An Ecological Ethics for the Anthropocene: Environmental Justice and Religion

James Rice

Abstract:

This essay examines the relationship between critical theological theories within avant-garde scholarship on religion as a social phenomenon and the equally, if not more, pressing revelations of climate scientists regarding the ecological crisis which is partly the result of a society whose faith has been misplaced in a form of unsustainable technology which threatens to destroy us. In order to take action in a world which has been and will become marred by ever-worsening environmental catastrophes, I argue that we need a new conception of earthly mysticism—one which sees humanity as a shaping force, guided by the political, economic, and innovative promises of secular humanism, but in need of a new morality which can govern the way we relate to the natural world both symbiotically and conscientiously. This new morality, I suggest, is already present in religious ecology, and bringing it into the mainstream, as a force for social, political, religious, and ecological sustainability, is the challenge of our time, both for theorists of the divine, which is ever-present even in secular modernity but threatened by false ideals of our duties of stewardship which undermine the resilience of creation, as well as practitioners of ritual and purveyors of catechism, who often, unfortunately, resist making determinations and proclamations which threaten to upend the status quo, but are necessarily consistent with the teachings of religion as they call on us to care for all things.

1. Introduction

Ecology has a deep and complex relationship with theology and religion. Most environmentalists who think about religion see ecological ethics as an alternative to much of the scientific and technological mainstream in modern society—at least since the environmental movements of the 1960s (Sideris 2012, 408).[1] While some religious theorists and philosophers have sought to engage at a higher level with the cosmological arguments that were developed in the mid- to late-twentieth century (Polkinghorne 1996), ecotheology has taken a different viewpoint. It is the appreciation of the natural world, its enveloping embrace of all that is living—including intelligent life—with all of its nuance that drives the ecotheological model of God. Vital projects which define the interrelationship between divine revelation—a historical and mystical

[1] Pedersen (2015, 559) describes environmental ethics in the following terms: "Environmental ethics deals with the relation of the human species to everything else on the planet, living and non-living. This totalizing perspective has led scholarship in religion and ecology to a focus on worldview as an intrinsic feature of religion and also to a special concern with science as a source of knowledge about the non-human natural world."

phenomenon which defined humanity's relationship to nature in its most primeval manifestation (i.e., in the paleolithic, mesolithic, and neolithic eras)—and the very substance of living, growing, evolving matter, which sustains and propels our ability to create, innovate, and reproduce on this earth, the natural world and the life within it, with which we share everything. One could say that religion is nothing more than "an attitude of awe" towards the divine as it presents itself in quotidian happenstance (York 2022).

Studies of nature in this context incorporate visions of environmental politics, morality, and theology. The revelations we experience in modernity are no longer driven and substantiated by myth and fantasy; they are grounded in fact, science, and evidence. As Lynn White notes in his pioneering 1967 article in *Science,* "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis": "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one" (1206). Might it be possible that by transgressing the boundaries which demarcate fields such as the natural sciences (i.e., physics, geology, biology), and the humanities (i.e., philosophy, religious studies, history, and literature) we might unlock secrets of our past which pave the way for a future which is more humane, egalitarian, and rational. Of course, the humanities are not known for their rationality—that medal belongs with economics and the self-interested market-making motivation uncovered by Adam Smith—all the same, it remains a fact that in an age of intelligence, computation at an unimaginable scale, and brutalizing conflict and natural disaster, humanity needs a spiritual salve—one which can only come from the love, joy, peace, and solace found in religion and in empathy for each other and for the rest of the living and natural world.

The empirical turn towards authoritative climate science has revealed the nature of society to be in such a critical state that we cannot wait for an absent creator to return to set things right. The environmental crisis we face is of our own making and only by collective action can we save ourselves. There is a difference between technocratic, industrial approaches to climate solutions and those approaches which place agency and responsibility with the individual. Thus, religion utilizes explanations for our predicament which conceptualize our species as simply one part of a living ecology of experience and nature; one that shares with all living entities a relationship with the creator that is asymmetric, yet is wholly explained by our tendency to lapse into social dependence and our need for political belonging (Gatens 2000). This appreciation has its roots in ecology, some forms of environmental aesthetics, and ecological ethics—the last of which exemplifies humans as embedded, and part of the world, rather than superseding it.

To appreciate the sense of belonging with the universe, and the sort of coevolution, or coexistence that is prevalent in some of the ecological ethics literature, take into account the fact that we are "inextricably linked to vast, ancient, and potent cosmological, geological, and biological processes" (Dowd 2008, 290). We are not unique as a dominant life form within earth's history—the dinosaurs rule that out—and we will surely not be the last major species of life which inhabits this planet either. We are merely visitors, pliant to our environment, and thus should recognize that we are growing and reproducing in much the same manner as the rest of life. Evolution has shown us that even our religion, like language or sight, is not a factor which distinguishes us—indeed, religion too is adapted to our needs as a social and rational species (Wilson 2002). Our technology will one day crumble and fall—even the very aspect of humanity

which perhaps might be unique to us, our rationality, our ingenuity, our intuition, will not save us.[2] The question then becomes: How should we live while we are here on earth?

In this essay, I argue that religion's emergence as a socio-cultural phenomenon can be reduced to a claim about the nature-culture divide within critical theories of social stratification, politics, and culture on the one hand and environmental, bio-political, and ecological theories about the preservation and sustainment of ecosystems, species, and life on earth on the other. In other words, I see a twofold separation between ecology and religious faith that needs to be remedied in order for religious organizations to make headway on ecological sustainability. This claim will bridge the waters of environmental ethics and non-linear narrative histories of religious traditions, which are specifically oriented to approach the question of ritual, worship, and practice from a standpoint of intersubjective norms. Religion is often thought to be a cultural phenomenon, in line with politics, intellectual life, and the arts. For it to hold authority, or at least influence, on or over environmental politics and activism, the diversity of religious traditions needs to divulge their positions on a range of topics critical for both furthering the human project, and remaining within planetary boundaries.

Inherent in this work is a refutal of perspectives which are gendered, sexed, racialized, and based on mistaken assumptions about class, social status, and disability.[3] Because of religion's history as both a cultural force and as a spiritual balm for the harshness and unforgiving nature of life, it needs to be a force for healing in more way than one. By this, I mean to suggest that religion, like our broader society, needs to address historical economic inequalities, including colonialism, discrimination, and oppression, as it works to find meaning in *environmental* justice within and beyond the Anthropocene. Justice for earth-dwellers in an age of capitalist exploitation, overuse, hegemony, and massively unaccounted-for economic externalities could be based, respectively and variously, on solidarity, sustainability, sufficiency, and participation (Dieter Hessel cited in Pedersen 2015, 563). As I note later, climate action should be a reconciliation with our obligations to the downtrodden, the meek, and the fainthearted. Without fulfilling these expectations of any moral society, any rational, conscious, moral being could hardly be worthy of the name.

What this tells us about the necessity for a reconceptualized, "natural spirituality" is that our social structures, including religion, must be based on holistic premises which recognize the positive virtues that are present in humanity itself (MacIntyre 2007). I would hasten to add that stopping short of secular humanism is the epitome of what is required of our broken world—a world of ruined projects, and ruined dreams (Hine 2023). Instead we need a reenchantment; a belief in the power of humanity to change; and a belief that the impersonated, yet impersonal and omnipotent divine has a plan for us which includes massive human-initiated action and ambition to transform our world. The acknowledgement of and subsequent reconciliation of eco-

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[2] See Rolston (2008) for a cosmic perspective on life and humanity's role in the universe. For a taste of what's to come in this essay, see Friedrich Engels (1964) *Dialectics of Nature*: Introduction.

[3] See Braidotti (2020), 466: "This [masculine, white, Eurocentric, heterosexual, able-bodied, urbanized, standard language speaking] subject is the Man of reason that feminists, anti-racists, black, indigenous, postcolonial and ecological activists have been criticizing for decades." See also the essays contained in Grusky (2014).

theological thinking in the face of these challenges, and this four-fold criterion for equity and prosperity, strengthens the equitable and ecological perspective on belief because of the global and decentralized nature of worldwide religions—religions which don't adhere to national boundaries, nor to the social hierarchies which exist in our societies.[4] In the following sections I argue that religion beings a necessary and crucial dimension of historical scriptural ethics to debates in environmental science and policy, as well as needed modern engagement with both social issues which are affected by the worsening crisis and vital engagement with and promotion of the economic solutions to the crisis itself.

2. Religion and Nature

To live in harmony with nature is not something humans have, thus far, been successful at. Whitney Bauman, in his book *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic* writes that "humans have not always been a part of nature, but to say that once humans emerge *from* nature they can kill nature as a whole simply gives humans too much power and leads to the question of what humans are if not part of the process of nature naturing" (Bauman 2014a, 41). Humans are merely a part, and an insignificant one at that, of divine creation. Our world may be small, but the universe which contains us is vast and contains many mysteries, of which we are incredibly naive, and to meddle with would be both imprudent and increasingly dangerous (Ord 2020). Part of my aim in this essay is to describe the relationship humanity should have with nature, within a religious framing, such that we recognize that nature has in the past, and could in the future continue without us. A spiritual validation of the human projects of technology, exploration, and cultural progress depends on the progenitors of those projects retaining a moral perspective which acknowledges the humble roots of our ever-changing and increasingly self-aware civilization.

I argue that this project of self-awareness is the crux of what differentiates us from previous life on Earth. As such, we bear a responsibility—some of it out of any one individual's control—but to the extent that our species can direct its own destiny, we have a responsibility to mandate cultural continuity with the past, including with the ethical project of natural and civil religions and their diversity (see Beiner 2010). We must allow space for humanity, and the project of civilization, to co-evolve with the scope of the universe. We must meet the universe halfway (Barad 2007)—doing what we can to advance our interests, while allowing the natural world space to be resilient and to recover from our increasingly harmful human intrusions. In other words, we must allow nature to go on naturing—the universe must continue to be in this process of becoming—if life is to continue. Without the process of immanent interaction, transaction, and exchange, life would not be able to develop and undergo revision, refinement, and evolution in the ways that it has. As Bauman writes, "the universe would be frozen in time" (2014a, 46). Nature and concepts of nature are, similarly, subject to scrutiny, and evolve with culture—scientific and popular—over time (Bauman 2014a, 58). I want to respond to an

[4] Religions, like time, and humans themselves, as I argue, can be thought of as rhizomatic—mixed up with the natural, political, and cultural worlds of which they, and we, are a part. See Deleuze and Guattari (1987), 3-25, and Bauman (2011).

objection at this early stage of my sketch: One could claim, in a religious context, that we must do more for nature and for creation than simply allow it to be. One could argue that we need to cultivate, foster, and develop the natural world, and that this is our duty as moral, ethical, political, religious, and environmental agents. As I hope will become apparent, I ascribe to and assent that this responsibility is ours; beyond our duties to simply allow nature space, we must be active champions of our world in its glory and beauty.

But we are, inherently, aware of our nature as intelligent creatures—we are *biohistorical* creatures—and this forms the problem of human exceptionalism which I am targeting in parts of this essay.[5] In one sense, our relationship with religion is intertwined, not with God—for this is a conceptual problem, not a social one—but with the historical and narrative relevance of the creation story. Or, at least with the more humanistic side of the story of the Abrahamic God, the nirvana achieved by the Buddha, or the personal ethical creed of Confucianism. The creation story can vary over cultures, but what remains the same is the fact that it is a story. This narrative has its modern origins in Marxist and Freudian conceptions of bourgeois theories of class struggle and the enlightenment and entitlement of the bourgeoisie (Siebert 1985, xi). Thus, theology and traditional historical materialism are symbiotic—but in a different, more idealistic, way than I use the term below. Theology grounds historical materialism in a metaphysical structure, while, at the same time, historical materialism gives theology a basis in political and economic forces, enabling theological ideas, and the immanence of divine law, to breach the gates of political and economic theology.[6]

The manner in which we treat the crisis of conscience, the crisis of no-longer-viable economic infrastructure, and the way we think of the ideals we ascribe to the solution set of possible futures plays an undertheorized role in our attitudes towards climate change, towards the Anthropocene, and towards environmental societal apocalypse. Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber, in a 2022 article wrestle with an alternate future—an alternate reality— where upon "humans are not responsible for climate change given that it is the fulfillment of an [eschatological] end-time prophecy. From this perspective, believers are likely to welcome and embrace climate change" (48). As I hope is obvious, I do not wish to allow that this ideology should become widely accepted. Much of what environmental and religious ethicists have learned about the environment in the past 50-60 years has shown that embracing climate change because it might somehow be good or beneficial—at least for some—is not only wrong, but also harmful and dangerous. In the following section I examine in more depth the dichotomy I proposed at the outset—religion/culture versus nature/God—and assess its strengths and weaknesses as a vehicle for action.

3. Environmental and Ecological Ethics

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[5] Bauman (2014a), 76. See also Latour (2017), Second Lecture, and Conway (2016), 62-63 for a discussion of a concomitant term, *geohistory*, as applied to humans' impact on the earth's ecosystems and ecology.

[6] Siebert, Ott, and Byrd (2013), 34. See also Siebert (1985), Ch. 3, and for a recent, comprehensive, treatment of economic theology see Schwarzkopf (2020).

I begin this section with a summary of the field of critical religious scholarship which preceded environmental philosophy. Ecological ethics, studied from the standpoint of critical theories of the interaction, and sometimes standoff between nature and culture, is usefully distinguished from much of the historical work within the philosophical scholarship of Marx, Engels, Freud, and others whose ideas have been influential, but for whom the environment was not in crisis. At the same time, the original theorists of the Frankfurt School held that the "key idea of the critical theory of society" was, paradoxically, a "religious and theological one" (Siebert, Ott and Byrd 2013, 39). Still, critical theorists also held that "humanistic religiosity without dogmas, authorities, institutions, and asceticism" was the best way to honor creation (2013, 40). But a religious, ecological, ethic still requires *some* institutions; still requires adherents carry out its guidelines; and still requires a foundation in a higher cause—one that human beings are apt to follow. This cause, and the institutions that carry out its directive, can and should be grounded in respect for all living things.

It should be made clear, especially within environmental ethics, that there is no such thing as a "great divide" between nature and the human culture of world religions—notwithstanding any dialectical or rhetorical distinction that I've been suggesting here. Humans are a part of nature, as much as they supervene upon it. What might be the implications for deciding between the two competing popular conceptions of our relationship to the natural world? I suggest that there is a discontinuity between what nature meant to us before the industrial revolution—before the Renaissance, before the scientific revolution, and before the Enlightenment—and what nature means to us in the era of knowledge, information, and complex social structures—albeit which still rely on cultural and religious texts to explain the origins of what is known as the Axial Age (Bellah and Joas 2012). As we enter deeper into a crisis of our own design—unwittingly at the outset, yes, but unequivocally *not* so now—it is crucial that our dignity is upheld such that we remain capable of retelling the modest and unassuming origins of our society in such a way that we make plain the mystical and spiritually dependent nature of our psychology and livelihood (e.g., Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1998). Let me explain: Unarguably, humans need spiritual connection—whether this is to established religion with a traditional ritual offering soteriological alms, or to a scientific humanism which extolls the virtues of high culture. We depend on validation, connection, and the wisdom of elder members of our community, whose experience teaches us—formally and informally—what is the nature of the good, and how we can live in cohesion and harmony with living and non-living others.

But religious psychology and cognitive models of divine wisdom can only take us so far in a world defined by human domination, exploitation even, of all that lives, including members of our own species. Bauman (2018, 383) writes that "climate change teaches us that we are not outside of nature and that we cannot 'manage' or 'steward' the rest of the natural world." Indeed, we must live in harmony with it, knowing that we are products of the biosphere and the biota of which it is formed. Our futures are, collectively, global and planetary. Thus, if we are to survive in the Anthropocene, we must recognize that we are entangled with all other forms of life. We must recognize that we are deeply interconnected, and that we embody the best of what some would call *bios*, or *zoe*. *Zoe* refers to the biological, chemical, and animistic aspects of life, while *bios* is often taken to mean the experiential, and uniquely human experience of living—in

particular, the scope and scale of the experience of life (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018, 68). The distinction between the non-agential z*oe*, and experiential *bios* is important because the opposition suggests that *bios* is only a product of the static and inanimate realm of *zoe* that we perceive as surrounding us within the larger solar system and universe and which we retain the ability to use—the the extent that we can—to construct the marvels of our civilization, thus bringing about the perpetuation of *bios*—us. It is only by depending on these tools, implements, and relatively inanimate props, that we derive the ability to push on, but without them—as now we see the certainty and stability of much of our environment being threatened by anthropogenic climatic change—when they are removed, damaged, or depleted, our spaceship earth becomes substantially less hospitable (Boulding 1966).

Following this, an earth-bound, planetary, and environmental ethic must take into account the sociobiology and symbiosis of all living things, including humans. The Gaia hypothesis, first developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the 1970s, holds that all life on earth is interdependent—all life is deeply interconnected in a web of shared experiencing (Lovelock 2006; Deane-Drummond 2019, 119; Mitchem 2014; see also Ruether 1992). It is this interconnectedness of all ecosystems on earth that leads to a concurrent acceleration in the bio-geo-chemical markers of the history of life; as human culture accelerates with the development of technology, the economy, etc., so the rest of the biosphere, geology, and climate even, are experiencing accelerated and remarkably unprecedented change (Latour 2017, Second Lecture). These days, we are often found to be speaking about "tipping points," "planetary frontiers," and "critical thresholds."[7] The level of urgency, as well as the level of alarm, is rapidly rising; we are finding that we are struggling to keep pace with the developments of both the human economy, as well as scientific and technological innovation—those fields which contribute the most to human knowledge are surpassing us. An ethics focused on the intersection of theology and ecology, can be a solution to this runaway acceleration.

I hope to have shown that the problem of "what to do about now" is deeper than what can be provided by the perspective of any one disciplinary approach. I also introduced one of the pillars of critical ecological ethics by suggesting that agency and spiritual animation requires us to take responsibility for our actions, and also by suggesting that the forces of nature are hardly fully understood by society or science. What we do going forward, we must do with care, and there is no tradition which understands care and humility more than religious traditions. Where my argument up until now has dealt with historical and ethical responses to the science, in the next few sections, I explain the spiritual implications and what spiritual organizations and movements can do in response to the problems already laid out.

4. Concepts of God/Nature

The section links environmental science to one side of the partition I already introduced—God/nature. The way that this partition interlinked with the opposing dimension—religion/culture—will be explored in the later segment. With the advent of theories that personified the granular and microscopic biological elements that link and permeate all life—strictly speaking, the Gaia

[7] Latour (2017), Second Lecture. See also Latour (2014).

hypothesis—it became clear that humans cannot survive without the life giving diversity that exists on Earth.[8] Like the outer surface of the earth, we are compartmentalized, specialized, merged, and assembled creatures. The revelations of an organic-yet-plural-being—by which I mean an organism which depends on microscopic others to survive—calls for a new ethic, one which takes into account the tenuous nature of our existence, our cohabitation and symbiosis with other creatures. The whisperings of the desert shaman, of the thaumaturgist, are not enough to appease the mechanistic whirring of the biological diversity within the ground beneath our feet, the sustaining and renewing water cycle disrupted by extreme storms and rainfall, the ocean currents which are rising and acidifying, and the previously malleable, pliable, regenerating, and adaptable, yet now sensitive, chemical composition of the atmosphere threatened by an overload of carbon—all of which are nearing crisis.

What does this mean for creatures supposedly made in God's image? Are we part of the evil that our creator left us to wrestle with? This calls for an ethic which acknowledges our differences and celebrates them. In the words of Rosi Braidotti: "we are all in this together, yet we are not one-and-the-same."[9] So what relationship does this multifaceted, plural "we" have with nature? What relationship do "we" have with God? As I have been arguing, one way to solve this seemingly intractable issue is to claim that the supernatural—the divine—desires that nature be robust to artificial cultural and mechanistic imposition; even by beings who are at the same time part of that nature. Needless to say, even a god who intended for humanity to develop tools and knowledge and technology could still not have intended for us to develop them in such a way that we endangered our own survival. At this point, one might object that perhaps God placed a fragile climate in our care as a way to test our ability to expand our morality by accepting a responsibility to take care of the Earth— an Earth under threat from a greedy and self-aggrandizing civilizational culture. I think this is a plausible objection, and I will have a few remarks to appease the sympathizer of this theory.

This line of inquiry goes beyond the main scope of my intended conclusions—indeed whether a creator has granted us autonomy to create, destroy, succeed or perish, leads us into questions of free will, on which I will not dare tread. Yet we can still ask whether the outcome of these debates a necessary follow-on to the setting in which western philosophers and theologians conceptualize the God/Nature interface. We can still ask whether, when we harm nature, we are also harming God? For some, "western culture has constructed nature as a force that must be dominated if culture is to prevail" (Gaard 1997, 120; quoted in Bauman 2014b). Nature can thus be thought of as a concept which is pliable and can be adapted to meet the needs of its caretakers (humans). Yet, this conception could be quite harmful, with countervailing implications for a society which seeks to live in harmony and symbiosis with nature. I argue that the necessary destabilizing—and, at the same time, healing—element of this conception of nature, is religion (Bauman 2014a, 63). And, I argue, it is religion that defines humanity's place, not as managers or stewards, but as co-creators—in a holistic, yet plurally diverse symbiotic relationship which is founded on shared dependence.

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[8] Latour (2014), 4.

[9] Braidotti (2019), 43. See also Braidotti (2020). Compare also "There is only one Gaia but Gaia is not One" (Conway 2016).

What I want to make plain in my argument at this stage is not the intrinsic opposition between nature and culture, which is still prominent, but rather the more subtle relationship between God and religion. The latter, of course, is part of culture. Many philosophers equate nature with divine creation, suggesting that it is somehow in opposition to culture, or that culture supervenes on nature in a way that diminishes or exploits nature's independence or separation from culture. Indeed this is true of our industrial society, yet concomitant to culture is religion—an ritualistic expression of cultural heritage and learned historical inheritance. Whilst some prominent examples of the world's violence, destruction, and harm has been the result of religious conflict and misunderstanding (Sheikh et al. 2012), I argue that religion takes what is best about culture when it is applied to the environment within the tradition of critical ecotheology (e.g., Sachdeva 2016). Humans' role in the natural world is mediated through cultures of both a religious and scientific nature. In exactly the way that humanity envisions the mythical, religious God creating the universe out of nothing, so humanity envisions the natural creation of the entire universe out of a blank space—this time, it is a randomness, an emptiness which threatens to consume us if we read too deeply into its mysteries. As a embodiment of the fear of that unknown, boundless void, humanity has fabricated myth, narrative, and culture (that is, religious culture). This narrative, I suggest, is what defines the ecotheological relationship between humans, culture, and religion on one side, and God on another.

5. Culture, Religion, and Faith

Religion is a part of culture, as much as human culture is an intrinsic development out of Spinozist ecological philosophy and ethics, rational interactions, and intersubjective communication (Deleuze 1988).[10] Ecology and ethics, as components to our knowledge of life, thus combine into providing a basis for a linguistic description of the duties that we have to the other life that we share this planet with. However, this linguistic description plays a merely delineative role, in that it represents the *is* of the so-called naturalistic fallacy (see, for example, Stearns 1972). What we *ought* to do, on the other hand, is, I suggest, squarely fitted within the eco-religiosity that is a component of environmental science and ecological ethics. The conception of God should not only provide us with the prescription—as an example of what *to* do. The conception should also ground our values in principles, i.e., *why* we value the environment; and provide an ethic that we can follow in recognizing our shared and common futures within and among the rest of God's creation.[11]

Absolute versus natural dominion. Schaefer (2005). Citing Aquinas.

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[10] Deleuze writes that Spinoza holds that we need "one Nature for all bodies, one Nature for all individuals, a Nature that is itself varying in an infinite number of ways" (1988, 122). I argue that the way Spinoza defines bodies, by Deleuze's characterization, echos Bauman's support of critical theories of class, race, gender, and religion taking part in ecological ethics.

[11] There is an extensive literature on how values might play into science—whether (environmental) science should make claims on political and religious values. I will not go into this in depth here, but see Rolston (2008) for a review of topics covered in this paragraph.

The challenge of global warming exemplifies and pulls into the spotlight the failures of humanity. As York asks, 'The question before human society concerns whether the preservation or restoration of the natural environmental balance of our host planet is to be or even can be augmented by religion, or, instead, how much of a role does religion—or do the religions—play in fomenting the problem in the first place?" (York 2022, 6-7). If living in accordance with justice for all beings, including within ecosystems made up of tens of thousands of species of life, means better understanding our relationship with God, then a better understanding of God may lead us to act more virtuously in relationships we form with various aspects of life. One might then wonder whether caring for nature is, or should be a religious concern (Rolston 2008, 921). Might we instead seek to merely advance nature's interests—after all we do have an interest in the success or failure of life as a whole. The tension around this question, as the Catholic Church has interpreted it, will be the subject of the next, penultimate section.

6. *Laudato Si'* and Latin Christendom's Climate Epiphany

When it comes to the environment, the Catholic Church's philosophy (as exemplified in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*) compliments the critical approach that I outlined above. I have argued thus far that ecotheology should view nature as holistic. We are part of the nature we seek to exploit, and at the same time seek to heal. Caring for the earth, accepting its almost unlimited and boundless life-giving properties is, and should be, an inherent part of an ecotheological ethic. With *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis made clear to the Catholic community that humanity can no longer look the other way when it comes to the adverse effects of the degradation and pollution of our atmosphere and natural ecosystems (Raven 2016). In Genesis (2:15), humans are commanded to care for the earth, and not simply bend the timbers of nature to their beck and call (See also DeWitt 2016, 273). As we take up this philosophy, we need to take a step back and consider three shortcomings to the traditional interpretation of humans' relationship with the earth and our creator. Criticism of these shortcomings is evident in both critical ecotheology, and *Laudato Si'*. The three are:

1) human exceptionalism and a disregard for the natural order,
2) a desire to (re)shape the world in humankind's image, and
3) a perspective from which we wrongly view ourselves as the ultimate, atemporal and preeminent earthly species.

Instead of stewards and benefactors, we should view ourselves as a product of, and simply one of many species with whom we share, the earth.

Without a reconceptualization of us-as-part-of nature, we face destruction—this is the major point of Pope Francis's encyclical. I have raised the example of *Laudato Si'* in this section to show how the religious establishment has tried to represent environmental culture. The growth of the human planet—the Anthropocene—is characterized by war, famine, incompetence, autocracy, pandemics, pollution, and greed.[12] In many cases, as we are seeing with wars fought

[12] For a similar critique by Bauman, see his (2015).

over territorial control, ideological differences, and national links to militant extremism, geopolitical strategy on a grand scale—strategy that fosters warmongering and the military-industrial establishment—has the potential to displace dire concerns of environmentalists and ecotheologians who are calling for an international coalition to promote sustainability and environmental planetary governance (Gardner and Stern 2003). This will only increase as the human population, and our pollution of the earth's resources, expand (Ceballos 2016). Between cultural pursuits and the divine ritual and belief systems that make up an important component of any society, we can impose an indication of the origins of that society, that faith, that tradition, noting that the latter term encompasses both society and faith. Such an indication would serve as a reminder for the secular ruling class, and the wayward would-be literati, that society—religion—is not possible without life and nature which is the origin of eschatological hope and which deserves moral protection as a creation of intelligent design and superhuman agency.

But critical ecotheology offers hope that comes from outside of human exceptionalism; hope for the fallen human being—a hope that returns us to our humble beginnings, not at the top of, but alongside life. An example of critical hope in the face of certain peril remains anti-war activism, particularly activism demonstrating against the building and testing of nuclear weapons (Wittner 2020). While further use of these weapons on a battlefield—against humans—would be a calamity beyond comprehension, even the creation of them—the expense of maintaining nuclear devices; money that could be put to more expedient use elsewhere—is, for the moralist, and for the practitioner of practical political, religious, and environmental morality, an egregious crime against the human project. Such a project is characterized by an effort towards peaceful progress, growth, and sustainability. It remains clear that whilst believers and people of faith hope for a more just and peaceful world, agents of terror and destruction use the term "common interest" to justify horrors which, if used, would devastate our planet and the advances in culture which sustain us. Those who do speak out, guided by a respect for homegrown knowledge and the natural world, develop a path forward for theologians who care about peace and who care about coexisting with the universal fraternal order of civilization.

My conclusion reminds the reader that religion can also be a political force—and that God nurtures life as whole, not just humans.

7. Conclusion

One oft quoted lesson from *Laudato Si'* is that "a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; [the ecological approach] must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both *the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (Section 49). Indeed, a God who nourishes the universe should (and does, I have argued) purvey, through theology, ecotheology, and environmental ethics, an ecological ethic where humanity can survive and flourish alongside of, and without endangering the rest of life on earth. Whether we listen to these cries is up to us. But practical problems arise alongside the philosophical ones, and I end on a philosophical note not to negate the very real issues that leaders, organizations, and states face in managing the diversity of religious and non-religious interests who play major roles and hold major stakes in a just transition. Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber (2022, 50) list four such issues: "rivalry between different religious traditions, resistance of non-religious actors, the

obduracy of secular institutions, or the marginalization of religion can thwart the impact of religious environmentalism." Without consensus within the religious community on these challenges, the implications and outlook for progress to be made at the interface between religions and the natural world remains dire.

My argument in this paper has argued for a model of God/nature which is respective of, and goes beyond the nature/culture divide. It describes a worldview which places God in a crucial position to guide human action and thought on environmental injustice in a postcolonial, posthuman, and humanistic age (see Taylor 2018). As it is written in Psalm (137:4), we all must ask: "how shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Indeed we must recourse ourselves to "hang our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof" (137:2)—implying that whatever grows in the midst of the destruction we wrest from the land, we shall make music of it, or at least learn to live with the knowledge that it gives us all that we have.

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