

16. Peter Mark, *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest: Form, Meaning, and Change in Senegambia Initiation Masks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 20.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
18. Prosper Lalaye Issaka, *La Conception de la Personne dans la Pensée traditionnelle Yoruba: Approach Phenomenologie* (Berne: Herbert Land and Cie 'sa, Publications Universitaires Europeennes server xx Vol. 3), p. 73.
19. *Ibid.*
20. C. L. Adeoye, *Igbagbo ati Esin Yoruba* [Belief and Ritual of the Yoruba] (Nigeria: Evans Brothers, 1989), p. 110.
21. Robert Farris Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art at the University of California at Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Museum and Laboratories of Ethnic Arts and Technology, 1971).

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Ecospirituality: First Thoughts

by Ned Hettinger

I. The Earth's Story

THIS IS A REMARKABLE TIME on planet earth. Students of natural history may need convincing of this point, however, for the earth's story is fantastic from the very beginning.¹ Our expanding universe arose from a fiery bang some 15 billion years ago of something infinitely hot and dense.² At that time, "all the matter and energy we can observe was concentrated in a region smaller than a dime."³ The planet—itsself a remarkable achievement—is theorized to have arisen from a process of accretion whereby cosmic dust particles lumped together. As they increased in size, they began crashing into each other and merging until 4.5 billion years ago the planet that is our home came into existence.⁴

After a billion years of cooking and random trial and error, life arose from this nonliving primordial soup (a process scientists call the "abiotic synthesis").⁵ During the 3 billion years that followed of exclusively single-celled organisms, major events included the development of the nucleus as a mechanism for governing the cell (2 billion years ago), the incredible ability to convert sunlight into food (photosynthesis) thus setting the stage for heterotrophic life and food chains, and an aerobic lifestyle in an oxygen atmosphere (oxygen was toxic to the earliest organisms). 600 million years ago, during the "Cambrian explosion"—Steven Jay Gould calls it "5 million years of intense creativity"⁶—multicellular life arose. Next came vertebrates. Life then makes its way out of water onto land, and then a 500-million-year period of repeated mass extinctions: one wiped out nearly 90 percent of all life forms; another was possibly caused by the impact of a "trillion ton meteor."⁷ Ice ages have come and gone repeatedly, the most recent one (ending 10,000 years ago) covered much of North America with an ice sheet 1 mile thick.⁸

What, then, is so remarkable about the present era in light of this glorious and turbulent history of earth? Despite the past mass

extinctions, there has never been more diversity of life on earth: 1.4 million forms of life catalogued, 5 million to perhaps 100 million species total.⁹ Although trilobites and dinosaurs are gone, there exists buffalo grass that is thought to be 10,000 years old, 37-acre, 100 ton fungi whose kind can grow one kilometer per day, and individual insects (queen bees) that can produce 20 million offspring.

Human beings are also present and what a marvelous and troubling species we are. We can love each other; we write poetry and can laugh; we can propel ourselves off the surface of the earth; we can wonder about the meaning of our lives and about the value of life itself. The human phenomenon is clearly a remarkable part of the earth's history and of great value.

But humans also are capable of incredible evil, not only against each other, but against other species and against the ground of our being, this earth from which we evolved. So this is a remarkable time in an unfortunate sense as well. Never before has one individual form of life destroyed so many other forms of life and so rapidly: The rate of anthropogenic species extinction is hundreds—perhaps thousands—of times greater than normal background extinction rates, resulting in a possible loss of one-quarter of all species within fifty years.¹⁰ One eminent scientist suggests that “we are in the midst of one of the great extinction spasms of geological history.”¹¹ This time, however, the cause is a species who should know better and who is therefore culpable for this drastic impoverishment of life.

Humans are now swarming over the planet and dramatically reordering it. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, one species among millions of others, now appropriates between twenty and forty percent of the photosynthetic energy produced by land plants.¹² Humans now rival the major geologic forces in our propensity to move around soil and rock: “Through both brute force and indirect influences, people move roughly 40 billion tons of soil and rock each year, a value that equals or exceeds the material transport by any other single agent such as water, wind and ice.”¹³ Human population, currently at 5.6 billion, is projected by the United Nations to more than double by the middle of the next century.¹⁴ If one leaves out Antarctica, there are now 100 humans for every square mile of the land surface of the earth.¹⁵

II. Religion and Environmental Concern

How we evaluate this massive humanization of the earth depends upon how we conceive of human beings and our appropriate place on the earth. Although ethics by itself has much to say about this issue, religion has a good deal to contribute as well. Religion is an incredibly powerful force in human life and our spiritual attitudes toward the earth, its teeming life forms and human presence, has had and will have powerful effects on the human-nature relation. As one commentator puts it, “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.”¹⁶ Thinking about the human-nature relation in spiritual terms is historically revealing; it can help us understand how we have arrived at our present situation. It is pragmatically useful; it can improve our treatment of the natural world. And it is conceptually illuminating; religion can help us better understand how we should think about and relate to the planet.

This paper considers the dialectic between religion and environmental concern. It explores how religious views can enhance as well as detract from environmental concern. Conversely, it also seeks to use environmental concern to inform religious belief. It articulates and attempts to make persuasive an ecospirituality that finds this earth a holy place. On this view, if there is anything sacred, anything that is worthy of reverence and devotion, it is this miraculous earthen community of life processes.

My attempt to spiritualize environmental concern (and to ecologize religion) has as its context the Western atheistic and humanistic reaction to the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁷ The position I develop is as an alternative to each of these options and is thus likely to draw protest from them both. Ecospirituality is not atheistic in the sense of anti-religious, for it locates religious and spiritual significance in the earth. It has a strongly anti-humanistic bent, not in the sense that it is anti-human, but in its steadfast opposition to the anthropocentrism that sees humans as of ultimate significance and that thinks human life has meaning apart from its context as one expression of the earth's creative energies. It is not Judeo-Christian because it does not speak of a transcendent ground to the religious significance of this world. My ecospirituality has a thoroughly immanent conception of the holy.

Salvation is to be found in an altered understanding of and relationship to this earth, not in getting in touch with or finding a way to attain something beyond this world. This view is naturalistic in the sense that it accepts that nature is all that is. But the nature it accepts is a sacred and precious nature.

My procedure will be to critically evaluate traditional Judeo-Christian attitudes toward the earth and humans' place on it and then to develop and defend my own ecospirituality as a response.¹⁸

III. Judeo-Christian Attitudes Towards the Environment

A. Human Dominion over the Earth

On the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York John Cardinal O'Connor cautioned the celebrants to remember that, "The earth exists for the human person and not vice versa." Rather than focus on "snails and whales," Earth Day should focus on "the sacredness of the human person." He was worried that the rising ecological consciousness represented by Earth Day relegated humans to a subsidiary rather than the central role on earth.¹⁹

O'Connor's comments fit the often quoted Biblical passages that give humans dominion over the earth. After God made the earth and nonhuman living beings, God made man and woman and told them to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."²⁰ Add to this that "God created man in his own image"²¹ and the supposition that only humans are made in God's image (and thus that the rest of creation is devoid of spirit) and we get an interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition that gives humans a license to dominate the earth. On this view, human dominion is to be understood literally as a grant of supreme authority over and absolute ownership of the earth.

From this perspective, it would seem that humans are doing quite well in our relationship to the earth and especially so recently (in the last hundred years). We are making great strides in subduing the planet and exponential human population growth is filling the earth with humans and human artifacts. Here, it seems, we have a religious justification for contemporary environmental degradation.

A defender of human dominion might argue that this outlook can support strong environmental concern because recent human-induced changes in the natural world are not compatible with "respect for the sacredness of the human person." It is true that humans, too, suffer as a result of the recent onslaught on the environment. But, the success of this argument depends on a conception of human flourishing that deeply connects humans with nature. Only in this way can it be maintained that driving other life forms out of existence impoverishes human life. The human dominion view, however, dramatically separates humans from nature in a way that makes the case that humans are losing due to environmental destruction more difficult to defend.²² We are godly, sacred, spiritual beings in a world of spiritless and profane resources that are our God-given property. If we lose, due for example to species extinction, our loss is not because of some spiritual connection humans have with all life, but because of more mundane reasons like the possibility we have lost a cure for cancer. Despite what the popular environmental movement often suggests, I think it doubtful that we are threatening our existence with our current environmental onslaught. Granted, we are losing food sources here and potential medicines there. But this sort of shallow anthropocentric evaluation of environmental value will at best get us relatively minor modifications to current environmental practices and policies.²³

Lynn White, Jr. is perhaps the best-known critic of this particular Christian attitude toward nature. In his classic "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," White identifies "orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature" as a root cause of environmental problems. He claims that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" and that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen."²⁴ O'Connor provides a recent reaffirmation of White's claim that for orthodox Christianity, "God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes."²⁵

Perhaps the most forceful rebuttals to this Judeo-Christian sanctioned human dominion over the earth have come from devout Judeo-Christians themselves who question the theological assumptions of this view. John Muir, a Christian nature mystic and founder of the Sierra Club, is worth quoting at length:²⁶

The world, we are told, was made especially for man—a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves. . . . To such property trimmed people, the sheep, for example, is an easy problem—food and clothing 'for us'. . . .

In the same pleasant plan, whales are storehouses of oil for us, to help out the stars in lighting our dark ways until the discovery of the Pennsylvania oil wells. Among plants, hemp, to say nothing of the cereals, is a case of evident destination for ships' rigging, wrapping packages, and hanging the wicked. Cotton is another plain case of clothing. Iron was made for hammers and ploughs, and lead for bullets; all intended for us.

But if we should ask these profound expositors of God's intentions, How about those man-eating animals—lions, tigers, alligators—which smack their lips over raw man? Or about those myriad of noxious insects that destroy labor and drink his blood? Doubtless man was intended for food and drink for all these? Oh, no! Not at all! These are unresolvable difficulties connected with Eden's apple and the Devil. Why does water drown its lord? Why do so many minerals poison him? Why are so many plants and fishes deadly enemies? Why is the lord of creation subject to the same laws of life as his subjects? . . .

Now, it never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? . . . The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

In a similar vein, Wendell Berry argues that the Biblical view is that God made all of Creation and found it good, including "the biting and stinging insects, poisonous serpents, weeds, poisonous weeds, dangerous beasts and disease-causing microorganisms." That we disapprove of these things doesn't mean God erred or let Satan make some of Creation, but rather that "we are deficient in wholeness, harmony, and understanding—that is, we are 'fallen'."²⁷

These passages make it clear that not all Christians—nor all interpretations of Christianity—accept the arrogant, human chauvinistic attitude that gives humans dominion over nature. Even Lynn

White knows this, for, at the end of his essay, he proposes Saint Francis of Assisi as a patron saint for those concerned to develop an alternative Christian attitude toward nature that is properly humble about the human role in the scheme of things.

B. Anthropocentric Stewardship

Perhaps the most widespread Christian response to these types of criticisms is the idea that dominion does not mean supreme authority and absolute ownership over the earth, but rather stewardship. On this view, that God gave humans dominion over the earth doesn't mean that the earth is human property to be disposed of as best suits our purposes, but rather that we are stewards of something that still belongs to God. The earth and its creatures are God's creation and God's purpose for humans is to be caretakers of God's property. A steward manages the affairs of someone else. If humans are to be good stewards, they must manage the earth carefully and treat it with the concern appropriate to the situation where one is taking care of someone else's property. On this view, humans are the earth's caretakers for an absentee landlord. A caretaker may use the land and property he looks out for, but he should not abuse or diminish it.

This stewardship understanding of humans' God-given place on the earth clearly has advantages over the dominion view in terms of its implications for ecological concern. Extirpating species when they belong to us is one thing. But if forms of life belong to God, then unless we have clear evidence that he wants us to destroy them we had better not. Similarly, a good caretaker of a piece of property does not heavily impact that property, use a third of its resources for his or her own benefit, dramatically rearrange the entire landscape, nor put his or her things in place of what was once there—again, at least not without clear evidence that this is the owner's desire.

Although a vast improvement over the dominion (domination) view, this view does not sufficiently avoid human chauvinism and self-glorification. Consider the words of one representative of this tradition:²⁸

Only humans, according to traditional Christian doctrine, have the potential to serve as the image of God and to exercise dominion in creation. Despite historical misinterpretations and abuse, these concepts recognize a basic biological fact: humans alone have evolved peculiar rational, moral and therefore, creative capacities that enable

us alone to serve as responsible representatives of God's interests and values, to function as protectors of the ecosphere.

It is true and important that only human beings are morally responsible for what they do. But the suggestion that the earth needs humans to protect it or that humans are up to the task, once again puts humans up on a pedestal where they do not belong.²⁹

Instead of property owners of creation, the stewardship view understands humans as planetary managers. I question both humans' ability to manage the planet and the desirability of humans managing it, even if we could. Altering some natural systems to achieve human benefits is one thing—it is both possible and desirable (though too often ill conceived and a failure). But will it ever be rational for us to assume we have sufficient scientific knowledge and wisdom to manage the entire planet either for our own benefit or for some supposed benefit of nature?³⁰

Even if we one day achieve knowledge sufficient to manage the planet for certain ends, the question remains whether we should manage the planet. If the goal of management were for nature's benefit, then the presupposition is that humans can improve upon nature in nature's own terms. This type of stewardship suggests that God has some higher purpose for the planet and we are to manage it for those goals. The supposition is that the natural world on its own is not good enough; it needs our help to achieve its ultimate value.

Except for planetary alteration necessary to meet legitimate human needs or to insure proper human flourishing, it significantly devalues the planet when humans manage it on a large scale, and thus it is inappropriate for humans to act as stewards in this sense. What kinds of large scale management activities might we engage in to improve upon nature? Should we feed deer in the winter because they starve, and thus improve upon nature by reducing death and suffering?³¹ Should we fumigate a forest to kill off an insect blight to improve the health of the forest for the forest's own sake? Shall we prevent extinctions in order to correct nature's mistakes or, even better, recreate ancient extinct species (if we could)?

While it may be that certain human interventions in nature may properly be characterized as enhancing nature's value, large-scale human management schemes significantly undermine nature's integrity. Rather than improve upon nature, they devalue nature and fail to show proper respect for the natural world.³² Thus human

management of nature—which is what is involved in human stewardship and caretaking if practiced on a planetary scale—diminishes the value of creation. In short, nature doesn't need a steward. Human stewardship undermines the integrity of the natural world.³³

C. *The New Christian Ecotheology*

A third Judeo-Christian view of the human-nature relation rejects the property concept entirely and sees all in creation as God's creatures, loved and cherished equally by God. The earth is a "communion of subjects, rather than a collection of objects."³⁴ Earth is not an object of exploitation, nor someone else's property to be taken care of, but a subject to commune with. Wendell Berry's recent writings powerfully articulate this more humble view of God's intentions for the human-nature relationship.³⁵

In "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," Berry is extremely critical of much contemporary Christianity. He claims Christianity "stands by while a predatory economy ravages the world," destroying its natural beauty and health and plundering its human communities and households in the process. He thus sees contemporary Christianity as conspiring in the industrial economy's "murder of creation." But Berry insists that we must distinguish between "the behavior of Christians" and what he calls true "Biblical instruction." On Berry's interpretation, this instruction teaches that the creation is not independent of the creator and that all creatures (not just humans) constantly participate in the being of God. The creation, he says, is "God's presence in things." This, he thinks, explains "why subduing the things of nature to human purposes is so dangerous and why it so often results in evil, in separation and desecration."³⁶

Like Lynn White, Berry suggests that our nature and culture-destroying economy could not exist without denying the spirit, truth, and holiness of nonhuman creation. Berry identifies a host of sacred versus profane dualisms that he thinks are responsible for our mistreatment of the earth. By restricting preciousness to one side of the dualism, the other, secular side is devalued and thus open for reckless exploitation. These dualisms include: spirit/nature, soul/body, human/nonhuman, church/life outside of church, worship/work, and religion/economy. Berry's ecotheology rejects these dualisms. Nature has spiritual value; the body is not lowly and despicable; nonhumans are precious as are humans; and ordinary life and work should be

treated as having religious dimensions. The Bible, he says, is unequivocal about the sanctity and holiness of the world: We are holy creatures—all of us—in a holy world.

From this perspective, our destruction of nature is not just the shirking of our responsibilities to fellow humans, not just bad stewardship, but a blasphemy against God. We are throwing God's gifts back in God's face. We are suggesting that our creations, human artifacts, are preferable to God's creation.

Berry's Christian ecotheology, with its understanding of the earth and humans' place on it, is as powerful a religious grounding of ecological concern as one could desire. It is also an ecologically informed religious worldview. I use many of Berry's ideas in the ecospirituality I am defending. We shall have to see to what extent I can successfully cut these ideas from their dependence on the supposition that a transcendent creator intends that we take the earth in these ways.

IV. Ecospirituality

My sense that the earth is a holy place has come from experiences I have had in nature, often while running, skiing, or hiking. More recently, some of the same emotions, feelings, and interpretations have come from more passive nature encounters, such as watching a cardinal, evenings sitting on the sea shore as the light fades, or noticing the first flowers to emerge in the spring. I did not at first identify these experiences as religious, but I now think they are properly so interpreted. Climbing to the top of a mountain I am stuck with awe at the magnificence of the panorama before me: Layers after layers of mountain ranges as far as the eye can see fill me with wonder. Nature at these moments is majestic. My response is to love this earth intensely, to be tremendously thankful for its existence (and my own), and to commit myself to defending and fighting for it.³⁷

Many other—if not most—humans have similar responses to nature in its many forms. Natural events—say a magnificent thunderstorm—make us feel small: they help us overcome our tendency to take ourselves, our lives, and what humans do generally so seriously. They can engender humility and can undercut human arrogance and hubris. The change of seasons—say the first frost—can teach us that humans aren't always in control and that we shouldn't want to be. Even if we could dominate the weather, for example, we

should not. There would be a great loss, for example, if the seasons and timing and ferocity of thunderstorms were determined by the Natural Weather Service.

These emotions, perceptions, lessons, and interpretations, I suggest, are appropriate when applied more generally to the earth and its life processes. This earth is an awesome, magnificent, and wonderful place that should elicit our love, our thanks, our support, and our humility. We should cherish the earth, and have reverence for life on it.

In addition to these common, quasi-religious human experiences of nature, reflection on some simple facts of natural history and anthropology helps to support this ecospirituality. The earth is our creator: it brought us and all other life forms into existence.³⁸ The earth's life processes—evolution, speciation, natural selection—are causally responsible for who we are. Humans are "earthlings." What kinds of beings we are have been totally shaped by this earth. Gary Snyder puts this point eloquently:³⁹

But how could we *be* were it not for this planet that provided our very shape? Two conditions—gravity and a livable temperature range between freezing and boiling—have given us fluids and flesh. The trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us five fingers and toes. The "place" (from the root *plat*, broad, spreading, flat) gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind.

So another reason to revere the earth is that it brought us into existence and shaped us into the kind of creatures we are. Further, this is not a case of wrongful life, of a bringing into existence of something that would have been better off not existing: human life—as all life—is deeply a good thing. Thus, the earth warrants a profound parental respect and honor. Profound because this parent is four and one-half billion years old and has begot not just you and me or our kind, but every kind of being on the planet. The earth has a justified claim to deference, inviolable respect, and ceremonial acknowledgment, if anything does. It produced us and continues to be our home.

Additionally, if miracles are taken as signs of the presence of the holy, the earth provides ample evidence. Both Holmes Rolston and Wendell Berry make the point that the miraculousness of the earth

itself exceeds that of more frequently mentioned miracles. The story of the development of the earth and life on it—told in the opening pages of this essay—is a story far more marvelous and spectacular, far more deserving of praise and wonder, far more of an account of a holy event than are stories such as Jesus walking on water. If the parting of the seas is a miracle that should elicit religious response, what about the existence of the seas in the first place? We are so familiar with and used to the miracles of nature around us that we often do not reflect on them with the amazement and wonder they deserve. Wendell Berry makes this case powerfully:⁴⁰

Outdoors we are confronted everywhere with wonders; we see that the miraculous is not extraordinary but the common mode of existence. It is our daily bread. Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine—which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.

The existence of the earth teeming with life in an otherwise lifeless (as far as we know) universe is an extraordinary and outstanding event. The earth stands out in the universe. It is a miraculous event.

A. Are True Religious Attitudes Only Properly Directed at an Intentional Agent?

Now one might object to this ecospirituality on the grounds that its quasi-religious attitudes toward the earth, in so far as they have any bite, implicitly assume an intentional agent or conscious creator who is responsible for creation. Talk of the earth as our creator or of being thankful to the earth treats the earth—or something that stands behind the earth—as a conscious intentional being. If the earth is a miracle, who performed the miracle, one might ask? Or as a friend of mine has suggested: “One can’t adore, reverence, or worship something that is not kindly or lovingly disposed towards us.”

This view is widely shared. Herman Daly asks, “Is it possible, really, to love an accident?”⁴¹ Daly is suggesting that if the scientific account of the origin of the earth and its life forms gives the full causal story and that if we don’t assume purpose or final causation underlies this account, then we cannot love the earth and thus conservation is

undermined. Wendell Berry strikes a similar theme when he says, “If we think of ourselves as merely biological creatures, whose story is determined by genetics or environment or history or economics or technology, then however pleasant or painful the part we play, it cannot matter much. Its significance is that of mere self-concern.”⁴²

I think a case can be made that at least some of these quasi-religious attitudes are perfectly legitimate without assuming conscious purpose is part of the earth’s story. I am most confident in my response to Daly. Of course one can love an accident: Is Daly suggesting that one can’t love an unplanned child, but only one intentionally conceived? That this beautiful blue earth was unplanned and an accident in the sense that it was not created by an intelligent designer does not seem to me to lessen our ability to love it or our duty to defend it.

The accidental nature of a thing may actually allow us to love and cherish it all the more. The earth is a more miraculous and incredible event if it exists without conscious design than if it is the product of an all perfect and powerful being from whom one would expect at least this much (and probably more).⁴³ The idea that God planned and designed the earth makes the process more familiar, less spectacular and awe inspiring.

To be sure, love and thankfulness when directed at beings who cannot be aware of these attitudes are different than are love and thankfulness directed at a person. In the latter case, one expects some kind of response; one expects that these attitudes will make a difference to their object. The earth will not respond to our loving it and being thankful for it. Nonetheless, these are appropriate attitudes and they make a difference in our lives, in how we respond to and treat the earth. The dead are sometimes the object of our love and thanks, and yet we have no expectation of this having an affect on them. I see no reason to think that such love or thankfulness is inappropriate and it clearly is meaningful, important, and motivational in our lives. That the earth and its life processes aren’t intentional agents, lovingly disposed toward us, doesn’t make it impossible to love, cherish, and reverence that which has made us and in which we literally “live, move, and have our being.”

B. Ecospirituality and Environmental Concern

The ecospirituality suggested here involves a dramatically altered way of understanding and relating to this world. This earth is our home and our creator. It continues to provide for us the sustenance of our existence. It ties us to other forms of life and individuals by bonds of kinship: all of us are offspring of the same earth parent. The mountains, the seas, the endless prairie, the grasslands, the wetlands, the deserts and rainforests are all infinitely precious, both manifesting and partially constituting a proper object of religious concern.

From this perspective, current human practices toward nature are a sacrilege—a gross irreverence toward this hallowed place. These practices degrade what is of ultimate value and meaning. We rape the land, forcing it to yield to our sick and trivial desires. We strip mine entire landscapes in order to overconsume while we throw away huge amounts of the products of this extraction.⁴⁴ We drive solo in gas-guzzling, polluting, internal-combustion machines and live in myriad other energy-inefficient ways, thereby condoning the damming of 65,000 U.S. waterways and the spilling of millions of gallons of oil each year. Our meat-eating predilections are an incredibly inefficient and destructive way of taking our nourishment from the earth.

Allowing our population to continue to grow exponentially, driving our kin out of existence, usurping a third of the planet's food resources for ourselves, and reshaping the planet in the massive earth-moving ways we do, suggests that we think it is not only permissible to turn the earth into ourselves and our projects, but that this enhances its value. Ecospirituality sees this massive humanization of earth—and humans' sanguine attitude toward it—as self-idolatry. We are worshiping ourselves by worshiping the results of human activity. Our ultimate concern is to domesticate, tame, manipulate and manage landscapes, ecosystems, and nonhuman organisms and processes.

This is a hubris that is blind to the holiness of that which it seeks to replace. Worse, it is a hubris that is in a certain way self-justifying and makes the possibility of ecospirituality all the more difficult. The more we tame, manipulate, dominate, and control the planet, the harder it is for we humans to feel small in creation and to be awed by its powers. Humility in the face of a nonhuman order that made us becomes less and less of a possibility.⁴⁵

While ecospirituality condemns the scale of human activity on the planet, as well as its methods and motives, it grants that humans have

a place on the earth, even a significant one. It acknowledges that humans must alter the earth and understands that we must kill to survive. Exactly what such a reverence for earth would see as appropriate human activity on the planet remains to be specified. But it would certainly involve living more softly, sharing the planet more fairly with other creatures, making amends for our past indulgences, and taking from the planet sparingly, humbly, and thankfully. Let me close with the words, once again, of Wendell Berry:⁴⁶

To live we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this lovingly, knowingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it greedily, clumsily, ignorantly, destructively, it is a desecration. By such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.

NOTES

1. It is fitting that a paper on religion and the environment starts with a scientific description. Religion must—if it is to have any respectability—fit with our best scientific account of the nature of reality. Religion spent too long combating science and that has been part of its demise in some quarters. As this paper hopes to show, science properly conceived can be a friend of religion, again, properly conceived. For a powerful merging of science and spirituality, see Holmes Rolston, "Secular Scientific Spirituality," in Peter H. Van Ness, ed., *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (New York: Crossroad/Continuum, Crossroad Publishing Co., forthcoming).
2. See Steven Weinberg, "Life in the Universe," *Scientific American* (October 1994), p. 24.
3. James E. Peebles, et al., "The Evolution of the Universe," *Scientific American* (October 1994), p. 53.
4. Claude J. Allegre and Stephen H. Schneider, "The Evolution of the Earth," *Scientific American* (October 1994), p. 67.
5. The oldest evidence of life is of blue/green algae, some 3.5 billion years ago.
6. Stephen Jay Gould, "The Evolution of Life on the Earth," *Scientific American* (October 1994), p. 89.
7. Kevin Timoney, "On Being Natural," *The Trumpeter* 10,1 (Winter 1993), p. 21.
8. Allegre and Schneider, "Evolution of the Earth," p. 74.
9. See William K. Stevens, "Species Loss: Crisis or False Alarm?," *New York Times*, 20 August 1991, p. C8.
10. See Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 280, and Paul R. Ehrlich and Edward O. Wilson, "Biodiversity Studies: Science and Policy," *Science* 253 (16 August 1991), p. 760.
11. Wilson, *ibid.*, p. 280. There have been approximately a dozen mass extinctions

- chronicled in the fossil record. See Neil Campbell, *Biology*, 2nd ed. (Redwood City, CA: Benjamin/Cummings Publishing Company, 1990), p. 500. It typically has taken between 2 and 10 million years for the earth to rebuild its former diversity after major catastrophic extinctions. Homo sapiens are only about 250 thousand years old. For discussion, see Steven Jay Gould, "The Golden Rule—A Proper Scale for our Environmental Crisis," *Natural History* (September 1990), pp. 24-30.
12. See Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, *Healing the Planet* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1991), p. 34. See also Wilson, *The Diversity of Life*, p. 272. Humans appropriate this photosynthetic energy that powers virtually all living organisms on the planet by consuming plants directly or through animal intermediaries, by reducing it as with the clearing of tropical forests for pasture lands, or destroying it as with parking lots and shopping malls.
 13. "Plate tectonic forces lift about 14 billion tons of rock per annum. . . volcanic activity in the oceans creates about 30 billion tons. . . Glaciers around the world transport 4.3 billion tons of sediment. . . rivers annually transport 14 billion tons of sediment to lakes or oceans." Meandering waterways move 40 billion tons short distances. See Richard Monastersky, "Earthmovers: Humans take their place alongside wind, water, and ice," *Science News* 146 (December 24 & 31, 1994), p. 432.
 14. Lester Brown, et al., *State of the World, 1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 7.
 15. See Donald Worster, "The Nature We Have Lost," in *The Wealth of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 6.
 16. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, #3767 (10 March 1967), p. 1205. White thinks that "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny," p. 1207. This may overstate the point, but religion is a highly important factor in the environmental crisis.
 17. I suspect that the view here embraced has affinities with many aspects of non-Western religions. But my ignorance prevents me from drawing these connections. I do know that my views have affinities with some Native American attitudes toward nature and have been greatly informed by the writings of Wendell Berry, Holmes Rolston, and John Muir. For a fine collection of Native American ideas about the earth, see T.C. McLuhan, *Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1971).
 18. A fuller treatment of ecospirituality needs as well to critique humanism and contrast ecospirituality with it.
 19. Ari L. Goldman, "Focus of Earth Day Should Be on Man, Cardinal Cautions," *New York Times*, 23 April 1990.
 20. Genesis 1: 20-31.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. See Ned Hettinger, "Levy on Indirect Utilitarianism and Ecocentric Environmentalism," (March 1993). Available from the author.
 23. Shallow anthropocentrism cannot allow for protection of numerous "worthless" species. The less shallow and more enlightened an anthropocentrism is, the more it can provide a strong basis for environmental concern. For an argument that anthropocentric justifications for environmental concern are not sufficient to preserve biodiversity, see David Ehrenfeld, "Hard Times for Diversity," *Beginning*

- Again: People and Nature in the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 114-123.
24. White, "Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," pp. 1206, 1205.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 1205.
 26. Edwin Way Teale, ed., *The Wilderness World of John Muir* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1954), p. 316-17.
 27. Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 97.
 28. James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p. 149.
 29. For the point that the earth does not need us and would do much better without us, see Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 114-15. For the point that humans couldn't end life on earth even if they wanted to, see Steven Jay Gould, "The Golden Rule—A Proper Scale for Our Environmental Crisis," *Natural History* (September, 1990), pp. 24-30.
 30. Aldo Leopold, for one, is skeptical about the possibility of such knowledge. "In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves." *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 240. Wendell Berry thinks that humans can understand the patterns of nature well enough to preserve them, although not to control or completely understand them. See Berry's "The Gift of Good Land," in *The Gift of Good Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981). Reprinted in S. Armstrong and R. Botzler, *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence* (New York McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 489-495.
 31. I ignore complications here concerning (1) why the deer are starving (because humans eradicated their predators and usurped their land) and (2) whether in fact such practices might not actually increase suffering and death.
 32. I am assuming here that natural integrity depends to a large extent on its being wholly other from humans. This obviously needs defense. For a partial defense, see Ned Hettinger and Bill Throop, "Can Ecocentric Ethics Withstand Chaos in Ecology?" (unpublished manuscript available from the author).
 33. Let us not confuse human stewardship of nature with human stewardship of our own affairs. Humans taking greater care of how human society is structured and how it impacts nature is precisely what is desired.
 34. "Is God Green," *Amicus* (Winter 1993), pp. 20-34.
 35. See Berry's "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" and his earlier "The Gift of Good Land." It is interesting to note that Berry has dropped the stewardship language of "The Gift of the Good Land" in his more recent "Christianity and the Survival of Creation." I should mention that Berry's sense of stewardship in "Good Land" has almost no resemblance to the stewardship model I criticize here.
 36. "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," p. 101.
 37. Who am I thankful to, one might ask? The assumption behind this question is that thankfulness is only appropriate if directed toward an intentional agent. But I don't think giving thanks necessarily requires this supposition.
 38. There is a problem concerning whether it is the earth or more broadly the universe that should be understood as that from which we came. More generally,

I need to explain why I think it is the earth that is a holy place, rather than the entire cosmos.

39. Gary Snyder, *Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), pp. 28-29.
40. Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," p. 103.
41. Herman Daly, "Beginning Again on Purpose," *Conservation Biology* 7 (3), p. 737. A review of David Ehrenfeld's *Beginning Again: People and Nature in the New Millennium*, 1993.
42. "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," p. 109.
43. Here I allude to the problem of evil. If an all-perfect and powerful God designed the earth, then the suffering and death all around us can serve to diminish our religious appreciation of what was done. No such moral qualms make sense if the earth arose on its own.
44. One figure I've heard is that in the United States we generate 25 tons of waste per person per year.
45. The analogy of a grown-up child confronting an aging and relatively feeble parent is both apt and illusory. For in all likelihood the earth will outlive us by many orders of magnitude and children's growing power and control don't typically arise at the direct expense of their parents' impoverishment.
46. "The Gift of Good Land," p. 495.

Eschatology and Ecology: The Environment in the End-Times

by Peter C. Phan

IT WAS ONCE FASHIONABLE, especially in the wake of Lynn White's famous essay, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,"¹ to charge the Judeo-Christian tradition with having given rise to the ecological crisis. Christianity, it is argued, contributed to the destruction of the environment, especially through its injunction to dominate nature in order to satisfy the needs of humanity.

A number of recent studies, however, have shown that such an accusation rests upon an unwarranted oversimplification of historical data. Among other things, it has been pointed out that the role of Christianity in the environmental crisis cannot properly be evaluated apart from other Western cultural movements such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. It has been noted, too, that other religious traditions, allegedly attuned to nature, have also assailed the environment. And, lastly, it has been shown that the Christian theological tradition itself contains powerful motifs that, if retrieved and developed, would contribute to a responsible care-for-creation ethics.²

One of the basic articles of the Judeo-Christian faith is the belief that the course of history is not cyclical, bound up in an eternal meaningless return of all things to their former state. On the contrary, history is oriented toward a divinely appointed goal, and is therefore constituted not by a meaningless repetition of events but by a beginning and an end, a past and a future, the present being the time in which the divine plan is providentially enacted by humans with their free choices. The beginning is described in terms of God's creative act, and the end as the fulfillment of God's plan, the symbol of which is the kingdom of God.

In formulating the doctrine of the end of time and eternal life (eschatology) Christian theologians have privileged the place of

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

Thomas G. Walsh 1

TAOISM AND ECOLOGY

Ellen M. Chen 5

ECOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN RELIGIONS

John A. Grim 16

AN INDIAN APPROACH TO THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Thomas Manninezhath 27

THE 'NATURE' OF RELIGION: REFLECTIONS ON NATURE AND RELIGION

Francis X. D'Sa 34

THE MODERN MYTH OF MASTERY AND THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF CREATION: A JOURNEY IN ECOLOGY AND CREATION THEOLOGY

M. Darrol Bryant 56

THE SPIRITUALITY OF MATTER: RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENT IN YORUBA TRADITION, NIGERIA

Jacob K. Olupona 69

ECOSPIRITUALITY: FIRST THOUGHTS

Ned Hettinger 81