against each other, and the very physical nature of women present in the birthing/creation of life will include punishment and pain. There are many interpretive conflicts over these texts and this summary is necessarily only a first-order treatment.

For many, the term "dominion over all the earth" sums up the religious roots of a destructive, anti-ecological, Western world-view that, as White (1967) charged, "insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends." In response to such charges, many scholars and religious ecologists point out that dominion is more

accurately interpreted as stewardship, or the caring and keeping of the earth, because it is the Lord's (DeWitt 1987, Granberg-Michaelson 1987, Hessel 1992). Other scholars de-emphasize the importance of this text by emphasizing the instructions in Genesis 2 to keep and till the Garden of Eden. They see the combined texts in covenantal terms, that is, that humans are to till and keep the land responsibly in return for God's blessing enabling them to be fruitful and multiply. In this same vein, many point out that this stewardship theme runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and is explicit in the numerous commandments regarding agricultural and dietary laws in the care both for the land and for animals (Brueggemann 1977). Ecologically oriented scholars go on to find much merit in the "land ethic" of the Hebrew Scriptures and the idea of a Sabbath for all, animals and the land included. Although it may seem to be more difficult to find ecological messages in the Christian New Testament, scholars point to Jesus's constant illustrations from nature to demonstrate aspects of God, including the affirmation that God loves humans in a comparable manner to God's love for the sparrows and lilies.

White's argument was far more nuanced and complex than merely placing the blame on the Genesis texts, for what he really argues is that it is the anthropocentrism (human-centeredness) of Judaism and Christianity, reflected in the creation story, that poses a major problem. To counter this view, he holds up St. Francis of Assisi as a model of the equality of all creatures, including humans. As tired as many today are of hearing White's thesis, its role in stimulating a flood of historical, philosophical, theological writing and religious activism on the subject of Christianity and ecology cannot be underestimated. Even without White's provocation, eco-theologians have to address the claims that human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism are at the core of the tradition. While White's thesis is the best known of many efforts to identify the sources of the modern view of nature, many scholars object to his emphasis on the Judeo-Christian⁴ tradition as the primary source of our world-view. They argue for the diversity and complexity of Western thought on the subject of the human-nature relationship and the multitude of interpretations that competed for ideological dominance in different historical periods. Or, they argue that White places too much emphasis on the role of ideas in social change.⁵ But many, even his critics, agree with White's ending conclusion that we must either "rethink our old religion" or create a new one, for religious and moral systems must address the ecological crisis.

Ian Barbour, in *Western Man and Environmental Ethics* (1973), a text that introduced the White essay to a broad audience, made the argument for the important influence of Greek and classical influences (as did Clarence Glacken in *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, 1967). Barbour cites Aristotle's view that plant and animal life exist solely for humans; the Stoic view that since animals are non-rational one need not respect them; and the Gnostic and Manichean philosophy that nature is a realm of evil from which humans must escape. In response, the Nicene Creed's emphasis on God as creator, and the emphasis on the goodness of creation in the work of many early Christian theologians, counter the view of nature as evil or entrapping. Creation as good versus creation as corrupt would continue to bedevil Christian thought throughout its history. Many scholars, such as Rosemary Ruether (1992), point to the dualism of Platonic thought, especially seen in a spirit/body, mind/matter division, which privileges reason,

spirit, and men over emotion, matter⁶ or this-world, women, and animals, which continues to be present in Western thinking.

The influence of Aristotelian and Platonic thought can be seen in the medieval emphasis on the Great Chain of Being, or the hierarchy of creation, as well as in Aquinas's articulation of natural theology. And as White pointed out, many still look to St. Francis (1182–1226) of Assisi as an exemplar of Christian ecology, to the point that Pope John Paul II named him the patron saint of ecologists. Most scholars, however, view the scientific, industrial, theological, and cultural revolutions of the period 1500–1700 as particularly crucial in understanding the modern world-view. Carolyn Merchant's influential treatise *The Death of Nature* (1980) argues that the result of this wide scope of change was the disintegration of a more immanent and organic view of nature, and the ascendancy of the modern, mechanistic world-view that sees nature as dead, or inert, and atomized.

Merchant surveys the various conceptions and organic metaphors for nature, humanity, and human society that shaped medieval and Renaissance thought, and she argues that these restrained invasive human activity, as is seen even in the implications of the concept of "Mother Earth." It was in this period that the revival of Greek thought introduced competing philosophical concepts to the domination of religious thinking, so that religious and philosophical views are no longer intertwined. Merchant is careful to examine more than just ideas, for, during this period, a great many events shaped the dominant world-view. Increasing population pressure and land capabilities (in part due to the "rest" provided by the earlier decimation of the population by the plague) necessitated changed agricultural and extraction practices. Innovations in these techniques led to greater production capabilities and to expanding manufacturing and marketing opportunities, which then created greater demand for goods, etc. All of these social and economic changes in turn contributed to attempts to expand and justify greater land and resource usage, or, in the metaphoric language of the day, greater efforts to "tame" nature. The new scientific discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler challenged the reigning/philosophical cosmology and produced a great sense of unease and disorder about what was seen to be a stable and harmonious, and to some, static, cosmos. The Reformation brought a wide variety of religious challenges to the Catholic and Renaissance world-views and reinforced the growing sense of chaos and disorder in the world. Finally, in the search for economic expansion through new trade and new sources of raw materials, the discovery of "new worlds" and new animals, plants, trade goods, and "heathen" indigenous peoples heightened the dichotomy of orderly, civilized culture back home versus disorderly, chaotic "wild" nature over "there."⁷

As a complex result of these changes, the view of nature as disorderly and threatening, whether as wilderness or as human "nature," became dominant. For instance, in the witch trials, the view of women as weak and passive by nature in the face of stronger natural forces (such as their own alleged insatiable sexuality) was linked with the increasing view that nature had a darker side that could be manipulated by witches. This dual denigration of both internal and external nature contributed to the justification of increased male domination both of women's bodies and of Mother Earth's body. The commentary of Francis Bacon aptly illustrates this connection:

For you have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able when you like to lead and drive her afterward to the same place again. . . . Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object. (As quoted in Merchant 1980:168)

Bacon is also an apt demonstration of how the term "dominion" came to be understood and applied, for he states that the most noble ambition is "to endeavor to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race," so that "the human race [can] recover the right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest" (as quoted in Merchant 1980:172).

Coupled with the growth of scientific understandings of the world, many scholars suggest that the Protestant Reformation continued the disenchantment of the world, or the removal of a sense of the sacred in this world, begun by Catholicism's attempt to eradicate the more nature-oriented indigenous religious traditions of various parts of Europe.⁸ Obviously, a figure such as St. Francis points to a plurality of Catholic views, and it is important to recognize that both Catholicism and Protestantism held mixed messages about nature, as Paul Santmire (1985), in *The Travail of Nature*, traces in the thought of key Christian thinkers throughout history. Although, as Santmire and other scholars now point out, Calvinism had a mixed message with regard to nature, the dominant Reformation understanding saw this material world as fallen and corrupt, needing to be subdued. As the sociologist Max Weber argues ([1904/5] 1958), the Protestant God became radically transcendent. This "removal" of God or the sacred from the world, already present in the history of the religious world views of the Israelites and early Christianity, opened the way for the scientific exploration of the natural world and widened an already present matter-spirit dualism present in Christianity. Continuing the mixed attitude toward nature: even though God was no longer in the world, nature had a positive value because it could reveal, through close study, the mind of God – this is similar to the natural-law theology of the Catholic Thomistic tradition. In a similar paradox, as Weber argues, the uncertain nature of salvation within Calvinism, a result of the belief in predestination, also fueled the search for revelations of God's will in the natural world. Although nature could reveal God, it did not have value in and of itself. Furthermore, in the effort to prove one's salvation by acting to further the glory of God, this uncertainty led to the desire to order and control the "fallen" chaos of nature (a seeming contradiction to the idea of studying nature in order to reveal the orderly mind of God), an impulse seen in the Calvinist Dutch efforts to rein in their swampy lands by turning them into cultivated fields.⁹

In the developing realms of science, the cultural view of nature as chaos was balanced by an increasingly mechanized view of the natural world as dead and inert. In this view, discoverable laws governed the realm of nature. These laws could then be used to "probe" and "utilize" nature's secrets. The new mechanistic view of nature was of dead, inert particles governed by laws that could be discovered and used to manipulate it for human gain. With this new market-oriented interest in the natural world came the beginnings of the removal of scientific understandings of the world from commonplace knowledge. In the ensuing centuries, science, in its bid to replace the role of religion as an ultimate authority, wrapped itself in a cloak of elite discourse,

so that the full implications of new scientific and technological developments were not expected to be understood, and thus were not a part of the everyday understanding of the world.¹⁰

The assumption of universal, "natural" laws, stemming from the Catholic quest for a natural theology and the Protestant search for the mind of God revealed in nature, also played a key role in Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment, for all of its exclusive understandings of humanity, stemmed from a desire to think more "scientifically" and search for universals and "inalienable rights" instead of being governed by historical particularities that seemed to cause such strife and chaos.¹¹ Thus the embrace of reason (and rejection of religion and superstition) replicated the dualistic privileging of mind/matter, spirit/body, reason/emotion, rationality/sexuality, culture/nature, etc. Nature was valued as a revelation of these universal laws, while at the same time being seen in contrast to, or as a hindrance of, the human pursuit of reason. The latter furthered the devaluing of those humans seen as "irrational" or governed in some way by their "nature" – women, children, indigenous peoples, subject or colonized peoples, those of different religious understandings – as opposed to those in possession of the "rational mind," so that the definition of "human" reflected the norms and characteristics of European men. Influenced by the prevailing Christian denunciation of the religious traditions of the peoples encountered in other lands, and its own pursuit of reason over faith, Enlightenment thought is filled with the dismissal of religion as superstitious and irrational, in contrast to Reason, often viewed as the divine spark of God in humans. True religion followed the dictates of reason.

Romanticism presented the major philosophical challenge to the Enlightenment desire to be freed from the yoke of nature through the exercise of human reason. Rather, Romanticism viewed nature as inherently good and as the source of truth. Romantics too talked of Reason, but meant by it access to knowledge through personal experience and intuition, often fostered by solitary experience/contemplation of nature. This romantic sense of truth as a vehicle for revelation and self-understanding differed greatly from the Enlightenment sense of truth in terms of laws regulating the universe. In reaction to the Enlightenment disengagement from nature, and in distress over the results of technological innovation and industrialization, Romanticism sought reunification with nature as a way to religious inspiration, harmony, and community. Today we are as much heirs of the mystical Romantic conception of nature as of the rational Enlightenment view of a mechanistic universe.

For many in the environmental movement, nature romanticism, as embodied in the American figures of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, represented a source of resistance both to the dominant strains of Christianity, and also to the dominant culture's embrace of science, technology, and progress and the quest for ever-increasing control of and escape from natural constraints. This aspect especially continued to grow in religious importance as varying forms of individual mysticism became accepted. Nature as a source of revelation would become the most important and nuanced response to the disenchantment brought on by much of Protestantism and science.

The notion of nature as a source of revelation remained prominent in many popular streams of Protestantism. Grounded in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, Catholics and Protestants alike had long, as in many religions, interpreted natural

phenomena as reflective of divine blessing or punishment. Nature's bounty in the form of natural resources was God's blessing for the settlers in the new lands, and to be good stewards was to use this bounty for the furtherance of Christianity and human benefit. This was particularly true in some of the colonized lands such as the Americas and Australia. Attention to nature as revelatory was also influential on the development of science and in the dedication to the observation of the details of nature emphasized by so many gentlemen (for the vast majority were upper-class men who observed nature as a hobby) "naturalists," for through the observation of the natural world, the mind of God was glimpsed. Yet nature as a source of revelation, especially in Romanticism's understanding, ultimately came to be seen as heretical by many Christians for it eclipsed the authority of institutional religion. On the individual level, nature as revelation provided an avenue to the divine outside of the Church and its control. On the societal scale, the sense that the scientific study of nature or of the material world could reveal the truths of the universe, stripped of any overlay of the mind of God, grew to reach almost deterministic proportions. This was particularly centered on the challenges represented in Darwin, who came to be viewed as a threat, by some, to religious Truth. Science, and not religion, came to be viewed as the final source of truth and authority.¹² In many ways, religion as the basis for understanding the world became subservient to a scientific understanding.¹³ The role of Western religion, instead, became primarily to provide meaning and a larger context for the findings of science. Liberal Protestants in particular became "captives of Science" because the "ability of man to have dominion over nature (and his own fate) depended so heavily on his knowledge of God's scientific laws" (McLoughlin 1978:158).

Today, all of these understandings still play into the complex world of both scholarly and popular, practiced ecological theology, and its acceptance or rejection. For many conservative Christians, and "secularists," nature is still a realm to be conquered, tamed, or utilized for human betterment. Nature is viewed as a backdrop to the unfolding of a linear movement of progress, whether it is toward a human world freed from any natural constraints (including age, disease, and "pests") or toward a history of God's salvific action in the world that solely concerns humans (including the dismissal of a need for ecological care because, in the triumph of God's reign, there will be a "new heaven and earth"). Evangelical and conservative Christians are still warned against nature as a source of revealed religious knowledge because it might eclipse the only recognized source of religious knowledge – the Bible. In current-day Christian creationism we see a response to the "battle" between religion and science for understandings of the nature of "Nature." For more typical, mainstream Christians, nature reflects God's bounty and blessing, and scientific and technological progress are part of the civilizing of the world. Although the explicit belief in God's action in the world to restore the natural order is subdued, the faith in science and technology to "fix" all problems remains strong. Both forms remain focused on human salvation, understood in a variety of ways, and human affairs, replicating a strong distinction between humans and nature. These complex views form the heritage of the contemporary movement as participants try to articulate a range of sacred, ecological perspectives. The religious ecology movement is also shaped by many strands and perspectives within the contemporary environmental movement.

Return to the Contemporary Environmental Movement

At the dawn of the contemporary movement, the US and Western European nations were emerging from the most intense period of the Cold War, and the period of recovery from World War II. Major technological innovations spurred economic growth, as did a peacetime population boom that came of age in the 1960s. For huge numbers, television, birth control and commercial air flight all opened up new worlds that contrasted with the world of their parents. Higher education, hailed as a response to the dangerous "irrationality" and bias of the war, was sought by a wide array of youth who could afford the luxury of studying for more than a job. Reaction and disenchantment over the development, and use, of the nuclear bomb provided a descant to the forties' and fifties' song of the triumph of progress and technology, followed by the environmental laments of the sixties – pollution and the limits to growth posed by an expanding population. These voices of critique and disbelief in the salvific abilities of science have significantly shaped the development of religious ecological voices, for the ability of science to pave the way to a brighter future was dethroned, creating a space for religious voices whose heritage was the liberal theological acceptance of a separate-spheres¹⁴ policy that gave science purview over the natural world. Many became critical of institutional religion while at the same time adopting a new sense of self, freed from previous social strictures and open to experience and revelation from a variety of sources, including nature and other religions. To understand the religious or spiritual strands within the environmental movement is to recognize this two-pronged shift away from the authority of science and religion regarding "nature."

One significant and symbolic event that shaped the environmental movement in a multitude of ways was the view of Earth from space, and the subsequent 1969 landing on the moon. It is worth pausing a moment to consider the various ways that the "space race" symbolizes different contemporary viewpoints. For many, the human entry into space demolished the last sense of limits on humans, for we were no longer bound by such an elemental force as gravity; we had escaped the *limitations* of Earth. This escape echoes the Greek and Christian desire of "spirit" or the soul to be freed from the confines of matter and this-world. The "conquering" of space, as it is often called, aptly demonstrates the triumphal belief that science and technology, as the extension of human reason, can overcome any obstacle; the corollary to this is often the secure belief that any environmental wrongs done, such as global warming, can be undone by science and technology, so we should quit worrying and plunge ahead. For others, the hubris of this view stands in stunning opposition to the humility they feel as a result of having seen the planet as a whole. In this reaction, the picture of Earth from space demonstrates the artificiality of political borders and the fragile interconnectedness of all on the planet, and becomes a powerful symbol for the need to recognize that eco-systems, and the effects of environmental degradation, go beyond often arbitrary political boundaries. The Earth becomes the symbol and source of a mystical insight into oneness and plurality (we are all in this together), so that it became the symbol of one environmental slogan: "Think globally, act locally." The view of the Earth also

symbolizes the changing scientific paradigm, from the atomistic approach to "dead and inert" matter that characterized Newtonian and Baconian science to the recognition of the ecological web and the intricate interdependency of a very alive nature seen in ecology, evolutionary cosmology, and other aspects of the new science, such as chaos theory.

One obvious heritage of the 1960s is the legacy of the youth counter-culture in general and the social protest and social movements in particular that characterized the era. Dominated by the civil rights and the anti-war movements, social protest was also directed at concern over race and ethnicity, ecology, peace, the rights of women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled, and human rights in general. Some who study these movements often point out the strong religious influence/motivation of activists involved, as well as a range of religiously motivated or inspired prophets, but scholars tend to emphasize the secular nature of these movements. Many in the "Church" admit that it is often ten years behind the movements of secular society, and in the case of environmentalism, it took a decade for a rich scholarly conversation to emerge (although the Faith, Man, and Nature project of the National Council of Churches of the USA had already begun the conversation in the 1960s). John Cobb's theological call *Is It Too Late?* (1972) reflected the doomsday mood of publications such as the Club of Rome 1972 report (Meadows et al. 1972) on the *Limits to Growth*, predicting resource depletion and economic collapse. Eco-feminist thought took form, and Rosemary Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth* (1975) stimulated the development of Christian eco-feminism. And many, varied responses to Lynn White's essay appeared, along with some early Church/denominational statements on the basis for environmental concern. At the same time, a call for more bio-centric thinking was articulated by philosopher Arne Naess's description (1989) of shallow and deep ecology, as well as chemist James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (1979) that the Earth is a living, self-regulating entity. John Passmore's contrasting eco-philosophy in *Man's Responsibility for Nature* also came out in the mid-1970s.

By the 1980s, religious and philosophical ecological voices had become many. For some, the interconnectedness of issues of the unequal construction of society with environmental concern was subsumed by a growing focus on scientific analysis and solutions for environmental problems. Environmental concerns focused on global issues such as acid rain, the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect, rapid deforestation and with it, increasing desertification. Many of the inspired youths of the environmental movements of the sixties had turned into respected scientists and technocrats seeking government recognition and support for their research and proposed solutions, and the movement had grown well beyond its grassroots beginnings. The World Wildlife Fund (now the World-Wide Fund for Nature), host to a significant meeting of world religions on ecology, at Assisi in Italy, boasted over a million members by the end of the decade; Greenpeace claimed over 2 million.

As the organizational aspect of the movement gained access to the centers of societies, it lost much of its moral imperative, or at least the ability to couch it in such terms. In this absence, theologians and philosophers, politicians, religious leaders, and grassroots spirituality groups found there was an audience for their message. The World Council of Churches' theme in the 1980s was "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of

Creation," linking together three of the important social movements of the seventies. Political Green Parties began to play a role in elections. Radical eco-resistance movements such as Earth First!, inspired by the grassroots movement in Australia to oppose the damming of the Franklin River in Tasmania, grew up on the fringe of the movement. The principles of deep ecology were given a wider audience by Devall and Sessions in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* in 1985. Many Protestant eco-theological and eco-ethical works appeared in the eighties, such as Jürgen Moltmann's *God and Creation* (1985), as well as Catholic voices such as the popular then-Catholic theologian Matthew Fox's *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*¹⁵ and the work of Thomas Berry, who calls himself a Catholic geologist. Berry's work was made widely available in *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), sort of a spiritual deep ecology, stunning its publisher Sierra Club Books by going through seven printings in six years.

Environmental ethics emerged as a distinct discipline, as seen in the work of Holmes Rolston III (1986) or Baird Callicott (1987), as well as in the growth of the animal liberation movement and a distinct discourse on ethics and animal rights. At the end of the decade, John Cobb and Herman Daly, a lead economist with the World Bank, published *For the Common Good* in 1989, a theological and ethical call for attention to the deep ecological problems of capitalist economics and the need for a vision of a sustainable society. Ironically, conservative Pentecostal Christian James Watt, Secretary of the Interior under US President Ronald Reagan, inadvertently alerted many to the need for a responsible religious ethic, when he told Congress not be concerned with the long-term future of natural resources policy because "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns" (Martin 1982). For US secular and religious environmental groups, the anti-environmental Reagan era of the 1980s galvanized people into action.

One important development in the US was the United Church of Christ's publication of *Toxic Wastes and Race* (Lee 1987). The study looked for common factors in the placement of hazardous and toxic waste sites throughout the nation and concluded that race and low income were statistically significant factors in the placement of these sites. This study helped launch a new movement, often critical of the whiteness of the main organizations of the environmental movement, termed "environmental justice," which in the churches became a part of the broader rubric of eco-justice (see below). Since many working on religious eco-justice had come to the movement through concerns over civil rights and economic justice, the articulation of environmental racism continued these concerns. The environmental justice movement is very significant as an organizing and empowering force for indigenous peoples and people of color, long left out of the mainstream movement, and has helped move the religious environmental movement away from being a predominantly white movement.

Earth Day of 1990 dawned with the environment seemingly on everyone's mind. *Time Magazine*, in 1989, had made the planet Earth its "person" of the year in the news. In January of 1990, the well-known physicist Carl Sagan, along with others, issued a call for the cooperation of religious leaders and scientists, stating that "problems of such magnitude and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension" (*New York Times*, January 20, 1990). Pope John Paul II, in his January 1990 World Day of Peace address,

pronounced that the "ecological crisis is a moral issue" and reminded Catholics that they have "a serious obligation to care for all of creation." By 1992, both soon-to-be US Vice-President Gore's *The Earth in Balance* and Rosemary Ruether's *Gaia and God* appeared, each very influential in reaching a wide audience in their own way. These works, along with others, demonstrate the parallel global social- and environmental-justice concerns of major eco-theologians during the 1990s, such as the various books by John Cobb critiquing the current economic model and calling for a more sustainable and just economic model, Larry Rasmussen's *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (1996), Ivonne Gerbara (1999), Leonardo Boff's (1995) works connecting ecology and liberation theology, and the edited volumes of *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (Ruether 1996) or *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Hallman 1994). In order to think more globally – a key theme of the 1990s under the specter of global warming – theology groped for metaphors, such as the earth as God's body, found in the work of feminist eco-theologian Sally McFague in her *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993), or apocalypse: Catherine Keller, in *Apocalypse Now and Then* (1996), took on the symbolism and debilitating thinking of the apocalypse, which loomed large for many with the end of the second millennium approaching.

During the eighties, theologians and religious groups alike had spent time articulating particular viewpoints; by the nineties, a plethora of religious voices and organizations could be found, and various ecumenical efforts flourished. Perhaps the most important was the global religious, indigenous, and NGO (non-governmental organization) effort to be heard at, and to influence, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and the subsequent Kyoto Conference on global climate change (see Wesley Granberg-Michaelson's *Redeeming the Creation: The Rio Earth Summit – Challenges for the Churches*, published by the World Council of Churches, a major presence at Rio, in 1992). From an environmental standpoint, little good happened at these conferences, dominated by corporate interests and an uncooperative US government presence that refused to sign anything with any teeth to it. Despite strong efforts by the US and multinational corporations to undermine the 1997 Kyoto treaty on global climate change, by the 2002 Johannesburg South Africa UN Summit on Sustainability, enough nations had signed on, including China, to mean that the standards of the treaty for reducing carbon-dioxide emissions will have some impact. Another large, global cooperative effort, in many ways the result of the conference at Rio, was the Earth Charter. This document, which thousands contributed to in hearings and meetings around the globe, was finalized and presented at the UN Summit in Johannesburg. The Earth Charter, as well as the religious and NGO presence at the UN conferences, was an effort to make sure that the voices of those most affected by economic development and environmental degradation – the indigenous, the poor, and developing countries – were heard, and to demonstrate that a new, global, ecological, and morally just vision was needed to guide Earth's citizens. Religious groups have joined this effort wholeheartedly, as illustrated in the following profile of the spectrum of activism, based on US religious groups, but applicable beyond.

Contemporary Ecological Christian Activism

As this brief decade-by-decade overview has shown, there are many who are dissenters from the dominant Western world-view, some from an ecological philosophical viewpoint such as deep ecology, others from indigenous or more pagan religious world-views, from feminist, womanist (African-American feminism), and *mujerista* (Latina feminism) points of view, new age or nature spirituality, and all the major religious traditions. These many, varied ecological voices are not just theologians, but are emerging from a variety of activist and church-related organizations, for it is in this range that the immense and rich variety of eco-theology is translated into action and problem-solving. In other words, it is at the level of activism that the purpose of eco-theology – that is, to change the way Christians think about ecology – can bear fruit in terms of changing the way people and institutional actors behave. There are many levels of this response, from theological, institutional, and activist organizations.

On the basis of nearly twenty years of research, I group Christian ecological activism into roughly three categories, with a wide range of overlap, exceptions, or variety (see Kearns 1996, 1997, for more detail). These categories do not work neatly for the plethora of theological views nor for neat denominational categories; rather, they are the voices of the “pews” and the no-longer-in-the pews who are still influenced by Christian thought. Following sociologist Max Weber’s notion of ideal types, I term these three categories or “ethics”: Christian stewardship, eco-justice, and Creation spirituality. By “ethic” I mean to include both world-view and ethos, such as understandings of how the world is and how it should be, what is ideal, and how an individual should act in order to be good. Eco-feminism, the linkage between the treatment of women and of nature, influences all three, particularly the latter two, but there are many within eco-justice and creation spirituality that do not think primarily through an eco-feminist lens, and there are many, many eco-feminists who reject Christianity. All three ethics are critical of science, especially scientific technology, while at the same time embracing it as a valuable and necessary source of knowledge about the world.

Briefly, Christian stewardship is most appealing to those Christians with a more evangelical and Bible-centered theology.¹⁶ They interpret the key “dominion” passage in terms of the sense of dominion given an Israelite king such as David. Kings were responsible to God for their “keeping” of the kingdom, and as such, held accountable. Thus, for many Christian stewards, to be a good Christian is to care responsibly for the earth. Christian stewardship is still anthropocentric, or human-centered, but believes that God calls Christians to be good stewards of the creation, and to till and keep the creation (referring to the Genesis passages). Much of their time and effort is spent trying to dissuade conservative Christians from an otherworldly, or personal-salvation only emphasis (this is eloquently seen in the work of a key figure, Calvin DeWitt). They do this by seeking to thoroughly ground “saving the creation” in biblical texts. Christian stewardship is an important voice countering a widespread strain of conservative Christianity that is anti-science with “creationist” overtones, or is anti-environmental, claiming that environmentalism is a direct threat to Christianity, or in more apocalyp-

tic scenarios, that it is the agent of the anti-Christ. In addition to countering the dismissal of science as an authority, Christian stewardship also must negotiate conservative Christianity's fears of pantheism or "worshipping the creation," harkening back to ancient Israelite fears of their "pagan nature-worshipping" neighbors, or Christian fears of the religious world-views of the conquered peoples. Two examples of more overt Christian stewardship activism are a 1996 campaign to preserve the Endangered Species Act from being gutted by conservative Republicans in the US Congress (who were actively supported by the evangelical, anti-environmental New Christian Right) and a 2002 campaign, in part sponsored by the Evangelical Environmental Network, about fuel-efficient vehicles, asking "What would Jesus drive?" – a take-off on a common conservative Christian phrase and bumper-sticker asking "What Would Jesus Do?" (WWJD). The WWJDrive campaign related driving fuel-inefficient cars such as SUVs (sports utility vehicles) to the unjust treatment of one's "neighbor," acknowledging that pollution and environmental degradation make us all neighbors in a new way.

Eco-justice advocates represent more mainstream and liberal Protestant and Catholic social-justice understandings of Christianity in which God's *kingdom* (many would not use the more hierarchical term "kingdom") of just relations between humans and with the realm of creation is to be worked for here on Earth by righting social wrongs. Here the source of authority is the example of Jesus and the Social Gospel tradition. They aptly demonstrate that environmental problems are also justice issues with strong adverse effects on those already excluded – people of color, the poor, women and children. To this end, many eco-justice advocates, such as the World Council of Churches and its constituent members, have worked to expose environmental injustices in the dumping of hazardous and toxic wastes and the enormous health consequences, especially for women, or the shortened lives of children caused by air pollution, arguing that the Christian principle of the just treatment of one's neighbor is applicable to the question of who pays the hidden costs for wastes and pollution. Another major concern has been those who will suffer, and perhaps already are suffering, from global climate, rising waters, failing crops due to erratic and often violent weather, and so on.

Finally, Creation spirituality focuses on the wonder of the universe, and the cosmological story of its evolution, which reveals that humans are but a small part of the "universe story," yet now have the capacity to interrupt the workings of the universe. Proponents often come from the most liberal Protestant and Catholic groups, and are the most open to a wide array of spiritual traditions, deep ecology, mysticism, feminist goddess spirituality, indigenous and "pagan" traditions of earth centeredness, etc. While in the first two, the Bible is either the main or an important source of authority and inspiration, in Creation spirituality, the revelations of the universe supersede the knowledge of most religious traditions (clear in the work of Thomas Berry), and many find themselves creating a collage of spiritual sources that recognizes the need, or incorporates the viewpoint, that humans are but one part of a larger ecological web of beings that need to be acknowledged. They embrace a numinous or immanent sense of the sacred in the world, and while highly critical of the atomistic, Enlightenment scientific world-view, Creation spirituality incorporates the more "mystical" new physics that

talks about infinitesimal sub-atomic spaces or the interconnections even found in chaos theory. Creation spirituality advocates work to return a sense of the sacred to everyday life, emphasizing the necessity of combining art, dance, and all the senses in ritual (as advocated by Matthew Fox), or the interconnectedness of humans and Earth represented in bio-dynamic and permaculture agricultural practices, as demonstrated at the Genesis Farm, founded by the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, New Jersey, a working farm and eco-community that draws people, especially Catholic religious sisters, from all over the globe to study and learn.

Challenges to Eco-Theology

This review of the history of the Western world-view of nature and of the environmental and religious ecological movements reveals many of the challenges still facing eco-theology. The deep-seated dualism of human/nature continues to undermine efforts to think about humans in, with, and as a part of nature. This dualism still haunts eco-theology as it tries to overcome the entrenched notion of God as radically other and outside of this world, and the related this-world/other-world, matter/spirit, body/mind, emotion/rationality, religion/science, or religious/secular binaries that continue to shape much of Christianity. The bifurcation between the worlds of religious concerns and scientific concerns bedevils the attempts of many to get Christians to pay any attention to what are deemed matters of science, such as the environment.

There are a variety of global issues that will shape eco-theological voices – issues that some clearly acknowledge while others try to ignore. Chief among these are the issue of population and consumption, the need for access to and religious legitimation of birth control, and the need to curb an almost religious fervor for consumption that has become the standard for measuring happiness and success in the West. The dueling future-disaster scenarios of over-population and over-consumption and the resulting scarce resources have proven extremely difficult for religious groups to face head on, and they are subsequently addressed in more subtle, covert ways. Issues of population and scarce resources point to the very difficult ethical territory ahead; territory in which religious, ecological, and ethical voices must be heard.

The problem of over-consumption by the “developed” countries points to another critical challenge – the global dominance of a capitalist economic system which values everything only in relation to profit margins, so that natural resources either have economic value for consumption, or have no value. The skewed value system of capitalism with regard to the Earth and its peoples is horrifically demonstrated in a leaked World Bank memo that stated that Africa was under-polluted and African lives worth less, therefore hazardous and toxic wastes, as well as highly polluting industries, should be exported to Africa.¹⁷ Further demonstration of the inherent value system of capitalism is manifest in various free trade agreements and the World Trade Organization, where environmental protection regulations are viewed as barriers to trade and thus seen as being against the terms of free trade agreements. Obviously, the variety of practitioners of capitalism is great, but there is an inherent value system in the “free” market that any eco-theological conversation must at some time address. The struggle

over endorsement of the Kyoto Global Climate Treaty, in which religious actors have been vociferous and numerous, is another demonstration of the clash of ecology and economics.¹⁸

The struggle of religious voices to respond to global warming is indicative of how the subject of pending environmental crisis and disaster, with apocalyptic overtones, often creates numbness and despair. Whereas, from a sociological point of view, religious systems provide meaning in the face of threatening chaos, many who are religious either ignore the sense of crisis, or when faced with the growing feeling of global environmental degradation and breakdown, often turn their gaze elsewhere to find comfort. Since, in most scenarios, any response to numerous global environmental problems will entail sacrifice or asceticism – a seeming “natural” for religious systems – it is notable that many in Christianity prefer to turn their attention to a “health and wealth” gospel of God’s blessing in material terms, or to spirituality as a form of personal therapy. Elsewhere, the growing threats of military conflict and violence over scarce resources such as oil and water, or of various scenarios of economic collapse, take even the most concerned minds away from the larger ecological needs of the Earth.

Many of the other challenges to eco-theology have been mentioned in the course of this chapter: dualistic thinking and the persistence of viewing humans and nature as separate; transcendent theocentric, or God-centered, theologies that fear embodiment and the earth, and the related fear of paganism or immanent understandings of God; the tensions between religion and science; the lack of scientific literacy in general, and the distrust and yet reliance on science for knowledge and problem-solving; the connection of nature with threat, darkness, and irrationality, or the romanticization of nature into the cute and cuddly; and the huge gap between changing how we think and changing how we then act.

The very questions of what Christianity is, who is Christian, or who is the audience for eco-theology, present a very large challenge, as Christians of the North Atlantic countries become the minority in global Christianity. With this change has come the growth of certain forms of Christianity, on the right and left, that focus on personal salvation and individual religiosity/spirituality to the detriment of notions of the common good, communal responsibility, or the Kingdom of God. Claims to Christian exclusivism that fear other religious claims to truth, or those Christians that await an apocalypse, undermine the absolutely necessary collaboration and cooperation of all in the sinking “lifeboat” of planet Earth. The sense of portability seen in the missionary impulse of Christianity, so that Christianity is a “placeless” or “transitory” religion (as opposed to non-proselytizing religions that are place-based, such as indigenous traditions), means that Christians must develop a sense of place and rootedness that can lead to a care for the land and place. At the same time, there are many who have left Christianity, claiming its anthropocentric (human-centered) bias is irredeemable, and others who have sought to merge parts of Christianity with the insights of other traditions in the search for an ecological spirituality. In the latter, there is the risk of the very well-meaning appropriation of other more nature-centered traditions such as those of Native Americans and Australian Aborigines, which replicates past colonialism. For other people around the globe, and for people of color and women in the “first world,” the struggle has been to convince us/them that the religion of the colonizers and oppressors has

something to say, or that eco-theology is more than a white "luxury" topic affordable when economic necessity no longer governs one's life. Perhaps, they suggest, it is time the so-called first world starts listening to them.

Finally,¹⁹ eco-theology has slowly moved into a multi-voiced, multi-faced complexity in which a range of theological, geographic and demographic voices are trying to be heard, so that the dominant discourse is not only by white Euro-Americans. This success is also the challenge it faces, for the message will take on a multitude of forms, many that disagree with each other, and can disintegrate into either academic parrying and wound-licking, open conflict, or mutual listening as Christian theology struggles to transcend the many limitations and embrace the many possibilities of its past complex and often ambivalent views of humanity, God, and nature.

Notes

- 1 There are, of course, scattered precursors. In 1939, in an address on Jerusalem Radio, Walter Lowdermilk outlined an Eleventh Commandment: "Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation" (as quoted in Nash 1989:97). The commandment then calls for stewards to avoid overgrazing, soil erosion, "waters drying up," and "the desolation of forest." Joseph Sittler also was an early influential voice.
- 2 The notion of *ex nihilo*, or "out of nothing," is a much later Christian reading back into the text and thus is not found in most Jewish readings of the text. See Keller (2003).
- 3 The "her" pronoun for God here refers to the fact that many, many creation stories are about mother goddesses and birth scenarios. Scholars, such as Ruether (1992), point out that one striking aspect about the Jewish creation stories is that creation is not through birthing, but through breath and through artifice, or the molding of dirt/clay.
- 4 Many scholars now avoid the term Judeo-Christianity for it sees Judaism through the gaze of Christianity and erases the distinctiveness of the ongoing Jewish tradition and thinking about nature. See Silk (1988).
- 5 In the larger corpus of White's work, he is actually careful about giving too much credence to the role of ideas, and does talk about changing social and technological factors.
- 6 Note that matter and "mater," or mother, have the same root.
- 7 Christian missionary texts of the time are full of references to indigenous natives that are "animal-like" or "bestial." Protestant settlers of the Americas thought the indigenous peoples already there were in league with the devil because of their ability to live off the land without seeming to cultivate it. Another glimpse of the colonial view of uncultivated land is found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850), where Hester Prynne is banished, as punishment, from civilization to the woods for giving in to her lustful, sexual "nature."
- 8 Lynn White comments that "by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects."
- 9 The ending to Goethe's *Faust* portrays the restless Dr. Faust finally content as he surveys the damming and diking, or as we might say, "reclamation," of swampy land, to be cultivated, or rescued from its "unproductive" and "disorderly" state.
- 10 This trend continues today, so that the general populace, according to survey after survey, do not understand even basic scientific principles, such as that chemicals and hazardous

- materials don't disappear, or have no effect, just because you can't see them (buried or dumped) anymore.
- 11 The Enlightenment desire to uncover universal principles led to the evolution of the various social sciences, which studied culture, society, or "irrationality" (psychology) in contrast to the physical sciences, which studied the natural world. This split mirrored an inherent dualism that contrasted society and culture with nature.
 - 12 This tension is very clear in Creationism, or the movement to posit that evolution is no more plausible than the Creation account in Genesis. Some creationists argue that evolution is wrong and should not be taught, while others argue that both "theories" should be.
 - 13 This tension is very clear in Creationism, or the movement to posit that evolution is no more plausible than the Creation account in Genesis. Some creationists argue that evolution is wrong and should not be taught, while others argue that both "theories" should be taught in public schools.
 - 14 The separate-spheres policy gave science domain over the material world, and religion domain over the soul, the unseen, and realms of meaning. Science is about "facts," whereas religion is about "beliefs." Beliefs can be changed; facts cannot be.
 - 15 Fox was later silenced by the Vatican, in part for his theology and in part for his association with Starhawk, a wiccan or "white-witch," who taught, and is still teaching, at Fox's Institute (now University) of Creation Spirituality. Fox has since left the Catholic Church and is an Episcopalian (Anglican).
 - 16 Although not usually viewed as Bible-centered, many Eastern Orthodox Christians would fall under this group, as would many Catholics. The "green" Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople has been very active within Orthodoxy and in joint projects with Roman Catholicism.
 - 17 As cited in Rasmussen (1996:78).
 - 18 Ecology and economy both stem from the same Greek root, *oikos* or "household." In that sense, they are about interrelated but distinctly different rules for governing the household of Earth.
 - 19 My colleague Catherine Keller adds to this list of challenges the effect of the cutting-edge deconstruction of "the natural," i.e. that much that is called "natural" and by implication "necessary" is in fact cultural construction. This discourse of deconstruction "has so far distracted more than critically enriched eco-theological work."

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