

Religion and the natural world

Welcome to the fifth issue of *The Ecological Citizen*, which is mainly dedicated to religion and the natural world. The context for its contents on that topic is threefold: the subject itself, our remit as a journal, and my own particularities as editor. Let me take each in turn.

I take 'religion' to mean a relationship with the sacred, together with others, whether past or present, sustained through practising certain rituals within particular traditions. And by 'sacred', I mean values that are taken to be ultimate, bedrock, and cannot be further grounded or justified. Also present here is 'spirituality', which overlaps with religion a good deal but applies more to views and practices which tend to be individual, private or personal. They sometimes extend to small groups or associations but lack the heft (both for good and for ill) of institutionalized religions.

As these working definitions imply, religion is far from only a matter of knowledge, let alone a list of propositions about the world. Nor does it require a God who is the object of 'belief'. There are religions without God – Buddhism being the obvious example – and in any case, a religion is not only about believing, any more than not believing necessarily means its absence. And isn't 'believing' taken to license the worst crimes, as long as the instigator believes correctly? No, religion is a way of being in the world, and the world that partly results, and the only way its truth can be 'tested' is by assessing the effects when it is taken up and lived. 'By its fruits ye shall know it', to coin a phrase.

In any understanding of collective human life which aspires to be deep

or complete, religion is ultimately unavoidable. Slightly more exactly, some sort of sacrality, which grounds it, whether tacit or explicit, is present in all known human societies, now and throughout history. Thus even when religion has been banned, traditional forms survived, and official 'secular' equivalents with dogma, ritual, worship (*etc.*) developed. Life under Soviet and Maoist communism is an obvious example. This is not surprising. Everyone has some kind of ultimate values, even (if they are honest) atheists.

This brings us to the second point, our own ultimate value and concern: ecocentrism. (By 'our' I mean those who make this journal, both editors and most contributors, and many, at least, of its readers.) Here it must be said that in an Earth-centred perspective, most religion looks mostly, if not decidedly, problematic. Stan Rowe (2000) lays it out with characteristic directness:

The virtues of religions are many, but they do not compensate for their deficiencies any more than a criminal wins pardon on the evidence that he has always been kind to his mother. In one way or another all faiths have sponsored a war on the Ecosphere. No world religions challenge agriculture: the earliest and still the major battle field where ecodiversity and biodiversity are the adversaries. No religions challenge human population over-growth, a fundamental sin against the rest of creation.

This statement needs qualification, but his basic point, I think, stands. The reasons for religions' deeply ingrained anthropocentrism – or theocentrism,

Patrick Curry

About the author

Patrick is a writer and scholar based in London, UK, with his works including *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Polity Press, 2018). He is Editor-in-Chief of *The Ecological Citizen*.

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which (if we are made in His image) is often a thinly disguised version of the same – is a vast subject. Minimally, we could say that human self-interest seems inexhaustible, and, however understandable, as societies have moved steadily away from direct contact with the rest of nature it has developed to the point of collective narcissism, now exquisitely technologically serviced by i-Everything. Naturally, religions have grown out of, been formed by and capitalize on that focus.

As ever larger, more complex and therefore necessarily more ordered (as well as disordered) societies developed, religions also became increasingly entangled with political, economic, military, institutional and cultural power. This is particularly true of the two universal monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. (Judaism is also monotheistic but limits that demand to its own people.) Their emphasis on a single, universal Truth dovetails nicely with drives for a single rule – leader, order, folk, land, corporation *etc.* – on Earth (Assmann, 2010).

Another reason for religions’ anthropocentrism is simply that for a long time they could, so to speak, get away with it. There have been many relatively local ecocrises but never before in human history a global ecocrisis, with biodiversity crashing and temperatures rising everywhere. The times truly are a-changing.

There are also endemic metaphysical problems that accompany most religions, old but with a modern twist. For those rightly shocked by the rise of a brutal materialism, often allied to a crude scientism, religion is a standing temptation to cross over and pledge allegiance to the apparent opposite, a spiritual supernaturalism. Ecocentrically speaking, this is a grave mistake, a trap. The very word ‘supernatural’ refers to something which is thought to be missing from nature and therefore needs to be added to it (or withheld from being added to it) – namely ‘spirit’

or, in secular drag, ‘culture’ – while nature itself becomes supposedly purely ‘physical’, whatever that means: no one really knows (Strawson, 2018). The result is a disaster, as nature is dismembered and handed over to religion, on the one hand, and science and technology, on the other. But living more-than-human nature (including but far exceeding us) is fully spiritual or mental *and* material (Bortoft, 1996; Bateson, 2000). That is the only kind of nature that is alive, sustainable and ultimately habitable.¹

Western religion and spirituality, in particular, are also afflicted by a series of heavily value-laden dualisms. They take the form, in essence, of ‘higher’ + ‘inner’ + ‘light’ = good, versus ‘lower’ + ‘outer’ + ‘darkness’ = bad. The latter, inferior set is then gendered as female, and further identified with the Earth, down here, as opposed to heaven, up there (Plumwood, 1993). These metaphors have a firm grip on our collective imagination and they are, to say the least, ecologically unhelpful. They don’t even stand up to scrutiny. Where is there an ‘inner’ with no ‘outer’, or the reverse? Why is ‘higher’ necessarily better than ‘lower’? And for embodied beings, nothing but light, without any healing and nourishing darkness, leads to madness and death.

Now if you combine religion’s ubiquity and power with its ecological culpability, or at least, overall historical unhelpfulness, you arrive at an odd paradox, which is that anyone who wants ecocentrism to succeed, so to speak, had better hope that religion can be turned to good account. An estimated 2.4 billion human people identify themselves as Christian, followed by 1.8 billion as Muslim, with most of the other religions merely in the millions; and for many of those people, at the very least, religion plays a significant role in shaping and informing who they are and what they do. Of course, religion is rarely all-determining, and it must share power with a wide array of other considerations. But it would be absurd to think it has no major effects, whether

positive or negative. And it's not about to go away.

Given this situation, those whose preferred mode of discourse is liberal, rational and/or secular – and all the more so, for those who pride themselves on being realists – should ask themselves whether their approach is always and everywhere the best one to take; whether, indeed, for many people whose communities are more attuned to a religious mode, it might be precisely the wrong approach, that is, counter-productive. In which case, the thing to do is rather to encourage and work with religiously motivated eco-activists.

Fortunately, being complex and sometimes self-contradictory, along with the problematic aspects every major religion also has the potential to inform and encourage ecological citizenship. Those resources comprise the main subject of most of the articles that follow, which is partly why I have given more space to these critical considerations. The other reason is that sooner or later, those problems must be faced and addressed by those seeking to develop, advocate and enact a religion's positive ecological potential.

In so doing, they will inevitably bump up against their religion's current limits. A good case could be made, for example, that the effect of allowing humans to continue multiplying, let alone encouraging it, is to harm God's creation, and thus to disobey His wishes. But given Christianity's unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) anthropocentrism, whereby if one human is good then more must be even better, the odds of any major Christian leader openly admitting that human overpopulation is a problem are miniscule. Then the eco-religious activist must choose whether to concentrate on working with what is on offer or on trying to shift what is in the way. Limited time and energy rarely permit both.

This issue of *The Ecological Citizen* includes two articles on a prominent example of this difficulty. Both address

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* but from opposing points of view. One, extolling it, is by Joseph Blay, speaking for the Franciscan Order of the Roman Catholic Church; the other, by Ray Keenoy, attacks it. I make no apologies for the latter; its anger is felt by many, and this journal has a duty to be critical and offer differing points of view on ecocentric issues.

With respect to both contributors, however, my own view is that in the end, neither a simple yea nor nay will suffice. However understandable, it is genuinely regrettable that *Laudato Si'* avoids facing up to human overpopulation as a major and serious problem in which the Church itself is implicated. At the same time, it is in other ways a courageous, progressive and important document. Surely any positive turn on the part of the global religions, especially Western monotheistic ones, towards concern about the natural world and rethinking our relation with it is something we should welcome. Even more remarkably, *Laudato Si'* arguably opens up a theological critique of anthropocentrism. We cannot foresee the exact future effects but they could be very positive (which is undoubtedly just why Pope Francis's reactionary critics within the Church dislike it).

It is also encouraging that *Laudato Si'* is not written in the numbing technocratic zombie-speak of governments and corporations everywhere – a way of talking inseparable from the mindset which reduces everything to a technical problem. (The Paris Agreement on climate change is a recent example.) Francis's clear and intelligent prose comes from both heart and head.

Sometimes religion can prove helpful despite itself, so to speak. For example, even after making full allowance for complexity, nuance and ambiguity, we must be able to say something is deeply wrong. (For a discussion of why these two considerations need not conflict, see the work of Smith [most recently, Smith (2018)].) The Japanese government's recent

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decision to restart commercial whaling, the new Brazilian government's renewed assault on the Amazonian rainforest and its inhabitants, and just about everything the current US government does concerning the land and sea come to mind. And despite its heavy theological baggage (or maybe inseparably from it), 'evil' is a perfectly serviceable term to mark the sheer malignancy of such actions.

Then there is my own role as editor, which needn't detain us long. I have not tried to be completely comprehensive: an impossible task, given the space available and my own limitations.² My knowledge in this context is limited to some kinds of Christianity and of Buddhism, sincerely but unevenly in both cases. And rightly or wrongly, it was my decision to concentrate here on the global religions with the most impact, rather than on small, relatively independent and unorthodox religious movements centred on the environment, however admirable. The exception is Michael York's article on Paganism, the ecological affinities of that religion being too strong to overlook.

Thus, there are articles here by other authorities on their subject: İbrahim Özdemir on Islam, Hava Samuelson on Judaism, and Sue Darlington on the Buddhist forest monks of Thailand. There is also an interview with Ringu Tulku, an eminent Tibetan Buddhist lama. Numerically, however, there are more articles on Christianity: in addition to Fr Blay's article, there is also an interview with David Shreeve, who is responsible for the environmental policies of the Anglican Church, and a dialogue with Nigel Cooper, an Anglican minister, which ventures into fascinating eco-theological terrain that was certainly new to me.

Perhaps the most glaring omission is anything on Hinduism. I can only repeat that completeness was never an option, although I also couldn't quite shake the suspicion that Hinduism is even less of a unitary phenomenon – and thus even

easier to misrepresent – than the other major religions.

There are two longer articles. One is by Bron Taylor, whose empirically based work on the ecological promises and realities of Christianity – particularly in relation to Lynn White Jr's influential article of 1973 censuring Christianity's destructive ecological impact – is widely respected. Taylor has also pioneered research in 'dark green religion', with obvious relevance for us. His scepticism, or at least caution, arguably well-founded, is an indispensable part of these conversations.

The second long article is by Graham Harvey, a leading scholar of animism. Very briefly, animism is the principled habit of being open to encounters with subjects and agents (whether human or otherwise) and the relationships, including ethics, which arise thereby. It doesn't fit into the dominant mould of 'revealed' monotheistic religions based on texts, nor that of a privatized New Age spirituality. My own feeling is that if religion is to help move us toward an ecocentric relationship with the rest of the natural world, revering this world, not another or the next, an indispensable part of that process will be strengthening and developing animistic practices, both in- and outside institutional religions.

I would also like to mention two important books published recently: *Abundant Earth: Toward an ecological civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 2018) by Eileen Crist, one of our Associate Editors, and *A Sense of Wonder Towards Nature: Healing the planet through belonging* (Routledge, 2018) by Haydn Washington, one of our Editorial Advisors. Sadly, I also have to record the death of Deborah Bird Rose, another Editorial Advisor. We can at least still be grateful for her work and her example.

In closing, if I may make so bold, this is our faith: the Earth is not something that needs to be, or indeed can be, 'transcended'. It can only be realized (heaven) or failed (hell). We come from the Earth and return to it, and our chief glory

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– in great and diverse company – is to be alive in it.³ What does need transcending is our own limitations in appreciating and valuing that fact. Whatever forms of religion and spirituality can help us do so are therefore welcome. ■

Notes

- 1 As the poet Paul Valéry joked, “There is another world, but it’s in this one.”
- 2 Those who want comprehensiveness should probably start with Jenkins *et al.* (2017), before moving on to the multi-volume series produced by the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997–2004. Note, however, that the former, although excellent overall, is not necessarily adequate either. The entry on philosophy by J Baird Callicott is parochially American and academic – as if other kinds of contributions have been negligible – and shamefully omits any treatment at all of ecocentrism, as distinct from a cursory discussion of Deep Ecology.
- 3 The thin surrounding layer of breathable air is an integral part of the Earth, so we are *in it*, not *on it*.

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The annual Blessing of the Thames on 13 January 2019 on London Bridge, led by the Rt Rev Tim Thornton (right; photo by Dafydd Jones).





ANNOUNCEMENT from GENIE

The Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy

We are a new organization, established in October 2018, with the mission of developing and expanding political, administrative, and legal initiatives to help adequately represent non-human nature within democratic processes and thus give voice to the ‘silent stakeholders’ in the more-than-human world.

We are currently seeking volunteers to help us trial implementation of ecodemocracy in their own localities. If you are interested in helping us in our mission, please get in touch with us via www.ecodemocracy.net/contact.html.

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