

Abstract

Protestant Mysticism and Early Modern Environmentalism

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The advent of Protestantism brought with it changing ideas of selfhood that drew sharper distinctions between human beings, the natural world, and God, but also invited serious reflection on the proper relationships between these. Indeed, scholars like Mark Stoll have argued for the enduring influence that Protestant thought and specifically Calvinism has had on the American environmental movement. Yet even since the early modern period, Protestant devotional writers have been considering the traffic between the human, natural, and divine spheres in ways that might be familiar to modern theorists of deep ecology.

An example of this early trend is a group of 17th century Anglican divines often referred to as the Metaphysical poets for their religious focus and the ingenuity of their verse. Their penitential introspection and attention to embodied experience resonate with contemporary notions of ecological selfhood. Indeed, due to their attention to the body and the sensuous, they have sometimes been ironically dubbed the “Physical” poets. This is no historical accident: Concurrent with the rise of the natural sciences and the intensity of early Protestant introspection, it has been argued that during the early modern period, the concept of

corporeality itself emerged. A self-conscious reckoning with the body in its sinfulness, redemption, and correspondence with other natural and astral bodies is a hallmark of their poetics.

Though not particularly effective on the policy level, this deeply Protestant impulse to experience God through the abundance of creation resonates with the spiritual ethos of the modern American environmental movement. Furthermore, it represents another important challenge to the thesis of Lynn White Jr. in his famous article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” that Christianity is mainly if not solely responsible for anthropogenic climate change. Indeed, classical virtues like temperance found powerful aesthetic expression in the work of these poets who reflected on the depth of human depravity reflected, for instance, in expanding mining operations in 17th century England.

I will expand upon original published research on corporeality and ecology in the writings of George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, both moderate priests in the Church of England whose devotional poetry longs for unitive experiences of the divine, sometimes employing the language of Renaissance Hermeticism in their yearning for a divinized creation. Poet-priest Thomas Traherne is likewise known for the proto-Romantic, nature-friendly mysticism of his Centuries of Meditations. Finally, I will examine the work of more radical Protestant mystics such as George Fox and the Quakers, the immediacy of whose experience of salvation issued in a social as well as environmental ethic.

To be sure, the Enlightenment posed challenges for a positive ethical evaluation of the environment and the natural world, but also offered distinct opportunities. On the one hand, Carolyn Merchant has noted the metaphors of sexual violence used in the work of

Enlightenment thinkers to explicate their efforts at uncovering the secrets of the natural world.

On the other, the New Science decentered the anthropocentric worldview of the medieval period that assumed that creation existed solely for the benefit of human beings. As writers, thinkers, and religious figures at the precipice of fading medieval sacramentalism and emergent Protestant individualism, these early Protestant “mystics” formulated a proto-environmentalist ethic that is enduring, if understated, in the history of modern environmental thought.