

Religion and Environmental Values in America

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family, especially my parents, grandparents and extended family who most shaped my own environmental values, and my wife and kids, who most influence them today; to Dr. Richard Baer, my dissertation advisor at Cornell University, whose pioneering thought about religion, ethics and the environment have had an enduring impact on my life and work; and to my students, who teach me most of all, and who keep my passion for this topic alive and growing.

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About the Author



Photo courtesy of Methodist Theological School in Ohio, used with permission.

Author's Frame:

The perspective of this book reflects its author in many ways, so while I have studied and been involved professionally and academically in faith-based environmental work since the late 1980s, and therefore have a reasonably informed view, I also find particular aspects of religious-environmental developments more important or interesting than others because of my own particular interests and background. I've never found a text book that quite covers what I teach in religion-environment, and over the years students and colleagues have encouraged me to write my own. So, with support from an Access to Learning (ALX) grant from OSU, I have finally done so.

As may already be clear, I think religion is important in the grand scheme of caring for the Earth, but I will say at the outset that despite teaching at The Ohio State University, I do not subscribe to "silver bullet" hopes that suggest that something like religion, or particular policies, or values, will be *The* key to solving environmental problems. In fact, I think that looking for any one thing to guide us or solve a large-scale social problem is foolish, and tends to result in shallow understanding. Environmental problems are complex. There will need to be many sorts of solutions and approaches. Religion is one of many things that I think are important in the mix, and that mix also includes science, policy, the arts and humanities, and people in general.

I think religion deserves particular attention because of its social importance, but more importantly, religion has often been either ignored or misunderstood within environmental thinking, and so there is some catching up to do to understand and engage with religion as a more helpful part of the mix. Given how consumptive (and wasteful) American culture tends to be per capita, it may be that religious and spiritual perspectives can help fill in a broader basis for environmental ethics than the secular environmental movement and government policies have been able to achieve so far. To be clear, I don't think that my approach to religion and the environment is the only or best one. The field of religion and ecology is complex, and involves diverse approaches. There are many excellent programs and statements and books already available, but the particular way I see the elements of religion-ecology dialogue connecting is what I hope to outline in this book, mostly as an aid to my teaching about religion and the environment. If the material I've woven together here is helpful to others beyond my students at OSU to understand the complex nexus of religion and the environment, then I am grateful.

Ecological Autobiography:

My students begin their study of religion and environmental values by detailing their own stories as a way to explore and express the values they already hold. I think this is an essential starting point for all of us.¹

For instance, I grew up with a number of environmental influences, starting with agriculture. My parents were raised on small family farms in northern Iowa, and I grew up on what I often call a 4-acre hobby farm on the outskirts of Columbus, Ohio, where the suburbs gave way to cornfields.² When I was young and money was tight, my folks estimate

1. This also parallels the story-telling of Michael Pollan in *Second Nature*, which will be discussed in chapter 3.
2. I've always said that the line where the suburbs ended and corn fields started was, literally, in my

that we raised about 75% of the food we ate, and we relished the low percentage of “store-bought” food in our diet. My mother practiced organic gardening before it was popular, and we regularly processed beans, corn, peas, and berries in long days of canning the fruits of our harvest. Most of our meat came from my maternal grandfather’s farm, stored in our deep freeze in the basement. My brother and I had our own roadside farm stand, where we sold sweet corn, zucchini, tomatoes, and whatever else might be available. Several other families tended garden plots in our backyard, and contributed to our compost pile. We spent many hours working (and weeding!) in our gardens, and in the summer we’d visit my grandparents on the farm in Iowa, where my brother and I would walk the beans, scoop silage to feed cattle, and do whatever other farm chores my grandfather needed help with, for which he’d pay us a going wage.

By the time I was in middle school, my father helped my brother and I start a popcorn business. Using a 1950s Ford 8N tractor and a lot of hand labor, we developed a market for a white, hullless popcorn variety. Within a few years we outstripped the capacity of our 2.5 acre popcorn field, so we began to contract out the planting and harvest of the corn. Though my brother and I dreamed of putting Orville Redenbacher out of business, the shift to hands-off production left us less engaged, and combined with the rise of middle and high school activities, our interest and our business faded. Orville Redenbacher dodged a bullet, and we moved on to other adventures.

The other way my family lived close to the land (and also saved money) was by our choice of vacations. I can remember staying in a hotel only once or twice as a kid, an exotic deviation from our norm. Usually when traveling we either stayed with family or friends, or we camped. Camping trips were our preferred mode for keeping in touch with extended family. I had a great aunt and uncle who moved out to Oregon,³ and they introduced us to backpacking in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness when I was 6 years old. I was smitten with alpine beauty and mountain grandeur. These and other outdoor pursuits shifted my experiences from an early childhood in the garden to teenage years in the woods and mountains.

In addition to camping and backpacking, I did my fair share of fishing, working hard throughout high school to draw my dad back into a pastime he’d enjoyed as a kid. Like most of his peers, my dad grew up hunting and fishing, but after he finished graduate school, he never found time or interest to hunt, and I eventually lured him into re-developing some fishing traditions. I brought all of these interests with me to college, where I dove into the outdoor education community at Cornell University. My studies in ecology were a nice complement to my growing passion for outdoor education. I took courses at Cornell in Adirondack canoe camping, flatwater and whitewater canoeing, wilderness first aid, and outdoor leadership, and then became an instructor of canoeing, fishing, and outdoor leadership, while also guiding a freshman orientation trip for Cornell’s Wilderness Reflections program. In the summers I worked for the National Wildlife Federation’s Wildlife Camp programs in North Carolina and Colorado, teaching about backpacking, rock climbing, lakes and streams, fishing, first aid, and geology, and co-leading a leadership program for 12-13 year olds. Following college, I took a job with NWF’s new Outdoor Ethics division to help create a program called NatureLink, which we designed to help connect families back to nature by learning to fish. I will expand on some of these points below; suffice it to say that by the time I finished and left college, I was fully immersed in outdoor and environmental pursuits, teaching, and ethics, but there were other important influences I should mention.

Beyond direct agricultural and outdoor influences, there are also stories and legacies that have shaped me. One example is the conservation ethic of my grandfather Ernie Hitzhusen. He retired off the farm in Iowa in the late 1960s and went into soil conservation. He was an avid birder, and spent many hours birdwatching with my grandmother. He worked for the better part of a decade to help establish the Cerro Gordo County Lime Creek Nature Center, the first nature center in the region. Previously, he’d been the subject of a documentary film called “A Way of Life” by John Deere

backyard, but that line has long since migrated about 20 miles further from the center of Columbus as the suburbs of Dublin, Worthington and Powell have become more developed.

3. My great uncle was a Forest Service volunteer and head of the ski patrol at Mt. Bachelor

and Company in 1968⁴, and that film was rediscovered (when it was nearly discarded from an archive box at John Deere Headquarters in Moline, IL) just prior to thanksgiving one year when I was about 9 years old, and became a favorite film to screen when our family gathered. My grandfather's philosophical quips from the film about life and farming and conservation were memorialized in my mind; for example, the film concludes with his view that: "really we're just tenants on the land. We have the use of this land, and if we take good care of it, it will live on for the next generation."



An image and prayer request of the author's grandfather. Photo Credit: Fred Hitzhusen

My grandfather was a Methodist layman, and though he likely would not have cited Leviticus when calling humans tenants, his views generally followed from Judeo-Christian values. I also remember my parents telling me to "take only photographs, and leave only footprints" at times when we were hiking or backpacking. And closer to home, we'd regularly hike straight from our doorstep through the many acres of farm and field and forest owned by Ohio State across the road from our acreage on Godown road. Author Wendell Berry talks of the "creek he grew up in", and without a doubt, mine was the stream in the middle of these fields and forests. As my grandpa Ernie might have said, with so many blessings around us in nature and the wide open, my cup overflowed.

My father was a professor of environmental economics at Ohio State, so I also grew up with lots of dinner-table conversation about sustainable development, and the connection between poverty, hunger, and environmental degradation. I also sat through my dad's slideshows featuring examples of innovative community and economic solutions to resource scarcity around the world, and heard about his research on the economic and community impacts of acid mine tailings in Ohio coal mining areas. So it may be no surprise that with these sorts of influences, I was relatively environmentally minded. And when awareness of acid rain grew in the 1980s in Ohio, and I realized that the high sulphur coal that was being mined and burned in Ohio (and which supplied the electricity in my

house) was responsible for acid rain falling in the Adirondacks, it hit me at a gut level that there was something really wrong with the fact that my flicking on my light switch was contributing to the death of ecosystems in another part of the country. And so I developed a strong interest in ecology as I prepared to apply to college, hoping that by learning about ecology, I might be able to do something to help address ecological degradations around the world, and figuring that the discipline of ecology might also provide more opportunity to spend time outdoors.

I had a rewarding college experience, majoring in biological sciences with an ecology concentration at Cornell University. I was somewhat surprised, though, when my professors taught me that it was the Judeo-Christian heritage that I'd seen in action growing up that was the source of the world's ecological crisis. My Methodist grandfather was the greatest conservationist I knew, but to hear my environmental science and ecology professors tell it, his value system was supposedly ecologically bankrupt. Some of my courses at Cornell allowed me to pursue this further – the first academic to teach a course in the US on environmental ethics, Dr. Richard Baer (who began teaching a New Testament environmental ethics seminar at Earlham College in 1966 as Chair of the Religion Department) had come to Cornell in the early 1970s and taken up teaching a course titled "Religion, Ethics, and the Environment" (NR407), and this course raised fundamental questions about the nature of religion and environmental ethics. Dr. Baer's course is the ancestor of the course I teach at Ohio State, and as it turns out, laid the foundation for my career.

There is more to my story. After directing the NatureLink program at NWF, I followed a calling to graduate school, doing joint theology and ecology studies at Yale University at the Divinity School and School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. I worked for the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. I returned to Cornell to

4. Leading the camera crew was Caleb Deschanel, Emily and Zoey's dad, during his years as a cinematography student

complete a PhD focusing on environmental education and ethics in North American faith communities. And I worked for a year as the Land Stewardship Specialist for the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs before moving back to Ohio to become founding Executive Director of Ohio Interfaith Power and Light and to begin my teaching career at Ohio State. Many important and formative experiences occurred during these years, more than I have room to share here (I have added thanks to many of the people who influenced me during those years in the Acknowledgements section of this book). In the future, I hope to create an online archive of ecological autobiographies accessible to anyone willing to submit their own ecological autobiography to the collection. Further details of my own background will be published there, with an invitation for readers to submit their own. In the meantime, I always enjoy sharing more stories in person. Stay tuned.

About the Editors

This book would not have come together nearly so well without the help of two extraordinary student editors:



Madeline Fox

is a lover of wildlife, especially insects, spiders, and groundhogs. In her free time, she likes to write crime thrillers with an emphasis on ethical dilemmas. She is pursuing a degree in Environmental Policy & Decision Making at The Ohio State University with a minor in Entomology, and she intends to go to law school after graduation.



Leah Kessler

is a stage manager and environmentalist. She stage manages with the Department of Theatre while pursuing her degree in Environmental Policy and Decision Making with minors in Theatre and Spanish at The Ohio State University.

Letter to Reader



Theotokos in the Apothecary. Photo credit: Jacob Taylor

“Religion and the Environment” is an emerging field that has evolved significantly over the past 50 years. Today, evidence of environmental concern can be found across most religious denominations, and the roots of faith-based creation care draw from both ancient and contemporary traditions and teachings. Whether in Pope Francis’s 2015 environmental encyclical letter, *Laudato Si’*, or thousands of other denominational environmental statements and programs, or a growing appreciation for the spiritual value of nature and the importance of environmental justice, religious engagement in environmental sustainability continues to grow.

While the roots for this flowering of religious environmental attention were developing, however, the modern environmental movement has had a sometimes antagonistic relationship with religion, particularly in the United States. Though theologians had been responding to environmental concerns by the mid-1960s,¹ the environmental movement and the counter-cultural flavor of the late 60s and 1970s gave rise to persuasive suspicions about the environmental fitness of religion, particularly biblical religions (and of traditional moralities in general), in the United States. Many in the environmental movement would likely have blamed Christianity and the biblical notion of “dominion” as underlying what they perceived as a Western culture of environmental disregard, and while Eastern religions were often deemed environmentally friendly, environmentalists through the 1980s and into the 1990s rarely found common cause with the most socially influential religious communities in American life.

But the 1980s was also the time when American faith communities started to effectively network and connect their environmental concerns across denominational boundaries. In the early 1990s the [National Religious Partnership for the Environment](#) joined and helped link a growing body of religious environmental organizations, and the [American Academy of Religion formed a Religion and Ecology group](#) that catalyzed a growing literature of religious-environmental scholarship. By the late 90s and early 2000s, environmental organizations like the [National Wildlife Federation](#) and

1. See chapter 1 for more details about the historical timeline of religious-environmental thinking in America.

[Sierra Club](#) were waking up to the importance of faith communities as allies, and by the 2010s, several environmentally-focused scientific and professional societies (such as [Ecological Society of America](#) and the [Society for Conservation Biology](#)) had begun to develop initiatives to engage with faith communities and religious environmental thinking.

So it was little surprise that scientific and environmental leaders alike lauded the environmental encyclical of Pope Francis in 2015; here at The Ohio State University, we hosted [Cardinal Peter Turkson](#), then president of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace and a primary drafter of portions of the encyclical; [Turkson joined university President Michael Drake and soon-to-be Provost Bruce McPheron](#) in front of a full audience in OSU's largest auditorium to discuss important values related to caring for our common home, the Earth. As of 2017, the [UN Environment](#) program has launched a sustainable development outreach program called the [Faith for Earth Initiative](#). Including religion as part of environmental dialogue has become much more mainstream in the 2010's than ever before.

So religion, which once often raised environmental suspicions in America, has now developed into a complexly engaged player in environmental conversations, and this online book seeks to characterize and chronicle some of those developments. The book is organized into three main sections: the first four chapters are designed to provide background and a framework for fruitfully examining questions related to religion and the environment in America; chapters 5-7 look at theological and spiritual anthropologies as a way of understanding how different religions view the role of the human being in relation to the rest of life; the remaining chapters provide a range of case studies that explore how faith communities are grappling with contemporary environmental and sustainability issues. By examining both the challenges and the potential of religious and spiritual influences on sustainability, these examples suggest how religion is playing a role in determining the sustainability of life on Earth, and point toward promising directions for those who seek to connect science, policy, communities, and values in the common goal of enhancing human well-being, peace, and planetary flourishing.

Acknowledgements

The Ohio State University's Affordable Learning Exchange (ALX) program provided grant support and a cohort of colleagues that made this book possible, and there are many people whose contribution was essential to writing this book. My students at Ohio State and Cornell to whom I've taught this material have been my most constant dialogue partners. Dr. Richard Baer was my dissertation advisor and teaching mentor at Cornell, and his own teaching is echoed in many parts of this book. Fellow Baer graduate students Dr's Jim Tantillo, Karl Johnson, and Jamie Skillen supported my early efforts to engage this material and continue to provide points of engagement. Rev. Dr. David Bartlett (1941-2017) was my advisor at Yale Divinity School and made my unique divinity-environment degree work there possible. Dr. Stephen Kellert (1943-2016) at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies greatly deepened my appreciation for environmental values during my masters work at Yale.

I'm also indebted professionally to Cheryl Riley, whose leadership in outdoor ethics at the National Wildlife Federation helped launch my career; Susan Johnson, whose NWF Wildlife Camp vision shaped my aspirations; Paul Gorman, whose inspired leadership blessed my work at the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE); Cassandra Carmichael, whose work with the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs and NRPE has continued to inspire me; Mary Evelyn Tucker, whose gracious encouragement and collaboration has helped sustain my academic vision; Tim Van Meter, whose collegial company at various pubs has kept me afloat; and Jerry Bigham, Ron Hendrick, Jeff Sharp, and Brian Slater, whose support and guidance in the School of Environment and Natural Resources has made my religion-environment work at Ohio State possible.

Many other friends and colleagues inspired me by their teaching, writing, leadership, or just by being wonderful people who have encouraged me along the way: Clair Bullock, Bob Gates, Brian Lower, Cal DeWitt, Katharine Hayhoe, Terry Chapin, Jay Rundell, Kathy Dickson, Elaine Nogueira-Godsey, Melanie Harris, Steve Bouma-Prediger, Loren Wilkinson, Michal Smart, Eric Mason, Erick Olsen, David Perry, Gretel Van Wieren, Mike Schut, Joseph Lombard, Fred Dobb, Nigel Savage, Dirk Slater, Larry Schweiger, Craig Tufts, Susie Greenstone, Seabird McKeon, Cheryl Dixon, Jon Wilkinson, Emily Rundell, Greg Graff, Kevin Schwartz, John Leinenweber, Richard Chiola, my CEHV and COMPAS colleagues Don Hubin, Piers Turner, Eric MacGilvray, Michael Neblo, Pam Salsberry and Dana Howard, Elena Irwin, Kate Bartter, David Hanselmann, Bruce McPheron, Carol Anelli, Linda Martin, David Wituszynski, Sara Ward, Meribah Mansfield, Rebecca Tollefson, Fr. Vinny McKiernan, Jerry Freewalt, Dan Misleh, Jason Cervenec, the Columbus Diocese Creation Care Team, Leanne Jablonski, Emma Earick, Howard Van Cleave, Terry Gustafson, Bryan Mark, the outstanding faculty of the School of Environment and Natural Resources, and surely many others: in one way or another you have all played an important part in shaping my work and teaching me by your excellent example.

There are also several folks who deserve the credit for directly helping me develop this online book. Mike Shiflet from OSU's Office of Distance Learning and eLearning woke me up to the possibility of an online book and provided ongoing assistance; SENR student Leah Kessler served as my first student editorial assistant, taking her outstanding understanding of course material from her time in class to help me organize the book material and begin crafting it for online form; Ella Weaver, SENR grad student and instructional assistant, provided generous advice and help in navigating Pressbooks and greatly improved the final edition; Sarah Walton, SENR PhD student and my outstanding Teaching Assistant during the final semester when the book took shape, who inspired me to continue exploring new approaches to this material; and SENR student Madeline Fox, who applied her editorial skills even while taking my class in order help bring the book to publishable form. And last but certainly not least, former students Natalie Pax, whose sub-chapter inaugurates the section of student chapters, and Sophie Manaster, who co-authored chapter 6, have my enduring admiration for becoming the first student authors whose work is part of this book. As of the autumn of 2019 as this book is being published, eight more students are working with me on finalizing additional sub-chapters that will be added to the book by early 2020.

Finally, I also would not appreciate many aspects of the complex world of religion and the environment without the input, questions, example, instruction, and friendship of many people of faith – friends, family, and strangers alike – who

have engaged with me throughout my life. To these peers and fellow travelers, I offer my gratitude, and I welcome your ongoing feedback about how this book can better engage all those who need to be part of the conversation about caring for our common home.

Explanation of Format (and call for peer review)

The book is organized into three main sections: the first four chapters are designed to provide background and a framework for fruitfully examining questions related to religion and the environment in America¹; chapters 5-7 look at theological and spiritual anthropologies as a way of considering how different religions view the role of the human being in relation to the rest of life; the remaining chapters provide a range of case studies that explore how faith communities are grappling with contemporary environmental and sustainability issues.

Each chapter includes footnotes and various hyperlinks to related material, as well as a bibliography of sources. A set of questions for reflection are included at the end of most chapters, which can be used for discussion sections.

Invitation for [Peer Review](#):

This first edition of the book has been written primarily as a text book for my Ohio State *Religion and Environmental Values in America* students, and regular student feedback has played (and will continue to play) an important role in shaping the text. However, the book may also be useful to adult study groups and faith communities interested in exploring these topics.

From 2019 to Spring of 2021, I would be deeply grateful for feedback from readers whose interest is to make use of this book within their community as a study resource. For instance, an adult study group within a congregation could select various combinations of the chapters to read and discuss over the course of anywhere from 4 to 12 weeks. All of us seeking to be more faithful caretakers of creation are peers in that work, and I would love to receive suggestions about how this material can be more useful or engaging for your community. If you develop activities or additional questions for discussion, or find complementary material or media that can enrich a community's use of this book, I would be pleased to incorporate your suggestions and improvements into the second edition of the book, which will be completed in the autumn of 2021.² At the same time, this first edition of the book assumes a sort of ongoing in-class dialogue that I have with my students, so I am also hoping that readers from beyond Ohio State will let me know where revisions might be needed to help this material connect better with readers far and wide.

As Pope Francis said in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the work of caring for our common home needs a conversation that includes everyone, and calls for a solidarity and a diversity of many minds and bodies working together to reconcile ourselves to one another, to the Earth and all creatures, and to our creator. As a reader or contributor, thank you for adding your thought and care to the dialogue of which this book is a part.

1. Notably, both religion and the environment can be tricky topics to discuss in America, and both topics, unfortunately, can trigger reactions typical of liberal-conservative “culture wars” that draw on social and political polarizations in American culture that can derail just about any conversation and render it useless for learning...so these chapters are aimed at setting a level and reasonable playing field to avoid pitfalls and antagonisms that tend to discourage fruitful discussion.
2. Anyone reading this in the autumn of 2021 or later will realize that the global pandemic of COVID-19 intervened during this time period, and verily shifted all sorts of plans and intentions. This invitation for peer review remains open, and in the meantime, the work of my students took on additional focus as we all worked to navigate teaching and learning amid the pandemic. What emerged is a forthcoming online book, student-authored, which will be titled “Emerging Perspectives in Religion and Environmental Values in America” and will be published in autumn of 2021. I look forward to linking that book here as soon as it is published!

You can submit peer review comments [here](#).

CHAPTER 1: THE BASIC LANDSCAPE OF RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN AMERICA

My intent in this chapter is to provide a general sketch, a brief but reliable overview of the basic landscape of Religion and the Environment in America from 30,000 feet. Much of that landscape is highlighted in [Hitzhusen and Tucker \(2013\)](#), which was an overview prepared for the Ecological Society of America's journal *Frontiers in Ecology and Environment*. What I want to share here is more detail about the background and context of that overview.



Spoiler alert: it looks a lot more like this than you might expect. "Our Lady of Perpetual Help Creation Care Council member Pat Sarosi gives a parishioner one of over 30 seedling trees handed out on Earth Day 2019." Photo credit: Sister Nancy Miller OSF

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1.1 Newsflash: It's Not a Fight!

Two things stick out in my mind as I recall my own studies of how religion and environmental concerns relate in America. Given how powerful the media has become in shaping the way people think about issues and that controversial and sensational stories get more attention than “daily life” stories, it might be no surprise that many of us continue to see religion and science or religion and the environment as in potential conflict. There has been a belief among American environmental thinkers – a belief I once shared – that religion is a significantly anti-environmental force, and echoes of that dying belief still reverberate. Even if the truth is that religion is mostly a force for environmental good in America, we are likely to notice a lot more reporting about the few examples of conflict that exist. One example comes from newspaper articles. When I worked for the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) during my masters program at Yale, one project I oversaw was a cataloguing of news articles about religion and the environment. At the time, when paper newspapers were still prominent in the mid-late 1990s, Lexis Nexis and other digital means of retrieving news were just beginning to ascend. Organizations that wanted to keep track of news reports still employed news clipping services. NRPE subscribed to two news clipping services, and every week we received envelopes filled with all of the news clips from around the country that week that had anything to do with religion and the environment. These services covered all of the large market newspapers, but also small market local papers in 50 states. Part of my job was to read all of those articles and enter them into a database of news clips.¹

By the end of 1998, the database had accumulated over 1,800 articles covering the period of 1992-1998. I had entered over 800 of those articles myself, reading them and categorizing them in the database according to their content – I noted which denominations they talked about, what environmental issues they covered, the basic tone they portrayed (negative, positive, ambiguous, etc.), and I kept track of which organizations, like NRPE, were being mentioned in the news. I would later return to further analyze these data during my doctoral work, but while there were other interesting things that emerged, the most striking fact was how many of the 1,800 articles reported from a negative or antagonistic frame.

Before commenting on this, it's worth recognizing that something that shows up in newspapers 1,800 times in seven years is not what you would call a popular phenomenon. When electronic/online searching began to be an option for news articles around this time, a search for “religion and environment” for a particular year might yield 300-400 hits, while articles about “Britney Spears” would tally 50,000, so it's surely safe to say that 1,800 articles during this span suggests that not that many Americans were reading about religion and the environment, even if papers like the LA Times, New York Times, Washington Post, or other big market papers were running articles (indeed, when I ask my students at Ohio State whether anyone has ever heard of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, usually only one or two raise their hands).² What's more, search terms for this topic are wide ranging: words like earth, spirit, faith, ecology, planet, prayer, and nature might all be used in preference to “religion and environment,” making it

1. For those who have only ever known “cut” and “paste” as electronic drop-down menu items, when I say news “clips” here, I mean actual articles that were clipped with scissors out of actual, hard copy newspapers, and pasted onto a sheet for photocopying.
2. Media attention would later increase: in 2002, when several US faith communities joined together to visit the big-three automakers in Detroit to lobby for more efficient and less polluting auto standards, evangelical Christians involved in the campaign surfaced the catch phrase “What Would Jesus Drive,” and that campaign alone scored over 1,800 media hits in a short period of time, equalling the total number of media reports about religion and environment in the preceding 8-10 years.

tedious to track down all the relevant stories. Regardless of these data management challenges, examining all the articles that could be found in a reasonably wide-sweeping search at least provided a sense of the extent to which religion-environment news was being reported, and gave me a clue about *how* the topic was being reported.

I predicted that a fair percent of the articles would pick up on the tensions between religion and science and would include comments about the negative impacts religion has on the environment that I had been taught about in my undergraduate ecology studies at Cornell, and that I'd also encountered in my environmental and theology graduate studies at Yale. So the question was, how many of the 1,800 articles would mention or focus on these negative influences? 1500? 300? 1000? 700? Take a moment to make your own guess. If you had access to nearly every article in the country that reported on religion and the environment from 1992-1998, how many – out of 1,800 – would you think had a negative frame? The answer, to my complete surprise, was 12. Only a dozen articles reported any sort of negative perspective. Half of those were articles from a particular storyline in California, where some reporters concerned about nature worship (a not uncommon concern of conservative Christians) wrote about some pagan groups that were practicing in California. The other half dozen negative articles involved a sprinkling of skeptical commentary from authors who thought that religions (and maybe particularly Christians) should not be getting so carried away with “environmentalism.” Other than these 12 (only 0.67% of the total!), all of the rest of the articles were reporting on stories of how local or national faith communities were engaging with environmental concerns, creating environmental curricula, challenging environmental problems, calling for environmental protection, or bringing hope to the environmental movement.



Ohio Interfaith Power and Light Co-Founder Sr. Paula Gonzalez, otherwise known as “the Solar Nun,” was a positive force for environmental change for decades, working as a biology teacher at St. Joseph’s College in Cincinnati, collaborating with her fellow Sisters of Charity, and giving over 1,800 invited talks about creation care. Photo courtesy of Ohio Interfaith Power and Light.

I didn’t imagine that news coverage was a perfect proxy for reality (indeed not!), but I was still amazed that the idea

of religion having a negative influence on environmental concerns was almost entirely absent from the news, and the standard story seemed to be essentially the opposite.

Another theme that stuck out to me in my studies was the result of the most comprehensive set of conferences ever organized to address religion and ecology. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim organized a series of 10 conferences at Harvard through the Forum on World Religions that focused on major religious traditions and “ecology”. From 1996 to 1998, these conferences invited and convened many of the main scholars that could be identified who were studying different religious traditions and ecology or environmental concerns around the world. The [10-volume series](#) that resulted from Harvard Press provides the proceedings of those conferences, which sought to answer the question of how the world’s main religious traditions are impacting human-ecosystem interactions. Here too, I thought the proceedings would characterize the dynamics I would expect from my ecological education – that eastern and indigenous religions have an environmentally friendly impact, and that western religions are ambiguous or problematic for environmental ethics. But Tucker and others offered the following summary of the results of the conferences: yes, there are some cases where religion can reinforce negative attitudes toward the environment, but the overwhelming conclusion of this scholarship was that the world’s main religious traditions contain deep and powerful resources to provide a basis for environmental care.

Bit by bit, discoveries like these started to shift my thinking. I had to admit that my own expectations and impressions of religion and the environment might have been somewhat negatively skewed against the facts, and I think that hasn’t been uncommon for many people engaged in religious environmental work. As clear signals began to emerge through the 1990s that religions might be a significant force for environmental good, the notion many of us began to favor was that if religions were starting to take on environmental interests, they were doing so by overturning or changing previously anti-environmental views; but, with each piece of history I uncovered, I began to question whether this notion too was based on evidence or opinion.³

3. It’s not clear to me that religion has ever, on whole, been particularly anti-environmental, at least not any more than its surrounding culture, and as I’ll detail in chapter 2, increasing evidence shows that, if anything, religion is more likely to be helping than harming the environmental cause.

1.2 The Increasing Connection between Religion and Environment

A couple of years into my doctoral work, as I discovered more and more evidence that religious perspectives on the environment weren't as negative as my professors seemed to think, I found myself in passing conversation with a faculty member at Cornell in the natural sciences. When he heard about my area of study he asked me, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't Judeo-Christian tradition the source of our exploitative attitudes towards nature?" I couldn't adequately respond given the brief nature of the conversation (I wanted to say, "well, you probably are mostly wrong, but how long do you have to talk about it, because it's not easy to see!"). To some extent, the first two chapters of this book are a more complete response to that question.

Given the tendency for negative expectations to linger regarding religion and the environment¹, I think it's important to try to set aside personal expectations, and take a fresh look at what seems to be going on. Anyone who already dislikes or mistrusts religion, for instance, may have a very hard time taking an objective look at the evidence, just as someone who strongly promotes religion might also see most of this dialogue from an only pro-religion frame. I think it's helpful to look at various indicators of the trajectory of religious-environmental thinking, scholarship, and programming. It seems wise to suspend judgement about how we think religion operates in the environmental sphere until we have a better sense of the landscape of religious-environmental activity.

Let's keep in mind the basic religious landscape of the United States. [The Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life's Religious Landscape Study](#) (2014) shows that:

- >70% of Americans self-identify as Christians
- 6% are members of non-Christian faiths
- 7% are members of no religion in particular, but still feel that religion is important

1. In the mid-2010s some colleagues and I conducted a survey of members of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) to gather feedback from ESA members about doing ecology outreach in faith communities. Responses were gained anonymously through a survey monkey instrument, and only a single email was sent to the ESA membership to announce the survey. More than 700 ESA members replied, and when the survey opened, I checked the survey monkey results page to see what kind of responses were coming in. A significant number of the quickest responses were very negative. In retrospect, they seemed like knee-jerk reactions, and they commonly said something like "religion has no part in ecological science" or "religion is irrational." Seeing these initial replies, I began to worry that any opportunity to do outreach to faith communities through ESA might never get off the ground. But these early negative replies soon gave way to a mix of affirming and even highly positive responses. When the survey was closed and I'd analyzed and categorized the responses, I coded 23 responses as being highly negative like some of those first responses; at the same time, I coded exactly 23 responses as being "boosterish," saying things like "hooray! I've been waiting for ESA to do something like this forever!" and "it's about time ESA began to wake up to the ecological potential of religion." The vast majority of responses, however, were not nearly so dramatic – more than 70% of respondents simply indicated that they thought outreach to faith communities was fine and probably a good idea. One take-home message from these responses is that the more extreme views (both highly negative and highly positive) tend to be loudly proclaimed, but only represent a small percentage of total views.

- 9% are members of nothing in particular and feel that religion is not important
- 7% are agnostic or atheist

Religion continues to have a significant presence and influence in America.²

One indicator of how much religion has been pro- or anti-environmental in American culture is seen in the news clips database studies I noted above. Through the 1990s in America, as awareness of the public was just starting to dawn on the topic, almost all religion-environment news centered around how religion was supporting environmentally protective views. Further study is needed of this period, but I think it is no accident that by the end of the 1990s when a broad coalition of religious organizations had emerged to support environmental protections (particularly in regards to climate change)³, counter-messaging emerged using religious language to oppose carbon legislation. This counter-effort included a coalition of religious figures, not representing any denomination, but gathered together by a free market economics think tank with funding from fossil fuel interests. It is likely a testimony to the growing impact of faith-based climate advocacy in the 1990s that this counter-trend emerged; I would note that the advocate coalition grew out of faith communities, and the opposition grew out of fossil-fuel funded think tanks to oppose climate legislation. The former seems to be an example of faith communities putting their faith into action, the latter an example of special interests trying to use religion to protect corporate profits. So I suspect that if someone were to do a content analysis of news clips from the 1990s to the present, they might find a different balance of positive and negative frames, as this industry-sponsored counter current has grown.⁴

One other interesting observation emerged from the news clips data. I re-examined the 1,800 articles from 1992-1998 to see whether they were articles that came from a news wire service and made “national” news (such as when a faith-based environmental group like NRPE held a big event that got lots of attention), or whether an article was just an example of local writers reporting about something environmental that a congregation was doing. Interestingly, while the majority of news hits in the early 1990s followed from news wire reports around the founding and early initiatives of the NRPE, as the decade went on, the ratio of local to national news stories got larger and larger, until by the late 1990s, the majority of stories were coming from local examples and had nothing to do with the programs of NRPE or any other faith based environmental organization.⁵

2. These numbers are somewhat akin to world religion numbers, too: 33% Christian, 23% Muslim, 14% Hindu, 11% other religions, 7% Buddhist, 10% non-religious, and 2% atheist, according to 2012 CIA Factbook.
3. Remember that in the late 1990’s, climate change became a very hot topic, as those years became the hottest years on record, with Vice President Al Gore becoming well-known for promoting new carbon regulations aimed at addressing global warming; additionally, the Kyoto Protocol was signed in 1997.
4. Two peer reviewed studies examined this particular issue: [Institutionalizing delay: foundation funding and the creation of U.S. climate change counter-movement organizations](#) and [The organisation of denial: Conservative think tanks and environmental scepticism](#). A recent popular expose also examines these trends in the news and opinion site, [Splinter – How Fossil Fuel Money Made Climate Change Denial the Word of God](#).
5. Two impressions I gleaned from this discovery: perhaps NRPE generated interest in religion and the

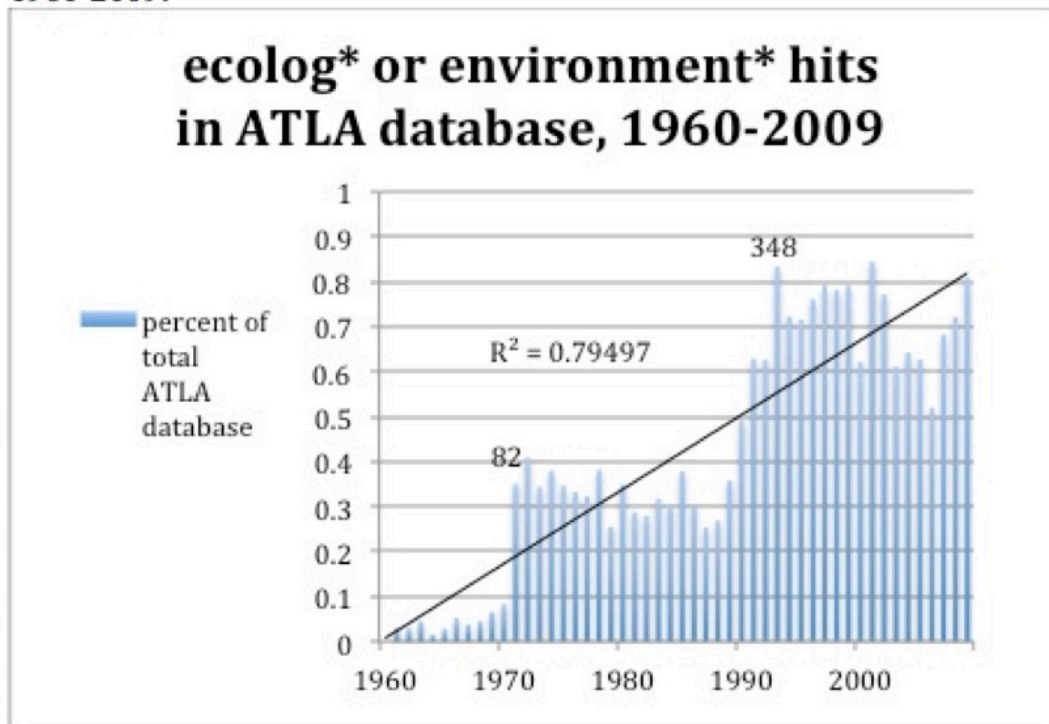
Recognizing that media trends might be fickle, I decided to look at more reliable indicators of the extent to which religious environmental thinking was developing in American faith communities. Librarians at Yale suggested I explore the [American Theological Library Association \(ATLA\)](#) database of theological literature. I wondered just how much attention was being given to environmental and ecological matters in the theological literature, so I searched, year by year, from 1960 to 2010, for any articles with “ecology” (or “ecological,” etc) or “environment” (or “environmental,” etc) in the title.⁶ After updating that study in the early 2010s, here were the results⁷:

environment, somewhat like Earth Day generated interest in the environment more generally; once that interest was kindled, reporters began to notice and write about religious environmental events and actions that were already going on. It is also possible that the interest sparked by NRPE caused more religious environmental activity, which subsequently was noted in the media.

6. I assumed that not all articles with these words in their titles would actually be about the natural world – they might discuss the “ecology of grace,” for example, or an “environment for safe counseling,” but by and large, the use of these words in the theological literature usually signals an environmentally relevant work, and it’s not clear that we should expect the proportion of exceptions to vary much over time, so the trend line is probably fairly reliable. Also note: the resulting graph is reported as a “percent of total ATLA database” (mainly because the total number of sources searched by the database changes frequently, so the number of hits on any given day might change, but the number of hits as a proportion of the overall database will be more stable), and the scale on the left side of the graph indicates that this literature, though growing, still represents only roughly 1% of the theological literature. However, this seems to be a significant amount: by comparison, running the same search in 2018 (when the database has expanded greatly) yields 3,601 ecology or environment hits for the year 1993 (compared to the high point of 348 hits in 1993 when this analysis was done in 2013). Clearly many more sources have become electronically searchable now than in the past. But by comparison, proportionally, searching for “love” in this database in 2018 (or loving, etc, by using the wildcard “*” after “lov”) yields only 314 hits; “grace” yields 155; “faith” yields 882; “God” yields 1,506, and “theolog*” yields 3,914, so it appears that hits for ecology or environment greatly exceed that for other key theological topics, and are comparable in number to those for “theology” itself!

7. Taken from free access journal article: <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1890/120322>

Figure 1: Fifty Years of Environment and Ecology Titles in the Theological Literature, 1960-2009:



Increase in percent of total sources in the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) database over a 50 year span, based on a title field keyword search for “ecolog* or environment*”. Significant increases in the literature were seen after Earth Day in 1970 (peak of 82 articles in 1971) and after the formation of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment and the Religion and Ecology Group of the American Academy of Religion in the early 1990s (348 articles in 1993).

Two things immediately stick out: the trend in environmental theology literature is increasing over time, and there have been two quantum leaps in the literature, one around 1970, the other around 1990. To add some historical perspective, Dr. Richard Baer recalls trying to publish theological articles about the environment in the 1960s, when Baer and others were founding the Faith, Man, Nature⁸ study group through the National Council of Churches. Ethics and theology journals were hesitant to publish on the topic because, as Baer and his colleagues were told, the “environment” wasn’t a serious ethical subject. At that time (the mid- to late 1960s), issues like civil rights and the Vietnam War dominated ethical commentary, and environmental concerns were famously characterized as only the worry of birding clubs and “little old ladies in tennis shoes.”⁹ Baer contends that Earth Day in 1970 changed that, because it caused a huge

8. For a record of some of the work of the Faith, Man, Nature group, see: <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1141688>

9. Generally this tag was applied to Audubon Club members, who were early conservation champions; more locally, women organizers who helped create the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes near Cleveland,

shift in interest toward environmental issues, at which point publications about the environment multiplied significantly across many fields (not just in theology).

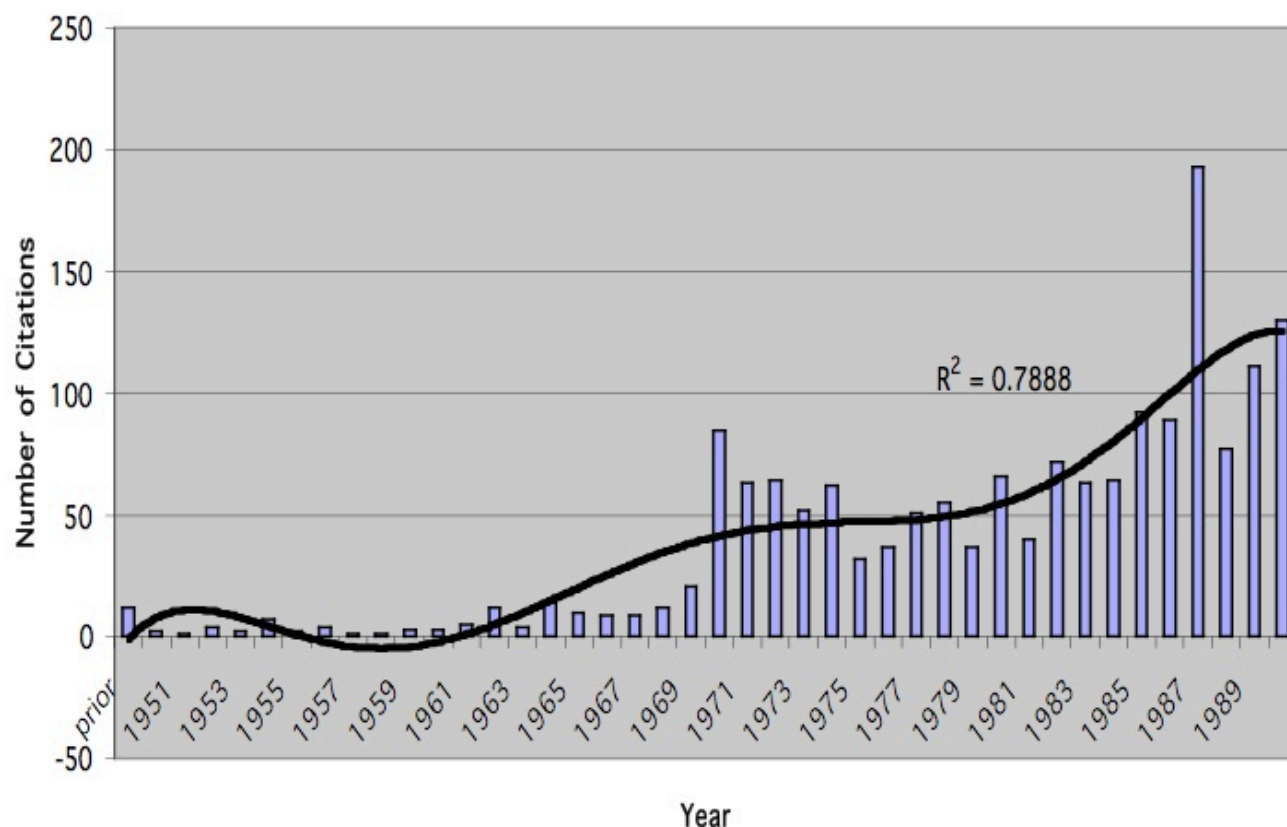
Baer remembers that a focus on the justice dimensions of environmental issues also helped open up theological attention – once it became clear that environmental degradations had disproportionately harmful effects on the poor and vulnerable, the existing social justice programs of faith communities began to engage the issue and tapped into deep and long-term structures and traditions of working for positive social change. This likely partly explains why the mainstream Catholic and Protestant arms of the NRPE (the [Eco-Justice Program](#) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (now complemented by the [Catholic Climate Covenant](#)) and the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice programs (now represented by [Creation Justice Ministries](#)) have long operated under an Eco-Justice banner.¹⁰

The second jump in the literature, around 1990, is likely the result of several relatively concurrent developments in the field. I also graphed the citations catalogued in Joseph Sheldon's bibliographic study, *Rediscovery of Creation: A Bibliographic Study of the Church's Response to the Environmental Crisis* (1992), from 1950-1990, shown here:

OH, also attracted this label when they were gathering community support to stop a highway development to establish the nature center.

10. Some of that history (1983-2009) is detailed here: <http://www.creationjustice.org/history.html>. By contrast, evangelical churches have tended to emphasize “stewardship” and individual responsibility more than “justice,” though to be clear, evangelical attention to environmental justice issues has increased – a good example is the NAE-sponsored study “Loving the Least of These”. The most famous religious contribution to study of environmental justice was the study: *Toxic Wastes and Race* (1987), commissioned by the United Church of Christ.

Sheldon Citations (Total) by Count



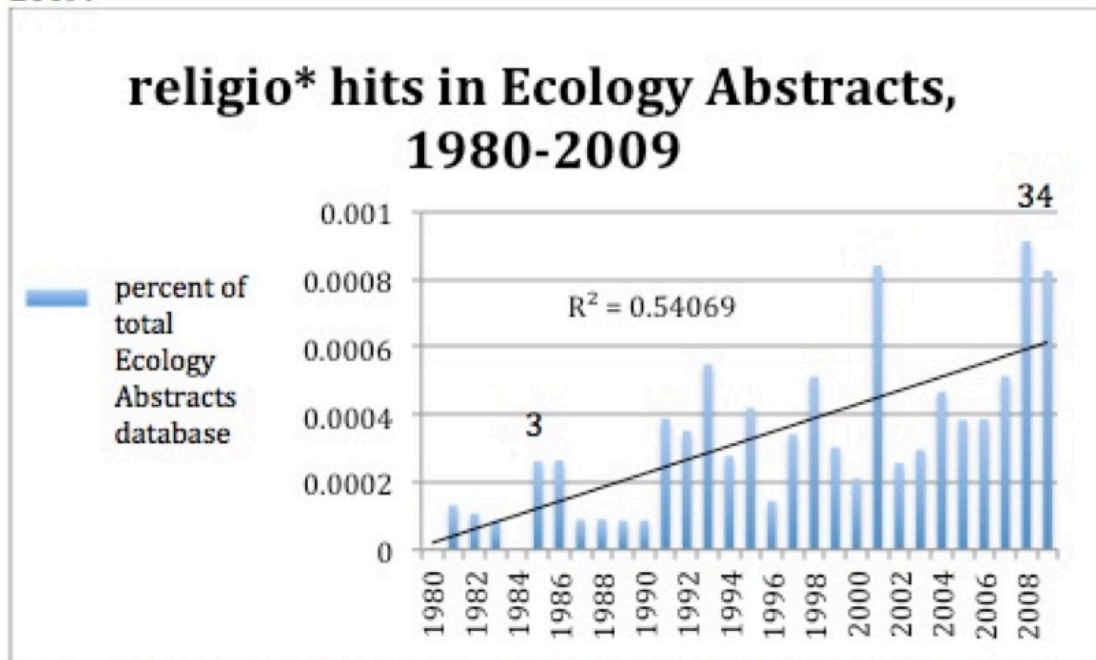
Sheldon's study of the literature also shows the jump in 1970 and a rising trend through the 1980s with a particular spike in 1987 that isn't shown in the ATLA graph. One explanation for this spike in 1987 is the "unpublished" literature that came out of the [North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology \(NACCE\)](#), which convened in 1986. The NACCE drew together several hundred of the scholars and organizers who were doing faith-based environmental work at the time and who subsequently published summaries of their presentations that Sheldon's bibliography would have included but wouldn't be searchable in ATLA. 1986 was also the year that the [Alliance for Religions and Conservation](#) got its start following a gathering of religious leaders in Assisi, Italy (St. Francis' home) convened by the [World Wildlife Federation](#). Both of these events were influential for Paul Gorman, the founder of the [National Religious Partnership for the Environment](#), and its precursor organization, the [Joint Appeal by Science and Religion for the Environment](#), which saw the evidence of this budding growth of environmental scholarship, organization, and concern among faith communities, and worked on making connections between and across denominations in the U.S. Another significant influence at this time was the formation of the Religion and Ecology Group of the [American Academy of Religion](#), which encouraged the contributions of religious scholars. Undoubtedly, some combination of these and other influences accounts for the jump in the literature around 1990.

Unlike the news clips database that I'd worked on at NRPE, I did not attempt a content analysis of the ever-expanding eco-theology literature, but one of my criteria for applying to graduate programs in religion and ecology in the early 1990s (before any official such programs existed) had been to search the library catalogs of those universities, to see how many titles they carried that would be relevant to religion and ecology. Yale's libraries were significantly better stocked than any other place I considered (only Harvard had comparable holdings), and so I was fortunate to have a lot of this literature at my fingertips. I spent hours, days, and weeks in the stacks of the Yale libraries browsing as much of this

literature as I could, and while I did not quantify my impressions in any systematic way, I saw a similar pattern to that I'd uncovered in the news clips database – this literature overwhelmingly consisted of books and articles focused on how theology reinforces environmental ethics themes, and I almost never came across literature that indicated a negative stance toward the environment.¹¹

If the theological literature has been growing steadily in its environmental interests since the 1960s, what about the inclusion of religious topics in the ecological literature? Perhaps predictably, that literature is also increasing, but only started to emerge significantly in the 1980s¹²:

Figure 2: Thirty Years of Publications Related to Religion in Ecology Abstracts, 1980-2009:



Increase in percent of total sources in Ecology Abstracts database over a 30 year span, based on a keyword search for “religio*”. No abstracts were found prior to 1981; the greatest number of hits is 34 in 2008.

In large part, the articles that have begun to emerge in the ecological literature focus on habitat studies of church-owned land (some of the only forests remaining in Ethiopia, for instance, are known as “[church forests](#)” that were

11. Eventually, I would identify a tiny sub-genre of what I'd call “anti-environmental” theology texts; there were then only a handful of those, and almost all were sponsored by a free market economics think tank that receives funding from fossil fuel interests, which I've mentioned above and will address further in Chapter 9 on climate change.

12. Taken from free access article: <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1890/120322>

protected from cutting because they were on church property), or on how particular religious traditions or rituals or customs might have a local ecological impact in some part of the world.¹³

13. A recent National Geographic article about Ethiopia's church forests can be found here: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/01/ethiopian-church-forest-conservation-biodiversity/>; a related Nature article is here: <https://www.nature.com/immersive/d41586-019-00275-x/index.html>; this attention to church forests in Ethiopia may have led to a recent Ethiopian reforestation effort, touted as the largest tree-planting effort in the world, with 350 million trees reportedly planted in one day, a Guinness world record: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/world/africa/ethiopia-tree-planting-deforestation.html>; some other articles on related topics include: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14639940802556529?src=recsys&journalCode=rcbh20> ; <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/338/6108/740.1> ; <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/338/6114/1537.2>

1.3 A Timeline of Religious Environmental Developments

These bibliographic studies give some sense of how religion-ecology interests have developed over the last 50 years, but another way to survey that development is to examine a historical timeline of significant events during that same span. One such timeline, centered on the impact of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, is found [here](#) (scroll to the end of the article to see a timeline that runs from 1990–2015).

As indicated above, there was already some theological literature focused on the environment in the 1950s and 1960s. Many people date the rise of the modern environmental movement to the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), and there is no doubt that religious concerns for the environment were also piqued at that time.¹ Prior to that, however, there are other precedents. One of the most significant examples of religiously influenced conservation success comes from the history of the development of the National Parks in the U.S. I will note some of this background in more detail in chapter 7, pointing to the work of historian Mark Stoll, who has chronicled the ways that progressive era thinking drew significantly on religious themes, specifically employing imagery of the Edenic qualities of wilderness lands to support the formation of national parks. Liberty Hyde Bailey's *The Holy Earth* (1915) also had a powerful influence on society and future writers on the topic of religion and the environment. 1923 saw the formation of the [National Catholic Rural Life Conference \(NCRLC\)](#), which has a legacy of environmentally relevant work, including contributing to the development of Rural Life Sundays and Soil Stewardship Sundays, which became established just before the Dust Bowl crisis – as a result, Soil Stewardship Sundays has been called the longest-standing faith based conservation program in America. In 1939, the USDA's [Walter Lowdermilk](#) visited the Holy Land and was struck by the scene of soil erosion and environmental degradation he witnessed there. In a radio broadcast and later publication, Lowdermilk proposed that if Moses were to see the Holy Land now, he would have convinced God to add an 11th commandment along the lines of: “thou shalt not despoil the earth.”

Though the various wars of the 20th century would monopolize a lot of the energy, resources, and political and moral attention of America and other nations, moral and religious attention to nature did continue to emerge. [A Christian Ministry in the National Parks](#) began in the 1950s, and in 1953, Eric Charles Rust published *Nature and Man in Biblical Thought*, which described “man” as the guardian of paradise, given responsibility for the natural world. The 1950s and 1960s also saw the emergence of one of the earliest significant eco-theologians, Joseph Sittler, whose 1961 eco-theology “Called to Unity” address to the [World Council of Churches](#) has been likened by some to be the shot heard by no one around the world – it seems Sittler was considerably ahead of his time, but a growing range of theological concern for environmental issues was soon to blossom. 1963 saw the creation of the Faith-Man-Nature (FMN) group, which grew out of the [National Council of Churches](#) Faculty Christian Fellowship, Research Group on Theology and Conservation. FMN lasted until 1974 and was a significant precursor to much subsequent thought about religion and the environment, hosting conferences of theologians around the country, and publishing a series of articles and books. FMN member H. Paul Santmire was the first to focus a Harvard dissertation on the topic in 1966, the same year that Dr. Richard Baer (FMN Secretary) taught the first known course in environmental ethics in America, a new testament seminar at Earlham College.

Lynn White's famous speech and article (see chapter 2) would follow in 1966 and 1967, sparking a tidal wave of attention – much of it now negative – toward religion and the environment. But even as environmental thinkers increasingly focused blame on Christianity, a veritable litany of religious environmental organizations and milestones

1. Members of the Faith, Man, Nature group, for instance, were influenced by the release of *Silent Spring*.

were established: Thomas Berry's [Riverdale Center of Religious Research](#) (1970), Alfred North Whitehead's process theology legacy and the roots of ecofeminist theory (1970s), Dennis Kuby's Ministry of Ecology in Berkeley (1973-1981), Eco-Justice Project and Network (EJPN) at Cornell (source of Eco-Justice Themes and Eco-Justice Quarterly newsletters (1974)), [Appalachian Bishops Pastoral Letter: This Land is Home to Me](#) (1975), World Council of Churches Nairobi: Just Participatory Sustainable Society (1975), the [Au Sable Institute](#) (1979), the 11th Commandment Fellowship (1979), [Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis's Genesis Farm](#) (1980), [Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences](#) (1981), World Council of Churches Vancouver: Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation (1983), [A Rocha](#) (1983), National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group (1983/1986), Alliance of Religions and Conservation (1986), North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology and the journal Firmament (replaced in 1991 by Earthkeeping News; 1986), Friends Committee on Unity with Nature (1987), Environmental Ministries of Southern California (1988), [Environmental Justice Office of the Presbyterian Church](#) (USA) (1988), North American Coalition on Religion and Ecology (1989), [Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment](#) (1990), Religion and Ecology Committee of the American Academy of Religion (1990), [Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge](#) (1992), [Earth Ministry](#) (1992), [The Regeneration Project](#) (1992), The National Religious Partnership for the Environment, including [Evangelical Environmental Network](#), [Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life](#), [National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program](#), and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Eco-Justice Project (1992/1993), [Presbyterians for Earth Care](#) (1995), Harvard Series of Conferences on Religion and Ecology (1996-1998), [Episcopal Power and Light](#) (1997), [Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation](#) (1998), Restoring Eden (2001)...and the list goes on and on. In addition to these organizations and events, religious denominations across the spectrum have generated hundreds of official environmental policy statements dating back to the 1970s.²



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/enr3470/?p=30#h5p-1>

All of these events and organizations have played a part in shaping the landscape of religion and environmental concerns today. With the publication and reaction to Pope Francis' environmental encyclical letter, it's now common for people to have heard of faith-based environmental views, but increasingly in the 2000s and 2010s, examples of faith-based environmental work had already proliferated. Profiles and success stories are catalogued on many websites.³

Suffice it to say that by now, an incredibly diverse array of religious environmental programs and teachings and legacies are woven throughout the American religious and cultural landscape. Despite this legacy, some amount of skepticism lingers about the usefulness of religion for environmental stewardship. The next chapter focuses on the most influential and enduring such skepticism in some detail. But the message is clear from scientific and environmental leaders: religion is now a critical part of the landscape of earth stewardship, and scientists and environmental

2. Mark Ellingsen's book on church social movements documents several hundred such statements: <https://www.amazon.com/Cutting-Edge-Churches-Social-Issues/dp/0802807100>.

3. Some examples include: <http://www.nrpe.org/stewardship-stories.html> ; <http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/about/success-stories-2/>; For a brief tour of some examples I think are illustrative, Ohio State students can look on Canvas for a short powerpoint describing a range of engagements and initiatives across many denominations.

professionals alike have focused increasing attention on understanding and collaborating effectively with faith communities. Most of the rest of this book tends to that effort.



Indianola Presbyterian Church Intergenerational Neighborhood Clean-up Day. Photo credit: Ann Hitzhusen

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CHAPTER 2: THE GENESIS OF ECO-THEOLOGY -- IS CHRISTIANITY TO BLAME FOR OUR “ECOLOGIC CRISIS”?

In a book that explores the burgeoning influence of faith-based environmental values, the question in the title of this chapter may seem odd. But before moving ahead to various themes and essential expressions of faith-based environmental work, this chapter delves into the most famous argument so far in the history of religion and environment studies, the Lynn White Thesis, which Lynn White, Jr, a historian at UCLA, published in 1967 in the journal *Science*. For decades, this thesis held sway in most conversations related to religion and ecology; in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, most major works on the topic would refer to Lynn White, and probably in their introduction or framing. In that sense, I am not breaking with tradition; though the field of religion and environment has moved beyond the Lynn White Thesis, its echoes still reverberate, and any informed discussion of this topic will benefit from understanding the arguments (and shortcomings) of White's thesis.

Click the link below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Theology](#)

2.1 A Nature Touched by Human Hands, and a Thesis Pulled Out by the Roots

There is a tradition in American nature writing, drawing on the precedent of transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson, to wax poetic about a beautiful nature scene in the introduction of a chapter or book. Stephen Budiansky in [Nature's Keepers](#) plays on this tradition by pillorying it as he begins his first chapter, “Good Poetry, Bad Science”:

If this were a conventional nature book in the mode of Thoreau and his countless latter-day imitators, I should begin by describing the walk I took early this morning across field and wood. How I rejoiced in the cry of the Canada geese overhead and the flash of the white tail of a fleeting deer; how the crackling of the frosted grass beneath my feet as I crossed a hollow by the wood put me in mind of the family of wild turkeys I had seen there early in the fall; how my spirit, indeed my every pore, was open to the sweet beneficence of Nature's society unfettered by the artifices of man. No worldly thoughts could intrude upon so perfect a reverie – unless it were that ever so slightly nagging doubt that even such unassailable testimony to my earnestness, sensitivity, renunciation of materialism, and oneness with creation had failed to make up for an utter lack of originality... But this is not a conventional nature book, and so I shall begin instead by pointing out how everything I saw this morning was a fake.

His point is that what is extolled as “natural” isn't as “natural” as Americans think. Bill McKibben highlights a similar point in his book, [The End of Nature](#); human impact has now stretched to the ends of the planet, so “nature” untouched by humans – the ideal of American wilderness sentiment – no longer exists. Another sort of rebellion against the canon of American environmental writing is when Michael Pollan takes Thoreau to task for one of his famous lines in [Walden](#):

As an observer and naturalist, Thoreau consistently refuses to make “invidious distinctions” between different orders of nature; sworn enemy of hierarchy, the man boasts of the fact that he loves swamps more than gardens. But as soon as he determines to make “the earth say beans instead of grass” he finds he has made enemies in nature: worms, the morning dew, woodchucks, and weeds. The bean field “attached me to the earth,” Thoreau felt, giving him positions he must defend if he hopes to prove his experiment in self-reliance a success. And so Thoreau is obliged to wage a long and decidedly uncharacteristic “war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead.” He finds himself “making such invidious distinctions with his hoe, levelling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivating another.”

Thoreau is gardening here, of course, and this forces him at least for a time to throw out his romanticism about nature – to drop what naturalists today hail as his precious “biocentrism” (as opposed to anthropocentrism). But by the end of the chapter, his bean field having achieved its purpose, Thoreau trudges back – lamely, it seems to me – to the Emersonian fold: “The sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction....Do [these beans] not grow for woodchucks too? ... How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?”

Sure, Henry, rejoice. And starve. (Pollan, p. 108)

Pollan believes Thoreau to be the progenitor of an American Wilderness ethic, whose romantic notions are sometimes not in line with reality. Pollan proceeds to track a history of various compelling ideas of nature in America, which he analogizes as different trees (The Colonial Tree, the Wilderness Tree, the Litigious Tree...). Pollan’s eventual point is that some American ideas of nature that have been compelling in the past have outlived their usefulness.

I suspect something similar is going on in American environmental ideas about religion.

A familiar refrain in environmental values literature is for an author to retrace their journey of enlightenment, from some self-centered, utilitarian view of nature as a “resource” to be exploited by humans to a more indigenous or eastern view that reveals the duality of their American expectations and awakens them to a more deeply ethical perspective on nature. The assumption is often that Western views (and Western religion) are uniquely mired in duality and antagonism to nature.¹ This idea makes great press for environmentalists, apparently. If only it were true.

1. For instance, Stephen Kellert, in *Birthright: People and Nature in the Modern World* (Yale U. Press, 2012): “An inordinate desire to control nature is said to be a characteristic of Western society, particularly its Judeo-Christian religious traditions that have encouraged human domination of the natural world.”



Note from the photographer, Tony Losekamp: "I didn't have many chances to get out and enjoy nature in college, especially freshman year living on campus at OSU. I really enjoyed taking time out of busy freshmen year to slow time and enjoy the little bit of nature on campus."

Having briefly surveyed the landscape of developments in American religious environmentalism in the last chapter, here I want to look at the most influential and famous idea in religion-environment thinking, Lynn White Jr's thesis about the culpability of Western Christian doctrine for our modern environmental problems. That question was the focus of the primary chapter of my dissertation, which was published in *Environmental Education Research* in 2007. That article can be found [here](#).²

For those who already appreciate the details of the case I make in that article, the bottom line is this: Lynn White's thesis posited that Western biblical notions of "dominion" and Christian anthropocentrism and duality were the key roots of our ecologic crisis. A number of significant critiques of White's thesis have evolved in the literature, as summarized in Hitzhusen (2007); in a nutshell, White's thesis is weakened because:

- White's thesis suffered from misinterpretation and overgeneralization,
- Other cultural factors have been more salient than religion in enabling environmental degradation in the West, such as: materialism, secularization, democratization, individualism, and wealth,
- Environmental degradation in the East (which is typically more severe than in the West) suggests that Eastern religions have been not been more "ecological" than Western,
- White's biblical interpretations are theologically incoherent, and
- White's thesis has not been well supported by empirical findings.

In brief, the thesis has not held up to scrutiny – it appears to be sociologically, geographically, and historically dubious, and I think Wendell Berry (1990) has it right in terms of the theological accuracy of White's claims: if the question is "does the Bible imply that humans are free to do as they please with Earth because of 'dominion,'" Berry replies that such an "extremely unintelligent" reading of Genesis "is contradicted by virtually all the rest of the Bible."

Lacking substantive evidence, many environmental writers who have continued to champion some variant of White's thesis have used a line from Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, as their primary evidence for White's theological claims, but it turns out that this is a famous misquote (Watt was alleged as saying "when the last tree is felled, Christ will return"). What many environmentalists assumed to be Watt's view of biblically-based disregard for the environment was derived from a comment by Watt that actually indicated that his Christian beliefs motivated him toward careful stewardship of natural resources for future generations (p. 61 of Hitzhusen (2007) elaborates on these specific details – Watt actually said that we don't know how long it will be until the Lord returns, so *we need to manage natural resources with care*). White's contemporary examples of anti-environmental biblical views were therefore ungrounded, and moreover, his theological claims were not just poor interpretations, they were theologically incoherent.

I realize that calling someone's thesis "incoherent" – especially a thesis that was as widely lauded as White's – is a dangerously frank criticism, and requires more elaboration. But White's idea has been around for over 50 years now, and given that it has not held up well to empirical scrutiny, maybe it should not be surprising that the theological assumptions of the thesis were flawed in the first place. I acknowledge that White's ideas remain compelling for some environmentalists, especially for those who argue that their own views are compelling in part because they avoid the criticisms of White's thesis. But the fact remains that White's theological claims make sense only through improbable interpretations of biblical theology. For instance, just on its face, to call an obviously theo-centric belief

2. ENR 3470 students at OSU have access to this article in Canvas.

system “anthropocentric” is surely to miss the point of that system. For most religions, re-orienting humans from their self-centeredness towards something greater than themselves (in the case of Biblical religions, that’s God) is more or less the point – a point that White and his environmental champions seemed to completely ignore.

2.2 The Genesis of Eco-Theology

So let's start at the very beginning and take a look at what I call the Genesis of Eco-Theology.¹ Most of the commentary that pegs the Bible as anti-environmental, including White's thesis, attends to just a couple of passages in Genesis, as if those few lines suffice to judge a whole tradition. This can lead to persuasive claims, especially for less theologically informed readers, but it is always important to know the context of a verse within a chapter. After all, if someone was reading a scientific article, or any other piece of literature and made criticisms based on only reading a couple of sentences, we wouldn't expect those criticisms to be very reliable.

The Hebrew Bible (and Christian "Old Testament") begins with the book of Genesis, which starts with this line: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth" ([Gen. 1:1](#), NIV).² Note at this point that the earth is "formless and void," darkness is over the the surface of the deep, and then the wind (*ruach*) of God sweeps over the face of the waters. So, there were some primordial waters, a dark deep, some sort of chaotic substrate over which God's breath (or spirit) swept. This is the beginning.

And then God speaks some things into being. "Let there be light" (Day 1) and "let there be sky" (Day 2), and "let there be dry ground" (Day 3). God orders (or *structures*) something at each step – light is separated from darkness, yielding day and night; waters above are separated from waters below yielding sky; the waters under the sky are concentrated in places to let dry land emerge so there is now land and sea. Then God "lets" the land get in on the act – God says "let the *land* produce vegetation" – plants and trees of all kinds (Day 3). And God says "let there be lights in the expanse of the sky, to set apart day and night and seasons, yielding sun and moon and the stars" (Day 4). And now the sea gets its cue: "let the *water* bring forth swarms of living things and let birds fly in the skies"; and so the waters teemed with creatures and all the winged birds took to the skies (Day 5). And the land again joins the creative act as God says "let the *earth* bring forth creatures of every kind," and now all manner of creatures, livestock, and wild animals entered the mix (Day 6). Between hovering and speaking things into existence and letting land and sea bring forth creatures, God's presence and spirit and Word are acting together within creation to bring all things into being.

1. My goal here is to run through the Genesis account from creation to Noah and highlight significant points relevant to ecotheology and creation care. I am not suggesting that this chapter provides a comprehensive examination – there will surely be some gaps in what I cover – our subject is only one of the most intensely studied pieces of literature in the entire world, and I don't presume to be the final authority on these well-known texts. But I do think that anyone who still finds White's thesis compelling must grapple with the points I highlight here.
2. I will follow standard abbreviation format for biblical verses, with a chapter number followed by a colon, followed by the relevant verse numbers within that chapter.



Image obtained through the public domain.

One important moment in this creative sweep comes after the waters have brought forth creatures: “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’” ([Gen. 1:22, NRSV](#)). The first divine blessing in the Bible is for the fish and birds, so we know that God wants them to flourish. On the same day that all the other land creatures and mammals were created, God also creates humans, male and female, in the image and likeness of God and lets them rule (gives them dominion, *radah*) over the fish, birds, and other creatures. We’ve now reached the first verse that often gets mentioned by environmental critics, Gen. 1:26, but it will be quickly overshadowed by Gen. 1:28, the mother of all verses for environmental criticism. And then, like God had done with the fish and birds,

God blessed the humans and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply (*rabah*); fill/replenish the earth and subdue (*kabash*) it. Rule/have dominion (*radah*) over the fish, birds, and every living creature” (Gen 1:28).

It’s worth noting a couple of points here: humans get a blessing just like the fish and birds, but they don’t get their own day of creation – they come along on the same day as other land creatures (and indeed, share most of their DNA with their mammalian kin, who also came forth from the earth – more below on human “earthiness” in Genesis 2). And as the next verse makes clear, God then invites the humans to eat plants, alongside the other creatures – “everything that has the breath of life in it,” to them God gives green plants for food. As theologian Karl Barth noted, humans and other creatures are “referred to the same table” to eat.³ Or as the bumper sticker from one faith-based environmental organization ([Restoring Eden](http://RestoringEden.org)) puts it:



Image used by permission from Restoring Eden.

Whatever the case may be about the language of “dominion” and “subdue”, it apparently does not involve humans eating animals, so we should question how much it applies to any system or culture where humans eat meat. For contemporary readers, perhaps this suggests that only vegetarians should be allowed to hold positions of responsibility for managing the earth (and perhaps only vegetarians are blessed to be fruitful and multiply?). I realize this may sound absurd to some readers – we will need to look at more than just these few verses for a more reasoned view.

As a preliminary summary: in this biblical account, creation takes place within a created order and by God’s creative will, through a process – not just from an act of fiat or even a series of acts of fiat – but also through prior things enabling the development and emergence of later things. There are three days of structuring, ordering, and separating things (days/nights, heaven/earth, water/land), three days of populating things with creatures, and then a day of rest.

There is one other obvious point so far which I have saved for now: as God creates day by day⁴, God stops and sees that what is created is good, so we hear a repeated line after each creation: “and God saw that it was Good” in reference to the light ([1:4](#)), earth and seas (1:10), vegetation (1:12), lights in the dome (sun, moon and stars, 1:18), sea creatures and birds (1:21), and land creatures (1:25). God saw each of these creations and saw that they were good, and after all things had been created (including humans), and God saw *all* that had been made, the text says that God saw that it was “very good” (1:31). This is the ending point of the first chapter of Genesis: each of the different parts of creation are good, and

3. I have been unable to find the original citation of Barth’s quote, though Dick Baer regularly quoted it in his teaching at Cornell, and Rod Garner’s chapter on “Being Compassionate” in the book *Teaching Virtue: The Contribution of Religious Education* quotes Barth on this point on [page 96](#).
4. The Hebrew term for “day” can also be translated as a longer period of time, like an “era.”

all of it together is exceedingly good. This is something that God, and perhaps humans too (made in God's likeness), can “see.”

This point about the goodness of creation is worth highlighting further. First, an important device in biblical Hebrew is that when something is important, a favorite way to signal importance is by repetition. So, to be told over and over (six times, in fact), that parts of creation are good – and a seventh time that all things together are *very* good – is a neon biblical sign signaling significance. No reader should miss that God sees and considers creation good; nothing in this chapter, the beginning of the whole Bible, is emphasized more. Second, note that God does not say, “Let there be light, and I declare that the light is good!”; rather, God creates, and then once that thing exists, it's goodness becomes apparent to God. This makes it clear that God sees the value and goodness in all of creation, and the text is at pains to make sure the reader notices that God says all these things are good. Secular environmental ethicists have built arguments for decades in an attempt to solidly ground the notion that nature has intrinsic value – in part, to counter the apparent lack of regard for the planet that Americans have – and here, on page and chapter one of the Bible, that seems to be an inescapable point. God can see that creation is good, and that point seems crucial enough to the biblical authors to highlight it more than any other point. In absolute contrast to Lynn White's thesis about biblical ideas causing disregard for nature, it seems the point at the start of the bible is to make clear that the creation has intrinsic value – creation is profoundly good.



Image obtained through the public domain.

A third point develops this a bit further. Some commentators have suggested that the English language makes a relatively flimsy translation of the concept “very good.” They point to the language of the Greek septuagint version of the Bible, which renders this as *lian kala* – “altogether good and beautiful” (HE Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia).⁵ This seems apt – not only does “altogether” echo the point that God is now seeing all things together as especially good, but the notion of “beauty” is added here, which might help explain why God sees goodness in all these things. As philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch argues (and we will comment on this in chapter 6), beauty is one of the easiest and most direct ways that humans recognize goodness beyond themselves and find value in other things. Our own experience probably confirms this – it's easy to see the beauty of creation, and this beauty adds to our valuation of creation. As the second chapter of Genesis says (in the Adam and Eve garden account of God's creation), in the garden “God made to

5. <http://www.orth-transfiguration.org/safeguarding-the-creation-for-future-generations/>

grow every tree that is pleasant to sight and good for food” – note that beauty is mentioned before utility (food value). Eden, furthermore, is the term for “delight,”⁶ and there is a certain revelling in beauty and delight that attends the acts of creation in other biblical accounts, too, such as in Proverbs [8:22-31](#) where the creation is recalled as the time when wisdom served as the craftsman at God’s side, dancing and full of delight day after day, rejoicing always in God’s presence, rejoicing in God’s whole creation and delighting in mankind.⁷ No matter what else creation might be, there is always this beautiful, good original value that cannot be ignored.

And to be sure, many later passages extol the beauty and goodness of creation, particularly in the Psalms, like [19:1](#) where creation is admired for testifying to God, or the ecological Psalm, [104](#), where the fullness and interconnectedness within creation inspires rejoicing, and reflects divine presence. In the Christian New Testament, Paul writes in [Romans 1:20](#) that no one has an excuse for doubting God’s existence, for *since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – God’s eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen in what has been made in creation*. If creation is so closely linked to God, and goodness – if created things are good, and all things together are very good – then we might take a related point from Thomas Aquinas as an argument for the value of biodiversity when he said that since [no one creature can adequately reflect all of God’s goodness](#),⁸ then all things together more fully testify to the glory of God.

6. “Fruitful” and “well-watered” are other meanings for “Eden.”

7. Richard Baer delighted in lecturing on this topic at Cornell University in his “Religion, Ethics and the Environment” course.

8. Aquinas wrote: “For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided.” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 47, 1).



Image obtained through the public domain.

A final point of perspective about all this goodness: If God – the creator, the source of life, who in this account will be described as caring for human well-being – made something precious and amazing and life giving (life itself, actually!) and called it good, good, good, good, good, good, VERY good... that doesn't sound like the kind of thing you're supposed to degrade or destroy.

Beyond the point of goodness, the second most-emphasized point here is “blessing,” which gets repeated three times (seven and three are key numbers in scriptural texts, and three repetitions is the more standard device for emphasizing a point). God blesses the sea creatures and birds to be fruitful and multiply (1:21) and then also blesses the humans to be fruitful and multiply (1:28). Finally, as the story shifts into the second chapter of Genesis, on Day 7, God rests from creating, and God blesses and hallows the Sabbath day. As noted above, the blessing of fruitfulness is not only given to humans, so common sense tells us that if humans act in a way that jeopardizes the ability of other creatures to be fruitful and multiply, that works against God's blessing of those creatures, which would not seem to be the way God would want humans to use their freedom. The blessing of the Sabbath day raises some additional points: the fact that God ceases from creative work and just lets creation “be” on the Sabbath indicates that creation is able to abide without God's constant activity – creation has an integrity all its own that is part of why later in Genesis God affirms that so long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, seasons, and night and day will not cease (Gen 8:22). This promotes confidence in the reliability of creation – it has its own substance and regenerating capacity. This account of creation also shows us that just as sun, moon, stars, water, land, plants, and creatures are all a part of creation, God makes Sabbath rest a part of the order of creation, too, and blesses and hallows such rest.

There will be much more to say about biblical creation accounts by moving on to Genesis chapter 2, but first we should return to take a closer look at the environmentally problematic lines that focus on human dominion and “subduing” the earth in Genesis 1. It would seem that these verses fall within a context of goodness and blessing in creation, but as many have pointed out, these verses are challenging for those who seek a creation-friendly posture in Genesis.

Genesis 1:26 says: Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (NRSV).

This hints at more to come in the following verses and suggests that there is something special about humans, who are made in God's image⁹, and to whom "dominion" over other creatures has been granted.¹⁰

Genesis 1:27 builds on this: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (NRSV).

It may be because humans are in God's image that they make a reasonable choice for the responsibility of dominion. From a Christian perspective, the image of God is also conditioned by the person of Jesus, believed by Christians to be Messiah/Christ, son of God, part of the trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Jesus' model of wielding power would therefore be the prime example of proper human behavior, and notably the leadership of Jesus was self-sacrificial, servant leadership. Jesus is an example of one who laid down his life for those "under" him, one who endured death rather than exercise any divine power for self-preservation (both during his temptation in the wilderness at the start of his ministry, and at his death when some of his followers encouraged him to avoid the persecution that seemed headed his way), thereby showing restraint. This echoes the Jewish image of a proper ruler (where "ruler" comes from the same root as rule/dominion, *radah*), who is not to Lord his power over others, and is to rule gently, not exploiting his people. So while this role of power sounds potentially dangerous, the biblical view of such a role is in contrast to a ruler who would use his or her power for exploitation.

Next comes the blessing of Genesis 1:28: God blessed them, and God said to them, "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" (NRSV, emphasis added).

First, what is this business about multiplying? In an age when many environmentalists have wrestled with the challenges of growing human populations, this blessing is often suspected of encouraging unchecked population growth, so from that perspective, it sounds like a source of environmental strain. But seeing this passage in context, note that these are the instructions given to the very *first* humans. According to the story, they have been made amid the already flourishing creation where the waters teem with creatures, birds swarm in the sky, and creatures are all around the earth. If humans are to make it, they'll need to get busy and start reproducing. Also note in this regard that these Genesis passages are the start of a narrative that develops along many storylines, such as in [Exodus 1:7](#), where the Israelites have settled in Egypt – they were "exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them" (NIV).

In the trajectory of the larger story that begins here, there are times when a land is now full of God's people, so this charge to multiply to fullness appears to be an encouragement that can be fulfilled, rather than a perennial order to just keep multiplying without worry (like some population-control environmentalists seem to suspect is the agenda of the Bible).¹¹

But notice another sense of the word "fill" – the passage says "be fruitful and multiply, fill the land... and subdue it." The King James translation of the word "fill" is "replenish," and that suggests a responsiveness to the fullness of the earth. As [Psalm 24](#) says, "the Earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof..." (KJV). The description so far of creation, with

9. God's image appears to be plural, which is intriguing, but not a point we will focus on here.
10. There's an interesting spin on this granting of dominion in Islamic tradition, where tradition holds that the role of holding dominion, or vice-regency (where humans are considered God's [vice-regents or vice-gerents](#)), was first offered to other beings, like the mountain, trees, and other animals. Each refused the responsibility, but when vice-regency was finally offered to humans, they were the only ones to say "yes."
11. Notably, once the Israelites became so numerous in Egypt, the Egyptians began to resent and persecute them, so biblical stories are not blind to the challenges of successful multiplying.

waters teeming with creatures and swarms of life on the planet, suggests abundance. “Replenish the Earth and subdue it” would suggest keeping the earth “full” and abundant so as to harvest from that abundance. You might even call it a good mandate for natural resource management. So perhaps “fill the earth” might suggest a charge to “keep it full,” which isn’t such bad advice. But we still have to deal with the terms “subdue” and have “dominion/rule.”

There’s no getting around the relatively rough sense of these terms, at least that for “subdue”:

- **Subdue** (*kabash*) – trample under foot, enslave, subjugate, conquer, force, molest, overcome, bring under control
- Have **dominion** (*radah*) – rule, govern, reign, officiate, trample grapes

It’s easy to see the environmentalist complaint – most of the senses of “subdue” sound like harsh treatment, so a ruler who is supposed to subdue the land sounds like a potential despoiler of ecosystems. But yet ruling, *radah*, is a royal responsibility (see [Psalm 72](#)) – it shouldn’t be harsh (see [Ez 34:1-4](#) and [Lev 25:43, 46](#)). Proper ruling should be understood as caregiving, nurturing, not exploiting, especially in light of the norm of vegetarianism and God’s blessing to other creatures to also be fruitful and multiply. And if the Christian sense of servant leadership is applied, the ruler might be expected to serve the land or the creatures, even lay down their life for them.¹² This latter might be a bit of a stretch, because land, animals and people are different sorts of things to rule or serve, and indeed, this is the only place in the Bible where the term *radah* is used in relation to non-human creatures – elsewhere it denotes rule over people (where it is intended to be a caregiving rule). In another sort of switch-up, the term *kabash*, subdue, can be used to refer to coercive human relations (see [Num 32:22, 29](#)), but there is no enemy postulated here regarding the earth/land as there is in other verses where human enemies are part of the context. Remember, the context here is the very recent gift from God of a good land, good creatures, good plants, good heavens and earth, and a very good biosphere (humans included), so there has been no sense that the creation is some sort of enemy to be subdued; rather, we have been given a picture of teeming life and abundance that God blesses and sees as good.

Subdue/*kabash* does refer to land in other passages (conquering the promised land, for example), but Genesis 1 is likely more agricultural in intent; here, as with the instructions to multiply, the “beginning of all life” context is probably relevant – these are encouragements to the very first humans who will try to make a living off the land. Subdue, *kabash*, makes a probable reference to the requirements of agriculture, a difficult task especially in those days.¹³ Subduing the land as such may have more sense of bringing order out of disorder – think about what it would take for the first humans to gather and grow food...make the soil productive... and be good stewards of the creatures.¹⁴

12. Andrew Linzey mentions a similar idea in his chapter: Linzey, A. “The Theological Basis of Animal Rights,” pp. 355-360 in Gottlieb, R.S., ed, This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment (second edition), New York: Routledge, 2004.
13. Imagine an anachronistic alternative for this creation story: God says, “Don’t worry about toiling on the land, just go to the Walmart Supercenter down by the burning bush and get whatever food you need!”
14. Terrence Fretheim’s favors such an interpretation in his book, God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation, Abingdon Press, 2005.

Think of it this way: you, the reader, are sitting somewhere, probably in a relatively climate-controlled space, reading this book on an electronic device whose very possibility represents an incredible amount of control of nature, and likely most everything about your life is linked to massive systems of managing and controlling natural resources, capital, and human labor. The earth is subdued now like never before, and we live off of the products of that control, some of us very comfortably, such that the idea of dirtying our hands with some harsh notion of *subduing nature* sounds far removed from our lives...but like the Budiansky quote at the beginning of the chapter, for most Americans, any sense that we are somehow living without causing much impact on the world is a very fake sense.

We will soon turn to the second creation story in Genesis Chapter 2, the garden story of Adam and Eve, which carries many similar elements and follows the basic line of the creation story in Genesis 1 but also has some stark differences. Where Genesis 1 takes an “ancient science” point of view, describing a relatively sequential creation process from a cosmic point of view, Genesis 2 frames the creation story more immediately from a human point of view, that of the original human characters, Adam and Eve. If we imagine the kind of instructions that God might give the very first humans, who are heading out into a vast world populated by almost no humans, and compare them to how God might advise humans today when there are over 7 billion humans already on the planet, perhaps we get a sense that we shouldn’t expect this story to directly address every question we might have about how to live in today’s world. But then, this isn’t a story designed to provide a list of do’s and don’ts – this is a commentary on the human condition and on the relations between God, humans, and the rest of creation.



Rooftop garden sunflowers at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Headquarters in Chicago, IL. Photo courtesy of technologyforthe poor.com

2.3 Human-Divine-Land Relations in Genesis 2

One of my favorite commentaries on the relation between humans, God, and nature is a [Far Side cartoon](#) by Gary Larson showing a countryside scene, like unto a newly created world. A big jar labeled “humans” has fallen from the sky and broken open in the center of the frame, releasing a small flock of naked humans into the wild. A deer and a squirrel look on tentatively while the humans run off into the hills with a posture of “woo hoo!” and a voice from heaven says: “uh-oh.” Perhaps a creator God who had prepared a very good creation, and had humans in mind as a possible addition, must always have been aware that there could be liabilities associated with releasing humans into an otherwise earthly paradise.

With this thought in mind, let’s move to Genesis chapter 2. Remember that in Genesis chapter 1, the humans have been created vegetarian. They’ve been given dominion (to care for what belongs to God like a steward would tend to the master’s property), but that dominion has not meant that they should eat any other creatures. {Footnote for my Ohio State students¹}

So far we’ve looked at all of chapter 1 in Genesis, where verse 28 has been the most famous supposedly “anti-environmental” verse, and we can see that this verse is set within a creation story that distinctly proclaims the goodness of God’s creation, charges humans to take responsibility through careful dominion, and seems to imagine a human role where ecological abundance and fruitfulness will be maintained. I’ve emphasized several points that run counter to Lynn White’s interpretations, but to be clear: most commentators who defend these verses against environmental criticism mainly do so with reference to Genesis chapter 2, and for good reason.

What we’ve read in chapter 1 is considered by scholars of biblical literature to be the “priestly” account, while the Adam and Eve creation story in the garden of Eden in chapter 2 is considered to be a more ancient story, the “Yahwist” account. Regardless of potentially different frames of reference, both accounts have been preserved in the scriptures and refer to many of the same questions. Any claim about what Genesis says about creation clearly can’t ignore one chapter and only focus on another. There are other differences and similarities between the two chapters, but this basic frame change remains significant. While chapter 1 has God saying “let us make man in our image, in our likeness,” and then confirms that God created humans, both male and female, chapter 2 provides more detail about God’s creation of humans. As verses 7 and 8 say:

1. Clearly there is a disconnect here between basic predator-prey biology and the biblical/Genesis 1 vision where apparently no one eats meat, not even the lions (the other animals have been given plants to eat, and note that the beatific vision of the “lion lying down with the lamb” (when all things are eventually reconciled to God) apparently returns to such a vision). Yet there is also evidence that on islands where species interactions are limited, some plants have never evolved the basic protections that they do in the face of competition and predation (thorns, for instance). How might a biologist who feels strongly about the preservation of biodiversity, or a vegan who idealizes a non-predatory lifestyle, wrestle with these contrasts between an ancient science/biblical view of nature, modern-science-informed views, and ethical concerns for the well-being of all life? That would make a great term paper topic.

“...then the Lord God formed man [adam] from the dust of the ground [adama], and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being [nephesh hayah]. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden...”

Most English translations say that God formed the man, Adam, from the soil, though at this point, the term *adam* is not gendered. The more environmentally interesting linguistic detail, however, is the word play of the human, the *adam*, being formed from the soil, the *adama*. Perhaps the *human* from the *humus* is a good way to say this in English, or as some have suggested as a way to capture the non-gendered status of this soil creature, we might say God created the *earthling* from the *earth*. And after God breathes into its nostrils (like the wind/spirit/breath that hovered over the waters in chapter 1), the earthling becomes a living being, *nephesh hayah*. Notably, trees and other animals are also considered *nephesh hayah*, so though the story doesn't mention God similarly breathing into other beings, they too are called *nephesh hayah*, living creatures, living souls, through whom life takes flesh. In chapter 1, it was the soil, the earth, that brought forth all the land creatures (and the plants), and the Jahwist account of chapter 2 seems to add the detail of how God also brought forth *humans* from the earth.

It won't be our focus here, but note that there is a whole different ordering of the process of creation in this chapter. Verse 4 suggests that the earth and heavens were made, but as yet there were no plants, as God had not yet sent rain nor made humans to work the ground. So, streams came up from the earth and watered all the land, and then God formed the *adam* from the dust of the ground, as noted above. God then places the *adam* in the garden God had planted in Eden, makes all kinds of trees grow there, and then offers what has often been the mother of all sources for the environmentally positive interpretation of “dominion and subdue” in Genesis: **The Lord God took the *adam* and put him in the garden of Eden to till (*abad*) it and keep (*shamar*) it** (Gen 2:15, emphasis added).

As a quick note,² God realized that it wasn't good for *adam* to be alone, so then made all manner of animals as potentially suitable helpers/partners, and *adam* named them. But none were suitable, so God put *adam* in a deep sleep and formed another human from *adam*'s rib (or *side* – the Hebrew term could be understood as dividing the *adam* in half and making another being from the other side. Here is where gender differentiation occurs for the *adam*, and we get *ish* and *isha*, the word play suggesting similarity, perhaps like two sides of the same coin)³. In any case, there is a powerful sense that humans are fundamentally relational beings who need other humans and other beings as partners to avoid isolation and being alone, which God could see was not good.⁴ So if we are still thinking about how obviously good all of creation is made out to be in chapter 1, now God is saying that it is not good for humans to be alone in the garden. Again, echoing Gen 1:31, it's apparently *very* good when all of creation is together, humans and plants and animals and earth and all.

So if the human is placed in the garden, on earth, to till (*abad*) it and keep (*shamar*) it, let's look at those words:

- Till (*abad*) – work, cultivate, serve, dress (implying adorn, embellish, improve)
- Keep (*shamar*) – exercise care for, guard, watch, protect, preserve

2. And keeping in mind that this basic order of *when* things were created differs from the order specified in Genesis 1 (for instance, in Genesis 1 other animals are created before humans, but in Genesis 2, humans are created before other animals)...

3. The classic source of a provocative reading of gender relations in Genesis 2 and 3 is Phyllis Trible's article: Trible, Phyllis. “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread.” *Andover Newton Quarterly*. 13 (1973): 74-81 (a copy is available [here](#)).

4. Gen 2:18: The Lord God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone...”

Most eco-theology commentators see this as a complement to the instructions in Genesis 1, where the blessing there was to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion, while here in the role of gardener, the human vocation is apparently best described as working/cultivating/improving and keeping/preserving/protecting the land. Thus, whatever one thinks “dominion” and “subdue” imply, Genesis 2:15 provides a further charge, though it does not appear too difficult to reconcile the two. Blessed to be fruitful and have dominion in chapter 1, humans would seem to be charged with careful stewardship of keeping the earth full and abundant in life; in chapter 2 the narrator simply tells us that the human was placed in the garden to care for it.⁵

5. This is the conclusion of the vast majority of commentators and theologians. However, there is a tiny minority interpretation, generated by E. Calvin Beisner, the spokesperson for the free market think tank I mentioned in chapter one, whose theology dissertation was funded in part by Exxon (no joke!). Conveniently, he arrives at a slightly different conclusion; he says that in chapter 1, God orders the chaos/wilderness and tells humans to have dominion; in chapter 2, by contrast, he notes that humans are placed in a garden, a developed area, and that’s where they’re told to till and keep. So by Beisner’s logic, wilderness areas and other lands rich in natural resources are there for humans to develop, whereas once we develop areas, then we should take care of them. I don’t think the garden of Eden as described in the Bible sounds at all like a humanly developed area, and the chaos of Genesis 1 (the primordial waters above which God’s spirit hovered) sounds nothing like a typical wilderness area, but I can definitely see how Beisner’s interpretation would be a nice justification for an oil company to keep on drilling in pristine wilderness areas, all for the small price of a graduate school tuition!

2.4 Filling the Earth Without Overdoing it

If humans are uniquely charged to be caretakers (perhaps because as beings created in the image of God, they have capacities to manage and make judgments that other creatures do not), let's not forget that on a wild, abundant planet earth, living and flourishing still require hard work. Especially when we think of the basic food-providing vocations that make life sustainable for humans (agriculture, fishing, etc), the work is demanding, yet you can't overwork the land or overtax resources – abundance must be replenished; so tilling, cultivating and improving the land will involve restorative work. The fruitfulness of creatures and plants and ecosystems must not be diminished lest God's blessing be obscured and our physical livelihood diminished, so we must keep, protect, and preserve creation.

If this is what human dominion means, it is no wonder why after God created all things, *including humans*, and saw all of it together, God saw all these things as very good. We humans can care for what God has made – we can tend to our common home while remembering that in the end, the earth and all its fullness is the Lord's, so we have a distinct responsibility as stewards and caretakers.¹

Sometimes critics mention the passages where *adam* names all the creatures that God brings to him (Gen 2:19) and suggest that this is an arrogant display of taking power over those creatures. But when I think of naming, I have two main reference points – one is as a parent, expecting our two boys when they were in the womb. We were delightfully focused on finding a name that would be suitable, that would capture who we hoped our children would be, a name that we'd love to call. I also have a lot of friends and colleagues who have backgrounds in biology (my wife is a high school biology teacher), and their experience around naming species may be more relevant. One of the coolest things a biologist or zoologist can do is discover a new species and get to name it. No doubt, the ideal of species naming is usually either to honor someone or something (thus a species name that includes a researcher or celebrity's surname – maybe this is a little akin to naming a child after a family member) or the latin genus and species name designed to help describe the character of that species. As [Cal DeWitt](#) has said, in order to properly name a creature, you have to study it, know it, and respect it. So while those looking for criticisms of the Genesis text might want to claim this as an example of humans showing power over creatures to highlight the anti-environmental dominion they imagine being promoted in these texts, I find that view convenient for critics but not very compelling.

Another point that gets attention from environmental critics of biblical texts is the cursing of the ground in Genesis 3:17-19:

“...cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life...By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

While this passage reaffirms human kinship with the earth/dust, the mention of cursed ground is what draws attention, and in this case, not from environmentalists being critical of the Bible, but usually from Christians reacting against the views of environmentalists, or at least from developers reacting against environmentalists who are trying to force them to protect rather than develop land. Similar to the “end times” type of argument associated with James Watt (that was debunked in Hitzhusen (2007)), the claim here is that because God has cursed the ground, there is no sense wasting extra time, money, and energy trying to heal land that is already fated to be cursed. This is a curious justification for not preserving land, but note that the charge to humans to be good stewards is nowhere revoked in this story.

1. This might be part of the sense of the important human role Genesis 2:5 describes by God's hesitance to create plants before there was a human to care for them.

The point that becomes clearer and clearer, however, is that humans turn out to be quite imperfect stewards. This is where no smaller concept than the “fall of man” comes into play; the ground is cursed, women will have pain in childbirth, thorns and thistles will sprout. We will keep reading to see how this story turns out, because humanity starts looking pretty bad at this point in the biblical narrative. Picking up on the instructions of the blessing in Genesis 1, Chapter 6 begins to reveal what happens as the people multiply:

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground... The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6:1,5,6)

Things are starting to go badly, and God, ever watchful, sees this, and the divine “uh-oh” in the Far Side cartoon mentioned above might be apt. To channel another popular cartoon character, a Homer Simpson version of this would be a divine “D’oh!” But this is really more than just a sigh of “oops” from God. The text continues:

Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was **filled** with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them...” (Genesis 6:11, emphasis added)

The creator is angry, aggrieved. Wondering why he ever made humans, God decides to blot them out – how dare they profane what God created good, what God intended, what God blessed? So, it’s not all good when humans begin to multiply. What God sees now is corruption, not goodness. Instead of multiplying and *filling* the earth and subduing it with care and keeping through good work or replenishing the earth, the humans have *filled* (this is the same Hebrew word from Chapter 1 of Genesis) the earth with violence. So as most Americans are probably aware, this is the start of the flood story with Noah’s ark. The text explains that thankfully, Noah was a good and righteous man, or that might have been the end of the human experiment. Unlike the rest of disobedient humanity, over and over the text tells us in Chapters 6 and 7 that Noah does all that God commands him ([Gen 6:22](#); [7:5,9,16](#)). The general state of disobedience has become a commentary on what humanity is like in contrast to what God intends or desires.



Image obtained through the public domain.

Yet there is one human who seems to be following the model God had intended. Noah is behaving like humans were supposed to – he does what God commands him, including building a huge ark on dry land (at great expense and enduring the ridicule of his neighbors). The ark allows him to undertake a heroic act of dominion and care; as the flood waters rise, Noah and his family and their ark protect/save/serve/rescue all kinds of living creatures. Not just the economically beneficial ones or the cute cuddly ones or the charismatic megafauna. ALL of them. Male and female each, preserving their potential for fruitfulness. No doubt, if they survive the flood as the last of their kind, they'll need to be fruitful and multiply all over again once dry land has reappeared! And indeed, that is what happens next in the story:

...and God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth. (Gen 8:1-3)

The language of a wind blowing over chaotic waters parallels day 1 from Genesis Chapter 1, and the restraining of heavenly waters and return of dry land parallel days 2 and 3 of creation. By verse 8:11, when the dove returns with the olive leaf, we know that the vegetation has returned, further paralleling day 3. The parallels continue in Gen 8:17 as the ark settles on dry land, and Noah is told to go out of the ark:

“Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh – birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth – so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply.”

Any attentive reader by now should realize that the elements of Genesis Chapter 1 are being repeated, and in biblical

Hebrew, any time the text repeats something, we know to pay attention. The animals – all flesh – are now called out of the ark to be fruitful and multiply. If only humans, birds, and fish got the explicit blessing in Genesis 1, now every creature on the ark is given God's charge to go forth and abound. It seems that all creatures are in the same boat when it comes to needing to be *fruitful and multiply* in order to abound on earth, especially at times when the earth is depopulated! These themes continue along with some assurance that the earth can be trusted:

And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. (Genesis 8:21-22)



Image obtained through the public domain.

This passage is interesting on multiple counts. God here ensures and assures stability, which humans cannot do. Humans appear to have the power to disrupt the earth, and in the case of the flood, God allowed human wickedness to carry the disruption to the brink of total destruction, but God's promise after the flood is never to destroy every living creature as in the flood.² Reading further in the Bible, we will see multiple examples of the prophets warning the people and decrying their evil and violence and wickedness and disobedience, and witnessing to how these actions of people are causing an un-doing of creation (land withers, creatures pass away, humans suffer), so it's clear that as the biblical story goes along, humans retain the ability to cause suffering and destruction by their sin, but God has pledged not to again

2. Some have suggested that this doesn't bar God from destroying all life in the future by some other means (if not by flood, maybe by fire?), but commentators generally agree that this is an assurance of earthly integrity and a pledge to restrain powers of divine destruction.

release a flood of total destruction because of human wickedness.³ And to the point we raised above, in response to the curse of the ground that some have used as an excuse to downplay the need to care for the earth, the text tells us here that God will never again curse the ground. Noah himself, whose name, *Nuach*, means rest, brings peace on the land as the curse is relinquished and creation returns from the chaos of the flood to the goodness and flourishing that God intended. And here, God repeats the blessings we recall from Genesis 1, helping us to realize that this story has just come to a point of starting over – this is the new starting point for humanity and all life:

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and the dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.” (Genesis 9:1-2)

An important thing to note here is that we are once again seeing exact lines repeated from Genesis 1, so we know that this is important. But when, such as here, something changes from the earlier usage compared with the new usage, then we should know that the thing that has *changed* is also particularly important. Note that the blessing to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth has been repeated, but the lines about having dominion over creatures and subduing the earth are not here. In their place is an acknowledgement of a power dynamic between humans and animals; fear and dread of humans will rest on all animals – a sad, fearful effect and an acknowledgement that humans indeed have the power of taking life.

I will say more below about the dynamics of the “dominion” and “subduing” that are not mentioned explicitly here, but one more point of note here has to do with biocentrism. There is no denying that this biblical account is not biocentric or ecocentric, if that implies that all creatures should be considered as complete equals. Biocentrism and ecocentrism have been popular views of environmentalists and make interesting topics in their own right {footnote for OSU students⁴}, but there is also a sense in which unless we are ourselves the biosphere, we can’t truly be biocentric – we are stuck being human.⁵ There is [another Far Side cartoon](#) that helps get at the tension: three haggard men and a dog are in a life boat, and they’ve just drawn straws. One of the men has drawn the short straw and has a shocked look on his face. The caption reads: “Fair is fair, Larry. We’re out of food, we drew straws–you lost.” The dog looks on smugly.

We will have more to say about animal welfare and animal rights in chapter 7, but some environmental thinkers seem

3. Some may point to contemporary comments from politicians claiming that they are not worried about climate change or other environmental degradations because they believe God is in charge, and will not allow humans to destroy the earth, but this much seems clear – the biblical witness goes on to describe all sorts of human strife and suffering and land and animal degradations that occur because of human wickedness, which the prophets call people to acknowledge and turn from their sinful, harmful ways in response to these violations of the integrity of creation. It is, however, true that the text claims that God decided never again to bring the end of the world because of such human wickedness.
4. These make great term paper topics for ENR 3470!
5. Buddhist views of the interconnectedness of all things will be discussed in chapter 5, but being part of something larger seems not to be the same as being the larger thing itself, though if one sees humans as being one and the same with the biosphere itself, then would biocentrism be a self-centered view? This too might make a good term paper for ENR 3470 students!

to assume that a biocentric view is necessary for humans to avoid disregard of animals and the planet. At stake in many criticisms of these biblical texts is the deeper question of whether these portrayals of the origins and orientations of humans in relation to the rest of life are generative of exploitation or of care or of some mix of sentiments. Let's return to the subsequent verses in chapter 9 to see what more this story might be saying. In Gen 9:3-4,6, the text says:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood... Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.

This is something of a turning point; as life re-starts after the flood, God grants humans permission to eat meat, though with some restrictions, including a prohibition against eating humans, who, the text confirms, are still considered to be in God's image. So, two significant differences and similarities with Genesis 1 are clear – as a concession, God now allows a meat-eating diet, but in concert with Genesis 1, humanity's identity as being made in God's image is reaffirmed. Finally, the re-starting of human-creaturely-earth-God relations comes to its conclusion in this story with a final re-charging of human expectations, and it's quite a finish:

“And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.” (Genesis 9:7)

This may sound fairly pedestrian. Again, the language echoes Genesis 1. But take a close look. What would you expect this verse to say if it were exactly paralleling Genesis 1?

Remember that in Genesis 1:28, the verse that exploded environmental worries about the Bible thanks to Lynn White, God told the humans to *be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the creatures*. Here in Genesis 9, when humanity starts all over again, the part about “subdue the earth and have dominion over the creatures” has distinctly been omitted. This is a conspicuous change from Genesis 1, and thus as readers, we should note that an item of particular importance in these texts has just been revealed. When God starts over with humans after all the wickedness and the destruction of the flood, he chooses NOT to charge humans with subduing the earth and having dominion. To be fair, the previous verses have just acknowledged that other creatures will fear humans (rightly, given our power), so the reality of our dominion-like power is not being ignored, but God seems to have learned something about these humans. Telling them they are in charge can backfire; charging humans with “subduing” and having “dominion” led to all manner of destruction, so here, God thinks better of saying that again and simply charges the humans with being fruitful and multiplying, to fill the earth and multiply in it.

If the environmentalist complaint against the Bible was that it encouraged an anthropocentric or arrogant “dominion” over earth, it appears that the Bible itself, if one simply keeps reading the rest of the story, is highlighting the dangers of the arrogance and self-centeredness of humans. Rather than affirm that the main charge of humanity is to have dominion, which White's thesis seems to assume, the biblical text distinctly removes that charge. It has been deleted as the first charge to humans. Perhaps the biblical writers were trying to make the same point that Lynn White was trying to make.⁶

6. There is one other interesting nuance of the text here, and that's in the specifics of the words “multiply” and “subdue.” Remember that multiply is the translation of the Hebrew word *rabah*, and subdue is the word *radah*. Those words look almost the same, and in fact, the only difference is a bet (Hebrew letter “b”: ב) in *rabah* compared to a dalet (Hebrew letter “d”: ד) in *radah*. The Hebrew maintains this distinction, but the translators of the Latin Vulgate (which was the translation

One of the more compelling reasons to say that Lynn White's thesis about the import of the word "dominion" in the biblical text is theologically incoherent is that it simply (and completely) misses the fact that the biblical text itself already was providing a critique of that term and its potential destructiveness at the hands of humans.

used most by the early church fathers, and thus would have informed multiple generations of early commentators, especially Catholic theologians) believed that the Hebrew scribes had erred, and added a single line that turned the dalet into a bet. They figured that to repeat "multiply" twice in the same line was probably not intended, and they assumed the biblical authors intended to include the word "subdue" from Genesis 1, so they changed the language to yield: "And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and subdue it." This still didn't include the word "dominion", but it did (incorrectly) preserve "subdue" at least for a while.

2.5 A Covenant with All Creatures

This isn't the end of the story, however, at least not for our purposes. The real ending to this particular piece of the story comes next, as the flood event ends, and humanity moves forward with a new beginning. Not content to simply give instructions to be fruitful and multiply, God now establishes a covenant with Noah and with all peoples to follow. Remember that the White Thesis said that biblical traditions were extremely anthropocentric, as though humans are the measure of all things. If so, we might expect that this covenant which sets the tone for the new start of humanity would in some way anticipate, establish, reinforce, or at least reflect this apparent human-centric focus. Take a close look at what is emphasized in the covenant, remembering that in biblical Hebrew, things that are repeated are being explicitly emphasized:

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 **and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.** 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy **the earth.**” 12 God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you **and every living creature that is with you,** for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me **and the earth.** 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant that is between me and you **and every living creature of all flesh;** and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy **all flesh.** 16 When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God **and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.**” 17 God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me **and all flesh that is on the earth.**” (Gen 9:8-17, emphasis added)



Image obtained through the public domain.

It should be obvious based on the bolded text that a major point here is that God wants humans to understand themselves as in covenant with God and with all life. Perhaps, just in case Noah and his family were prone to become as self-centered as humans had before the flood, God repeats that the covenant is with all creatures (and with the earth) six times! Does anyone remember the last time the Bible repeated something six times? Yes, it was in the creation story when chapter 1 emphasized the goodness of creation.¹ There, the point was that creation was good, good, good, and

1. There is a seventh “I establish my covenant with you” in these verses that only mentions the humans (Gen 9:11), which

very good. Now the point is that God is covenanting with humans and with all other life – not just with humans, but with humans *and with all other life*. This covenant reaffirms the passage above (Gen 8:22) that God will not again cause such destruction with a flood – God cares about humans and the earth and all life, desires to protect creation, and affirms its endurance.

A few more points will round out our attention to eco-theology in Genesis. I have argued that these Genesis passages don't actually promote human "dominion" (particularly not the sort of *environmentally disrespectful* "dominion" that White's thesis imagines), that they in fact critique it and explicitly demote dominion (even the more benign sort that God intended), by toning it down in the charge to Noah. These passages ("the fear and the dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth"...) acknowledge that humans do have dominion-like power – it's hard to imagine that we would be able to have so much negative impact on the planet if we didn't have some power of this sort – but they caution the reader about the potential destructiveness of humans.

I have used this overview to show that if we focus beyond just one or two verses in Genesis 1, we can see that even the passages in Genesis 1 are not bent toward environmental disregard. But readers may still wonder, what about the rest of the Bible? I quoted Wendell Berry above as saying that a "dominion" interpretation requires ignoring most of the Bible, but what if it goes the other way – what if there are later passages that re-encourage dominion? Well, great question: when does the Bible mention human dominion over earth and creatures again?

The quick answer is that the Bible does not ever again encourage humans to have "dominion" or subdue the earth (no doubt this is also confirming evidence of the theological incoherence of the White thesis, though it should come as no surprise after realizing that Genesis intentionally writes the dominion charge out of the human story). You'd think if "dominion" was the intent for humans that the prophets might encourage it, the 10 commandments might have included it, that Jesus would mention it (in the New Testament), or at the very least that it would be recalled in a fond way. Nope.

There are, however, a few allusions to human dominion, the power that humans seem, for good or ill, to have. Probably the most familiar mention is in the humble and reverent lines of Psalm 8, where the psalmist wonders in awe at the heavens whose greatness make humans seem small and cause wonderment that God would give humans dominion. And Solomon, the wisest human of all time, is acknowledged as having a dominion that stretched from sea to sea ([I Kings 4:24-25](#)) – notably the text then says he had "peace on all sides". So dominion does get mentioned again in the context of a wonderment at the creation that causes humility, and in the context of the wisest of all humans overseeing peace from sea to sea. Solomon is also noted as having unsurpassed knowledge of trees and all creatures, such that people would come from all nations to hear him ([I Kings 4:33-34](#)) – here, the dominion-holding king who brings world peace would apparently have been a great biologist and likely would have done well at naming the animals had he been around when God made *adam*.² As far as the Christian New Testament goes, there are exactly zero scriptures referring to humans subduing the earth or having dominion – Jesus never mentions that people should have dominion – there are only references to God or Christ having dominion.

And what about the prophets? There are many books of the Bible that report the visions of the most revered prophets – surely they would refer to something as important as "dominion" if it was meant to be a key function for humans. By now we are not surprised, however, to find that the prophets never once encourage or chastise the people to "get back

tempts me to wonder whether the seven "goods" of Genesis 1 (six "goods" and one "very good") are being balanced here by seven "I establish my covenant"s...

2. The following quote seems apt here: "What is man that he has been given dominion over the creatures? It is the man "who has first looked up to the stars, and realized how small he is in comparison with the glory of the Heavens. It is the man who knows his place in the creation....This Adam is no strong ruler, trampling the earth; this is the shepherd king or the gardener." Margaret Barker, 2002, "Paradise Lost: Religion, Science and the Environment."

to subduing the earth and having dominion,” nor fault them for failing to fulfill such a charge. Rather, over and over in the prophets we see the opposite – we see the echoes of the sort of destruction that caused God to wipe out humanity with the flood. A key example is in Hosea 4:1-3:

Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites, because the Lord has a charge to bring against you who live in the land: “There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgement of God in the land. There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.”

The prophets echo and warn against the destructiveness of human wickedness. Time and again they note that when humans are wicked and unjust, the land mourns, the animals perish, and creation starts to unravel.³ Over and over the prophets attend to the problem of human sin perverting God’s intentions and bringing violence and disharmony to the world. These sentiments echo the view of [Gus Speth](#), former Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies Dean, when he said he’d realized that rather than biodiversity, climate and pollution, it seems that pride, apathy, and greed are the toughest environmental problems; and indeed, problems of the sort that religions seek to address.

A few notes from Christian scriptures will round out our investigation, as there are related themes of Christocentric cosmic salvation that extend these ideas further into Christian theology. John’s gospel begins with echoes of Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word...” and adds that “all things have been created through him...” (John 1:1, 3). The famous passage (often seen on placards between the uprights in football games), John 3:16, “for God so loved the *world* that he gave his only son,” uses the term *kosmos* for “world,” meaning that Christian salvation stems from God’s love of all creation. [Colossians 1:15-20](#) brings many of these themes around somewhat like the covenant with Noah – these verses mention six times that **all things** (*ta panta*) were created by Christ, through Christ, for Christ; he is before **all things**, and as verse 20 concludes: “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” For Christians who wonder what Jesus Christ has to do with saving the earth, these passages suggest that Christian salvation is intended as a reconciliation of all things, not just humans (anyone feeling like we’re back in Genesis 9?). In the words of Romans 8:19, which is one of the key New Testament bases for eco-theology, “all of creation is eagerly waiting for the revealing of the children of God, so that creation itself can obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God.” The sort of liberation and freedom that Christians associate with salvation in Christ is thus a freedom that all of creation might enjoy, if humans could just note how creation is groaning in travail ([Romans 8:22](#)), and reveal themselves to be the children of God that they are – articulate caretakers of creation.

If humans were to fulfill such a calling, then Gary Larson’s vision of God’s great mistake – his [cartoon](#) where the release

3. Jeremiah 4:22-28 and 5:23-25 provide particularly good examples of the undoing of creation, with the elements that came together in Genesis chapter 1 at creation getting un-done because of human wickedness. So contrary to the “religious” claims of some current politicians who have said that they think God is in control of nature and won’t let humans destroy the earth (harkening, ironically, to God’s promise after the flood not to destroy the earth again) – and thus they needn’t fret so much about environmental degradations – the message of the prophets seems to be that the undoing of creation continues when people are wicked and unjust, greedy and power-seeking, and (surprise!) rather than saying “don’t worry about it, God won’t destroy the earth again,” the prophets are at pains to call humans to repentance and faithfulness, to turn from their unjust and greedy ways and work toward peace.

of humans into the wild appears to have been a mistake – might be revised. The divine “uh-oh” of the cartoon seems a great match for the Genesis story, as clearly humans can foul their nest (and that of other creatures) now more than ever. But imagine if these humans then stopped to notice the stars, were humbled, and then marveled that they should have such a station in life as to be able to care for God’s creation. Undoubtedly, God would be pleased, and would think such an outcome was very good. The birds and beasts and the trees and mountains, in fact, rather than tentatively looking on as in the cartoon, might even celebrate and rejoice.⁴ Something along these lines, in any case, and not a notion of “dominion” as divine sanction to do as one pleases with the earth, is the sort of direction pointed by biblical sources.

Lynn White’s thesis is now over 50 years old, and much of eco-theology and the field of religion and ecology has thankfully moved beyond the assumptions and expectations that White’s thesis helped generate among many environmentalists. That biblical religions are bad for the environment turns out to have been a case of fake news. Perhaps it should have been obvious sooner that the “White thesis” as pursued by environmentalists was thin, since it didn’t even match White’s own conclusions, which commended a Western, Christian model for moving forward.⁵ It may be that many environmentalists wanted White’s thesis (or their interpretation of it) to be true, so that they could justify disregarding biblical views. Regardless, there are now many Christians who resist any affiliation with “environmentalists” – not, it seems, because they feel a need to disregard the environment, but rather, because they wish to distance themselves from a movement that has so often blamed them unfairly for the world’s environmental ills, and treated them like second-class environmental citizens. Perhaps better understanding the values and beliefs of faith communities can help environmentalists become less alienating and more inclusive of those whose beliefs are different from their own.

4. In Christian theology, when humans and God are reconciled, as in the person of Jesus Christ, then even the stones might cry out!
5. In 1998, Carl Pope, the Executive Director of the Sierra Club, joined Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew at a forum, and apologized on behalf of the American environmental community for not realizing sooner what an ally faith communities had been for environmental work. He acknowledged that many environmentalists had read Lynn White, and totally missed the fact that White concluded his famous paper by suggesting that a direction forward could be found in St. Francis, a Western, Christian saint (see: <https://vault.sierraclub.org/sierra/199811/ways.asp>).

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CHAPTER 3: DEFINING OUR TERMS AND DIRECTION

Given that biblical sources are not as ill-fit to environmental values as 1960s and 1970s environmentalists thought, the intellectually curious might next want to examine with fresh eyes the creation care teachings of the Bible. However, before we begin to look more deeply into different religious views of nature, the next two chapters will take a step back to lay a firmer foundation for exploring these topics. This chapter, complemented by Michael Pollan's book *Second Nature*, provides some tutoring in how to share ethical views in a narrative, self-deprecating way that lends itself to the kind of conversations we have with friends. We suspect an approach like that is the kind we'll need to achieve the the sort of *conversation with everyone* that global environmental problems invite.

Beyond introducing a more fruitful way of making an argument about environmental ethics, this chapter moves from Pollan's debunking of the wilderness ethic and appreciation of our own stories to defining some of our terms and beginning to ask larger questions about the human story. Richard Baer's article on [Our Need to Control](#) will become the point of departure for exploring deeper questions of epistemology and the philosophy of science in the next chapter.

A digital copy of Michael Pollan's *Second Nature* is available [here](#) from the [Internet Archive](#), a non-profit digital library.

Click the links below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Nature](#)

[Garden](#)

[Culture](#)

3.1 Embracing Human Nature in Relation to "Nature": A Gardener's Ethic...and What are People For?

*If nature is one necessary source of instruction for a garden ethic, culture is the other. Civilization may be part of our problem with respect to nature, but there will be no solution without it. As Wendell Berry has pointed out, it is culture, and certainly not nature, that teaches us to observe and remember, to learn from our mistakes, to share our experiences, and perhaps most important of all, to restrain ourselves. Nature does not teach its creatures to control their appetites except by the harshest of lessons – epidemics, mass death, extinctions. Nothing would be more natural than for humankind to burden the environment to the extent that it was rendered unfit for human life. Nature in that event would not be the loser, nor would it disturb her laws in the least – operating as it has always done, natural selection would unceremoniously do us in. Should this fate be averted, it will only be because our culture – our laws and metaphors, our science and technology, our ongoing conversation about nature and man's place in it – pointed us in the direction of a different future. Nature will not do this for us. – Michael Pollan, *Second Nature* (p. 232)*



Milo-Grogran community garden in Columbus, OH. Photo credit: Kamara Willoughby

A highlight for some ENR 3470 students at The Ohio State University is reading Michael Pollan's book, [*Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*](#). It is deliciously written, and I suspect Pollan's stories about his failures and successes in his garden connect well with many of our own stories. Many readers appreciate Pollan's relatively "hands-on" philosophy of human-nature relations. But I also commonly get the question: "What does Pollan's book have to do with *religion* and the environment? He has almost nothing to say about religion, so what is the connection to religion and environmental values in America?"

Part of the reason I use Pollan's *Second Nature* at this point in the course is that the book, like the class, is an exercise in discovery more than truth-telling. Aldo Leopold's environmental ethics classic, *A Sand County Almanac*, succeeded in inspiring environmental values where much of Leopold's earlier scientific writing had failed; Leopold allowed the reader to learn how he had developed his own views through experience and failure.¹ Pollan takes a similar approach, so it's an easy book to read; he skillfully deals with a number of significant questions in environmental ethics.² Most importantly, Pollan critiques what he calls the "wilderness ethic" that has characterized a fair amount of American environmental thinking, and – by sharing his own story of learning to garden – he commends a "gardener's ethic" as more suited to our times.

Pollan takes on no less than Henry David Thoreau and the romantic vision of nature he painted in his writings. Pollan recognizes that truly "pristine" wilderness no longer exists and points out that the bean field "weeds" that Thoreau poetically defended as wild were actually exotic invaders. Pollan is intent on countering romantic, hands-off alienation from nature and what he sees as human alienation from our own nature, which is to be hands-on gardeners.

More important for our purposes, however, is Pollan's narrative style. He does not attempt to make a watertight, lawerly argument to end all arguments; rather, he invites the reader into his story, his world, his garden like a friend and is honest about his own prior notions, failings, and lessons learned the hard way.³ He memorializes many good practices he learned from his grandfather, a developer and gardener, but updates them for his own life as an environmentalist and gardener. Along the way, Pollan provides suggestions for how American culture might more fruitfully shift its affections and loyalties from a consumer/developer model to a citizen-of-nature model. Leopold would no doubt approve.

It is this approach of Pollan's that we will build upon in this chapter and the next, but first there are other points to emphasize from *Second Nature*. Pollan offers his gardener ethic as a cure for environmental failings in our culture. He blames romantic, "wilderness ethic" notions of nature that Americans inherited from Thoreau as asserting a separation between nature and culture. By assuming that humans were not themselves a good part of nature, but instead must be separated from true nature/wilderness to restore nature to harmony, Pollan remarks that Americans became good at protecting the "sacred 8 percent" of land that is set aside as wilderness but lost the conviction to "prevent us from doing a great deal of damage to the remaining 92 percent." Pollan says a wilderness ethic "taught us how to worship nature,

1. See pp. 51-67 of Louis Ulman's chapter <http://www.geography.ohio-state.edu/faculty/madsen/files/ENGLGEOG/Readings/UlmanThinking-OPT.pdf>
2. Credit goes to Dr. Jim Tantillo, lecturer in environmental ethics at Cornell University, for incorporating *Second Nature* into the lexicon of Dick Baer's Religion, Ethics, and Environment course, where I was introduced to the book. Baer was the originator of the "discovery rather than truth-telling" approach.
3. This is the same rhetorical approach that Leopold adopted in *Sand County Almanac*, quintessentially in the essay "Thinking Like a Mountain," as argued by Ulman (see note 1 above).

but it didn't tell us how to live with her. It told us more than we needed to know about virginity and rape, and almost nothing about marriage."⁴

Pollan opens a line of critique that might have connections to religion. This commentary about purist ideals that focus us strictly on the extremes but leave us less equipped to cultivate balanced daily norms suggests a somewhat puritanical ethos underlying the wilderness ethic. Perhaps for the earliest "American" Puritan European settlers, whose survival was greatly in question and who likely lived in great fear of whatever lack of vigilance might deliver their demise, it was appropriate to attend to extremes. But for Americans who now live in a greatly subdued wilderness – where death by the claws of wild (non-human) predators or exposure to elements is significantly outpaced by death at the hands of vehicles, guns, economic distress, or diseases – it seems an extreme wilderness ideology has outlived its usefulness. There may be echoes here to my comments about the creation stories in Genesis and the instructions there to "fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the creatures" – the survival value of these instructions is more compelling for the first humans who were vastly outnumbered by the swarms of other creatures described in that story. Later, once the land is "full" of people, that sort of imperative might seem dysfunctional.⁵ These sorts of ideas about how people might be suited to relate to nature, whether religious or not, can have persuasive and historical impact, as ideas evolve to meet the challenges of any particular time.

In contrast to the negative view of humans that the wilderness ethic and the American environmental movement has often espoused⁶, recall that the "re-origins" flood story makes critical revisions to the biblical commentary of *what people are for*. It concludes with God's repetitive, dramatically emphasized covenant that makes absolutely clear that God cares for and covenants with humans and with all life, with all of nature (Gen 9:11-17). The text highlights this God-human-creation link six times, perfectly echoing the number of times God saw at creation how good creation was (Gen 1). And in contrast to the wilderness notion that humans are not good partners or parts of nature, the biblical story asserts that humans are meant to be a key part of what makes all of creation very good. Pollan highlights that contingency in nature – the fact that all manner of forces influence what thrives and perishes – is "an invitation to participate in history. Human choice is only unnatural if nature is deterministic..." If nature will be "the product of myriad chance events, then why shouldn't we also claim our place among all those deciding factors?...If our cigarette butts and Norway maples and acid rain are going to shape the future of this place, then why not also our hopes and desires?..." Pollan concludes that nature "is evidently happy to let the free play of numerous big and little contingencies

4. Pollan quotes a wilderness ethic proponent who opposes development as giving up on land that isn't protected as wilderness, since then "you might as well put up condos!" p.221, 224-225 (Delta Trade Paperback edition of 1991).
5. Indeed, this seems to be the implication of the text in Genesis, which, as described in the last chapter, goes on to describe how the multiplication of humans led to a multiplication of violence and destruction. As a result, the story says God started over again, wiped out all the humans save for Noah and his family, and conspicuously did not charge the newly original humans (version 2.0?) with "subduing and having dominion" as humanity repopulated the earth after the flood.
6. For one view on environmentalist misanthropy, see the following: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/01/environmentalisms-deep-misanthropy>; environmental elitism is also critiqued in other ways, such as the following: <https://grist.org/article/klingel/>

settle the matter. To exclude from these human desire would be, at least in this place and time, arbitrary, perverse, and, yes, unnatural.”⁷



Note from the photographer, Tony Losekamp: "These beautiful hostas were surrounded by concrete on all sides in a busy city. In a desert of a city these were an oasis of life."

This is Pollan's message for humans to embrace their own nature, their calling as gardeners, and to avoid an unnatural situation of imagining ourselves outside of nature – de-coupled and divorced from nature, only capable of destruction – such that we have to exclude ourselves from it to imagine nature as good. Given the goodness attributed to all of creation – including humans – in the biblical creation accounts, such a separation seems unforgiven, cursed, focused on human depravity rather than human wisdom, care, and faithfulness – perhaps there are some deep theological issues underlying some of these impulses.⁸ It is curious that most environmental criticisms of Genesis are focused on

7. Pollan p. 219

8. It could be that background “we are damned” sorts of messages from religion have contributed to the pessimistic view the wilderness ethic has of humans; in Chapter 7, we will look at the work of Mark Stoll, who traces the intriguing history of many of the champions of the environmental movement

the dysfunctional human themes that Genesis itself critiques; yet, these criticisms ignore how the biblical accounts reconcile and move beyond those human problems.⁹ Pollan's more gracious approach to the possibility of human goodness as a gardener moves us out of a mainly negative view of the human role in nature. Maybe the Genesis accounts of creation (and the relations of people to God and creation commended there) have been arguing for a Pollan-esque gardener ethic all along.

A final point of note in Pollan is what he calls the either/or tendencies of our culture:

"All or nothing," says the wilderness ethic, and in fact we've ended up with a landscape in America that conforms to that injunction remarkably well. Thanks to exactly this kind of either/or thinking, Americans have done an admirable job of drawing lines around certain sacred areas (we did invent the wilderness idea) and a terrible job of managing the rest of our land. The reason is not hard to find: the only environmental ethic we have has nothing useful to say about those areas outside the line. Once a landscape is no longer "virgin" it is typically written off as fallen, lost to nature, irredeemable. We hand it over to the jurisdiction of that other sacrosanct American ethic: laissez-faire economics. "You might as well put up condos." And so we do. – Pollan, p. 223

One positive sign since the time Pollan wrote these lines – perhaps evidence that something like his gardener ethic has begun to take hold – is the rise of the field of ecological restoration. Indeed, as Pollan would applaud, we now see increasing investment in the training and employment of professionals who observe a great respect for ecology and land; apply their knowledge and training to repair and enhance degraded natural systems; and design urban and suburban systems that are more and more in line with natural, sustainable processes. I suspect Pollan sees this as very good.

of the 20th century. These champions grew up with protestant clergy parents and seemed to evolve a reformed puritan ethos that put care of nature at the center of human good works and salvation, which provided a deep spiritual/theological motivation and justification for environmentalism that often goes unnoticed.

9. Likewise, biblical theologies focused on human sinfulness that fail to also highlight grace, the subsequent lifting of curse, or ongoing blessing to humans may have a similarly negative tone.

3.2 From the Garden to the Culture: More Food for Thought



Youth pose with produce harvested from a YMCA garden spurred by Cardinal Turkson's visit to Columbus in 2015, which catalyzed an urban garden sister project between Columbus, Ohio and Accra, Ghana. Photo Credit: Dustin Homan

By now, we have added a number of ingredients to the pot, and I like to assure my students that if all of these points don't seem to connect like a dot to dot not to worry – we will add still more ingredients to simmer, and we'll use the whole book to let the full flavor develop. Pollan raised up a gardener ethic as a suggestion of how to overcome nature being opposed to culture in America, to encourage more of a *marriage* of nature and culture (drawing on a bit more culture, not less). Where Thoreau said “in wildness is the preservation of the world,”¹ Pollan channels Wendell Berry to claim, in contrast, that “in human culture is the preservation of wildness.”²

This echoes what Colin Beavan says in his book, [No Impact Man](#), which was the Ohio State Buckeye Book Community selection for freshman book in 2010. In his author talk to OSU students, Bevan assumed his audience already knew the book's story of how he and his family managed to live with no net environmental impact for a year in Manhattan, so he instead focused on the key lessons he'd learned from trying to live with minimal environmental impact. One of the main motivations he said had propelled him into action was not just a reaction to environmental crisis but his frustration at his own inaction. He was sick of his comfortable and easy pretension of helplessness. “Am I really helpless? Is it true that a

1. Henry David Thoreau's essay, Walking <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/&sa=D&ust=1517787385632000&usg=AFQjCNGIqL0AwFkhRMz2x2BwUuVdI6kuDQ>

2. Pollan, p. 135

guy like me can't make a difference? Or am I just too lazy or frightened to try?"³ He decided to change his own life when he realized that his culture and his own self-centeredness were leading him to believe that he was powerless to effect change. Recognizing the gap between the environmental values he held and his own environmentally impactful lifestyle, he challenged himself by asking whether he was at least willing to try to live according to his own environmental values. In doing so, he took a slightly different approach than just trying to reduce his impact:

"Instead of just thinking, How do I live without harming the environment?" Beavan said, "I find myself asking: How shall I live?...What will it all count for when I'm gone?...What is my life really for?...These questions are so important, because we live our lives on the assumption that the way to happiness is to fulfill our desires. What if we kill the planet filling our desires and then discover that that's not what we were here for? Isn't this worth stopping to figure out?"⁴

Beavan also concluded – even as he embarked on many lifestyle choices that bucked the American, consumerist norm – that his efforts to live sustainably, if they were to have any ripple effect on his culture, would need to embrace culture. He said he recognized that it is easier to say that our culture should be more sustainable than to actually make it that way. He decided "it might be easier...to understand the challenges for our culture in solving our environmental emergency if I didn't repudiate the culture."⁵ This approach is in contrast to some of the counter-cultural roots of the environmental movement, and it certainly contrasts the impulse to blame culture or religion, as with proponents of the White thesis. What Beavan, Pollan, and Leopold all suggest, rather, is to shift, rethink, and re-feel culture instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. This is what Lynn White recommended in the conclusion of his famous article, where he commended the spirituality of St. Francis to point a direction, distinctly concluding that a Western, biblical view was *not* somehow inferior as a basis for environmental care. The environmental movement⁶ and various champions of the supposed White thesis all but ignored these suggestions, preferring instead to promote a position of blame and repeal, one that often also proposed beliefs like biocentrism or deep ecology as the only sufficient ideologies to support environmental ethics.⁷ One legacy of these condescending, elitist approaches is the continued resistance

3. Beavan, p. 10.

4. Beavan, p. 110-115.

5. Beavan, p. 20.

6. I suppose if "environmentalism" amounts to such a narrow and sectarian view of things, privileging only certain views while unfairly criticizing views (like biblical views) that have much more cultural potential and resonance in America, then the "death of environmentalism" (2004) that was much discussed a decade ago might be a helpful advance for the environmental movement itself.

7. Note that some of the ongoing supporters of the White thesis, seemingly in spite of the evidence that has been already presented in earlier chapters, are also promoters of ecocentrism as superior to other views (for example, Taylor et al, 2016, claim to conduct a comprehensive review of literature and research related to the White thesis and call for more empirical study to arrive at better conclusions, but curiously ignore existing reviews of the empirical literature (like Hitzhusen 2007) that highlight the philosophical and empirical weaknesses of the White thesis, or other reviews of social science

of many Americans to allying with environmentalists. Particularly in a time when the American political climate is as polarized and partisan as ever, rather than continue to promote ideologies that seek environmental progress by proclaiming their superiority to other views, environmental care could gain much wider support by empowering Americans' existing values.

Perhaps a reappraisal of the value of a gardener's hands-on, connected, responsible and respectful approach as well as the well-suited teachings of American religious communities (yes, including Western, biblical religions) could be more important than previously realized for environmental care in America. Where Earth care is concerned, those who insist on preaching that "western/developed is bad, while eastern/indigenous is good," would seem to be antagonizing a powerful ally for creation care. Biblical views – especially for those 70-80% of Americans who self-identify with biblical traditions – could be a profound platform for gardener/earthcare/environmental ethics that are already suited to the majority of Americans, who needn't convert to a new ecocentric or Eastern religion to be gardeners and environmental caretakers. If religion is as influential in shaping thoughts as its detractors seem to fear, that is all the more reason to empower the environmental ethic and positive tenets of belief systems that people already hold.⁸

approaches to the White thesis that cast doubt on the prospects of vindicating the thesis (like Proctor and Berry 2005)). I admire and support many aspects of ecocentric thinking and believe that it has as much right to guide environmental progress as any belief system (it would also make a fantastic term paper topic!); however, I reject the notion that other, more prevalent and culturally salient perspectives (like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other religious views), are inferior bases for environmental ethics and policy, especially in America. Note that Arne Naess himself (a founder of deep ecology) concluded that White's thesis was an oversimplification (Ness 1989).

8. This is not to disparage religious conversion for the sake of caring for the Earth – surely that could be, is, and has been a viable path for some (there is evidence that among American environmentalists, in contrast to the general public, conversion away from Christianity has been a pattern (Shaiko 1987)). But generally, promoting religious conversion makes for a big ask, and for the majority of Americans – who *haven't* denounced their religion (Christianity) *in order* to better care for creation, and who are probably highly unlikely to denounce their religion in any case, especially when their religion has demonstrated outstanding potential for inspiring creation care – I wager that deepening and enhancing their focus on environmental work *because* of their religion, faith, or spirituality seems a much more likely path to increasing environmental citizenship in America. Put another way, the more likely "conversion" for most Americans toward greater environmental care is likely to be the sort of "ecological conversion" that Pope Francis or other religious leaders are calling for *within* their faith communities than a conversion to a system of secular environmental values or ecocentrism or some other new environmental belief system. At the same time, while Americans are known for being curious and interested in the religious beliefs of others, so any religious or spiritual environmental witness can be a positive influence for Americans – surely Buddhism has been held in high esteem by many Americans for its environmental views, for example – continuing to blame people's religion, unfairly, for environmental problems, or arguing that people can't be good caretakers of the planet unless they forsake their religion for other views, is more likely to discourage other Americans from wanting to associate with "environmentalists."

3.3 Defining Our Core Concepts

This section explores some further thoughts from Richard Baer about the underlying sources of environmental degradation. Baer says we won't solve environmental problems until we understand what it is about us that led to our environmental situation in the first place. He claims that the healing of nature will only come about with the healing of persons, which is most likely to occur through each individual's own spirituality, religion, or belief system. However, Baer cautions that our ways of thinking about these questions have been conditioned by Western views of knowledge, which have shifted significantly in the last 500 years towards the rationalistic, aggressive, and controlling modes of knowing characteristic of science, industry, and technology. To take a balanced look at these questions requires stepping back to examine the ways we think about thinking, question what we think we know about knowing, and attend to the historical and philosophical underpinnings of the paradigms that shape contemporary dialogue. Such an approach commends re-balancing our use of different modes of knowing to create a more complementary mix of intuition, reasoning, contemplation, action, wonder, dispassion, meditation, research, and aesthetic, ethical, and religious forms of understanding.

Before delving into such a range of topics, though, it's high time that we defined the basic terms of our discussion, don't you think?

Following the title of the book, the four terms I'll focus on are "religion," "environment," "values" and "America." These terms are best explored in conversation; I don't want to short-circuit that discussion, so I will only briefly treat each of these here and will leave space for the reader's own thinking. In any case, a clear conversation about matters of religion and the environment will need to be clear about what we might mean by these terms.

- **America**

The easiest term to start with is "America," because its importance in the title of this book is mostly a matter of location. To some extent, "North America" might be the larger area of interest, but the primary focus is simply the United States. A key reason for this is our problematically consumptive status – while it's been said that much of the world aspires to live like Americans, it's also been noted that the U.S. holds only 4-5% of the world's people, yet consumes 25% of the world's resources and produces 25% of the world's waste. Thus shifting American culture away from such disproportionate consumption (which clearly can't be sustainably duplicated by all nations) could be huge for global environmental prospects.

There are also a few elements of the American story that make us interesting. First is the unique creation-evolution clash in America. While this has mostly been a non-issue in other places, the unique history of the U.S. (and the [Scopes trial](#), in particular) has turned questions about creation and evolution into a divisive cultural issue. Second is the fact that America is known for a sort of frontier mentality, classically described by [Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis](#), which described how access to relatively unlimited resources attended the establishment of our nation. Settlement and industry and natural resource exploitation developed for several hundred years with relatively few constraints because there was effectively always more open land, more room to dump waste, and thus free wealth to be had. The American unlimited development trajectory only started to hit obstacles as the frontier began to close at the start of the 20th century, and we began to encounter natural limits. It's easy to see, then, how the American national ethos (young, as nations go) might include an expectation of unlimited growth, free from constraints. Finally, America is relatively religious. So, there are many aspects of the American values landscape that may occupy our attention.¹

1. One might also simply note, as many environmental thinkers do, that the contemporary American landscape I am emphasizing here is that of a very young nation, with only a few hundred years

- **Values**

Values are a more complex topic of interest for our purposes, and no doubt America has a multi-faceted moral history. I explore a number of related terms with my students including values, morals, and ethics. In general, “value” can mean “worth,” and commonly we think of a “value” as an ethical precept on which we base our behavior. Values are also understood as the social principles, goals, or standards held or accepted by an individual, class, group, or society. There are many common cultural values that are esteemed in America. Can you think of some of them?



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As we think about what it means to be human, what humans are for, and what our purpose might be, keep in mind that [Charles Darwin](#), in his [Origin of Species](#), judged humans as compared to other species as “the moral species” – we are the species that wonders about, talks about, argues about what is right and what is wrong, and that is one of our distinctive traits. Just as Pollan says it’s natural for humans to garden and to make invidious distinctions, Darwin apparently thought it natural for humans to ponder right and wrong. Any notion that humans *should* do anything – like pollute the environment or not – is a question of morals, ethics, and values. “How should we live?” is, after all, the fundamental question of ethics.

One treatment of environmental values that is worth mention is [Steve Kellert](#)’s typology of basic values of nature, from his book [The Value of Life](#). Kellert considered these values as biological in origin, signifying “basic structures of human relationship and adaptation to the natural world developed over the course of human evolution.” Kellert uses the

of history under its belt...and that this history involves a systematic and unjust displacement of indigenous Americans who had lived in North America for 10-20,000 years without generating the sort of environmental damages that plague us today (or that have plagued Eastern lands). Exploring the moral, ethical, spiritual, religious and other lessons to be learned from native American cultures and histories makes an excellent term paper for this course. Indeed, these themes merit entire courses such as those connected to Ohio State’s American Indian Studies program (see: <https://americanindianstudies.osu.edu/program>).

typology descriptively to characterize the range of values that arise from human-nature relations, and thus he provides us a sort of functional definition of values by highlighting what he thinks is the function of each.

Table 1: A Typology of Basic Values

VALUE	DEFINITION	FUNCTION
Utilitarian	Practical and material exploitation of nature	Physical sustenance/security
Naturalistic	Direct experience and exploration of nature	Curiosity, discovery, recreation
Ecologistic-Scientific	Systematic study of structure, function	Knowledge, understanding, observational skills
Aesthetic	Physical appeal and beauty of nature	Inspiration, harmony, security
Symbolic	Use of nature for language and thought	Communication, mental development
Humanistic	Strong emotional attachment and “love”	Bonding, sharing, cooperation, companionship
Moralistic	Spiritual reverence and ethical concern for nature	Order, meaning, kinship, altruism
Dominionistic	Mastery, physical control, dominance of nature	Mechanical skills, physical prowess, ability to subdue
Negativistic	Fear, aversion, alienation from nature	Security, protection, safety, awe

Kellert’s view of values highlights that beyond the ways that our values shape our environmental ethics, behaviors, and policy preferences, nature is valuable in providing for our development as human beings, and we may therefore also value nature because it benefits us.²

- **Environment-Nature and Religion**

2. Much of this commentary on values (including Table 1) comes from: <http://environ.andrew.cmu.edu/m3/s1/03valuescultures.shtml>

If we value nature because it benefits us in some way, what do we mean by nature or the environment? The terms “natural” and “nature” are some of the most complex in the English language, with multiple definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and other dictionaries. Religion, meanwhile, is the central concept of this course, and let’s be honest – three of the toughest terms to define for philosophers are God, humanity, and nature³, so how we might define “environment” and “religion” is no small topic. I discuss additional nuances of these terms with my students, but I’ll add a few notes here.



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Religion and Spirituality

We will discuss the term “religion” further, and eventually I will recommend a “functional definition of religion” as the best way to proceed with discussions of religion and the environment. “Religion” is a word with many connotations. For some it signifies something of great and sacred importance. For others it generates feelings of fear, abuse of authority, or irrationality. But in general, we tend to think of “religion” in terms of structured or organized expressions of spiritual identity and practice.

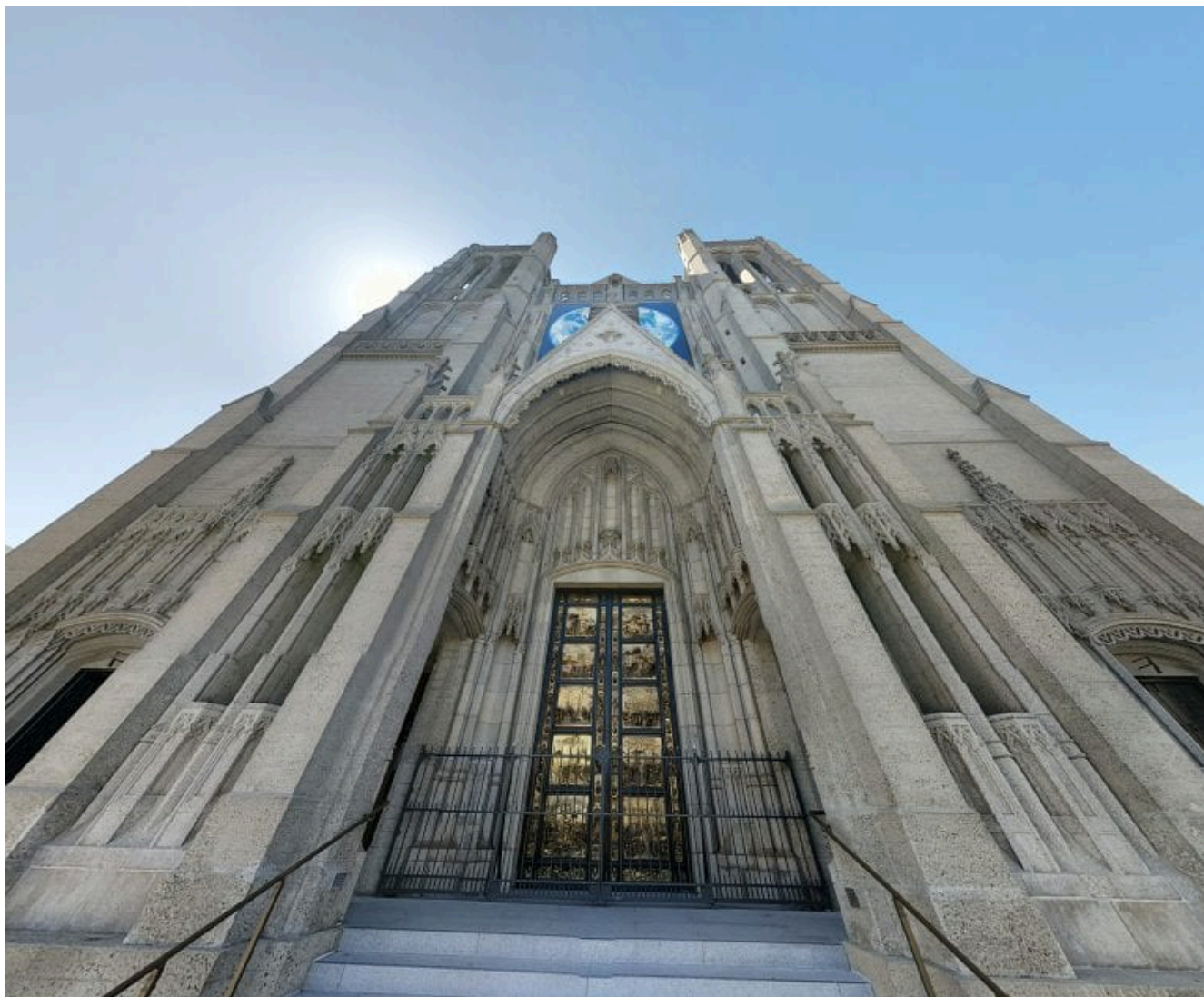
“Spirituality” tends to connote the general spiritual experiences or dimensions of human life. Below, in section 4.4, we’ll look at how Ian Barbour typified the range of spiritual phenomena that human cultures recognize, but for our purposes, the “spiritual” domain is that which points toward greater depth or transcendence of daily material existence. To have a spiritual experience is to experience something that seems to reach beyond us, or to encounter the mystery of that which is larger than ourselves. Spiritual experiences are often understood within religious systems – you might say that any patterned or *common-enough-to-become-tradition* spiritual experience or practice becomes “religion.” Based on the history of spiritual experiences that helped form any particular religion and its traditions, one’s spiritual experiences can be contextualized and understood. “Theology” is the study of God or the divine (*theos* = God, *ology* = study of), and while this term tends to be associated with Christian cultures, such study of spiritual experiences and encounters with the divine provides reflection and understanding, and usually informs the traditions and practices and ethical understandings held by a religion.

For many Americans today, especially younger Americans, being “spiritual but not religious” is becoming more common. To some extent, as Americans become less familiar with the spiritual understandings held by different religions and denominations, or perhaps as some familiarity with a much wider range of religious traditions has become available, it seems harder or less appealing for some to place their spiritual experience in general into a particular religious context. Whatever the case may be, these days it is clear that “religion” can be a charged and challenging term. In terms of the ideas we discuss in this book, it is helpful to step back from the more charged connotations of religion (if your tendency is to see “religion” as something to fight about one way or another, this book may not be of much interest to you, or at least my lack of interest in engaging in fights about religion may bore you); instead, we commend a **functional definition of religion**.

For our purposes of discussing religion and the environment, a religion, functionally, is any system of understanding that answers one’s questions about life, particularly the “big questions” about human meaning and purpose. Whatever system of understanding and belief you appeal to to make sense of the world and what’s going on, and to guide your moral or ethical sense of how you should live is, functionally, your religion. And putting different functionally “religious”

3. Note that these are also the three members of the Noahaic covenant that we discussed in earlier chapters.

understandings in conversation with each other is the conversation this book is interested in. Thus, whether one is theistic, agnostic, atheistic, or otherwise, your own views and understandings are important to this conversation. As Pope Francis stated in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015), addressing the challenges of living sustainably on our planet will require a conversation that includes everyone, and considers all views offered in good faith.



Grace Cathedral. Photo credit: Bill Bradlee

Environment

There is also more to say about the meaning of “environment.” Loren Wilkinson outlines several “names for the Earth” in his book [Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard](#), each of which has been popular at different times. Wilkinson describes “nature” as the first and oldest such word, which “is related to words referring to birth (like *natal* and *nativity*), and reflects the mysterious fertility of the earth, which seems to bring forth life of its own accord.” Wilkinson notes that nature religions worship the earth and/or fertility. Another name is “resources,” which Wilkinson says is a more modern way of thinking of the earth – seeing Earth as something to be used. “The trouble, though, within thinking of the earth as resources,” says Wilkinson, “is that it implies that its main purpose is for human use.” Wilkinson also comments on the word “environment,” which he does not favor. He says that largely as a reaction against damage done by regarding the earth as “resources,” we’ve moved to the term “environment,” which reflects a growing sense of interconnectedness.

Multiple elements, living and non-living, make up our environment. “The problem with environment,” clarifies Wilkinson, “is that it says either too little or too much. It says too little when we mean by it our (human) environment. Then we are back to regarding all things simply as resources for us. But it means too much when it means “everything connected to everything else” in an equal and undifferentiated web.” This gives humans no real place to stand. “In this environmentalist view we are just one more part of the web, acting and acted upon. But one part of a web can hardly be steward of another.”⁴

As the title of Wilkinson’s book suggests, his preferred term is “creation” – a word also commended by no less than [E.O. Wilson](#), whose book [Creation: An Appeal to Save Life On Earth](#) follows the logic of the study by Kempton and colleagues mentioned in chapter one. Wilson favors the respectful sense of seeing the Earth as a creation and recognizes that most humans – including a strong majority of Americans – hold a belief in a creator. Scientists and environmentalists, claims Wilson, will find better common ground to care for Earth by referring to “creation” than otherwise.

We can see an additional sense of the term “nature” with reference to an article by Harvard theologian [Gordon Kaufman](#), who distinguishes between nature as “wilderness”⁵ and nature as “cosmos,” signifying the world, the universe, which is a construct to help us understand things, but not an empirical reality as such. Semantic slippage between these two senses of the word might matter in cases where experts in one realm (say, scientists on the one hand examining the physical universe, and philosophers or cosmologists on the other examining purposes and meanings) might mistake what they know in one realm as sufficient to answer questions in the other realm. Coming to clarity about these and other terms can help point us in a good direction right from the start.

[Editor’s Note: Readers may wish to skip ahead to chapter 9, the case study on climate change, if you would like to get a taste of the range of faith-based views on environmental issues before moving ahead to chapter 4.]

4. Wilkinson, pp. 14-15; Wilkinson’s view represents a Christian, theocentric framework.
5. This is often seen as distinct from “culture” – this is the “nature” that we think of as forests and pristine landscapes (experienced “as God made them”).

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Chapter 3 Discussion Questions

The Garden: What Does It Tell Us about the Meaning of Nature?

Reflection Questions:

- By and large it seems that college students are often more interested in preserving wilderness than in either gardening or protecting the natural qualities of our near environment. Do you think this is the case, and if so, why?
- “All or nothing,” says the wilderness ethic, and in fact we’ve ended up with a landscape in America that conforms to that injunction remarkably well” (p. 233). What is Pollan talking about? Do you agree with his analysis?

Discussion Questions:

1. Pollan writes on p. 13 that his grandfather’s “concern for our soil was also an extension of his genuine and deeply felt love of land. I don’t mean love of *the* land, in the nature lover’s sense. The land is abstract and in some final sense unpossessable by any individual.” What do you think?
2. Pollan refers to gardening as “moral drama of a high order” (p. 80). What is he talking about? Do you agree with him?
3. Pollan writes in Chapter 4: “There isn’t an American gardening book published in the last twenty years that doesn’t become lyrical on the subject of compost.” By contrast, claims Pollan, most Europeans seem to be only mildly interested in compost. What does this difference in attitude tell us about the views of Europeans and Americans about gardening?
4. According to Pollan (Chapter 6), Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that “a weed is simply a plant whose virtues we haven’t yet discovered.” What do you think?
5. Pollan argues in Chapter 4 that Americans tend to think in terms of “crude alternatives” about nature: “to virtually subdue it in the name of ‘progress,’ or to place it strictly off limits in ‘wilderness areas.’” Do you think this comment is accurate, and if so, why do we act this way?

Study Questions:

1. What were some of Pollan’s views that changed as a result of actually growing a garden as over against theorizing about nature?
2. American gardeners, according to Pollan, are more interested in virtue than in beauty. What is his evidence for such a claim?
3. Pollan notes that in the sixties “weed” became a nickname for marijuana. Why does he find this significant?
4. Why is your attitude towards “weeds” a pretty good indicator of your overall view of nature?
5. What does Pollan mean when he writes (p. 136) that “[t]o weed is to bring culture to nature”?
6. In what ways, if any, did Pollan’s discussion of Cathedral Pines change your views about the management of nature?
7. In Chapter nine, Pollan discusses the case of Cathedral Pines. What would you have chosen to do at Cathedral Pines following the tornado if you had had the authority to make the decision? Give reasons for your plan of action (note: Pollan also discusses Cathedral Pines on pp. 233–38).

8. In Chapter 10, Pollan summarizes what he thinks the garden can tell us that will help us develop a new land ethic. In your own words, summarize his main points.
9. What are some of the ways in which the design of a garden is an *intellectual* challenge? (See Chapter 12).

CHAPTER 4: SOME POINTS FROM EPISTEMOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE TO HELP US THINK

How can we know what we're talking about?: Drawing on epistemology and philosophy of science to better address the topic of religion and the environment

In this chapter we finish our discussions of definitional questions about “religion,” “environment,” “values,” and “America”– wrestling with some of the possible meanings and implications of these terms, and focusing on what sort of conversation we think is possible and responsible about these topics. Underlying the intersection of these terms is the more basic and potentially challenging relationship between religion and science. If science and religion are going to be discussed in the same conversation, we’ll want to take a close look at what we think we mean by “science,” and what we think we mean by “religion,” and what we think anyone can say with any authority or reliability about these subjects. Doing so may uncover some often-ignored barriers to better understanding, and will help us lay a firmer foundation as we move forward to discuss the key concepts and questions of religion and the environment.



“It just speaks to a universal pull and blessing of nature when we have time to lie down and contemplate in the stillness of nature,” says photographer Andres Arnalds. (Another blessing: photos submitted with captions to the [Religion-Environment Photo Gallery](#) that are complementary to the philosophy of science.) Central Highlands, Iceland.

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4.1 Preview



“Faith and Science standing together to advocate for all creation and community-led climate solutions. Birmingham, Alabama.”
Photo credit: Michael Malcolm

Religion-Environment discussions don’t always take the step that we intend in this chapter, which is to consider the underlying meanings and paradigms that contextualize these topics and the ways that we typically understand and assess them. This may seem like a simple step, but examining our own context can be elusive, because often what and how we *already think* seems as basic (and as taken for granted) as the air we breathe. My belief is that we can arrive at a better understanding by critically assessing our underlying paradigms than if these remain unexamined. Because this approach¹ is uncommon and nuanced (and possibly perplexing), this preview provides hints as to the direction we are heading in this chapter.

We’ll start by thinking about what it means to know anything in the first place. Science and knowledge are closely linked, and we’ll critique some of the ways moderns have thought about knowledge by examining Richard Baer’s “Our Need to Control,” which criticizes an overemphasis on knowledge as power and control. We’ll also question whether preferences for “objectivity” in our claims about knowledge might reveal a control-based approach to nature. If so, such

1. The basic tenets of this approach are based on the philosophical and epistemological framework that Richard Baer developed while teaching NR407 “Religion, Ethics and the Environment” at Cornell University from 1974–2005. It is my view that this framework might have provided a better starting point for much contemporary religion and ecology scholarship and education, but Baer’s work has not been appreciated sufficiently to cause such a ripple effect. While this book is dedicated to Richard Baer, this chapter in particular is indebted to his teaching and vision.

rationalistic views – that make human reason the measure of all things – might be what got us into this “ecologic” mess, more than the religious variables that Lynn White blamed.²

We will look at different modes of knowing – particularly at the more objective, rational, repeatable, scientific modes and methods of knowing (what Baer relates to *ratio*), as well as the more intuitive, subjective, relational, spiritual, mystical, emotional/affective modes and methods of knowing (*intellectus*). We will discuss how these forms of knowledge relate to one another in a complementary way that provides a platform for fruitful and respectful dialogue. We will note several models of how religion and science might interact. Our approach assumes that dialogue and some amount of integration between science and religion is both possible and appropriate, both for environmental professionals, college students studying religion and environment at a land grant university, and people of faith in Ohio and beyond. We will also respect the assumption that operating in this realm does not threaten our respect for scientific and religious experts alike.³

As for epistemology – after discussing what we think it means to “know” something, either in science or religion (or both), we will want to talk about the ways in which we think knowledge is relevant. Will we assume that what we decide we “know” about religion and the environment is a form of *absolute* knowledge – knowledge that is definitely right as opposed to other things that are wrong? Will it be a type of *relative* knowledge, where what we know will be compelling to us, but other things might be compelling to others? Allen Wood’s article on “Relativism” explores these questions, and compares relativism to skepticism, fallibilism, and other options. In the end, we will discuss ways to redefine knowledge and “objectivity” so as to proceed with productive common ground between religious and scientific knowledge and without being derailed by premature dismissals of views that challenge us or getting pulled into knee-jerk arguments that uncritically insist on marginalizing either science or religion.⁴ We will proceed from there with “eyes wide open”

2. Alister McGrath’s book, [“The Re-enchantment of Nature,”](#) makes a compelling case that rationalistic criticisms of religion as being the source of modern problems may in some cases be a projection of blame – McGrath argues that modern science and enlightenment rationality, not religion, have been most responsible for disenchanting the universe (or at least the Western view of the universe). This dismissal of religious/spiritual beliefs leaves humans in control of all meaning, and removes any theoretical limits on human behavior beyond what humans can enforce on themselves. This scientific, rationalistic turn, argues McGrath, objectifies nature as something to be controlled with indifference, whereas a religious, or more enchanted view of reality, would cast humans in a more humble role. McGrath (who holds PhDs in biochemistry and Christian theology) therefore advocates for the re-enchantment of nature as a way to undo the damage of an over-emphasis on rationalistic control of nature and knowledge, and he encourages a posture of awe and wonder in the face of the gift of creation.
3. This is not to say that all scientists and religious people respect each other – indeed, some people perceive or assume great tension between religion and science; part of the point of this chapter is to demonstrate that assuming such a conflict is not the only (and certainly not the best) option for how intelligent people can approach religion and the environment, and we will decidedly not privilege perspectives that do not respect either science or religion and faith as starting points for respectful dialogue. (I will also acknowledge that religion has regrettably been (and will likely continue to be) the cause of great harm in some people’s lives, though it has also been and will continue to be a source of great inspiration, meaning and peace for others. Even so, that religions and spirituality contain valuable resources for creation care and might help humans live sustainably, regeneratively, and peacefully on Earth is the *raison d’être* for this book.)
4. Some readers may immediately be thinking: “why would anyone want to proceed with such unhelpful, dialogue-killing

about what we are talking about and the challenges of talking about these subjects. Hopefully by the end of this chapter, the table will have been set for our proper investigation into religion and environmental values in America.

Belief systems addressed in future chapters:

Religion	Belief
Buddhism	The teachings of the Buddha can alleviate suffering and bring about enlightenment.
Christianity	Believes Jesus Christ to be the Messiah and ultimate revelation of God, as documented in the Bible. Includes Protestants and Catholics.
Hinduism	A person's karma will determine their fortune in this life or the next. Each Hindu may choose to worship different gods.
Islam	The words revealed to the Prophet Mohammad in the Quran are the definitive revelation of God.
Judaism	Reveres the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and traditions of commentary.
Scientism	Rational/scientific knowledge and understanding provides the answer to all of life's meaningful questions

reactions?" Unfortunately, such reactions have been quite common in religion-science dialogue in the past, so it is important to become more aware of such barriers.

4.2 Returning to Terms

In the last chapter, we looked at definitions of “environment.” Loren Wilkinson¹ noted that several names have been popular for the Earth² at different times. “Nature,” he said, is the “first (and oldest) of such words. It is related to words referring to birth (like *natal* and *nativity*), and reflects the mysterious fertility of the earth, which seems to bring forth life of its own accord. (‘Nature’ religions worship the earth and worship fertility.)” Earth as “mother” tends to fit this concept, or here you could include “Gaia,” the Greek name for the goddess of the earth.

“Resources” is a more modern way of thinking about earth, as “something to be used.” Wilkinson says “the trouble with thinking of the earth as resources is that it implies that its main purpose is for human use.” Similar to Lynn White’s concerns, this word became popular when the “new world” was discovered by Europeans and was seen as a great source of riches. Scientific and industrial revolutions then gave us new knowledge to gain power. Coal, iron ore, falling water, uranium, plants, and animals are no longer seen as part of creation, but as resources for our use.

“Environment” is a more recent term – it emerged mostly as a reaction against damage done by “earth as resources” notions. It reflects an interconnected world made of many things. Wilkinson says the “problem with ‘environment’ is that it says either too little or too much. It says too little when we mean by it ‘our’ (human) environment. Then we are back to regarding things simply as resources for use. But it means too much when it means ‘everything connected to everything else’ in an equal and undifferentiated web.” Here, we have no place or purpose; we’re just one among many, part of the web and acting on it. “But one part of a web can hardly be ‘steward’ of another.” Here we get a sense of Wilkinson’s Christian view, where humans have a role or significance more than just being a part of nature like any other part; this view is clearly not bio- or eco-centric, but neither is it anthropocentric (it is *theocentric*). Wilkinson is holding out for a term that isn’t as prone to extremes.

Better than this, says Wilkinson, is to think about the human role on Earth in terms of “stewardship.”³ The greek root of “stewardship”, *oikonomia*, means “keeper of the household,” and the term is also translated as “economics.” This bears some unpacking, because many of us think of “economics” as mainly a monetary or financial concept. Wilkinson explains that “In Greek, the word contains *oikos*, which means household, and shows up in a more recent word *ecology*, coined to describe the science of the relationship of living things to their environment: the whole *ecumene*, or earthly dwelling place.” From this view, “‘economics’ not only means stewardship but is closely related to ecology: both deal with the whole *oikos* or household of creation.” This helps explain why Wilkinson and co-authors like the term “‘earthkeeping,’ which suggests not just everyday “housekeeping” but also the breadth of our larger home, the whole created earth.”

1. All Wilkinson quotations are derived from his book, “Caring for creation in your own backyard,” pages 14-15.
2. Often, “Earth” is capitalized as a proper name for a planet; at other times it is not capitalized, suggesting a sense of the term related to soil, the ground upon which we walk, or the life and ecosystems of the planet. These different usages are not always consistently applied.
3. To add some layers: some thinkers who favor eco-centric views have criticized “stewardship” as being too human-centric. Alternatively, Pope Francis more recently softly indicated a preference for the term “care” by only using the term “stewardship” twice in his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si’*, since humans, he said, might be good stewards by doing the right environmental things, but still not actually “care,” and Francis feels caring is essential to successfully addressing degradations of creation.

These terms, then, would suggest a holistic linkage between our economic systems and our ways of caring for all of creation.



Within the context of this discussion, it has been interesting to see which words people use in their captions in the [Religion-Environment Photo Gallery](#). Comment from photographer Jackson Howard: "At Camp Albermarle, God and environmental stewardship are one. Students who volunteer for the North Carolina Coastal Federation through Buck-I-SERV are fortunate to stay at a beautiful campground whose roots are deep in stewardship for all types of creation. Being an environmental steward gets one closest to creation, and at Camp Albermarle, it seems even that much closer."

Those are some ways of thinking of "environment" – note that many faith-based environmental programs and literatures have not focused on "environment" but on "creation" or "Earth" or "green." I use "environment" in the title of this book in deference to its general and popular usage to refer to sustainability issues. I also opt for "environment" because it may well be "environmentalists" who have the most to gain (and the most to learn or re-learn) from a better understanding of religion and the environment. Note how complex these terms get, even when we merely scratch the surface – "nature" has many potential meanings.

One example of this complexity is Gordon Kaufman's discussion of nature as "wilderness" v nature as "cosmos,"⁴ which highlights the potential for people to talk past each other when discussing these concepts and underlines the importance of attending to the scale and scope of whatever commentary we intend to make.

By "nature" as *wilderness*, Kaufman means the immediate natural world that we experience, say, when walking in the woods. This is the sort of nature that we can relate to directly, and might invoke our wonder, perhaps even worship. How a forest works or how the parts of ecosystems interact in the processes of this "nature" is the study of ecology and biology and other fields, and the experiences and inspiration gained here is the focus of poets and writers and naturalists. This is a different concept, and at a different scale, than what Kaufman calls "nature" as *cosmos*. This term has to do with our idea of the whole of existence, the nature of things – the universe.⁵ Since the whole universe is not observable as such – we cannot take it all in with our limited human perspective – it is not so much an object of our experience as it is a concept, a notion, an idea that we have developed to help explain and bring together all things as

4. Gordon Kaufman, "A Problem for Theology: The Concept of Nature", Harvard Theological Review, 1972

5. Note that the former is mostly about observables, and the latter is more like a theory to make sense of what we can observe. Our discussion of laws and theories below will tread similar ground.

we think we see and understand them. As such, nature as cosmos is a creation of human minds, and while extraordinary and commendable as such, Kaufman says it is not therefore worthy of our worship. When we speak of what we know of nature as wilderness, we speak at a different level of knowledge and understanding than when we speak of nature as cosmos. How “nature” works at the wilderness level doesn’t necessarily directly translate to the cosmos level, and vice versa. For example, the inexhaustible expansiveness of the universe and how it might have come to be is not the same as the wideness of an ocean, which can seem unlimited to the viewer. Newtonian laws apply at the physical level, but they don’t at the sub-atomic level – the basis (underlying sub-atomic order) of what we see is not operating by the same sense as the sensible matter of our normal, daily experience. So too ideas of cosmology and of what brought all things together and continues to hold things in existence. We can’t say when discussing nature that what “is” in the wilderness is the same sort of thing that “is” about the cosmos. That is semantic slippage.

The point is this: semantic slippage happens, and scientists may be guilty of this when they try to make metaphysical comments about the nature of reality (cosmos) based on what they “know” only from physical reality (wilderness).⁶ Similarly, religious authorities can mis-apply knowledge about metaphysical and spiritual realities and impose it unhelpfully on physical realities.⁷ To complicate things further, this is not to say that spiritual and physical realities are unrelated or cannot be connected (after all, perhaps it is the case that all physical reality is just an expression of a larger or deeper spiritual reality, or, perhaps what we perceive as spiritual reality simply emerges from the fundamental physical reality of the universe, or – to shift perspective – separating the two may only seem to make sense at a shallow level of inquiry, while more careful inquiry and reflection may reveal deeper connections or a unity of truth that transcends these surface distinctions!); rather, this is to say that some of the typical modes of seeing these issues may involve more confusion than is usually noted, and these distinctions are often missed.

Another reason why such distinctions can be hard to see is that sometimes the discussion of them is too heated to think clearly. As a result, the famous adage: “never discuss religion or politics in polite company” often makes good practical sense. Especially where religion and science are seen to oppose one another or be in heated conflict, it can be challenging to avoid getting drawn into an emotional ideological fight, even among polite company. Part of the goal of this chapter is to invite us into the space of collegial (if not polite!) company, where curiosity and respect for sincere ideas hold sway, so as to avoid some of these pitfalls that limit understanding.

6. A good example of this was astronomer Carl Sagan’s claim that “the cosmos is all that ever was or ever will be”; some might also see semantic slippage in applications of E.O. Wilson’s concept of “consilience,” which seems to want to extend the sort of knowledge that works for natural sciences to all of reality, making other forms of knowing subservient to the dominant form of scientific knowledge.
7. One supposes, for instance, that some cases of illness that may once have been attributed to demons or sin were actually simply caused by bacteria or viruses whose existence was not yet known. This is not to say that spiritual health is irrelevant to physical health (excessive confidence in modern medicine might miss the point in the other direction!), but to indiscriminately declare spiritual causes for physical phenomena where knowledge of the physical processes is lacking can cause error.

4.3 Comparing different perspectives



"Pondering life at Ross Lake. Chillicothe, OH." A good complement to pondering life in an E-book. Photo credit: Laura Corcoran

A larger question here is how science and religion are related to reality. [Ian Barbour](#), in his work on reconciling science

and religion, describes a four-category typology of the ways we may think science and religion relate to one another: conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration.¹

Ian Barbour's 4 models of the interaction between religion and science:

- **Conflict:** Science and religion are in conflict. This view assumes that either science or religion is true while the other is necessarily false, and thus the perspectives of each will be in conflict.
- **Independence:** Both science and religion can be true, but in different domains. This view assumes that science and religion focus on different things, so as long as each keeps to its own domain, it can yield truth in that domain (Stephen J Gould's idea of *non-overlapping magisteria* would be an example of this view).
- **Dialogue:** Science and religion can be conversation partners, as they both contain truth about many things. This view doesn't assume that science and religion are the same, but that there is enough overlap in what they focus on to mutually inform one another about truths.
- **Integration:** The truths of science and religion can be integrated into a larger whole. This view assumes that the best way to understand the world is through an integration of science and religion, because they are complementary modes of knowing the truth about reality.

While there are many implications of these views, for now, the point to note can simply be that “conflict” isn't the only reasonable option, so if you find yourself in a conversation where the assumption seems to be that *conflict* between religion and science is the only option,² just know that you needn't be drawn into that fight – there are other (and probably better) options for understanding and discussing these relations.

It may also be helpful to think about the range of disciplines and fields of knowledge that most universities support, so that we can expand this conversation even more towards its proper bounds, which are larger than we've let on so far. The chart below lays out some of the common disciplines across a spectrum of fields in the physical/natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities and arts, and religion/ethics. Note that the data and information we gather about things at the far left (physical) end of the spectrum are based on essentially infinitely repeatable and physically-caused phenomena, which can often be reduced to laws. But items of interest at the other end of the spectrum, things like ethics and morals and other things we want to know related to the meaning of life, these are not things that function so much like physically caused things, like billiard balls colliding. So the kinds of things we want to know about across the spectrum differ, as do the methods we use to learn about different types of things.³

1. From: Four Views of Science and Religion, p. 7-38 (Ch 1) in Barbour, I.G. (2000). When Science Meets Religion (Harper SanFrancisco: SanFrancisco). Another overview is found in Hallanger, N.J. (2012). “Ian G. Barbour,” p. 600-610 in The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity, First Edition, Ed. by J.B. Stump and A.G. Padgett. A good discussion of these four is also found here: <https://scienceandtheology.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/science-and-religion-barbours-4-models/>
2. Some signs that a conversation is caught in these narrow confines is when someone says something like: “well, everyone knows...” or “well, religion has always been at odds with science...” or other overblown generalizations.
3. As Richard Baer was fond of saying: when you want to know how physical particles behave under different conditions, you subject them to those conditions and carefully observe the results. If, however, you are curious to know how torture affects the mental well-being of children, you don't subject children to torture and then carefully observe and record the

Spectrum of Disciplines

<u>Natural Sciences</u>	<u>Social Sciences</u>	<u>Humanities/Arts</u>	<u>Religion/Ethics</u>
physics	psychology	literature	theology
math	sociology	languages	ethics
chemistry	anthropology	philosophy	
biology	economics	classics	
ecology	civics/poly sci	arts, music	
	history...	...history	

If you think about all of the various disciplines of knowledge at the university, the spectrum displayed above suggests a range of approaches to understanding just about everything under the sun. One exercise to help think about this further is the following: If you were to chart the following pairs of terms on the spectrum above in terms of where such things are studied, at which end of the spectrum (or where in the middle) would you put each term?

- facts versus values
- objective versus subjective
- “is” versus “ought” (to be)
- lawful versus unique
- public versus private
- real versus symbolic
- material versus spiritual
- predictable/repeatable versus unique/unrepeatable
- daily/mundane/profane versus life- changing/transformational/sacred
- questions of observables and physical interactions versus questions of meaning, purpose, and morals

There is more overlap and trading on these points than simple dichotomies suggest, but it might be helpful to think about where you'd place each term. Regardless of where we place these different words and phrases, a key point here is that the different knowledge domains along the spectrum use different methods to know about different (and/or similar and/or related) types of things. You don't set up a controlled experiment to learn about the impacts of child abuse like you might set up an experiment to learn about how one reagent interacts with another in a chemistry lab. And yet, facts and objectivity do play a role all across the spectrum, just as values and subjectivity do.⁴ Consider that it's one thing to know what a physical thing does when it strikes another physical thing – that's simple physics, and it is ever repeatable. But what is it to know about a moral concept and how that influences a human's behavior? That's a different type of thing to know about; it may show tendencies, but will resist pure repeatability due to human free will.⁵

results (unless you are a sociopath). Instead, we use thought experiments (and sometimes books and movies serve as types of thought experiments to help us think through and see or test what might happen in different social conditions), or we examine what *has* happened in various cultures.

4. Keep in mind that many famous scientific discoveries have been made by accident or were aided by dreams or various and sundry serendipities – creative leaps don't only come from “purely objective” number crunching.
5. “Free will” is a debated concept. For many, free will seems one of the more obvious traits of human reality, but others

These questions about the properties of knowledge across the spectrum lead us to Barbour's redefinition of *objectivity* as "intersubjective testability with commitment to universality." Barbour notes that data are always theory-laden, and science is subjective and human, though still reliable. So what is sometimes considered to be "objectively" true, might more properly be viewed (particularly for a critical realist like Barbour) as that which the relevant community of experts agrees is reasonable and reliably "true" based on all that we know at any given time, and according to our most rigorous processes of peer review and testing of results and ideas. Surprisingly, this sort of process isn't entirely dissimilar from how the canon of scripture within Christianity was formed, through a public process of intersubjective testability over several hundred years. These ideas will be more deeply engaged below. In any case, it becomes clear that the pursuit of reliable knowledge and understanding is not only important in "science," but also in other domains of knowledge.

Another provocative view of what can be known reliably, particularly in religion, is that of Greek Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky. Lossky's notion of full-being knowing as the integration of ratio and intellectus, public and private, treats theology as the publicly or commonly agreed interpretation of people's private or unrepeatable spiritual experiences.⁶ Lossky's view suggests that this is what leads to orthodoxy, that there's an intersubjective (hence empirical) agreement in experience across members of a community about real things that have happened to them and what those things mean. If so, that which we call "objective" is more or less what we agree upon as "orthodoxy."⁷

argue that it is not a proper entity. From a purely materialistic worldview, which believes all things to be reducible to physical or chemical causes, free will must be viewed as an illusion; this belief is not shared by all (and perhaps not by most).

6. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976

7. Lossky, from *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*: "Far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism support and complete each other. One is impossible without the other. If the mystical experience is a person working out of the content of the common faith, theology is an expression, for the profit of all, of that which can be experienced by everyone. Outside the truth kept by the whole Church personal experience would be deprived of all certainty, of all objectivity. It would be a mingling of truth and of falsehood, of reality and of illusion: 'mysticism' in the bad sense of the word. On the other hand, the teaching of the Church would have no hold on souls if it did not in some degree express an inner experience of truth, granted in different measure to each one of the faithful. There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism..." (p.8-9).

4.4 Similar Structures: Theory and Data in Science, Belief and Experience in Religion

Before going further, it will be helpful to clear up how the sort of religious language we've used above could be applied to science, and Ian Barbour's comparison of the structures and methods of religion and science is helpful in that regard (refer to [handout](#).) Barbour describes how science works – how theory and data lead to what we know in science; he also develops a parallel description of how *belief* and *experience* lead to what we know in religion.

The Structure of Science

Barbour's flow diagram (in the handout linked above and outlined below) highlights how concepts and theories influence observation and lead to observation and data (via a deductive path); meanwhile, inductively, based on what we observe, we use imagination, analogies, and models to come up with theories and explanations. The inductive view of Bacon and Mill involved generating theories by generalizing patterns of data, but Barbour notes that theories involve concepts and hypotheses not found in the data and can refer to things not directly observable. Barbour asserts that all data are theory-laden: our choice of phenomena to study, our choice of variables, the form of our questions that determine our answers, the process of observation which alters observables – all of these relate back to theory. Similarly, Thomas Kuhn¹ said data depends on existing paradigms, and paradigms imply the kinds of questions that will be fruitful and the types of explanations that are to be sought.

Barbour notes that accepted paradigms are harder to change or overthrow than particular theories. So, science uses four criteria for assessing theories:

1. Agreement with data and predictive power: the theory matches the data of what is observed and provides predictive power for subsequent data gathering,
2. Coherence: the theory is consistent with other theories, integrates with them, and yields understanding; simplicity is also a virtue of coherent theories,
3. Scope: the theory is comprehensive and generalizable, and
4. Fertility: the theory leads to further developments or can provide a framework for future research.

Barbour notes that these criteria relate to three Western views of truth (each with their own drawbacks):

1. Correspondence view: a proposition is true if it corresponds with reality – theories agree with data (and yet we can't always tell what is real; we don't have total capacity to directly discern or access reality),
2. Coherence view: a proposition is true if it's comprehensive (coherent and generalizable) and internally coherent (and yet reality seems more paradoxical and less logical than rationalists assume, as demonstrated by chaos theory, complexity theory, and flux – (which show that even if you know all the inputs in a complex system like life on Earth, you can't know or predict all the outputs)²),
3. Pragmatic view: a proposition is true if it works in practice (and yet a false idea could still “work” in certain contexts).

1. See Kuhn, T.S. (2012) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th Anniversary Edition (University of Chicago Press: Chicago).
2. See also: White, P.S. (2006). “Disturbance, the Flux of Nature, and Environmental Ethics at the Multipatch Scale”, pp.

Barbour concludes that the best definition of truth is “correspondence with reality.” Because reality is not entirely accessible to us, the criteria of truth must include the four criteria listed above (agreement with data, coherence, scope, fertility). Taken together, Barbour’s favored view is a form of realism, a *critical* realism because of the combination of criteria that are used. (Section 4.6 below will delve more deeply into what Barbour means by “realism” as distinct from positivism, idealism, and instrumentalism.)

Barbour adds that science does not lead to complete certainty – its conclusions are always incomplete, tentative, and subject to revision. Theories change in time, but science offers reliable procedures for testing and evaluating theories through a complex set of criteria. That is how Barbour characterizes the structure and process of science. How he characterizes religion has some surprising parallels.

The Structure of Religion

Barbour charts a similar set of relations for religious knowledge. In religious experience, there are concepts and beliefs, which function like theories do in science. These beliefs influence experience and interpretation, in connection with religious experience, which is then expressed and packaged and stored and reviewed and replayed in story and ritual. These experiences, stories and rituals are like data for religion, which engage and lead to imagination, analogies, and models, from which concepts and beliefs are derived.

By this account, Barbour says that “data” for religion are *religious experience, story and ritual* (for example, some key stories for Christianity are the creation of the world, covenant with Israel, and the life of Christ; for Buddhism, the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha under the Bodhi Tree; for Judaism, Passover and the exodus from Egypt). Unsurprisingly, experimental testing of religious beliefs is problematic as religious-spiritual experiences are not particularly amenable to scientific approaches for testing data (thus the criteria below become critical). Barbour also notes that the influence of religious beliefs on the interpretation of data is very strong – more so in religion than in science, though this influence is akin to that of paradigms in science. With religion, we’d say that paradigms are extraordinarily resistant to change, and data is much more theory-laden than in science.

To develop further on religious “data,” Barbour lists six distinctive types of religious-spiritual experience, understood as accessible to individual experience, but in the context of the community:

1. Numinous experience of the holy – more characteristic of a Western transcendent God; usually interpreted in personal models,
2. Mystical experience of unity – more Eastern, implying a union with all; usually interpreted in personal models,
3. Transformative experience of reorientation,
4. Courage in facing suffering and death,
5. Moral experience of obligation,
6. Experience of order and creativity in the world.

Given the broad human experience of these sorts of things – which can’t necessarily be repeated or predicted so are not amenable to scientific method in typical experimental ways – assessment of beliefs comes from *within* a paradigm, and reliability in the cultures of religious community therefore calls for the same four criteria as above for science:

1. Agreement with data: in the case of religion, this is very theory laden, but beliefs should nonetheless accord with religious experiences,
2. Coherence: new religious experiences, beliefs, or interpretations are evaluated by the intersubjective judgement of the community, which protects against individualism and arbitrariness,
3. Scope: a religious belief should help interpret life and social reality, though Barbour says it should also accord with

176-198 in David M. Lodge and Christopher Hamlin, Eds, *Religion and the New Ecology* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, IN)

science, and

4. Fertility: does a religious belief advance basic understanding and virtue? Does transformation result? Is healing affected? Is character improved? Are peace and love generated?

In Barbour's framework, the modes of knowing in science and religion are not so dissimilar, and if this is true, we might expect that a comprehensive approach to knowledge about the world would draw from both. We might also suspect (hearkening back to Kaufman) that science would be the preferred mode for knowing about nature as wilderness, while religion would have more to say about cosmology and the purpose of life. And in any case, these understandings would be supportive of Barbour's notion of dialogue, or perhaps even integration, between science and religion. Indeed, the last couple of decades have seen more and more dialogue between science and religion about the environment, and an increase in integrative approaches.

These more complementary patterns differ markedly from what held sway 50 years ago when Lynn White was writing about religion and the environment. Undoubtedly the project of modernity privileged ratio, observables, empiricism, and "science," across all realms of knowledge, which has led to some imbalances. E.F. Schumacher put it this way (also 50 years ago) in *Small is Beautiful*:

"The present danger," says Viktor E. Frankl, a psychiatrist of unshakable sanity, "does not really lie in the loss of universality on the part of the scientist, but rather in his pretence and claim of totality... What we have to deplore therefore is not so much the fact that *scientists* are *specialising*, but rather the fact that *specialists* are *generalising*." ³ After many centuries of theological imperialism, we have now had three centuries of an ever more aggressive "scientific imperialism," and the result is a degree of bewilderment and disorientation, particularly among the young, which can at any moment lead to the collapse of our civilization. "The true nihilism of today," says Dr. Frankl, "is reductionism... Contemporary nihilism no longer brandishes the word nothingness; today nihilism is camouflaged as nothing-but-ness. Human phenomena are thus turned into mere epiphenomena." ⁴

The notion of "specialists generalising" as a bad thing is not meant to discourage inductive thinking as a path to the creation of theories – it's a reference to those who take what they know at a physical level of reality, and try to impose it onto the whole cosmos and on larger questions of meaning. It's an example of the semantic slippage that Kaufman might warn us against – of gaining small knowledge about nature as wilderness, and thinking then that it automatically applies to nature as cosmos. This is misinterpreting the forest because of the trees, or, more precisely, misinterpreting cosmology because of the trees. To invoke the James Gustave "Gus" Speth quote we discussed in chapter one: to make progress in sustainability, we don't need just more *science* and *policy*, we need *cultural* and *spiritual transformation*, and that is not so much a thing for the realm of science, but rather falls in the domain of religion. Speth sees science and religion as complementary forces, in contrast to the modern, rationalist turn that would privilege science as the arbiter of all and as having the final authority on all subjects. ⁵

3. This brings to mind the problem of semantic slippage raised by Kaufman between nature and wilderness and cosmos. But we also might note that "science" was once a much broader term than it is today; the ancient sense of "science" included knowledge about ethics as well as about the physical universe. So the impulse to think about wilderness and cosmos in relation to one another is ancient, and seemingly quite natural.
4. From E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, and note how this may imply Allister McGrath's point noted earlier, that a better response to the dominant "nothing-but-ness" perspective of modernity might be a re-enchantment of nature as a common point of reference.
5. We will note in chapter 8 and when reading Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* that Francis explicitly acknowledges the

This discussion of religion and science may be challenging. If Barbour's perspective holds true, it might even point toward something of a paradigm shift in the way that science is understood in relation to religion. For our purposes, the point has been to examine how science and religion operate, and how we arrive at understanding via science and religion. In so doing, we might notice that the contemporary science-religion conversation is still sometimes truncated and obstructed by attitudes, paradigms, and perspectives that don't well match the material. If we allow an anti-science or anti-religion view to set the frame, our discussion will not be very productive. But if we take the time to notice the similar structures of science and religion, and the complementary forms of knowledge that they produce, our prospects for understanding deepen.

limits of religion, stating that religion does not have the final say in matters of the environment, and must turn to science as a partner.

4.5 What is knowledge?

We've come a long way from the day of logical positivists¹ – postmodernism and the positive engagement of religions in environmental issues have had an impact – and maybe the discussion above indicates that science and religion are moving toward better complementarity.² At the same time, there is still resistance to this. Sometimes people fight about objectivity versus subjectivity; or, the trajectory of modernity might imply that we can only “know” things of which we are “certain.” But if we think about it, we know almost nothing in that way – save for a range of important physical facts about how the material universe works, we do not have theoretical certainty (like predictable cause-effect relationships governed by scientific theories) about most things. For all we know, the elevator we get in every day could fail catastrophically at any moment, or we could be killed in a traffic accident, and yet most people don't only get into elevators (or take any other action) when they are absolutely certain that no harm will come to them by doing so. We live our daily lives based on much less absolute or certain knowledge about things. Knowledge, for all practical purposes, doesn't rely on absolute certainty. So what is knowledge if it's not theoretical certainty?

Theoretical certainty is not the basis of most of what we know and act upon, since we would be paralyzed if we could only take actions where we were certain what the outcomes would be. So what is a more likely definition for knowledge? What sort of thing is a knowledge claim upon which we might base our actions or our lives? It might be something like the following:

- a claim for which we can give good reasons
- a warrantable assertion
- a justifiable claim or belief

We cannot know for certain that each car ride we take won't end in a terrible wreck that takes our lives, but we can justify our choice to ride in a car based on the warrantable claim that only a small percent of people crash and die when they drive somewhere in their car, and we feel the risk is sufficiently low to allow us to drive or ride in cars when we need to. We live our daily lives despite innumerable bits of knowledge about which we cannot be certain. There will probably not be an earthquake that will swallow me up into the sidewalk today. Gravity will not stop working today. We can give good reasons, though, for why these things are very unlikely to befall us, and that's enough to live by.

Now, as we've noted above, these ideas might not sit well with everyone, and for anyone who agrees with scientism (the belief that science can provide all the answers and knowledge necessary for life), these ideas admittedly pose

1. Logical positivism (later evolved to logical empiricism), a form of positivism, was a movement in western philosophy whose central thesis was the verification principle; developed by members of the Vienna Circle, it claimed that the only meaningful philosophical problems are those that can be solved by logical analysis (see section 4.6 for more discussion of positivism).
2. Sometimes there is still resistance to this, as an article by Charles Krauthammer, [“Coffee, Tea, or He?”](#) describes. The influence of modern scientific or positivist thinking still holds sway even though these paradigms have fallen out of favor. For instance, some suggest that we have moved beyond a “modern” ideal, where science and technology and human smarts were believed to be capable of improving and perfecting all life. One need only look at the evils of Nazi Germany – the Germans having attained the best universities and a high culture of arts – to realize that such an ideal is not an end-all, be-all; thus the need for post-modern thinking.

a challenge. We should expect, as our discussion of knowledge has concluded, that knowing something (including knowing that the world is a certain way) should mean that we have good reasons or warrantable claims as our basis. But sometimes when faced with challenging ideas, rather than address them seriously, we dismiss them with a certain argumentative sleight of hand known as relativism.

Relativism

[Allen Wood's article on relativism](#) addresses this possibility, and challenges us to avoid lazy thinking. Wood's argument partly aims at helping us avoid simplistic dismissals of the ethical, moral or religious views of others by appeal to the claim: "what's true for you is true for you; what's true for me is true for me," which is the basic argument of philosophical relativism. At first glance this view can seem to be epistemologically enlightened. But if we look closer, it seems that such claims are really saying "I think I'm justified in simply ignoring your view and any shortcomings in my own, because I think it's impossible for my own view to be flawed."³ Wood wants to avoid that relatively sophomoric philosophical cop-out, in order to make more engaged and thoughtful dialogues possible. He also helps us dial down the tension that is often felt between those who seem to believe in "absolute truth" and those who don't agree with them. Wood demonstrates that relativists, quite opposite to their own claims, are actually claiming an absolute truth (that of relativism, a move that ironically makes relativism self-refuting, and thus a philosophically indefensible view), and he suggests that relativism simply can't support the sort of tolerance and open-mindedness that relativists seem to want to champion. Instead, Wood describes what he thinks are the quite positive moral ideas that relativists might be trying to affirm, views which aren't threatened with self-refutation. They aren't relativistic at all, it turns out – they are values that relativists think everyone should honor.⁴

While Wood shows that basic philosophical relativism is self-refuting and thus incoherent, he also shows that *ethical* relativism⁵ is self-refuting and inconsistent. He even explains that *cultural* relativism⁶ is saddled with similar problems of self-refutation and incoherence. Wood nonetheless is at pains to defend the values and virtues that he thinks

3. It is also possible that I might invoke relativism simply because I am legitimately threatened in some way by a particular conversation. Perhaps I was bullied by my parents or my community, and religious ideas were used almost like a weapon against me (to control me, to criticize me, to "put me in my place," to ostracize me, to threaten me, to judge me), and if so, I might simply need to check out of a conversation that will otherwise be too emotionally loaded, or too painful to bear. In this case, I would hope readers can acknowledge and honor anyone's need to not be pressed into painful, dangerous/threatening discussions, and it is always ok to say "I think I need to just sit back and listen a bit" rather than answer to a particular charge that creates anxiety. In fact, outside of the class I teach, I might even commend the tactic of the relativist when faced with an absolutist who has no interest in a mutual exchange, and is only intent on forcing their views on you – just saying "well, whatever is true for you is true for you, and something else is true for me" can quickly conclude that conversation, and save you from the unjustified sermonizing of another. But it should be clear why I want to protect the conversation space in my class (ENR 3470) so as not to have to invoke this conversation-ending relativist (and basically insulting when intentions are not to bully) tactic.
4. Here Wood distinguishes himself from some other forms of postmodern thought, which embrace relativism.
5. Ethical relativism believes that if truth/reality itself isn't relativistic, maybe just "ethical truths" are relative to individuals.
6. Cultural relativism believes that right and wrong are relative to different cultures.

relativists are (rightly) asserting.⁷ However, Wood makes clear that absolute truth is not the enemy of these values – indeed, those arguing for tolerance, open-mindedness, and humility tend to believe that these are values that truly and absolutely are important and commendable. But through a view like fallibilism, rather than a simple absolutism, Wood makes clear that just because someone believes in absolute truth or in some particular truth or value, it does not follow that they must believe themselves to be in possession of (or even that humans can be fully in possession of) *all* truth. A fallibilist can hold to a belief in absolute truth, but will at the same time be able to say “I could be wrong.” They can live their lives and stake their well-being on what they believe to be true, and they can discuss and argue and disagree with others about what is really true or not, all the while admitting that they could be wrong. It seems that it’s not so much the notion of absolute truth that is offensive to people (indeed, the idea that there isn’t any absolute truth is itself an absolute truth claim!), but the presumption that because there is truth, that someone must believe that they are in sole or full possession of it and that they have some right to force that truth onto others. In my class, we proceed with an embrace of the idea that absolute truth (in whole and in parts) is a legitimate thing to discuss, believe in, compare notes on, and think more deeply about.

7. Virtues of tolerance, open-mindedness, and humility, for instance.



This photo, “Seeking Truth Among the Birds,” is accompanied by a relevant story from photographer Iris Mark about her 9-year-old sister Libby. Libby, a “future explorer and curiosity extraordinaire,” tests out the binoculars as she looks towards the heavens to find species of bird that live in the saltwater marshes lining Barnstable Bay, Cape Cod. Similar to the way we look for God in our day to day lives, we often find his wonders in nature. My sister looked a little too hard though—the bird was sitting right on the railing behind her, just like sometimes you only need to turn around for the answer to become clear.”

This is not the end of what we might think about truth and knowledge. There are libraries worth of books about these subjects. One additional concept to put in our toolbox is the term *phronesis*, which Aristotle described as practical wisdom, or knowing how to live in the ways we discern as best. It does us little good to “know” what is right and wrong or to know what the good life is if we have no clue *how* to live well. Another idea is this: we’re not Gods, we’re humans (we are not all-knowing), so maybe it is no surprise that faith enters our knowing.

The concepts we’ve discussed above will cover our purposes, and the next chapter will explore two faith-based

accounts of the human person – the spiritual anthropologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and David Loy. But for those who want to dive a little bit deeper into this philosophical territory, the next section adds a few more thoughts to the pot.

4.6 A deeper dive into philosophy of science

Science itself isn't pre-determined to be what it is – it could be done in other ways, and there have been plenty of debates about the trajectory of science over time. These varying trajectories suggest that there are many competing worldviews that have shaped science, and indeed religious worldviews have accompanied science (and scientists) all along. After all, some of the most important scientists have been religious people (such as Isaac Newton or Gregor Mendel), and many prominent scientists today are also people of faith (such as Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project, who is an evangelical Christian). At the same time, religious authority has been roundly opposed by science at times, and of course many important and contemporary scientists are not religious (and some are firmly anti-religious). We have already noted the “scientific imperialism” that has framed our era, and the influence of scientific thinking continues to convince some that science is the only legitimate path to knowledge. If we pull back the veil of some of these views, it's easier to reduce some of the confusion between science and religion that tends to fan the flames of conflict and obstructs complementarity. If so, one implication is that “conflict” is an unfortunate and unnecessary category for the relation between science and religion (it really only makes sense when people either try to use science like a religion, as in *scientism*, or when people try to use religion like a science, as in some varieties of creation science); I think some amount of independence, dialogue, and integration all seem more reasonable.

For instance, we see examples of independence and dialogue and integration all happening at universities – different fields delve into different realms of ideas and understanding, and often don't talk much with each other, and yet more and more there is interest in multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary dialogue.¹ In addition to these possible ways of seeing how religion and science relate to each other, Barbour also comments on the more specific question of how science is related to reality.² Barbour lays out four options that have held sway in the past 100 years: positivism, instrumentalism, idealism, and realism. Barbour asserts that most scientists hold to some form of realism; Barbour himself favors critical realism. Another way to understand these categories of understanding science is as different understandings of what “theories” are:

Theories as summaries of data: Positivism

Positivism is a philosophy of science that rejects metaphysics and theism; it holds that every rationally justifiable assertion can be scientifically verified or is capable of logical or mathematical proof. This view includes logical positivism and the verification principle (see further discussion below). However, positivism doesn't adequately represent the crucial role that concepts and theories play in the history of science. Since “the real” appears to be more than just “the observable,” this philosophy seems lacking. Despite the fact that positivism doesn't seem very likely to be correct and has been largely discredited, the attitudes, traditions, and habits of positivist assumptions still hold more sway than we'd think they should for a notion that doesn't match reality. (The idea that “objectivity” is an end-all/be-all criteria for all science and knowledge is one such tradition based on positivism.)

Theories as useful tools: Instrumentalism

In contrast to positivism, instrumentalism recognizes that the knower does more than record and organize data. She abstracts, idealizes, constructs, invents, etc. Here, theories are tools to make accurate predictions, organize information to guide further research and achieve technical control (whether results are true or false is secondary). We recognize that laws and theories are invented, not discovered. However, Barbour reminds us that it seems that valid concepts are true as well as useful, so instrumentalism doesn't seem a perfect match with reality either.

Theories as mental structures: Idealism

1. Note that these three correlate to some extent with the independence, dialogue, and integration categories from Barbour.
2. Ian Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, Harper and Row, 1971

This notion posits that the structures of theory are entirely imposed by the mind on the chaos of [sense data](#). As such, theories are subjective; the activity of the mind imposes structure on uninterpreted data – sense-data have no structure otherwise, according to this view. Thus, reality changes as discovery proceeds! However, realists say: our ideas change, but the world/physical reality doesn't, and concepts represent the structure of events in the world.

Theories as representations of the world: Realism

In realism, being is prior to knowing. For many, intelligibility rather than observability is the hallmark of the real. This view is critical of both positivism and idealism, picking up on the critiques noted above. Barbour claims that scientists usually assume realism in their work. Naive realism overlooks the role of our ideas (it looks a bit like positivism: if you assume realism is “true” and then assume that humans can discern a 1 to 1 relationship between the real and our theories about it, then such a naive view will hold some of the same assumptions as positivism). Critical realism – Barbour's preferred view – acknowledges both creativity of human thinking and the existence of patterns and events not created by human minds. It posits that no theory is an exact description of the world, but yet the world is such as to bear interpretation in some ways and not in others.

If good science aims to understand nature, we can unify the concern for empirical testing of positivism with the concern for intellectual coherence of idealism, while avoiding the excessive preoccupations of either. Science requires both logical processes and a creative imagination transcending logic. For Barbour, this describes critical realism.

A few additional points emerge from the concepts discussed above. The first regards the **verification principle**: this was part of the suite of beliefs of the positivists, and it states that only what can be verified (repeated and predicted) is real or true or knowable.³ But if only the verifiable is real or has meaning, this is a contradiction, because we can't verify the verification principle itself. *That it is true* is not empirically verifiable – it appears to be a tautology.⁴ The problem can be phrased like this, too: a statement is only legitimate if there is some way to determine whether the statement is true or false (or what the answer to the question is), but the standards of discerning true and false are not verifiable. Indeed, if we look at how much non-verifiable information we base our lives on, the verification principle seems less compelling already – it's as though our empirical experience in this world, ironically, points towards even us empiricists relying on non-empirical knowledge to know what we know about life and empiricism itself! This is like Jodie Foster's character in the movie *Contact*;⁵ she is a rationalistic scientist, who realizes that the thing she knows with the most certainty in her life is something that she can't prove scientifically, namely that her deceased father loved

3. Barbour notes that Hume and the empiricists said that observation is the only way we can acquire knowledge.
4. A tautology involves the needless repetition of an idea, especially in words other than those of the immediate context, without imparting additional force or clearness, as in “widow woman”; it is a compound propositional form all of whose instances are true, as “A or not A” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/tautology>), thus not actually meaningful. For a verificationist, non-tautologous statements are meaningful only if it is – in principle – possible to establish empirically whether they are true or false. But if your standard is the observable, then we would need to be able to step back and watch a universe where people act only on what they observe versus a universe where people may know other things that aren't verifiable, and I guess then we'd have to judge that the empirical-only universe is somehow “better” or more “correct.” However, the standard we'd have to use to make that judgement itself would then be an opinion, not verifiable as such, so we would need to appeal to something that can't be verified, which would seem to argue against the verification principle.
5. Based on Carl Sagan's novel of the same title.

her. A related point is that all knowledge, if you question it's foundations far enough, is revealed to rely on unverifiable presuppositions.⁶

Another point that needs attention, or is likely to have arisen from the preceding discussions, has to do with “objectivity.” One hangover from positivism, somewhat akin to the verification principle, is a bias toward thinking that only “objectivity” is trustworthy or can provide knowledge or a basis for science, but the above categories make clear that some of the more “subjective” functions of knowing and thinking do indeed play a role in good science, always have, and always will.⁷ Barbour addresses this by redefining “objectivity” as “intersubjective testability with commitment to universality.” By this he means that if we look at how science actually proceeds to create and confirm knowledge, we see that any particular field will seek the expert judgement (through peer review) of its own practitioners to test any new ideas or conclusions against what is already known and trusted as reliable information. Here “universality” suggests a focus on aspects of experience that are universal and applicable to all. The result is a perspective on scientific knowledge that isn't merely “subjective” and thus somehow unreliable, but rather an acknowledgement of the elements of science that draw on subjective capacities in an intersubjective way (such that any idea will have to pass the scrutiny of a consensus of experts in order to be seen as reasonable).

Laws and Theories

Barbour further comments on laws and theories in science to describe the differences between the two. Essentially, we think of laws as descriptions of observed phenomena, and of theories as explanations of phenomena (*laws* don't explain why a phenomenon exists or what causes it). It is tempting to think of theories and laws as existing on a spectrum, where the hunches and ideas of scientists (based on careful study) eventually start to gain coherence as a theory that finally is verified in terms of a law of nature, thus completing the quest for certain knowledge about some part of the world. In some cases, this sequence of development might hold true – we might craft a theory based on limited observations to explain what we're observing in the behavior of gasses, and then, with time and more and more accurate observations, derive a universal law of physics. But it is important to remember that not only do theories not necessarily lead to laws – we might instead first discern a law through observation before we can figure out a theory to explain why that law is true – but even if some theories lead to laws (as sometimes happens in physics, chemistry, or other physical sciences), it is another thing to think that all of reality works this way – thinking that it does would assume a positivist (or naive realist) view of the world that doesn't seem to merit such trust. It would assume that all of reality is governed by a sort of physical/material Newtonian/causal set of formulas.⁸

Rather, it seems more the case that laws and theories work at different but complementary levels, and though intuitions and hunches may play a role in the formation of theories, by the time something is declared a law, it's been thoroughly tested for repeatability and “always-trueness.” With things that are purely physical/Newtonian in character,

6. For one who believes that there can be no reality that isn't “verifiable”, this claim could be disorienting or might seem impossible. It is akin to the story of the foundations of the earth resting upon the shell of a giant turtle: one then asks, “Well, what is the turtle resting on?” The answer is “another turtle.” The obvious next question becomes: “Well, what is that turtle resting on?” The answer again is “another turtle” and so on, until the questioner finally says “Don't you see? This is absurd! That makes no sense! You just keep invoking another turtle!” which occasions the final reply: “Don't you see? It's turtles all the way.” This is the philosophical problem of infinite regress, here exploited to question “certainty.”
7. The intuitive leaps, eureka moments, and hunches of scientists might be examples. The mode of knowing that Baer described as *intellectus* fits in this space.
8. Prior to the elucidation/clarification of quantum theory, philosophers were left to debate this, but physicists themselves have provided contrast to such a Newtonian worldview with quantum physics.

formulation of a “law” may be the goal all along. But there are also many types of things where we probably shouldn’t ever expect a “law” to emerge or for “law-like” relationships to be the norm.⁹ Many aspects of life are messy, chaotic, chancy. For instance, imagine that we think we could reduce human relationships, say marriages, to a set of laws. That would suggest that we could predict the outcomes of marriages and relationships, and also that we could expect to achieve happiness in relationships by simply following the formulas allowed by whatever laws of marriage are true. This seems either highly unlikely, or like an achievement that would require either extreme restrictions of human freedom or a great deal of brainwashing. And yet we’re not about to therefore say that relationships and love are not real or are insignificant or irrelevant, just because we can’t derive “always true and predictable” laws about these things. So it behooves us to attend to what is a theory, what is a law, and why they might matter.

That said, *laws* are usually observed or deduced – they have to do with directly observable relationships. Laws can be deduced from theories (at which point we test empirically to see if that law holds true in reality). Laws are about correlations between two or more concepts that are closely related to observables. These are less complex mental constructs – once we figure out the correlation/pattern/relation, it seems pretty straightforward to see and describe what is going on. Meanwhile, Barbour says that *theories* are usually deduced, intuited, or interpreted. They are mental constructs. They are unified and generalizable conceptual schemes from which laws can be derived; as such, theories are things that can’t so much be observed (at least not yet).

For example, you can derive laws from theories: from [Newton’s theory of gravitation](#), you can deduce [Kepler’s laws](#) about the elliptical orbit of planets around the sun. However, it can go in the other direction as well – to account for [Boyle’s Law](#), which had been observed and figured out in the 1600’s, [Kinetic Theory](#) was later developed (and Kinetic Theory accounted for other laws, too, and led to new discoveries).

So we’d say that (ala [Bacon](#), [Hume](#), [Mill](#)) the inductive ideal is the example of coming up with a law – “generalizing from particular experiences/data to universal patterns.” We take observables, figure out the general pattern, and viola, we are headed towards the discernment of a law. The deductive ideal, on the other hand, is when we derive verifiable observation statements from general theories – it’s like taking Newton’s theory of gravitation to deduce Kepler’s laws (if those theories are true, our calculations show that there must be another planet out there, and voila! There is!). We can arrive at laws by deduction from a theory, but we can also discover laws by inductive processes working with the data/observations that turn out to be governed/predicted by a law. Note, however, that creative imagination plays a key role in inspiring theories as well as in deducing laws from observables.

In a sense, we might think of it this way: you figure out a theory based on what you can measure/observe and on the ideas you have about what might explain those observations, but theories can be about things that are still too complex, or maybe not repeatable enough, to deduce a law about them. But, you can also figure out a law based on what you can measure/observe and on the ideas you have about how those things are related, which will be influenced by your understanding of what explains those observables. So, good theories make it easier to sort out complex data to see repeatable patterns that might be reduced to laws (of motion, say, or behavior).¹⁰

Understanding the relations between laws and theories in science is challenging, and it invokes both historical and philosophical points. And yet all of this conceptual work still falls within the limited bounds of what and how we think we know things in science. For those who believe (as in scientism) that scientific laws and theories are all that is, it will be hard to see these concepts as complementary or in dialogue with religion, except as a means to exclude religion as a legitimate mode of knowing. But putting all of these concepts within the framework of Barbour’s critical realism, and

9. The relative lack of “laws” in the social sciences compared to the natural sciences might be an indication of the limits of assuming that physical/causal “laws” govern all of reality.

10. Likewise, bad or inaccurate theories based on incomplete data can delay our elucidation of a law.

with modes of dialogue and integration in mind as alternatives to the conflict model required by the faith of scientism, we will be able to open up a much deeper and far reaching conversation.

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Chapter 4 Discussion Questions

Epistemology – Knowledge and Science

1. Baer claims that American culture has few of the rites of passage common in most primitive cultures through which the adolescent learns to confront death. Why would this matter to environmental values? Do you agree with Baer's claim? What do you think are the main rites of passage in contemporary American culture?
 2. Baer argues that Western culture has lost some of the balance between *ratio* and *intellectus* that was evident in previous eras. What are *ratio* and *intellectus*, and how do they relate to the different kinds of knowledge that Baer discusses? Do you agree with Baer's suggestion that a better balance between *ratio* and *intellectus* would help us address environmental problems? Why or why not?
 3. Do you agree with Baer that in addition to new science and technology and the restructuring of political, economic, and social institutions, the healing of nature will come about only with the healing of persons? Why or why not?
 4. Baer says that Max Scheler argued that the practical requirements of survival, including the need to perpetuate the conquest of nature, helped shape the scientific perspectives that remain in force today, and that this results in a certain disregard for ethical, religious, and aesthetic dimensions of existence, in preference for what is measurable, quantifiable, and empirically verifiable? What do you think?
 5. Do you agree with Baer that "we have become woefully deficient in other kinds of understanding, including intuition, wisdom, and aesthetic, ethical, and religious understanding"?
 6. What do you think of Baer's point about the aggressive view of the mind and intellectual processes that is revealed in university settings?
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Knowledge Across the Spectrum: What Do We Know About Nature and Knowing?

1. What are the strong points of the Allen Wood article on relativism? Do you find any flaws in his argument?
2. Do you believe that you can say anything valid about moral questions in cultures other than your own? In light of the Allen Wood article, say why or why not.
3. Why, according to Wood, is relativism self-refuting? If relativism is self-refuting, then what is the truth that relativists are trying to uphold?
4. Is civilization possible without making judgments about other people and their actions?
5. Why do you think the Western world, at least since the Enlightenment, has up until fairly recently so persistently defined knowledge as certainty?
6. What does it mean to "know" something?
7. Is it ever right to impose our moral judgments on others?
8. What is autonomy? Do you consider it good to be autonomous?
9. Discuss and evaluate Allen Wood's argument in "Relativism" that relativism serves as an intellectual defense mechanism. "Relativism comes to the rescue by protecting my opinions (making them all 'true for me,)," writes Wood. Do you agree with Wood when he says that relativism makes us tolerant of our own "intellectual cowardice, laziness, and incompetence"?
10. Is scientific knowledge the only truly reliable knowledge we have? What other kinds of reliable knowledge can you think of?
11. What moral imperatives are found among all human cultures?
12. What is religion?
13. What are the different ways we define "nature"?

14. What is science?

CHAPTER 5: SPIRITUAL ANTHROPOLOGIES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Before we talk about what religions believe about the environment, what sorts of things do religions believe about human life in the first place?

Having set an epistemological frame in the last chapter, we will now examine some theological anthropologies.¹ Instead of trying to compare or rate the “best environmental religions,” we will look at how different religious communities understand the human situation in the first place so as to understand how religious perspectives on humans and the environment might operate. To do this, we’ll use David Loy’s article, “[Healing Ecology](#),” and excerpts from Reinhold Niebuhr’s book [The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation](#) to identify two different religious views of the human condition. We will then tie these perspectives back to environmental issues that are prevalent today. If we can understand the particular way that a religious understanding of the world (and of humans) operates, then we’ll be in much better position to understand the meaning and diversity of religious responses to environmental issues, as highlighted in several case study chapters that follow.

Click the links below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Anxiety](#) [Healing](#)

1. A theological anthropology is a study of the human person in dialogue with the beliefs of a religious tradition.

5.1 From Epistemology to Anthropology

We move now from our discussion of relativism, truth, and how we know things in science and religion, to examine anthropologies that express different spiritual or theological understandings of the human person. This move might be somewhat atypical. I've noticed that for whatever reason, often when people think of religion and the environment, they seem to want to jump immediately to finding sacred instructions (or scriptures) about taking care of the planet. It's almost as if the first impulse for some might be to scour the Bible to see if Jesus ever said "thou shalt recycle." Indeed, we can examine ethical imperative statements that we can interpret from religious traditions including the Bible – a lot of "eco-theology" has directly done so, and some of the religious climate change statements (see chapter 9) and the material we covered in chapter 2 are examples of this. But too narrow an approach to eco-theology can fall into some of the traps of the science-religion confusion we've tried to get beyond over the last few chapters.

Not to be misunderstood, it's not unreasonable to search for religious authority encouraging humans to "take care of the planet" and then consider how such moral imperatives and obligations influence people's behavior. Indeed, religion and morality sometimes work this way – moral imperatives from legitimate cultural authorities are influential, and for good reasons. But there is also a somewhat tricky and potentially unhelpful tendency in American religious and political discourse for adversaries to throw "proof texts" at each other from opposite sides of an issue. So, faith community environmental statements might quote Genesis to claim that Christians are called to care for creation and reduce carbon emissions to address climate change, while a special interest think tank opposed to environmental legislation might likewise draw on Genesis to claim that reducing carbon emissions will create injustice, and suddenly it seems that we are at an impasse. Almost all social issues are deeper than this, though, and so are the religious and spiritual dimensions of these issues. Treating moral claims like they are scientific facts to be proof-tested against rival moral facts creates the impression that if there is disagreement, then no particular action is justified, as though legislative action could only be taken where scientific certainty is assured.¹

We don't want to start out in that direction. We want to start, instead, by paying close attention to the basic orientation we'd expect of a person of faith in different religions – what's the basic frame of reference that's understood here? How does that frame understand who and what people are? How might that frame influence how we think of what we should be doing and what really matters in the grand scheme? What's our total story of the human being, including the spiritual dynamics that different faiths believe to be true?² Before examining spiritual anthropologies, some larger perspective is useful.

1. This is not to say that good or accurate scientific information shouldn't be an essential part of the basis for various policies; the point is simply that if we narrow moral authority to the confines of scientific certainty claims, it becomes easier to oppose positive social change simply by generating rival "facts." I also do not suppose that political debates can be avoided by the perspective shift I am suggesting; the point is simply that some of these dynamics have been influential in religion-science-policy debates, so it is worthwhile to attend to them and avoid their pitfalls. Avoiding the tendency to fall into these dead-end debates is precisely why we've focused on the philosophical and epistemological points of the last chapter.
2. We'll look at theological/spiritual anthropologies that come from within specific religious/spiritual traditions, because where secular anthropology will describe cultures and values, it tends not to do so from *inside* the perspectives of different belief systems. While we will focus on a Buddhist and mainline Protestant perspective as our points of dialogue, any number of religious anthropologies might be similarly explored.

The question is not just: “How can religion influence environmental policies and behaviors?” That is a question content to keep all the same power dynamics of the status quo in place; rather, “How might a better understanding of religious/spiritual communities and beliefs empower faith communities to play their own native roles in cultural and spiritual transformation?” Another way to think about this: some might say that despite the large influence of religion in America (and in the world, to be sure), we nonetheless live in a culture where secular forms of power and control hold sway. For instance, public schools exclude religion, and religion is separated from state functions. And yet it might be that some religious insights, traditions, and ways of being operate based on fundamentally different models of how power and influence should work. Rather than seeing how religion can just be a tool of the state or of secular environmental interest groups, the more interesting question is to explore the extent to which religious communities in America are contributing and can contribute more generally to environmental solutions and sustainability.³

This turn to spiritual and theological beliefs, and taking them seriously, is a key part of our examination of religion and the environment. If Wood’s critique of relativism pushes us to take others’ views of truth seriously, then we are left with the challenging task of wrestling with different ideas and maybe even of challenging paradigms. Recall that there have been major shifts in thinking about physical facts. Some ideas were extremely challenging (and fraught with danger for the thinkers!) in their day: geocentric to heliocentric, flat earth to sphere – perhaps in similar ways, the environmental movement has promoted shifting from anthropocentric to biocentric views and values. The verdict is still out on these value orientations and preferences (it’s not clear that biocentrists are living any less impactfully on earth than others). We must recognize here that the question of whether we should be anthropocentric or biocentric, or which perspective is better for the environment, is a question of how we *should* believe or think in order to build a culture that will live as we *should*, which is assumed to be “sustainably.” But a key point arises: that is a different sort of thing to KNOW (to know how we should live) than just a physical fact. We will need different methods than scientific ones of testing observables if we’re claiming to *know* that one of these value orientations is demonstrably “better,” which is also a value judgement.

It is also important to acknowledge that semantic slippage can occur – to be a scientist and KNOW via physical evidence that the solar system revolves around the sun, or that the planet is spherical, is one kind of thing to know. This is expertise in knowing that isn’t the same as expertise in ethics – in knowing how we should live – and in sociology, of knowing what influences people to live as they do. We can get confused translating from science to ethics if we ignore the difference.

For instance, these questions relate to our earlier conversation about definitions of environment and nature. Gordon Kaufman was important to religion and ecology primarily because he was a professor of the first wave of environmental theologians who sparked the ecotheology movement in the 1960s. [H. Paul Santmire](#) was a student of Kaufman and wrote the first dissertation on the subject and first [book](#) length treatment (published from his dissertation); Ian Barbour,

3. For Christians, it is instructive to remember that one of the transformative points of early Christianity was realizing that Jesus was not a “king” like the world would expect, to come wielding earthly power; rather, he modeled a power characterized by servant leadership, where the first became last and the last first, and where worldly power dynamics were turned upside down. Especially in a political environment where power struggles are constant (as in American politics), those hoping that religions can influence environmental policies might take note: it might be that we wouldn’t expect religion to play its best role by becoming a weapon in the oppositional power dynamics of contemporary politics. We might rather consider the ways that religions might help reorient our basic postures towards issues (and towards our “enemies”) to make different solutions possible. The Christian notion of loving one’s enemies is relevant here, and the [Buddhist Renewal documentary segment](#) raises a related potential by seeking not to create separation and duality between environmentalists and their perceived opponents .

the religion and science thinker whom we've studied already, was a fellow student; Dick Baer – first to teach an environmental ethics course in the US (an Earlham College seminar on environmental ethics) – was another of their contemporaries. Kaufman's paradigm-challenging ideas on cosmos versus wilderness helped spark the emergence of significant attention to eco-theology.

[John Vucetich](#)'s more recent ideas about what science is for is an example of re-evaluating our paradigm of science. Where Pollan said the wilderness ethic should be replaced with a Gardener's Ethic, Vucetich said that science now needs to be more for communicating wonder than just being about controlling nature.⁴ That may well be a compelling thought for many environmental scientists, while other scientists might resist an idea like that, especially if they perceive that this might threaten the "objective" foundations of science.

Scientists like [George Washington Carver](#) (the father of applied chemistry) fall into the category of being more open to mysticism and wonder – Carver claimed that his daily routine included going for a walk in the woods and "talking with flowers," at which point he often received spiritual inspiration that guided his work in the lab.⁵ A counter-example might be E.O. Wilson, whose notion of "unifying" all knowledge (as outlined in his book [Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge](#)) seems to be an illustration of desiring rational, scientific knowledge to replace (and improve upon) social and intuitional forms of knowledge.⁶

Another example would be the key physicists of the 20th century who considered themselves mystics: Einstein, Schroedinger, Heisenberg, Bohr, Eddington, Pauli, de Broglie, Jeans, and Plank (this makes an excellent starting point for term papers in ENR 3470, and in fact, [a related sub-chapter found in the Appendix of this book was written by former student Natalie Pax](#), who developed her term paper on Einstein and mystery to contribute to this book). As [Ken Wilbur](#) says in his



A sunflower from the community garden of Archbishop McNicholas High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, provided spiritual inspiration to Tony Losekamp, the photographer: "The sunflower was huge and the number of seeds it produced was incredible. I wanted to capture the detail in the perfectly organized seed arrangement in the flower that is one of infinite examples of an intelligent designer of creation."

4. Vucetich, J. A. (2010). Wolves, ravens, and new purpose for science. In K. D. Moore, & M. P. Nelson (Eds.), *Moral ground* (pp. 337-337-342) Trinity University Press.
5. A biography of Carver that details his spiritual approach to life and science is [The Man Who Talks with the Flowers: The Intimate Life Story of Dr. George Washington Carver](#), by Glenn Clark (reprinted from the original 1939 edition).
6. Wilson is one of the most respected scientists of his generation, and he has participated helpfully in dialogue between religion and science. His book *The Creation: An Appeal To Save Life on Earth* (2007) argues for respectful exchange between science and religion, and invites scientists to use the term "creation" in reference to nature as an offering of common ground between scientists and religion, honoring the belief of many humans that a creator, or God, plays a key role in how life works. Nonetheless, critics have noted that his respect for religious perspectives is more pragmatic than principled, believing that religious people will be needed to save the earth, so it is foolish to insult them.

book [Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World's Greatest Physicists](#), each of these physicists was surprisingly open to mystical understandings of the world, but they were careful to keep semantic and epistemological distinctions. Their *physics* didn't commend mysticism, it just *allowed* for it – it didn't contradict it.⁷ But if we can't just say (ala relativism) that “what's true for you is true for you” and “what's true for me is true for me,” then we may have to think more seriously about views like this and admit (ala fallibilism) that our views (or socially dominant views) may be wrong. With that, we will look at the theological/spiritual anthropologies⁸ of two traditions as expressed by Reinhold Niebuhr and David Loy.

7. This might be similar to Vucetich's view of how science allows for wonder, though Vucetich seems to be arguing that the more important *purpose* of science now should be to inculcate wonder.
8. We will call them “theological” when from a “theo”-logical tradition that believes in God, “spiritual” when not, as with Buddhism.

5.2 Niebuhr's Theological Anthropology: Finitude, Anxiety and Sin

Reinhold Niebuhr's theological anthropology comes from a mainline Protestant (Christian) perspective, and was classically developed in his chapter "Man as Sinner" from *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, which was developed for his 1939 Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University. Niebuhr was an American theologian and ethicist, Union Seminary professor, and leading American public intellectual in the 20th century; he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 (his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, was also a famous theologian of the 20th century, at Yale Divinity School).

Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man* is considered one of the top 20 non-fiction books of the 20th century.¹ Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr considered him the "most influential American theologian of the 20th century," and TIME magazine named Niebuhr the "greatest Protestant theologian in America since [Jonathan Edwards](#)" (1703-1758, the congregationalist/puritan promoter of the Great Awakening). Niebuhr remains influential for his views on American foreign policy and just war theory.²

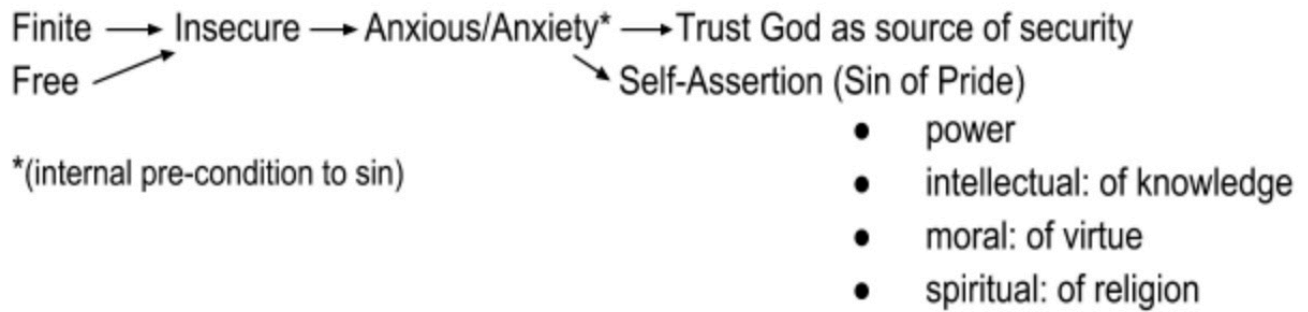
In describing "man as sinner," Niebuhr elaborated on terminology that is not as common today. Aside from gender exclusive language that many theologians now avoid, Niebuhr's topic of "sin" isn't exactly a popular one in contemporary cultural and political discourse, and it might have negative connotations for some readers, so it will help to clarify what is meant by "sin." For our purposes of understanding Niebuhr, sin can be understood as:

The disruption of human relationship with God by:

1. Ignoring God's grace & absolutizing ourselves (pride)
2. Ignoring God's grace & negating ourselves (self-hatred)
3. Ignoring God's grace & over-indulging limited goods (sensuality)
4. Rejecting God's grace & worshipping idols (idolatry)³

Niebuhr's basic scheme for describing the human situation of "sin" focuses mostly on the sin of pride (with some reference to sensuality) and can be charted something like this:

1. Niebuhr, R. (1995). *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*. Westminster John Knox Press.
2. For example, see: <https://religionnews.com/2016/02/24/reinhold-niebuhr-speaks-2016-american-politics/>
3. Migliore, D. L. (1998). *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (First ed.) Eerdmans.



Niebuhr describes the human situation as mortal: we are limited, we will die, so we are *finite*. And yet, at the same time, we are *free* – we have a sense of freedom, we can step outside of ourselves, think about our finitude, and aspire towards various transcendences of our limited situation, imagining ourselves limitless. However, this juxtaposition of freedom and finitude makes us fundamentally *insecure*, for no matter how aspirational our vision of what is possible, we will yet die, and we can't control that, thus making us feel insignificant. This position of insecurity, of being fundamentally limited and mortal, leads to *anxiety*. Now, Niebuhr notes that being in a state of anxiety is not itself sin, but it is a *precondition* to sin. (He also notes that for some Christian communities, there will be a strong notion of the devil playing a role in tempting us to believe a false interpretation about reality, which increases our temptation to sin rather than trust that “we’re ok” in some way. To this extent, the situation of temptation is not entirely our fault.)⁴

4. In the Biblical creation/garden story (Adam and Eve, and also in the story of Job), the role of the devil is one of tempter. The devil, himself a fallen angel who tried to be as God, now tries to get humanity to follow suit, to try to transgress the bounds set for human life by God. The devil wants us humans to believe that God isn't caring for us (so we think we must care for ourselves) and to think that God is maybe tricking us, so we shouldn't trust God's provision (we're being made a fool). All such thoughts serve to separate and alienate us from God, which fits the definition of sin as error – missing the mark, being separate from God.



“Pondering the death of Jesus on a Good Friday hike in Leprechaun Canyon, Utah,” says photographer Alexander Wimmer. The photo’s subject looks awfully small in comparison to those rock walls– perhaps they are pondering why their God would choose to become finite and die, as well.

Niebuhr says the human condition of anxiety is a precondition to sin because anxiety makes us less likely to act well in the face of our insecure situation.⁵ Niebuhr suggests there are two main routes for us to then take. We can either trust God as the source of our security, or we can take the path of self-assertion, of trying to assure our own security, often at the expense of or by exploiting others and nature, which gives rise to injustice. This is the path (or sin) of pride, according to Niebuhr. What might be involved in “trusting God” is elaborated more in a subsequent chapter on “Wisdom, Grace, and Power,” and I won’t emphasize that here, but some might liken the notion of trusting God here to “trusting the universe” despite the many dangers implicit in the realities of life. New Testament passages about not being afraid

5. There are other sources of anxiety as well, such as abuse, stress, and traumatic experience, and these need to be taken seriously in themselves – Niebuhr is not focusing on these sources of anxiety, but rather on the basic existential anxiety of the insecure human situation. Thus Niebuhr’s response to existential anxiety will differ from how one would want to respond to other forms of experience-based emotional anxiety.

or not needing to worry also come to mind: “consider the lilies...not even Solomon in all his glory was dressed like one of these... how much more will God clothe you?”⁶ Hebrew Bible passages describing the Israelites wandering in the wilderness also come to mind – it was in the wilderness, after all, that the Israelites learned how to trust God’s provision and where their well-being was covered despite the harsh conditions of years of desert travel.⁷ If God will provide, as suggested by these biblical traditions, the conclusion might be that one needn’t fear for their life or resort to exploiting others and nature out of desperation.⁸

Niebuhr’s prognosis of humans as sinners focuses on the path of self-assertion as the sin of pride; he considers it the besetting sin of the Western world. Niebuhr says there are four main types of the sin of pride:

1. **Pride of Power** – this is the most basic sense of pride, akin to the will to power. For the powerless, it is the drive to gain power over others; for the powerful, it is the act of using power against others unjustly. This is the basic notion of “might is right” – stockpiling resources and protections to be able to fend off all threats. It is thinking that we will be ok, safe, and secure because we’re strong enough to overpower or deter all threats. Niebuhr says our insecurity prompts the drive for power.

Sometimes this lust for power expresses itself in terms of man’s conquest of nature, in which the legitimate freedom and mastery of man in the world of nature is corrupted into a mere exploitation of nature. Man’s sense of dependence upon nature and his reverent gratitude toward the miracle of nature’s perennial abundance is destroyed by his arrogant sense of independence and his greedy effort to overcome the insecurity of nature’s rhythms and seasons by garnering her stores with excessive zeal and beyond natural requirements. Greed is in short the expression of man’s inordinate ambition to hide his insecurity in nature... Greed as a form of the

6. Luke 12:27-28.

7. The wilderness wanderings story describes where the Israelites became God’s people; you might say they learned to trust God’s provision, or they never would have made it for 40 years. Notably, they didn’t just wait around for God to meet all their needs – even with “manna from heaven” and other seemingly miraculous provisions of food and water, the people were daily engaged in surviving their situation. Beyond this basic level of survival, there was also a fundamental, existential level at which their trusting God shaped them as a community in understanding what it means to be God’s people in the world. Realizing the need to trust God’s provision developed an orientation to the world and a humble sense of one’s perceived power and control in the world which is different from believing we must save ourselves.
8. A popular joke suggests some of the common sense line between naive trust in God’s provision and basic survival reality: During a massive flood, there was a man who refused help – as the flood waters encroached the street, a truck drove by to offer him a ride to higher ground, but he replied: “I’ll be ok, God will rescue me!” Later, as the water reached his second floor, a boat came by and offered to carry him to safe shores, but from his second story window, the man replied “I’ll be ok, God will rescue me!” Finally, when the waters had reached the top of his roof, and the man was sitting on the last few shingles that hadn’t been submerged, a helicopter came by to rescue him, but even then, he still refused and said “I’ll be ok, God will rescue me!” The man died from drowning shortly thereafter, and when he got to heaven, he asked: “God, why didn’t you save me from the flood?” and God said: “Well, I sent you a truck, a boat, and a helicopter, what more did you want me to do?”

will-to-power has been a particularly flagrant sin in the modern era because modern technology has tempted contemporary man to overestimate the possibility and the value of eliminating his insecurity in nature. Greed has thus become the besetting sin of a bourgeois culture. This culture is constantly tempted to regard physical comfort and security as life's final good and to hope for its attainment to a degree which is beyond human possibilities. 'Modern man,' said a cynical doctor, 'has forgotten that nature intends to kill man and will succeed in the end.'⁹

2. **Pride of Knowledge** – intellectual pride; this may be the basic sin of the university. It is the sin of modern science (or at least of scientism) when we believe science can know all. It is thinking we'll be ok because we're smart enough to take care of ourselves and assure our well-being. Niebuhr says this is a more spiritual sublimation of the pride of power. This form of pride relates to what Niebuhr calls the "ideological taint" that taints all human knowledge. "It pretends to be more than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge."¹⁰

The philosopher who imagines himself capable of stating a final truth merely because he has sufficient perspective upon past history to be able to detect previous philosophical errors is clearly the victim of the ignorance of his ignorance. Standing on a high pinnacle of history he forgets that this pinnacle also has a particular locus and that his perspective will seem as partial to posterity as the pathetic parochialism of previous thinkers¹¹ ...Not the least pathetic is the certainty of a naturalistic age that its philosophy is a final philosophy because it rests upon science, a certainty which betrays ignorance of its own prejudices and failure to recognize the limits of scientific knowledge....Intellectual pride is thus the pride of reason which forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history."¹²

3. **Pride of Virtue** – moral pride; pride of self-righteousness or self-deification. It is thinking we will be ok because we're virtuous or because we are right while others are wrong, that we're good while others are bad. Moral pride occurs when:

The self mistakes its standards for God's standards... Moral pride is the pretension of finite man that his highly conditioned virtue is the final righteousness and that his very relative moral standards are absolute. Moral pride thus makes virtue the very vehicle of sin.... The sin of self-righteousness... is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamations against our fellow men. The whole history of racial, national, religious and other social struggles is a commentary on the objective wickedness and social miseries which result from self-righteousness.¹³

9. Niebuhr, p. 190-191.

10. Niebuhr, p. 194.

11. Here Niebuhr's commentary seems to apply to the example in Allen Wood's article on relativism of a thinker who imagines religions as parochial systems of thought akin to climbers that only have access to one side of a mountain; the author of the analogy seems to imagine himself as above all those views. Niebuhr says on p. 196 that "a significant aspect of intellectual pride is the inability of the agent to recognize the same or similar limitations of perspective in himself which he has detected in others."

12. Niebuhr, p. 195.

13. Niebuhr, pp. 199-200.

And finally, what is really a subset of moral pride, or perhaps the far extreme of moral pride, is:

4. **Pride of Religion** – spiritual pride. Niebuhr says this final form of pride makes the self-deification of moral pride explicit. It amounts to believing not only that we're right, but that we also have divine sanction; it is believing God is on our side (not on others') in how we live and understand the world. Niebuhr claims that spiritual pride is the worst and most intractable kind, and it's been the cause of some of the world's worst problems: "the worst form of class domination is religious class domination... the worst form of intolerance is religious intolerance, in which the particular interests of the contestants hide behind religious absolutes... the worst form of self-assertion is religious self-assertion... 'What goes by the name of 'religion' in the modern world,' declares a modern missionary, 'is to a great extent unbridled human self-assertion in religious disguise.'"¹⁴

With this second option, the path of pride (self-assertion in response to our insecurity rather than trusting God) spelled out, we can also consider a third option that Niebuhr comments on in a subsequent chapter: the sin of sensuality. This sin may be more relevant to our discussion of consumerism and materialism in Chapter 12, but it is worth a brief mention here. The sin of sensuality for Niebuhr, in contrast to pride (which attempts to mask our finitude), is the attempt to escape from our freedom. In our insecurity and anxiety that arise from being both finite and free, we can renounce our freedom, often by immersing ourselves in another's vitality or by turning our devotions to whatever appeals to us. Niebuhr says:

If selfishness is the destruction of life's harmony by the self's attempt to centre life around itself, sensuality would seem to be the destruction of harmony within the self, by the self's undue identification with and devotion to particular impulses and desires within itself.

Niebuhr says Christian theology regards sensuality "as a derivative of the more primal sin of self-love. Sensuality represents a further confusion consequent upon the original confusion of substituting the self for God as the centre of existence." Having lost the true center of life (God), we are no longer able to maintain our own will as the center of ourselves, articulates Niebuhr. Giving up on finding fulfillment as the unique children of God we are meant to be, we indulge our physical appetites as ends in themselves – we turn inordinately to mutable goods. We will reserve further commentary on the potential implications for consumerism and over-consumption until Chapter 12.

Note that I do not have my students read Niebuhr's chapter on "Wisdom, Grace and Power," which is his fleshing out of the implications of the path of "Trust God," to provide a vision of a Christian alternative to being caught in the sins of pride or sensuality. I won't focus on that, partly because I find it harder to appropriate than the sin chapter and also because the variety of "solutions" or "salvations" that Christianity, even mainline Christianity, might offer, is too diverse to just focus on Niebuhr's view.¹⁵

14. Niebuhr, pp. 200-201.

15. I also think Niebuhr's diagnosis of the human situation is more compelling and important to our discussion here than his descriptions of Christian paths forward. In brief, however, Niebuhr's description of salvation focuses on grace received in faith, the spirit and power of God in humans, the gift of new life, being crucified in Christ (shattering the self in a perennial process of the self being confronted with the claims and presence of God), forgiveness of sins, and the power, holiness, and new life of continually acknowledging God as the source and center of all life. Niebuhr's theology of the human situation and his framework for salvation and freedom was a primary basis for the healing and recovery process developed by Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12-step concept in general.

There are a number of other potential “paths forward” in Christian eco-theology, including the following. [Reverend Denis Edwards](#) describes a *trinitarian incarnational view*¹⁶, which understands that God’s intention in the incarnation (the belief of God becoming human in Christ) was always to be in relation with creatures, so salvation isn’t a plan to fix the mess caused by human sin, but a revealing of the relationality of all life with God. Various *liberation theologies*¹⁷ emphasize liberation from economic, social, and political oppressions by engagement in aiding the poor and vulnerable through political and civic involvement. *Eco-feminist theologies*¹⁸ focus on the connections between exploitation of women and of nature, particularly in patriarchal societies. They also aim to reconstruct a (non-hierarchical, non-dualistic) wholistic and just vision of relations in creation; *eco-womanism*¹⁹ draws on the sacred cosmological perspectives of women of African descent in their struggles for earth justice. *Catholic perspectives* tend to focus on the sacramentality of nature²⁰ and have been most recently expressed in terms of *integral ecology*²¹ as described in the encyclical *Laudato Si’*, which we will study in chapter 8. Some Christian eco-theologies overlap with *environmental virtue theory* – such as the work of [Stanley Hauerwas](#) (which we’ll study in chapter 11) – or *Greek Orthodox perspectives*²² (of crucifixion, transfiguration, faith, hope, and love), such as those of [Kallistos Ware](#).



¹⁶. One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

[#oembed-2](#)

17. <http://www.landreform.org/boff2.htm>

18. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ecofeminism-and-ecofeminist-theology>

19. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/eco-journey/2015/06/26/gender-race-environment-and-religious-ethics-eco-w/>

20. Denis Edwards and many liberation theologians were/are Catholic.

21. <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/laudato-si-ch-4-integral-ecology-as-a-new-paradigm-of-justice/>

22. <http://www.orth-transfiguration.org/safeguarding-the-creation-for-future-generations/>

5.3 A Buddhist Spiritual Anthropology: David Loy's Healing Ecology



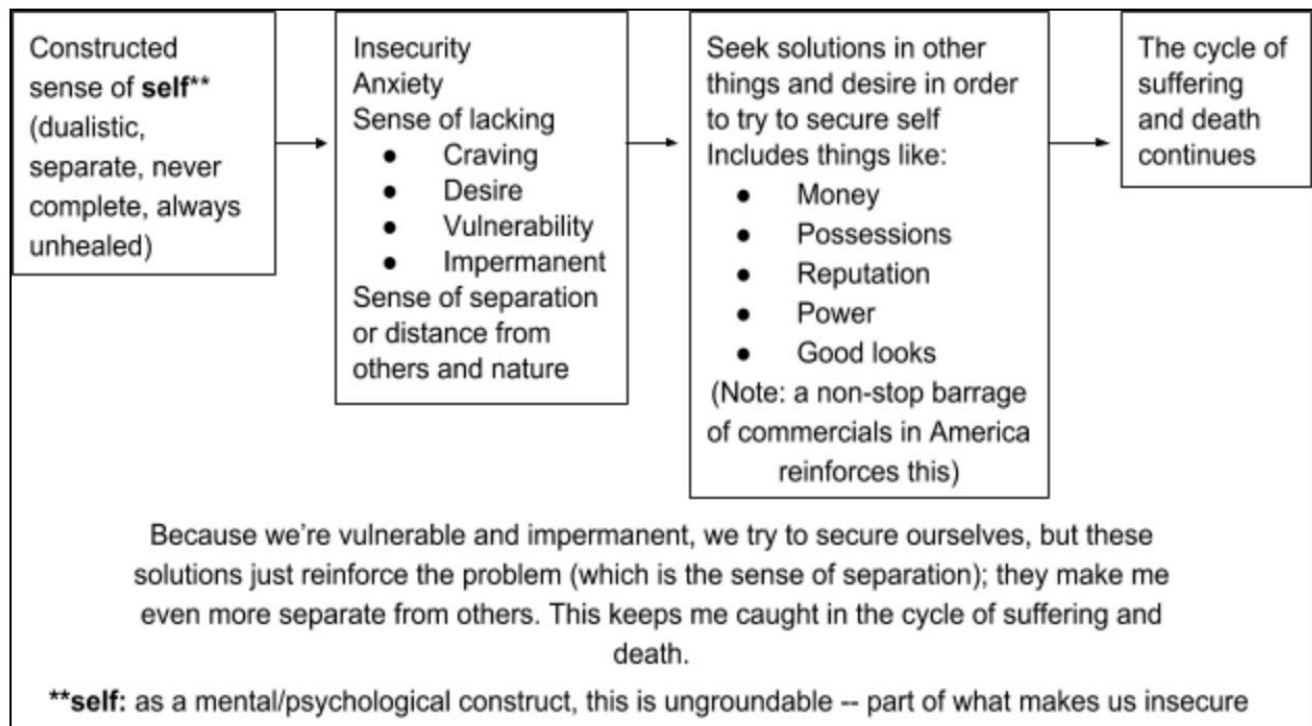
Enlightenment at 16,340 ft: Rongbuk Monastery against Mt. Everest. Photo credit: Rongkun Liu

Beyond the diversity of Christian perspectives, there are of course many other world religious perspectives we could explore, and now we will move on to consider the vision of David Loy, a Buddhist scholar and primary author of the Buddhist statement on climate change referred to in chapter 9 (whose first signator is the Dalai Lama). Loy's perspective on humans' individual and collective environmental situation was developed in an article titled "Healing Ecology." As we would expect, it is different from Niebuhr's perspective, but there are also points of connection between the two.

To start, Loy reminds us that there is a larger view of "What's going on?" in Buddhism that is described by the [Doctrine of Anatta](#), the not-self, which says that there is no *self* independent from the rest of the universe. Everything is connected (there is oneness). We are interdependent with all beings, animate and inanimate. Because this is true, autonomy is a path to unreality and suffering.

From that basic understanding, the key point is that our delusive sense of self is intrinsically related to *dukkha*, which is suffering in the broadest sense: dissatisfaction, discontent, anxiety, inability to be happy. The fundamental delusion is: I believe something outside myself is the solution to my sense of lack. Our sense of self is delusive in part because it

is dualistic, when in fact, peace is to be in accord with reality¹, which is a oneness. As such, the self is not something we can get rid of, because it doesn't exist in the first place. These contextual points about the human predicament suggest a scheme somewhat like the following:



Here the trouble begins with humans' sense of self, which as a delusive mental construct, is ungroundable, thus the 'self' is never complete or satisfied. This dualistic, separated² state of being leads to insecurity, anxiety, and a sense of lack, which fuels craving and desire. As we try to secure our 'self' through money, power, possessions, etc, we remain ever more stuck in this cycle of suffering and death, because building up this delusive 'self' makes us more and more separate from others, thus reinforcing the fundamental problem of trying to inhabit the ungroundable space of a 'self'.

There are some obvious points of overlap here with Niebuhr's scheme in the depiction of the human situation of anxiety and insecurity, and this might cause us to pause and wonder whether Niebuhr and Loy would say they are describing the same reality. Niebuhr's work was written long before the modern environmental movement, and Loy's was written largely in response to environmental concerns, so Loy provides a great deal more specific description of the potential environmental ramifications of a Buddhist way of seeing the world and a Buddhist path forward both individually and collectively.³

1. Some potential points of similarity with other views emerges here. For instance, Niebuhr advises trusting God because God provides. St. Augustine, a 4th century theologian, said that true freedom is perfect obedience to the will of God. Some ecologists might say that true freedom and sustainability is being in accord with ecological reality.
2. Thus off-base from the truth of oneness...
3. It is worth noting that in the next chapter after "Man as Sinner," Niebuhr focused on "collective egotism," so a fantastic term paper for ENR 3470 would be to look more closely at how Loy's comments about the collective human-environmental situation compare with Niebuhr's; such a

In response to this problematic human situation, rather than remaining stuck on the path of anxiety and craving and dualism and trying to build up the self, we can take the path of enlightenment, see the Four Noble Truths, and follow the Noble Eightfold Path (and consider the Bodhisattva path). The path of enlightenment starts from our situation of suffering. By suffering, we think of birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, distress, despair. This suffering comes from the dualistic, separate sense of self, which – because it isn't real – makes us feel perpetually incomplete and unhealed. In our *ignorance*, we resort to craving, and it's our craving/desire that causes our suffering. We think we can ground ourselves with things that we crave, so we try to secure ourselves. Alternatively, however, amid our suffering, we might gain enlightenment, like the [Buddha did sitting under the Bodhi tree](#) long ago.

That starts with the **Four Noble Truths**, in that realizing these truths engages us in the process of enlightenment:

1. Suffering exists
2. Suffering exists from attachments to desires
3. Suffering ceases when attachments to desire ceases
4. Freedom from suffering is possible by practicing the Noble Eightfold Path.

The enlightenment gained from realizing the Four Noble Truths can then be practiced and integrated into our lives through the disciplines of **The Noble Eightfold Path**:⁴

1. **Right* view** – an understanding of the Four Noble Truths as the source of suffering
2. **Right intention** – renounce the world; good will; non-violence; harmlessness
 - Right view and right intention together encompass “wisdom” – seeing things as they are, aware of karma
3. **Right speech** – no lying, idle-chatter, or divisive/abusive speech
4. **Right action** – no murder, stealing, unchastity
5. **Right livelihood** – no harm (weapons, livelihoods like slavery and prostitution, meat, intoxicants, poison)
 - Right speech, right action, and right livelihood together encompass “ethical conduct” – restrain oneself, eradicate greed, hatred, and delusion
6. **Right effort** – virtue, skill, persistence
7. **Right mindfulness** – bare attention – present, open, quiet, alert
8. **Right concentration** – singleness of mind now that you are equipped with #1-7..
 - Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration together encompass “concentration” – where dispassion, non-clinging, and release arise

*“right” = completion, togetherness, coherence, ‘perfect/ideal’

paper could also incorporate other commentaries about collective egotism, such as the following:
<http://www.chadbird.com/blog/2017/5/6/when-denominations-think-theyre-gods-chosen-group>

4. The Dharma Wheel represents the Noble Eightfold Path.



“Ewam and the Garden of a Thousand Buddhas” is a Buddhist monastery and garden in Lake County, Montana. It is built with 8 spokes, representing the Dharma Wheel of the Noble Eightfold Path. A Buddha statue sits in each of the four cardinal directions, representing past, present, future, and final Buddhas. [Their brochure](#) states: “There are 1,000 plants and trees that adorn the Garden along with many flowers as an example of safeguarding and replenishing the environment of the world.” Photo Credit: Parker Dean

The end goal or experience of this process is achieving **nirvana** and escaping the **cycle of suffering and death** (cease **dukkha** and achieve **self-awakening**, which leads to **liberation**).

Another description of the “path” that Buddhism commends is the [Middle Way](#) – the path Buddha discovered that led to liberation. It is moderation between the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification; it is the path of wisdom.⁵

5. In later texts, the Middle Way refers to the concept of direct knowledge that transcends seemingly

Achieving nirvana is to escape the cycle of suffering and death – to be liberated from it. Yet there is more, because if you are truly connected to everything else, then any other's suffering is your suffering; even if you liberate yourself from suffering, to leave it at that separates you from the all of which you are a part. Herein lies the *Bodhisattva Path*, which is when an enlightened one who could leave the world of dukkha sticks around to help the rest of us, to work for the complete enlightenment of all sentient beings.⁶

Another way to envision this is to think about meditation and practice. In meditation, we can deconstruct our sense of self – meditation gives us the space to see the world rightly, to see what's really going on. So we see dukkha as it is and realize the Four Noble Truths about suffering. I wake up and see that the self is delusive, and realizing non-duality, I am freed to live as I choose (but that will be a way that contributes to the good of the whole because I'm part of the whole), and that is the realm of practice. Practice includes meditation, which allows us to reconstruct our sense of self, replacing greed, ill will, and delusion with generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. It includes following the Eightfold Path to be free from suffering. Doing so, we are living in meditation and practice and are able to achieve nirvana and escape the cycle of suffering and death; however, on the Bodhisattva path, we stay in the world of dukkha to help others, because if we are truly “not self”, then others' dukkha is our dukkha.

A concept from cognitive psychology is worth noting here: research shows that repeated action (habituation), learning, and memory can actually change the nervous system physically, altering both synaptic strength and connections. Such changes can be brought about by cultivated change in emotion and action, and they will, in turn, change subsequent experience. It would seem that we can truly re-think and re-feel our “selves” through a process of meditation and habituation. If we do NOT, however, if we remain in a delusive sense of self, seeking fullness from other things, following desires, we merely reinforce the problem, and we remain in suffering.

Loy also outlines a collective version of this as it pertains to the environment. He asserts that we have a collective sense of separation (culture) from nature – we have a loss of faith in God⁷, leaving us rudderless – and we have powerful technology that makes us think we can do anything. But, amid this, we do not know what our role is, what we *should* do. Subsequently, if we can't depend on God or godlike rules to tell us how to live, we are left with only ourselves (who lack grounding greater than ourselves and thus generate greater dukkha, collective and individual!).

As such, Loy says the modern sense of separation from the natural world has become an ongoing source of alienation and frustration. For the anxious “self,” we try to solve it with other things – we compulsively crave and acquire and consume. For the anxious collective, we obsess over “progress” and growth, thinking that more is better, bigger is better. But remember that what is true for human reality is *not-self*, so awakening to the delusion of self and taking a path of unselfing is the path to liberation. For the collective, what is is that all things are connected, so awakening to the delusion of selfish hoarding and competition (which is really fighting against self – a house divided) and forging solidarity is the path to peace.

So, as we wonder what we should do, Loy notes that technology and economic growth can't themselves resolve the basic human problem – they may be a good *means* to accomplish something, but they are not good *ends* in themselves. Since we don't really know where we want to go or what we should value, we've become demonically obsessed with

antithetical claims about existence. Curious students might explore connections between the Buddhist Middle Way and Aristotle's Golden Mean, which will be mentioned in chapter 11.

6. The following analogy relates to some of the options here: as king, you arrive first; as boatman, you arrive with; as shepherd, you arrive last.
7. Note that many sects of Buddhism do not ascribe to a belief in “God,” so Loy isn't necessarily speaking for all Buddhists here, but he is likely also alluding to the general historical sweep of religion in American culture, where “faith in God” is a less prominent common force than in the past.

ever-increasing power and control. As such, Loy says, eco-crisis is inevitable – sooner or later we bump up against our collective compulsive project of endless growth and never-enough control. The collective problem is that trying to control the world for our purposes makes it “resources” to use, but that doesn’t yield security. So, what’s the collective awakening that can save us? It may be to see that we’re not separate from the biosphere so that we can become the collective bodhisattva⁸ of the biosphere.⁹

Ok, so that’s Loy, and he seems to be a very smart guy. Another very smart guy, Albert Einstein, said: “The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained liberation from the self.”¹⁰ Maybe there’s something to this. That is not to say that there are no critiques of these ideas – we will attend to some of them in the next chapter.

8. An interesting thing to ponder (or an excellent term paper topic) – Loy’s Buddhism ends up sounding fairly activist. Loy seems to prescribe/conclude some environmentalist goals; rather than let Buddhism be Buddhism and cure human greed, we’re to be motivated by being the world’s conscience, which seems like putting a lot on the self when the self doesn’t exist. Why not just meditate more so that we can all slide toward peace? Niebuhr talked about this sort of danger – as soon as we identify the Bodhisattva Path, and believe that we are to be the conscience of the universe and do good, we’ve put ourselves at the center of our action. So how do we keep our actions (as part of the collective) true to what’s for the common good, versus becoming actions possibly motivated by trying to be a savior or superhero? Niebuhr would say that as soon as we see ourselves as having some sort of power, our actions may just as easily be an expression of pride. Loy might point out that this is why the practice of meditation, to continually deconstruct the self, is so important.
9. This suggests that the biosphere needs liberation from suffering too, and that notion strongly overlaps with Christian thought. This is what the key eco-theology insight of Romans 8 says about salvation – if humans get saved and reveal their children-of-Godness, all creation can be liberated into freedom.
10. Einstein, Albert, *The World As I See It*, (Philosophical Library, New York, 1949)





This prayer flag mound is located close to the aforementioned Garden of One Thousand Buddhas. “Monks live intentionally here, studying, mediating working and praying year round. Tibetan Prayer Flags fly in the wind, sending prayers to the mountains of Montana and the world.” Photo Credit: Parker Dean.

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Chapter 5 Discussion Questions

Spiritual Anthropologies: Sin, Grace, Dukkha, Biophilia & Death-o-phobia

Reflection Questions:

- What is the relationship between human finitude, anxiety, sin, and pride according to Niebuhr? Evaluate his point of view from the standpoint of your own experience.
- Compare and contrast the Christian and Buddhist views of the human situation presented by Niebuhr and Loy. Are these views compatible?

Discussion Questions:

1. What is *sin*?
2. Do you ever use the terms “sin” or “sinner” in reference to yourself? If not, what terms do you use to refer to things you do that you think are wrong or bad (or things you do not do that you think you should have done)?
3. What relevance does the Niebuhr reading have for how we think about and treat the environment?
4. How well does the concept “sin” fit into modern psychological analysis?
5. What is *dukkha*?
6. Do you think the “individual predicament” Loy describes from a Buddhist perspective contains parallels to the collective situation as Loy suggests? Why or why not?
7. What does Loy mean when he says that “traditional societies did not realize [a] distinction between nature and social convention,” and that such cultures enjoyed “a collective sense of meaning that we’ve lost today” (259)?
8. Once again, what is autonomy? Do you consider it good to be autonomous?

Study Questions:

1. According to Niebuhr, why does anxiety often lead to sin?
2. What function does belief in the devil have in Christian thought?
3. What is the “ideological taint”?
4. Why, according to Niebuhr, is anxiety “the internal precondition of sin”?
5. What are the major points that Niebuhr makes about pride in a person’s life?
6. What does Niebuhr mean when he argues that ignorance is often the consequence of sin?
7. Why does the self not deserve unconditional devotion, according to Niebuhr?
8. What, according to Niebuhr, is the relationship between dishonesty and pride?
9. What similarities do you see between the Niebuhr and Snow readings? Must one believe in God to overcome the fear of death?
10. Why does Loy say that the “Buddhist solution to the human predicament is not to get rid of the self”?
11. What is a *bodhisattva*, and what role might a *bodhisattva* have in relation to the welfare of the environment?
12. What similarities are there in the way Loy’s Buddhist and Niebuhr’s Christian views address the illusions of the self?

CHAPTER 6: SPIRITUAL ANTHROPOLOGIES II: ECOFEMINISM, IRIS MURDOCH, AND OTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE HUMAN SITUATION

By Sophie Manaster and Greg Hitzhusen

The theological and spiritual anthropologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and David Loy that we explored in the last chapter reflect a well-versed religious perspective in America – one that sees human failings caught up in selfish egotism and sin. The three major strands of American religious engagement in environmental causes– stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality –all play off of this in one way or another. Stewardship entails taking up the duty and call to care for the planet rather than live selfishly; eco-justice focuses on righting the injustices caused by selfish, exploitative human behavior; creation spirituality often involves connecting humans more empathically and experientially to the creation, in a unifying way or such that close connection and love of creation motivates one to eschew selfish regard and overconsumption and live in ways that are protective and honoring of all creation. Laurel Kearns ([1996](#)) highlighted each of these approaches in her analysis of the environmental traditions of American churches, but she also lifted up ecofeminist views as providing another abiding perspective by which to understand our environmental dilemmas and move forward into more sustainable living. Indeed, one of the more compelling critiques of both Niebuhr and Loy comes from eco-feminist thinking. Feminists have argued that Niebuhr's analysis of sin and salvation is male-focused, such that while for *men* (who are often in positions of power and control) the abiding issue may be learning to “unself”, for *women* (who more often are in positions of subservience or oppression), it may more often be important to receive more support for the self, and thus Niebuhr's prescription of “shattering the self” could be harmful, not salvific, for many women. In this chapter, Sophie Manaster explores some of the dimensions of feminist thinking that provide innovative perspectives for creation care. The views of neo-platonist Iris Murdoch also provide a framework for new ways of moving forward.

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[Gender](#)

[Love](#)

[Self](#)

6.1 Feminist Views and Nature

As we discussed in the last chapter, Reinhold Niebuhr argued that human anxiety, the precursor to sin, is due to the human condition of being simultaneously finite and free. While this theory offers important commentary on overall basic societal tendencies, it fails to recognize that the human condition is not homogenous among all social groups, as some have always been more finite, and less free. For instance, for most of human history, women¹ have not been entirely free, and in most of the world, are still subject to limitations that can be attributed to discrimination,² rather than simply being caused by the overall human condition of existential anxiety (chapter 13 will expand on these concerns by taking up the topic of environmental justice and environmental racism). In addition, David Loy's argument that the solution to the environmental crisis is the abandonment of "the self," fails to recognize the ways that women have historically been socialized to abandon the self. So, while a mindful enlightenment to free oneself from the delusion of the self is one thing, being told to forget the self by others (who might then expect you to serve *themselves*?) could be more an example of domination, exploitation, and manipulation than of enlightenment. So, while Niebuhr and Loy highlighted some important human spiritual challenges, to the extent that they ignore issues of gender, their analyses may be limited as we attempt to apply these ideas to humans, the environment, and spirituality.

What might feminist perspectives add to our discussion, and in what ways do concerns about the domination and abuse of nature connect to issues of the domination and abuse of women? What spiritual and social perspectives can shed more light on the role of power and exploitation as contrasted with love, relationship, and community solidarity?

³ We'll start by thinking about nature itself as having feminine qualities.

1. Much the same could be said for indigenous people and minority groups, and at the same time, undoubtedly the fear and anxiety of dominant social groups has been one of the underlying causes of discrimination.
2. Implicit bias, particularly in how it underlies pervasive racial discrimination, has been highlighted by a great deal of recent scholarship (you can test your own implicit biases [here](#), and read how those biases affect the hiring process [here](#)), and is another striking example. A good deal of important scholarship has highlighted the similar links between race, discrimination, and the environment (including [this paper by Chris Carter](#) and [this paper by Melanie Harris](#)), some of which is discussed in the forthcoming sub-chapter on Ecowomanism in this book.
3. Chapter 11's discussion of virtue theory will ask us to think differently about how to reason about environmental ethics. Rather than splice logic to arrive at the best environmental choices as other modern ethical theories might lead us to do (as we'll discuss in chapter 10), virtue re-orientes us to approach human problems from a different direction. Chapter 5 asked us to consider theological anthropologies as the point of orientation, an approach that focuses on the larger story and understanding a religion might have about how life works, rather than just looking at how its "rules" or ethical imperatives might add weaponry to existing political or ethical arguments about the need to care for the environment. Eco-feminism asks us to stop just focusing on how men say we should fix things... and consider for a moment that men's dominance over women and over land seem related, and might be a big part of "what's going on" overall that we need to attend to if we're going to

The concept of “Mother Earth” and feminine personification of nature has been echoed for thousands of years, transcending cultural boundaries. The connection makes sense: every living thing is given life through a mother—born from a biological mother, and sustained through a metaphorical mother known as Earth. Humans are given life and nurtured by their mothers, just as the planet bestows them with abundant resources that provide sustenance. Yet, cultural expectations can lead to an insatiable desire for wealth, power and security, creating social systems in which the sources of human life, women and the earth, are often dominated. The injustice of a culture of domination is that those who give the most, are taken from the most and often given little in return.



Image obtained from the public domain.

The tragedy of a domination-driven culture is exemplified by one of the most beloved children’s books of the last century: *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. This story has widely been perceived as a cautionary tale of society’s interaction with natural resources, yet it can also be viewed as an allegory for maternal love. In *The Giving Tree*, a tree interacts with a boy throughout his life. In an effort to help the boy at each stage in his life, the tree gives him parts of herself, which he can transform into material items. With every stage of giving, the tree happily gives, and the boy continues to take, until the tree has nothing left to give. Still, the tree remains happy through it all, as selflessness is in her nature, and giving brings her joy. As humans, we repeatedly take resources from the natural world, until there is simply nothing left to take. Similarly, mothers sacrifice themselves in physical and emotional ways for their children, often expecting nothing in return. The gift of life, coming directly from a mother, is unconditional. The Earth does not

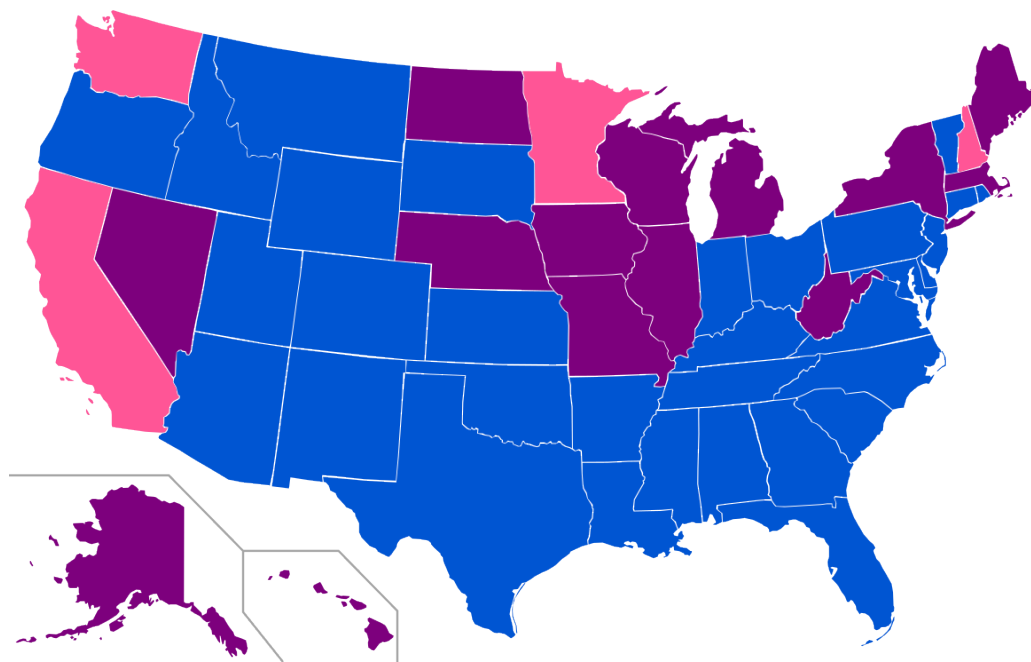
understand and respond well to eco-crisis and other environmental concerns. So rather than remain stuck in the way we think and argue about things, we are attempting to step back and notice other major factors like this that we should be thinking more about.

charge a farmer for tilling its soil just as a woman does not expect anything from her newborn child. Yet, while humans are not in debt to their mothers, should they not honor them, as well as all women, with respect for their sacrifices?

6.2 Discrimination and Socialization

Today, both women and the environment face exploitation, violence and injustice. Furthermore, there are direct connections between the ecological degradation of the environment and the oppression of women. Many of these connections are found in statistics, such as the fact that women often disproportionately bear the burden of environmental crises. Scientists have estimated that 68% of all disasters are related to climate change, and women are 14 times more likely to face injury or death as a result of these disasters than men (“Why is climate change a gender issue?” 2013). Gender based violence also increases astronomically when communities face social and economic turmoil resulting from environmental disasters, as illustrated in one example by a 300% increase in domestic violence cases following an increase in tropical cyclones in the Pacific Island region (“Why is climate change a gender issue?” 2013).

Yet while women disproportionately are impacted by environmental problems, they also hold a disproportionately subdued voice in the global conversations seeking to address these problems. Only about 20% of the members of the United States Congress are female, and female political representation is typically even lower in other nations (Warner, 2014). In the business world, women are only 14.6 percent of executive officers, 8.1 percent of top earners, and 4.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs (Warner, 2014).¹ In the world of academia, women are underrepresented as well. And many of the studies that created a foundation for the field of psychology and Western understandings of moral development lacked women subjects entirely (Gilligan, 1982).



A map depicting the genders of U.S. senators in 2016. Pink states have two female senators, blue states have two male senators, and purple states have one of each. Image obtained from the public domain.

In addition to lack of representation in power structures, research has shown that gender socialization plays a key role

1. Dorceta Taylor’s study of diversity in environmental organizations (<http://vaipl.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ExecutiveSummary-Diverse-Green.pdf>) takes an even closer look at these phenomena in environmental leadership. This issue could make an excellent term paper topic in ENR 3470!

in silencing the female voice. In recent years, studies on women's moral development have characterized girls' initiation into womanhood as an initiation into a selflessness that pressures them to silence their needs and voices in relationships (Gilligan, 1992). This is revealed through studies showing that compared to males, females have a stronger ability to take the role of a conceptualized other (i.e., other-orientation) (Gough 1960, 1994; Zeleny et al. 2000), and stronger levels of social responsibility (Borden and Francis, 1978).

During adolescence, women in patriarchal societies experience intense socialization to be gentle, kind, nurturing, and preserve relationships at all costs, while men are taught to be dominant, aggressive, independent, and to attain wealth at all costs.² As a result, women often feel pressured to suppress their opinions and dissociate themselves from their own needs, silencing their voices and negatively impacting their self-concept. Because females are more socialized to sacrifice themselves for the sake of relationships, selflessness, a positive trait for society, can instead become an invitation for exploitation. Since gender roles implement different messages among the sexes, this imbalance is perpetuated in social hierarchies, as women are taught to be altruistic, and as a result, are often taken advantage of. A nationwide study showed that between elementary and high school, a girl's self-esteem drops 3.5 times more than a boy's does, a confidence gap that continues to increase with age (American Association of University Women, 1991). Since rigidly structured gender roles have taught women to be selfless and give, while men are taught to be competitive and earn, selflessness is discouraged in one half of a patriarchal society, while it exploits the other.³

Before attributing the cause of a disproportionate system to differences in the societal expectations of men and women, it is important to emphasize the sheer complexity of human systems, and note that making generalizations about social groups cannot always be extended to individuals based on one characteristic of their personhood, such as their gender. However, male dominated power structures and psychological tendencies influence both individual and collective human behavior, and this dynamic should be considered in the development of environmental values in America.

Defenders of environmental and social justice seek to push for and promote equality among men and women. In order to pursue equality, however, scholars have sought to identify the cultural norms that contribute to gender disparities, and identify whether elements of patriarchal societies manifest themselves in other aspects of the human experience. If gender socialization pressures women to develop an extended-other value orientation, yet female voices are disproportionately silenced within power structures, is society's overall value altruism diminished? Will a culture that encourages women to be gracious and other-oriented but then gives women little voice, and allows men to gain

2. In relation to material we covered in chapter 4, this sounds like a culture that promotes ratio for males and intellectus for females, but then favors males/ratio on the whole.
3. Self-esteem measures might raise additional questions. It seems that American culture ails in part because we are too focused on the "self" – on people being independent (when we're more truly built for relationship), on "getting what we want." The message seems to be "you're number one!" or "you deserve a break today"... and if the Buddhists are right, that's just false – everything is number one, and self-focus leads to suffering and discontent. So while these points about what gets reinforced with girls and women are keen, the problems of this sort of development seem more acute in a culture where people take advantage of each other. Otherwise, we might interpret this to mean that in American culture, girls and women get developed into human beings (who can learn to unself and share) while men get short-changed and taught that they should be selfish jerks to get ahead. There is an irony in using a male/independence/autonomy-favoring metric to show the imbalance of male-female roles in American culture. A corrective to this will be discussed below.

power and influence through selfishness and exploitation of women,⁴ be a culture that will perpetuate exploitation and injustice and be self-destructively self-centered? This question should be explored in order to inform both social and environmental justice.

4. Is the emergence of a MeToo movement an unsurprising but perhaps hopeful sign in such a culture?

6.3 Toxic Masculinity and Other Deadly Pollutants

One misconception that is important to deconstruct is that the current social hierarchy and overly dominating society is beneficial to men, and only harmful to women. In reality, the structure is damaging to our planet, women, and men alike. As concepts of masculinity dominate women, they dominate men as well, holding them to standards that are both unrealistic and often detrimental to society and the environment.

The term ‘toxic masculinity,’ while often associated with third-wave feminism¹, actually originated from male activists of the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement in the 1980s and 90s. Begun as a self-help group for men, this movement viewed the forces of industrialization as poisonous and dehumanizing to male identity, leading to over-competitiveness, lack of friendships, and suppression of emotions—all characteristics associated with a modern understanding of ‘toxic masculinity.’ According to American sociologist Michael Messner, toxic masculinity was responsible for “trapping men into straitjackets of rationality, thus blunting the powerful emotional communion and collective spiritual transcendence that men in tribal societies typically enjoyed”(Messner, 2000).²

Susan Faludi discusses the harm that the modern paradigm of masculinity inflicts on men in her book, *Stiffed*. Faludi explains a flawed assumption permeating many feminist theories that argues “male crisis in America is caused by something men are *doing* unrelated to something being done to them” (Faludi, 2000). The reality is that the patriarchal expectation of masculinity dehumanizes men as well as women. Cultural norms pressure men to take control “to survive in a nation that expects them to dominate” (Faludi, 2000). Since the post-world war II era, American culture has recreated the ideal of what it means to be a man, and reinforced it repeatedly with priming and media messaging. Industrialization came with the emphasis that masculinity meant consistent drive to rise from rags to riches, and “claim, control, and crush everyone and everything in your way” (Faludi, 2000).

Men are expected to be the makers of history, the financial breadwinners, and physically and mentally strong at all times. The United States itself was created by “metaphorically orphaned Sons of Liberty,” and the firm belief that hard work is essential to an ultimate goal of “individual success” in the material form (Faludi, 2000). While there is nothing inherently evil in working hard, doing so in a way that harms others or oneself is detrimental to societal wellbeing. When determining the source of this masculine ideal, it is noteworthy that perhaps an American national feeling that we must “prove ourselves” to the world³ has contributed to a culture that praises power and domination. In any case, this ideal perpetuates toxic masculinity, and adds fuel to the myth of the American Dream.

Elements of the idea of heroism in America are directly related to a history of domination: through war, imperialism,

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third-wave_feminism
2. The following podcasts explore related topics further: 2019: All Sides with Ann Fisher: <http://radio.wosu.org/post/closer-look-traditional-masculinity#stream/0>; 1999: Susan Faludi on White Male Discontent: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1064358>; 2016: NPR Health Shots: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/06/18/482156268/is-it-ok-for-boys-to-cry>; 2017: Tom Ashbrook, On Point: <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2017/08/22/middle-aged-men-need-more-friends>
3. Joseph Sax argues in [*Mountains Without Handrails*](#) that Americans, in part, set up national parks to show off our lofty mountains to the rest of the world, to argue that young America was just as amazing as older European countries. This was born of our national insecurity, and new-nation feelings of being weak or young or small, so we needed to make ourselves feel bigger and more impressive.

the manifest destiny, and the constant push towards increased “productivity.” The American dream itself is wed to dehumanization—through male exploitation as expendable soldiers and the oppression, exploitation, and domination of multiple marginalized groups, including women. Historically, in a domination-driven culture, profits have always been prioritized over people. Thus in part, the environmental problem lies in the reality that an American man's self-worth is defined by his ability to attain and provide wealth, in a world where resources are finite. This unrealistic expectation leads to male feelings of inadequacy and environmental destruction, a cycle that is perpetuated by American consumerism.

Accompanying the male expectation to dominate, is the male expectation to suppress emotion. From a young age, men are taught that crying is something to be ashamed of, one of the first introductions to the societal expectation that being emotional is a feminine characteristic. Western culture discourages feeling as feminine, and feminine as weak, in a world desperately short on empathy. Empathy extends beyond the awareness of one's feelings, to fully understanding the feelings of another being. It is emotion in the selfless form, and has been cited as one of the final hopes to resolving the ecological crisis. In an age where humans must prioritize the interests of others and future generations as well as their own, empathy is needed now more than ever before. Like the boy's choices in *The Giving Tree*, our collective actions as a society often seem void of empathy. Rather than tending to the environment for the benefit of others, vulnerable populations and future generations, Western society strips nature of all she has, regardless of who bears the pain of this overconsumption. It is said that the ecological crisis is really a human crisis, as the physical problems in the environment are a direct result of human action. Arguably, much of the problem lies not in the environment, but in an aggressive culture that suppresses empathy. Will American society ever achieve collective empathy, if nearly half of its population is discouraged from even expressing their *own* feelings?

Carol Gilligan described the societal deficiency of empathy in her influential book, *In A Different Voice*. Through numerous case studies, Gilligan determined that both men and women alike associate “the acquisition of adult power as entailing the loss of feminine sensitivity and compassion,” and that “to be ambitious means to be power hungry and insensitive” (Gilligan, 1982). Traditionally, research showed that men are more likely to tie moral dilemmas to “rights and rules,” while women tend to view these issues as “problems of care and responsibility in relationships” (Gilligan, 1982). This social tendency revealed itself through a three-year study on adolescent responses to various social dilemmas, led by researchers Norma Haan and Constance Holstein. When faced with difficult moral decisions, the largest distinction between male and female participants were “the greater extent to which women's judgements are tied to empathy and compassion” over logic alone (Gilligan, 1982).

More recently, this widely perceived gender distinction has been applied to the study of a gender basis for perceptions of eco-friendly behaviors. Studies have shown that overall, women lead more environmentally conscious lifestyles, care more about climate change, and believe humans have a moral obligation to protect the planet (Brough & Wilkie, 2017). Furthermore, a recent study led by Dr. Aaron Brough and Dr. James Wilkie suggested that there could be a psychological perception among men that “green behavior” is feminine (Brough & Wilkie, 2017). Study participants overwhelmingly perceived behaviors that were good as opposed to bad for the environment, such as using canvas bags over plastic, as “feminine” actions. While these findings cannot be applied to all people, as there are likely as many environmentally-conscious men as there are wasteful women, this study highlights a societal notion that masculinity is characterized by competitiveness, individualism, and the drive to accumulate power and wealth above all else.

While biological gender differences in fetal brain development have been suggested as a source of distinction, cultural expectations and traditions undoubtedly exacerbate and reinforce behavioral gender differences. Today, patriarchies, which by definition are the systems of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women, continue to persist (Giddens, 2006). Women are taught to be submissive and self-sacrificing in a world where influence is attained through aggression and competition. These patterns have been most associated with the Western world, but that influence has spread, and the results are detrimental to all.

6.4 Western Roots of Aggression

Arguably, the division of society and departure from compassion and feeling extends back to Plato's division of the world into "spirit" and "matter" (Griffin, 1980). Loren Wilkinson and his colleagues point out that Platonic views of nature often contain references to *contemptus mundi*, or contempt for the world (Wilkinson, 1991). Through the belief that the proper relationship between humans and the natural world was full of tension and fighting for survival,¹ both spiritual connection to nature and an ethic of care that extended beyond nature to other humans was lost (Wilkinson, 1991). Prior to this, the first signs of patriarchal dominance emerged among ancient humans of the Neolithic Era, as the desire to have ownership over herds replaced the practice of sharing resources, and having more children was seen as an advantage to manage these commodities ("The History of Patriarchy," 2015). In many early societies, women too were seen as commodities, and had virtually no rights.

In addition to misogynistic undertones (such as Aristotle's explicit statement that women are inferior beings,) the development of a Western philosophy that lacked women's perspectives entirely created a rationalistic, dichotomist mentality among cultures, and led to thinking of "the self" and "the other" as separate (Provencher, 2013). The development of ethics in Western culture was therefore driven by a notion of "us versus them," and the prioritization of "the self" over "the other," with the ultimate other being the natural world (Provencher, 2013). The Western mentality of "us versus them" has contributed to numerous injustices, including the separation of humans from nature, and women and other marginalized groups being labeled as inferior.

This trajectory of Western philosophy ultimately led to worship of reason that permeated all other aspects of thought, overriding feelings, senses, and intuition. These ideals created a societal foundation that labeled the sensitive as weak, shaping a lack of respect for the natural world. The Epicurean view of nature, which arose during Aristotle and Plato's time, argued that nature is nothing more than atoms, and no greater purpose exists (Wilkinson, 1991). This theory reasons that since no deeper meaning exists, the goal of human life is to live as comfortably as possible, with no ethic of care towards the other, and with a focus on the self (Wilkinson, 1991).

In many ways, this ideal permeates modern scientific conceptions of nature as economic resources which must be extracted for human purposes only. Through the Protestant Reformation and acquisition of 'virgin lands' in 'the New World,' the conviction arose that man had a sacred right to exploit 'the other,' which they saw as nature, indigenous peoples, and women. This exploitation of natural resources resulted in an economic stimulus, as Western colonizers realized that the most wealth could be attained by alteration of the land. As a result, an ideology of exploitation of others was passed down through generations (Glacken, 1967). In response, the vision of many ecofeminists is the merging of "the self" and "the other" as one, not unlike the idea of "unselfing," as described by Niebuhr and Loy, but inclusive of all members of society and nature. Essentially, the inclusion of "the other" can be interpreted as the inclusion of all aspects of nature as valuable, as in Aldo Leopold's ecocentric ethics (Leopold, 1966) as a counterforce to the Western backdrop of dominance and aggression.

The rise of the enlightenment and emphasis on rationalism bolstered black-and-white-thinking: the domination of facts over feeling and duty over love. This is tragic, because as many social theorists emphasize, love, more than duty, is what motivates a change in human consciousness. Through the rise of industrialization and consumerism, the separatist tradition of individualism and masculinity has continued to permeate collective actions, leading to overall dissatisfaction among men and the mistreatment of women, minorities, and the planet. The combined critiques of Susan Faludi, Carol Gilligan, and other researchers, in addition to an assessment of aggressive Western philosophy, exposes patterns that

1. No doubt humans have always had to work to survive, but the notion of fighting nature, which is the source of our material sustenance, evokes a curious opposition to our source of support

underlie overly dominating aspects of American culture. A society that worships power, and views emotional sensitivity to others as incompatible with this power, is bound to remain in a cycle of domination.

6.5 Cultural Transformation Toward More Balanced Power Dynamics

Emphasis on the importance of psychological awareness as a solution to the ecological crisis has been repeated by numerous scholars of environmental ethics. However, many of these theories do not address gender norms and expectations as a potential source of emotional detachment, and the need to control. David Loy describes this cultural tendency as a “compulsive project of endless growth and never-enough control” (Loy, 2010). Richard Niebuhr views the compulsion as a result of anxiety over the human condition of being “both finite and free” (Niebuhr, 1964). This claim has been echoed by many social critics, yet many of them do not emphasize the role masculinity plays in the compulsive need to attain wealth, power and control in Western societies, and instead frame it as a general characteristic of the human condition.

Environmental ethicist Richard Baer discussed the importance of fully understanding the basis for these aggressive tendencies, stating “rather than asking how strip mining affects the environment,” sociologists must ask “what psychological needs in us are being met this way?” (Baer, 1976). While there is merit in the argument that all humans have a psychological need to control, and this need to control is a source of environmental crises, social critiques must also address the cultural norm that those who aggressively seek power and control are overwhelmingly men, as evident by the disproportional statistics showing that men are more likely to hold positions of power and more likely to commit violent crimes, both means of establishing dominance (Warner, 2014). If the social tendency that is to blame for environmental problems is disproportionately prevalent in one gender over another, should social scientists not ask themselves why?

While dismantling gender roles is not the sole solution to environmental crisis, asking if the cultural expectations of masculinity also reinforce the social behaviors that harm ecosystems is a question social theorists can explore further. If increased levels of empathy and decreased compulsions to attain power and control in society are keys to better treatment of the environment, we must remember that a culture of domination has taught men that they must repress their emotions, view themselves as separate from a collective whole, and tie their identity to the amount of wealth and influence they attain.

What can be done? Many ecofeminists have argued that the answer lies in more representation of women in positions of power. While this solution would likely mitigate imbalances, it does not address the underlying problems that caused these imbalances in the first place: the prioritization of accumulating power over restraining one’s power. The importance of self-restraint is emphasized in many basic tenets of the world’s most influential religions and scholarly works. Translating these messages into collective actions could be crucial to dismantling the traditional ideals of power, domination and masculinity responsible for the oppression of both women and the environment in today’s society.

Reframing traditional female weaknesses as human strengths could play a role in dismantling the dominating aspects of American culture and replacing these value structures with ones based on ‘unselfing’ and self-restraint. While many feminists seek to destroy the notion that there are differences between men and women, perhaps these differences should be strengthened rather than diminished. After all, if the stereotypical female is compassionate, nurturing, sensitive, vulnerable, and emotional: are those not the key traits society needs to display more of to address the ecological crisis, as well as other issues of injustice that plague the globe?

Integrating an ethic of empathy, collective interest and self-restraint into a complex culture is not something that happens overnight, or through one approach. Transforming the world view of society happens on the individual and collective level, and occurs in a myriad of different ways. To suggest a simple solution to a problem that is as old as Western society would be hopelessly unrealistic. Nonetheless, elements of these ideals can be found in the work of prominent scholars and in the tenets of every major world religion.

In terms of self-restraint and limiting toxic individualism, these ideas are manifested in religious traditions in a variety of ways. The Buddhist tradition of meditation is a method of mitigating emotional turmoil, rather than simply resorting

to emotional repression. Furthermore, Buddhist ethics of compassion and anti-consumerism can help counter the practices of a consumeristic and dominating society. In Jewish and Christian tradition, the idea of resting on the Sabbath contradicts the premise that rest is for the weak, and instead views self-restraint as a form of efficiency and strength. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis identifies the Sabbath as a day “which heals our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world” (Francis, 2013, P. 237). Emphasizing the importance of self-restraint and rest further, the Pope defined it as necessary to “give us renewed sensitivity to the rights of others...and motivate us to greater concern for nature and the poor” (Francis, 2013, P. 237). Furthermore, Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice is one of the greatest examples of restraining one’s power in human history. Obedience to God—an ideal emphasized in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other religions—is wed to the idea that humans must deconstruct preoccupation and praise of both the self and material items.

Finally, religious emphasis on the importance of community is another method of disengaging preoccupation with the self, and the relationships formed help foster feelings of empathy within these communities. In a study of four communities historically rooted in Western religious culture (the Amish, the Hutterites, the Franciscan Order, and the Benedictine Order), Martine Vonk found that a level of emotional reflectiveness of whether specific behaviors matched community values allowed these communities to preserve their way of life while maintaining a viable economic system (Vonk, 2011). Many social theorists argue that these communities are “the missing link on the relation between world views, values, and behaviors” (Vonk, 2011, P. 25). In addition, a Pew Research Survey found that nearly nine in ten of U.S. adults believe religious institutions bring people together, strengthen community bonds, and help the poor and needy (“Views of Religious Institutions,” 2015). Communities that value all members of society, regardless of gender, can help honor our differences as strengths rather than weaknesses. The spiritual ideals that transcend religious affiliation are strengthened by communities, and all challenge a dominating society driven by the urge to prioritize individual interests over collective ones, and accumulate wealth and power at all costs. The values of self-restraint and community can be found cross-culturally in religious beliefs, and emphasizing their importance can play a key role in healing the schism between ‘the self’ and ‘the other,’ and helping close the gap between nature and culture.

The argument that emotion and spirituality are key components to resolving the environmental crisis is highlighted in the idea that American education must be revived by rebalancing *ratio* and *intellectus* (Baer, 1976). *Ratio* is a logical way of thinking that relies on factual information that can be proven, while *intellectus* is a less black-and-white way of knowing that relies on effortless awareness that often comes through contemplation (Baer, 1976). In short, a society that relies only on *ratio* to pursue knowledge lacks emotional sensitivity and empathy, and is perpetuated by a culture of masculinity. While it is certainly a stretch to argue that women represent *intellectus* and men represent *ratio*, perhaps biological and sociological research on this idea could serve American culture well. The female intuition to nurture, place others before themselves, and identify with the pain and suffering of others can play a key role in restructuring the norms of domination.

When it comes to addressing the environmental crisis, women, as well as men, have a key role to play in replacing current cultural norms with an ethic that is inclusive over individualistic, and eco- or other-centric over egocentric. While Western society has integrated damaging gender stereotypes and social expectations among cultures in the past, acknowledging this reality is the first step towards challenging its foundation. On the individual and collective levels, people must question their own biases and ideas of gender norms, and strive to form a set of moral beliefs that align with environmental and social wellbeing over profits. Whether this renewal is achieved through religion, art, education, or a combination of all, is less important than the ultimate goal—a new understanding of women, men, and their place on this planet.

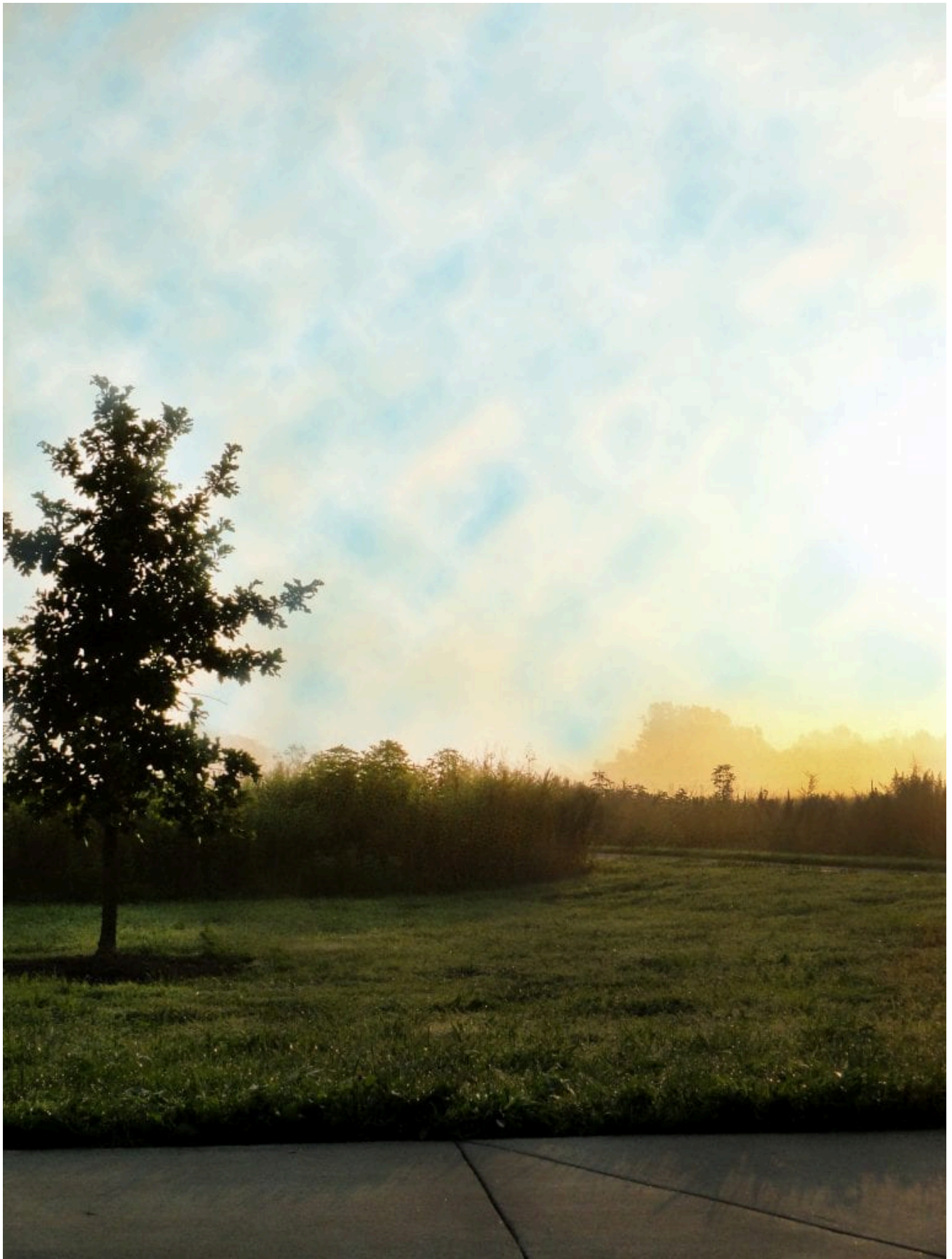
The development of a system of ethics that honors empathy, collectivism, and self-restraint is crucial to the fight against environmental and social injustice in America, and across the globe. A cultural value system that honors and strengthens women and the environment could potentially drive a social transformation seeking to dismantle systemic domination and exploitation—saving people and the planet in the process. If society adopted an ethic more synonymous with The Giving Tree’s, and less like the never-satisfied boy, perhaps this could be achieved. Multiple religious views can point a direction.

6.6 Iris Murdoch's Neo-Platonist Views of Reality, Illusion, Love, Humility, and Unselfing

If overcoming selfish human impulses can reduce exploitation of humans and nature, and if feminist and religious perspectives can provide helpful practices and suggestions to get at these underlying exploitative patterns, another source of direction can be found in the works of British novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch.¹ In harmony with the perspectives we've examined in chapters 5 and 6, Murdoch argues that the fundamental questions to address in ethics concern who we are and what the world is like, from which most of our ethical views follow. In contrast to much moral philosophy that focuses on what ethical theories like utilitarianism or Kantian deontology have to say about ethical dilemmas (such as those we'll explore related to animal welfare in chapter 10), Murdoch is more focused on understanding the larger vision or worldview of moral agents. How one answers the “big questions” in life about human purpose will give shape to how one answers a wide range of more specific moral and ethical questions. One way that such an approach differs from modern rational choice-based philosophies is that the latter presume the primacy of the autonomous self and free choice; Murdoch, an agnostic neo-platonist, takes a dramatically different view that nonetheless has some resonance with traditional modes of religious thinking.

Murdoch, for example, argues that we probably are far less free when it comes to making moral decisions than most people think. This point is really quite obvious the moment we begin to reflect on the combination of genetic endowment, self-interest, peer pressure, social conditioning, and all the other realities that shape our identity. She believes that to focus too exclusively on particular decisions tends only to mire us more deeply in our self-preoccupation, and that what we need is to be “unselfed” through our encounter with great art and literature, music, nature, and perhaps quintessentially through the experience of falling deeply in love with another human being.²

1. Much of the discussion in this section is drawn from Baer, R.A., Tantillo, J.A., Hitzhusen, G.E., Johnson, K.E., and Skillen, J.R. (2004). From delight to wisdom: Thirty years of teaching environmental ethics at Cornell, *Worldviews*8(2-3): 298-322.
2. Hauerwas writes (1981: 39, n. 30): “Like so many of Miss Murdoch’s themes this understanding of love is derived from Simone Weil.” See, for example, Weil’s work *La pesanteur et la grace*[Gravity and Grace] (1952).



Note from the photographer, Tony Losekamp: "I decided to take advantage of the beauty of a new day to see the world in a unique light. The low sun and thick fog created amazing silhouettes that really emphasized the strength of the trees to me."

Murdoch claims that we live out much of our lives under the spell of our illusions and fantasies, especially our neurotic preoccupation with ourselves. "When clear vision has been achieved," she writes, "self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object (Murdoch, 1970: 66). With respect to both ethics and the academic life, she holds that perhaps the greatest virtue is humility, which is not a putting down of self but instead a deep and abiding respect for the way the world really is. Seeing the world clearly, however, is no simple task, for our constant self-preoccupation always threatens to prejudice and distort our thinking.

Nearly all of the great naturalists in our own American tradition understood this point, as did the great Taoist sages such as Chuang Tzu. For example, treating nature rightly is not just a matter of rules and ideas (although correct scientific understanding is absolutely essential), but rather a matter of discovering the incredible beauty, mystery, diversity, and wonder of this reality we call nature. It is a matter of the heart as well as of the head....

Although Murdoch was not a theist, her position is similar to that of many religious traditions in her view that an understanding of the nature of reality precedes and grounds the doing of ethics. Actually, the same is true of virtually all ethical traditions, whether religious or secular³, although theologians are perhaps more likely than secular philosophers to acknowledge this fact. What we judge to be the nature of reality overall is dispositive for how we construe moral reality. "Knowledge informs the moral quality of the world," she writes. "The selfish self-interestedly casual or callous man sees a different world from that which the careful scrupulous benevolent man sees" (Murdoch 1992: 177, *emph. Original*). In common with many theological traditions, Murdoch argues that human freedom is dependent both on a clear vision of reality and on the humility born of knowing that we are not the center of things. "Freedom is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves," she insists. "Virtue is in this sense to be construed as knowledge, and connects us so with reality" (Murdoch 1998: 284).

Stanley Hauerwas summarizes Murdoch's understanding of freedom in these words: "Contrary to Sartre, freedom is not in the self but in the other. Without love, without recognition and respect for the other, freedom is but an illusion of our neurotic self-preoccupation" (Hauerwas 1981: 41). What pulls us out of the cocoon of self-preoccupation and makes it possible to live generously and justly is not just right thinking but falling in love—with art, music, literature, people, animals, nature, or, on a more transcendent level, with the Good, the Tao, or with God. "Love," as Hauerwas reads Murdoch, "is any relationship through which we are called from our own self-involvement to appreciate the self-reality that transcends us. That is why it may be a profound moral experience to take self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones, and trees" (Hauerwas 1981: 39; Murdoch 1970: 85).

3. See "Ethics of Inarticulacy," in Taylor (1989: 53-90).



"Ecstasy"—Dimitri Kadiev beautifully demonstrates what it means to fall in love with art, nature, and God as he paints "one of four sacred murals we brought from Taos to the Capitol in Santa Fe for Global Climate Strike, Sept 20." Photo credit: Todd Wynward, TiLT [Taos Initiative for Life Together]

For Reinhold Niebuhr, our self-absorption begins with our own fear and anxiety. Niebuhr believed that in confronting our fear and anxiety, we either fall into sin or open ourselves to God's grace. In sin we seek to control our lives and the world around, in grace we begin to accept life as a gift and a promise; in grace, God draws us out of our self-absorption and fear (Baer et al, 2004: 302). For David Loy, the Buddhist is saved from compulsive tendencies towards control by awakening to the suffering inherent in such striving, and meditatively deconstructing our illusions of self. For Murdoch, when we see the world rightly, we recognize life as the gift that it is, which opens up new perspectives on moral issues (Baer et al, 2004: 302). Hauerwas and Murdoch label such a perspective an "aesthetic vision" of ethics. Such a vision undoubtedly requires a balance of ratio and intellectus thinking, and invites us to integrate the motivation of our hearts and our minds. We might seek exemplars whose way of life provides a model by which to live⁴. And for those who discover upon reflection that their way has been more about control than about freedom, it may be time to listen and observe, and learn from the wisdom of others, particularly those who have been overshadowed or crushed by patterns

4. This will resonate with the virtue ethics approach we will explore in chapter 11

of control we've inherited in America. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor have some common sources – let those with ears to hear listen.

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Chapter 6 Discussion Questions

Reflection Questions:

- A. According to Hauerwas, how does Iris Murdoch describe the moral life, and what roles do love, attention, freedom, humility, and unselfing play in Murdoch's vision?
- B. How does Bishop Kallistos describe the significance of beauty? How do his comments compare to Iris Murdoch's view of the beautiful? What other similarities and differences do you find between Murdoch and Bishop Kallistos?

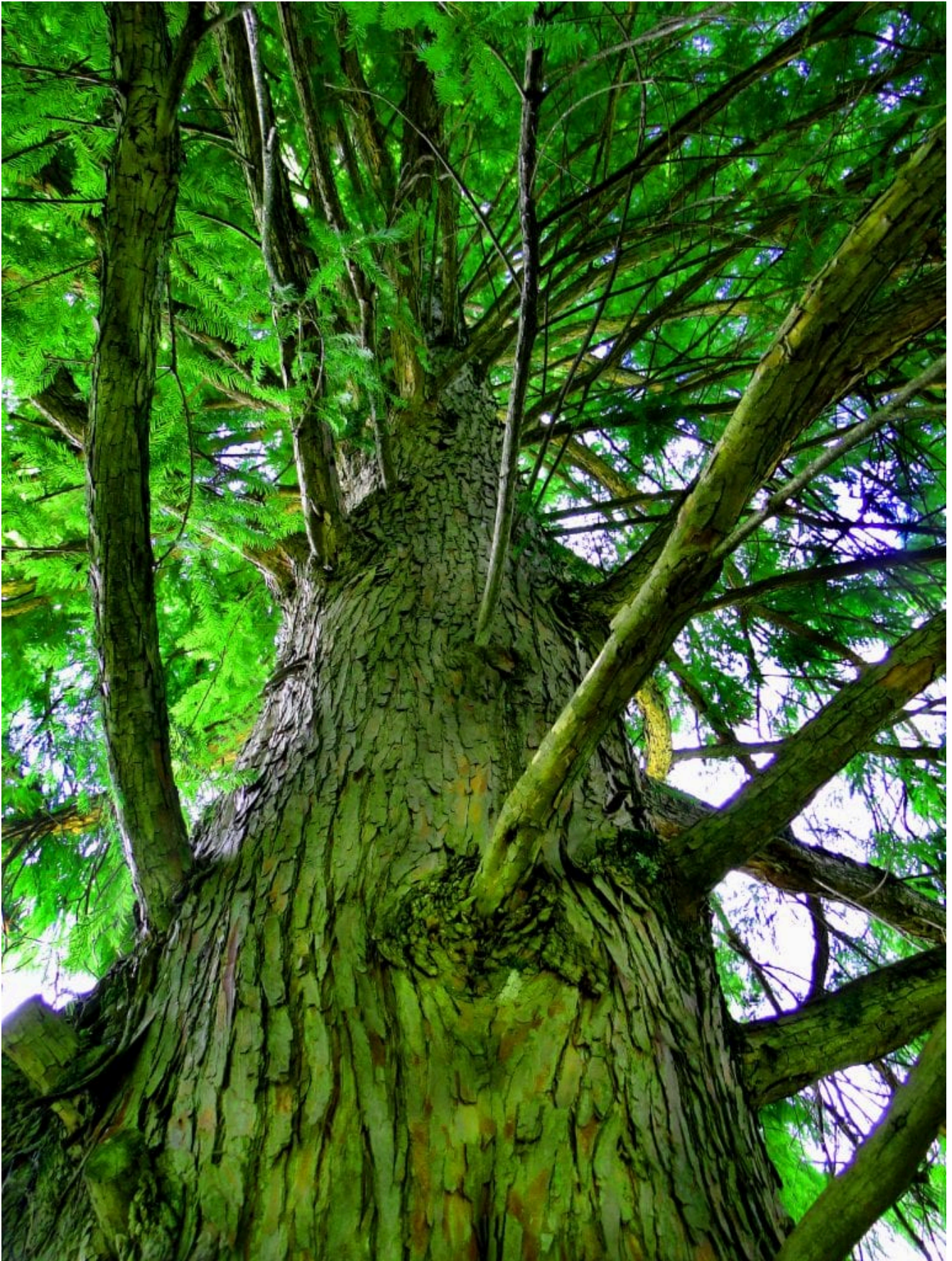
Discussion Questions:

1. Hauerwas believes that the ethical significance of the life of the Christian is to be found not mainly in crisis situations or in the decisions they demand but in the humdrum of everyday life (p. 47). What do you think of his interpretation?
2. What are one or more significant differences between the way Iris Murdoch views the ethical life and the way that Christians – according to Hauerwas in *V* and *V – view* it?
3. What is freedom, according to Iris Murdoch? Do you find this understanding of freedom convincing? How does it differ from your own understanding of freedom?
4. How does Murdoch's understanding of the illusions surrounding human perceptions resonate with or differ from Loy's description of the insubstantiality of the constructed self?
5. Do you agree with Hauerwas that "to affirm and embrace the fact that we are faced with real death... denies final significance to our lives" (37)? Why or why not?
6. Why does Bishop Kallistos say the "Transfiguration of Christ stands out as the ecological event par excellence" within the entire Gospel story?
7. Why is it significant for Bishop Kallistos that human beings are not saved from but with the world?

Study Questions:

1. How does Iris Murdoch define "love," "attention," and "fantasy"?
2. What are "unselfings" according to Iris Murdoch? Why are they essential for human growth and maturity?
3. What does Murdoch mean by saying that human beings are "defined by [their] inability to bear reality" (Hauerwas, 31)?
4. What is the role of art for Murdoch in helping persons grow toward the vision and humility necessary for truly seeing one another and reality? Why is art (and especially literature) uniquely necessary for such growth?
5. How does one's social location (in relation especially to structures of power and privilege) shape the very "reality" one views? Use the Murdoch essay to discuss.
6. What is the importance of the cross in the Transfiguration Mosaic in Sant' Appolinare, and in Bishop Kallistos' ecological theology?
7. How does Bishop Kallistos' view of wonder compare to John Vucetich's perspective on what he calls the more important function of scientific knowledge?

CHAPTER 7: CASE STUDY: WILDERNESS AND CREATION SPIRITUALITY



"I took this photo in Hocking Hills, Ohio on the trail between Old man's cave and Cedar Falls. It was spring and the forest was exploding with life. The air hummed with excitement and power that is comparable with excitement and power of a rich spiritual life in communion with God." -Tony Losekamp, photographer

Wilderness spirituality comes at the center of this book for several reasons. First, in the flow of a semester, my students will have just finished the midterm exam, and fall or spring break comes next, so it is a perfect time to take a step back and reflect. Second, so far we have covered a lot of background material and philosophical and epistemological ground in order to set the stage for a deeper conversation; a foray into the wilderness, into some quiet places for reflection, will allow an opportunity to integrate some of the challenging themes we've engaged so far as we move forward. And finally, whether it's the essential role wilderness spirituality has played in many religious traditions or the outdoor experiences that have been formative for many conservation champions¹, it often seems that wilderness spirituality lies at the heart of a thriving environmental ethic.²

Click the links below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Wilderness](#) [Creation Spirituality](#) [Creation](#)

1. <http://u.osu.edu/religionandenvironment/2017/03/04/history-professor-explains-religious-origins-of-american-environmentalism/> will be discussed briefly at the end of this chapter.
2. This is not to say that such a "wilderness ethic" is the superior basis for environmental values—Michael Pollan, as you may recall from chapter 3, made a compelling argument that this mindset may perpetuate a separation in America between nature and culture. Additionally, though some environmentalists privilege views like nature-spirituality, a person's environmental views may not correlate with their ecological footprint. A wide range of worldviews can support positive environmental change, and none are exempt from the potential for hypocrisy. Tom Dunlap's book, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest*, argues that the environmental movement has often functioned like a religion. If this is true, environmentalists must be careful not to allow religious or moral pride to alienate others by promoting a single environmental ideology as morally best.

7.1 Wilderness and Creation Spirituality

There are powerful wilderness or creation spirituality themes evident in many religions, and these provide rich ground for further reflection. Gautama Buddha, after all, received enlightenment while sitting under a tree;¹ Moses led the Israelites to freedom through a 40-year wilderness sojourn;² Mohammad found inspiration and revelation in a cave;³ and Jesus began his public ministry only after being tested for 40 days in the wilderness.⁴ These and other wilderness-linked traditions of spiritual formation⁵ attest to the important role nature plays in shaping the ethos of religious traditions.

1. <https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/bodgaya.htm>
2. One source among many is Leal's Wilderness Theology in the Bible; a review can be found [here](#).
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad%27s_first_revelation; http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/muhammad_1.shtml
4. The classic exposition of wilderness themes related to Jesus is Ulrich Mauser's *Christ in the Wilderness*; an early review can be found [here](#). A recent post on Christian wilderness experience in Africa is [here](#). A Holmes Rolston commentary on biblical terms for "wilderness" is [here](#).
5. Think of Australian aboriginal walkabout, or native American vision quest, or any of the rites of passage in indigenous cultures that Baer noted as being relatively absent from American culture in his "Need to Control" article



A Tibetan Buddhist temple perched on hillside for meditation retreat. Photo Credit: Rongkun Liu

One way to begin this conversation is exemplified in an article I wrote while working as the Land Stewardship Specialist for the [National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program](#), during a year when that program was focused on “wilderness.” I was tasked with illuminating some of the wilderness themes found in Biblical traditions, and I did so with an eye toward thinking about how themes of wilderness spirituality that are evident in the Bible might be resonant for biblically-influenced Americans today as they seek to ground environmental ethics within their own tradition. In other words, how could themes of wilderness spirituality provided by the Bible help contemporary Americans forge their own deeper bonds with the natural world in a way that strengthens their expression of creation care? That article makes a good starting point and provides the bulk of our current conversation, and can be found [here](#).⁶

Following on this article, which highlights seven evocative biblical wilderness themes (highlighted below), several points deserve additional attention. One obvious point is that there is far more wilderness and outdoor spirituality to be found in the Bible than many Americans would likely guess. Within Christian theology, professor of biblical theology and the New Testament Ulrich W. Mauser argued that Mark’s gospel could not be understood apart from a robust focus on the wilderness, which is to say that the lead-up to Jesus (including the ministry and message of John the Baptist) is hugely evocative of wilderness themes, and the preparation of Jesus for ministry was completed only after Jesus was led into the wilderness by the spirit after his baptism. Furthermore, the whole of Jesus’ ministry, Mauser asserted, remained

6. The rest of this chapter assumes that the reader has read this article: Biblical Wilderness Theology: Spiritual Roots for Environmental Education from the Spring/Summer issue of the journal Taproot.

close to wilderness themes, as Jesus and the disciples repeatedly retreated to wilderness places (or “quiet places”) in the desert or beyond the edge of town to re-center and re-group themselves. Likewise, Jesus is found in the wilderness or on the mountain in prayer the night before most of his major miracles, like walking on water and feeding the 5,000 people. Contemplative and restorative time in the wilderness was an abiding theme of the life and ministry of Jesus as reported in the Bible.

Similarly, the spiritual formation of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible is closely tied to the land and to the wilderness. In addition to the themes we discussed in chapter two, where the Genesis creation accounts link humans intimately and fundamentally with the earth,⁷ the Hebrew Bible says it was during the exodus from Egypt and 40 years in the wilderness that the Israelites were formed as God’s people. The basic starting points of relationship with God were powerfully shaped by or in wilderness places – God’s provision of water and food, of protection, of freedom amid and through the wilderness journey – all were constitutive for Israel. If a later theologian like Reinhold Niebuhr might suggest that the faithful path for humans is to “trust God,” then the wilderness experience was the formative experience where the Israelites learned that they could do so, indeed must do so if they were to flourish. Notably, throughout the biblical history at times when God’s people have gone astray, prophets have tended to return to the wilderness to regain a clear sense of God’s purposes for people; it is often from the wilderness that prophets call people back to God. Over and over, the spiritually formative, primeval power of wilderness is made clear in biblical traditions.

The psalms also underline these themes, and often express praise in response to God and the wonders of God’s creation, as in Psalms [104:24-30](#), [148:1-12](#), and [36:5-6](#):⁸

How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number – living things both large and small. There the ships go to and fro, and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there. All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground. – Psalm 104:24-30, NIV

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for at his command they were created, and he established them for ever and ever – he issued a decree that will never pass away. Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and women, old men and children. – Psalm 148:1-12, NIV

Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep. You, Lord, preserve both people and animals. – Psalm 36:5-6, NIV

7. I.e., humans from humus

8. More discussion of ecological witness in the psalms can be found here: <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2010/all-nature-sings>

7.2 Categories of Biblical Wilderness Theology

The classic commentary on the many biblical wilderness themes is Susan Bratton's book [*Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire*](#).¹ Bratton tours through both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament to highlight various wilderness and wildlife themes, and she distills eleven categories or quintessential models within Christian tradition:

- **Genesis/foundational model** (creation stories, Noahic covenant)
- **Exodus/community model** (40 years in the wilderness, becoming community in the wild)
- **Davidic/leadership model** (David's leadership shaped by shepherding and other wild experiences)
- **Poetic model** (lessons about nature found in the Psalms, Proverbs, Job)
- **Prophetic model** (perspectives voiced by the prophets from wilderness)
- **New exodus (later prophets) model** (e.g., Hosea imagining a return to wilderness to find God)
- **Ascetic model** (John the Baptist as exemplar of living a wilderness life as preparation for Jesus)
- **Contemplative model** (exemplified by Jesus' experiences in the wilderness)
- **Early monastic model** (highlighting the development of desert monasteries amid city corruption)
- **Celtic model** (examining the nature-linked themes of Celtic Christianity)
- **Franciscan model** (highlighting the example of St. Francis of a brother/sisterhood of all creation)

Bratton's categories translate nicely into the main themes that I found present in Christian and Jewish environmental wilderness programs (Hitzhusen, 2005),² which I outlined in the article on Biblical wilderness theology mentioned above. Christian and Jewish outdoor, experiential, environmental education programs have drawn deeply on these themes, highlighting traditions from the various categories outlined by Bratton. The following themes make for ready environmental lessons:

- **God provides** (Eden; Hagar's cry; manna, water, and quail in the wilderness; feeding the 5,000)
- **Theophany** (the divine reveals self in wilderness, leading to profound awe in the wild)
- **Testing, refinement, vision** (wilderness challenges hone skills, sharpen vision, clarify reality)
- **Rest, solitude, contemplation** (quiet spaces allow for quieting of the mind, meditation, prayer)
- **Renewal, restoration, purification** (tests and rest and sublime presence lead to renewed self)
- **Beauty** (nature's beauty unselfs us, inspires us, reinforces intentions to care)
- **Sabbath** (regular rest as a rhythm of life allows for regular renewal, celebration, health)

1. Bratton, Susan (1993). *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire*. Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press.

2. Hitzhusen, G. E. (2005) Understanding the role of spirituality and theology in outdoor environmental education: a mixed-method characterization of 12 Christian and Jewish outdoor programs, *Research in Outdoor Education*, 7, 39–56.



Trail Magic Second Year Tall Grass Prairie. Photo credit: Carl N. McDaniel

7.3 Values of Nature in Religious Wilderness Traditions

In addition to how clearly biblical traditions rely on wilderness themes and influences, and how these can be translated into environmental lessons, it is easy to see how these religious traditions highlight some of the values of nature outlined by Stephen Kellert that we discussed in chapter three.

Kellert's "utilitarian" value highlights the practical and material sustenance and security that comes from nature, and many of the "God provides" examples of biblical sources provide ready examples, like the provision of water, manna, and quail in the wilderness. The "naturalistic" value, which highlights experiential benefits of curiosity, discovery, and recreation in nature, is evoked in many of the psalms that marvel at all the details of nature. The "ecologistic-scientific" value, which entails systematic study of nature to gain knowledge and understanding, seems exemplified by the natural history knowledge of Solomon or by the traditions of monastic contributions to science, such as Gregor Mendel's disciplined discoveries in genetics or mystically-inspired scientists like George Washington Carver.

The "aesthetic" value arises from the full understanding of beauty leading to inspiration, harmony, and security; this also finds expression in many psalms extolling the beauty of creation and how all things work together through God's provision ([Psalm 104](#) particularly highlights this, and is sometimes referred to as the ecological psalm). The "symbolic" value is the use of nature for language and thought, which contributes to communication and mental development; here I would note that religions regularly draw on symbolism and metaphor related to nature, such as Jesus's many agrarian parables within Christianity¹ or metaphors for God like "rock" or "lamb" or the many symbolic representations of divine spirit or wisdom in nature in Native American traditions.²

1. A textual content analysis of the four gospels of the Christian New Testament found over 1,000 references to nature (Faber, D.A. (1972) *A Content Analysis of the Four Gospels in Relation to Jesus' Use of the Outdoors*. Master of Education Thesis, Pennsylvania State University). Other examples of nature references in the bible are noted here: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-nature/> and <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/10-bible-verses-on-the-glory-of-god-in-creation/89071.htm> ; (the [Green Bible](#) also has a "nature trail" through the Bible)
2. For example: <http://www.native-languages.org/nature-spirits.htm>



Note from the photographer, Tony Losekamp: "I took this photo in Armleader Park on the Little Miami River after soccer conditioning at 6 am in high school. Coming home the sun was always still rising in the river valley that was blanketed in fog every morning. After practice instead of going back to sleep I decided to take advantage of the beauty of a new day to see the world in a unique light. The low sun and thick fog created amazing silhouettes that really emphasized the strength of the trees to me."

The "humanistic" value describes strong emotional attachments and love of nature, and encourages cooperation, bonding, companionship and sharing – these are certainly functions that emerged from the biblical exodus wilderness experience (which Bratton typifies for its community-building character), and biblically-based wilderness programs depend on this aspect to develop an environmental ethic in participants. The "moralistic" value entails spiritual reverence and ethical concern for nature (evoking meaning, kinship, and altruism), and this too is a mainstay of biblical outdoor environmental programs.³

3. The moralistic value is also a basis for what Ursula Goodenough calls religious naturalism.



Father and son duo remove an invasive plant in Strouds Run State Park, July 7th, 2018. This was part of an ongoing monthly service project called First Saturday, where all participants wear their red shirts with the Wesley quote: "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can." Photo credit: Jenaye Michele Hill

The "dominionistic" value, which entails mastery, physical control, and dominance of nature, sounds like a tricky value for environmentalism, but its function is producing mechanical skills, physical prowess and ability to subdue (or survive) nature, and no doubt the woods-skills and craftsmanship aspects of many outdoor programs draw on this value to some extent (while tempering any over-weening sense of mastery of nature on the whole). Finally, the "negativistic" value involves fear, aversion, and alienation from nature in the sense of recognizing the power and danger inherent in wild

nature, which tends to parallel the power sensed in the divine;⁴ the security, protection, safety and awe that Kellert says are the functions of this value are the same sort that might emerge from one's sense of the power and sovereignty of God.

While the associations named above are mainly suggestive, they point toward the sort of potential that religions have (and already make use of) to connect powerful values related to the creation with enduring religious symbols, traditions, and teachings. No doubt, thousands of religious camps in America make use of a wide range of these values, and the growing Jewish outdoor experiential education community has documented the related values and impacts of their programs in the JOFEE report ([Jewish Outdoor Food, Farming, and Environmental Education](#)) produced by the Jewish environmental organization Hazon.

This chapter has focused mainly on biblical traditions, and surely multiple chapters could cover additional examples from a wide range of religious traditions around the world. Yet in America, there are also powerful past examples of how values of nature have undergirded the protection of nature through religious resonance.

4. Romans 1:18 indicates that God's power and divine nature can be seen in the creation, and Elijah's famous encounter with God in I Kings 19:12 pictures the divine presence in the stillness (and in that case not in the wind, or earthquake, or fire); Jeremiah 5:22 also displays Kellert's negativistic value.

7.4 Applied Wilderness Spirituality: Inspiring National Parks and Environmentalism in America



Vernal Falls, Yosemite (1983). "Glory to God for the beauty of the earth," says photographer Fred Krueger.

One of the more noteworthy examples of how religious influences have played a role in the conservation and preservation of nature in America is to look at the use of religious themes in the formation of the national parks and in

the rise of environmentalism. [Mark Stoll](#), a historian at Texas Tech, has done pathbreaking work on this topic, in his book [Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America](#) (2007), in several other articles ¹ and in his most recent book: [Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism](#) (2015). Stoll details how early proponents of preservation like John Muir preached about nature using the resonant biblical themes of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and how religion provided early American environmental leaders with a moral and cultural basis to champion their work.

A good summary of Stoll's work can be heard in a recent [podcast](#), but part of the point for our purposes is simply to note that mainstream religion has already been a very significant inspiration for conservation and preservation progress in America, prior to the rise of the modern environmental movement whose counter-cultural leanings tended to eschew the dominant religious culture. When we look back at the ways that religion was particularly influential in the past in America, the passionate and deeply moral values that follow from the encounter with pristine nature and the awe-inspiring beauty of nature have particularly fueled those developments. Wilderness spirituality may well remain an essential ingredient in positive religious environmental influence.

1. See for instance Mark Stoll's "Milton in Yosemite: *Paradise Lost* and the National Parks Idea" (*Environmental History* 13 (April 2008), 237-74.) and his essay, "Religion 'Irradiates' the Wilderness," chapter three of *American Wilderness: A New History* (Lewis, M. L. (2007). *American Wilderness: A New History*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 35-53.)

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Chapter 7 Discussion Questions

Reflection Questions:

A. Take at least a full hour to “be quiet” in nature. Find a “natural” place that seems inviting to you (maybe a wilderness area, maybe a mountain or hill top, maybe a field, maybe a forest, maybe your garden, maybe your back yard, maybe a park, or cemetery, or other green space...), and then simply “be” there for at least 60 minutes. Contemplate. Observe. Meditate. Pray. Listen. Appreciate nature. Maybe draw a little, but mostly, just BE STILL and experience the place and yourself in it. For an hour. Naps don’t count. (Dress appropriately for the weather.)

Discussion Questions:

1. In which way has nature influenced your religious beliefs, or lack thereof?
2. Do you feel at home or out-of-place in natural settings? On an intellectual level, do you believe that you are a part of nature, or that humanity is disconnected from the natural world? Do your feelings about your place in nature match your thoughts?
3. Have you ever had a supernatural experience in nature? What happened?
4. Chapter 7.3 details several ways in which nature can be valued:

- **utilitarian** (how nature can be used to accomplish our goals)
- **naturalistic** (recreation, curiosity, and discovery)
- **ecologistic-scientific** (how nature can be used to further science)
- **aesthetic** (beauty)
- **symbolic** (how nature can be used through metaphor to help one understand other concepts)
- **humanistic** (how nature can bring people closer together)
- **moralistic** (how nature might make one a better person)
- **dominionistic** (how nature might foster toughness and survival skills)
- **negativistic** (how nature might instill us with an awe and fear of the divine)

In what ways has nature been most valuable to you? Are there ways in which you value nature that are not on that list?

5. Does environmental exploitation stem from valuing nature too much or too little? How might efforts to preserve the planet benefit from wilderness spirituality?

CHAPTER 8: CASE STUDY: LAUDATO SI

Pope Francis' environmental encyclical, [*Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*](#), is both common and uncommon.¹ It is common because religious communities and denominations have been creating official environmental statements for decades – denominational social policy statements that outline theological, environmental, and moral tenets that call people of faith to action in response to environmental issues.² The encyclical is uncommon, however, in the amount of attention and arguably impact that this statement has had on religious environmental dialogue and action. My own estimate is that this encyclical is the most important development in the field of religion and ecology in decades and may stand as the most important for a decade or more to come.³

1. This chapter will be kept intentionally short, to encourage readers to prioritize reading the encyclical itself! Full text is available online from the Vatican here: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
2. Mark Ellingsen's book [*The Cutting Edge*](#) documents hundreds of such statements prior to the early 1990s; the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology maintains an online list of statements [here](#).
3. See the next section for further description of papal encyclicals.



Staff from the Catholic Diocese of Columbus gathered at St. Therese Retreat Center. “We discussed Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* and recommitted ourselves to make the world better than we found it.” Photo credit: Jerry Freewalt

Click the link below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Laudato Si’](#)

8.1 Laudato Si

Laudato Si' has made an impact for several reasons. First, at least among Catholics, a papal encyclical is a highly authoritative statement that speaks to a particular societal issue in a way that extends to all Catholic communities.¹ Only a *papal bull* (a formal proclamation on any topic issued by the pope), *apostolic constitutions* (decrees of the highest level, issued as a papal bull usually dealing with doctrinal matters), and *motu proprio*s (documents issued by the pope that receive their validity from the pope on his own initiative, not from the reasons given in the document; these usually address legislative matters within the Catholic church) hold more religious authority for Catholics.²

Beyond its import for Catholics, however, it is important to note that Pope Francis wrote *Laudato Si'* to reach out to not only Catholics, but to everyone on the planet. This is not unprecedented in a papal encyclical,³ but it is more explicit and far-reaching than any previous encyclical. Pope Francis writes to “all people” (not just *people of good will*), and repeatedly notes that in order to adequately address environmental issues, all people will need to engage in the dialogue and response. This universal intention is underscored by the apologetic⁴ framing of significant parts of the encyclical, particularly the second chapter on environmental theology. Here, where we expect to find the heart of the argument in a *papal encyclical*, Pope Francis introduces relevant Catholic theology, acknowledging that the church is not the authority on matters of science (*Laudato Si'*, ¶61)⁵ and that not everyone will be interested in theology⁶; nonetheless, he offers resources from Catholic theology because of their potential contribution to fruitful dialogue. Surely some Catholics

1. One commentary states of encyclicals: “all Catholics are bound seriously in conscience to accept the teaching contained in these documents.”
2. <http://library.atheneaeum.edu/c.php?g=30820&p=193150>
3. Francis notes in ¶3 of the encyclical that Pope Saint John XXIII addressed the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) to the entire “Catholic world” and to “all men and women of good will,” and then says that “now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet.”
4. Traditionally offered in defense or vindication, Christian apologetics is “a branch of Christian theology that aims to present historical, reasoned, and evidential bases for Christianity, defending it against objections”; in this case, however, Pope Francis simply seems to be apologizing to those who aren’t interested in Christian or Catholic theology by acknowledging their view and offering Catholic theology “for what it’s worth”...
5. Note that references to specific paragraphs of *Laudato Si'* will be signaled with the symbol for paragraph: “¶”, followed by the paragraph number.
6. ¶62 says: “Why should this document, addressed to all people of good will, include a chapter dealing with the convictions of believers? I am well aware that in the area of politics and philosophy there are those who firmly reject the idea of a Creator, or consider it irrelevant, and consequently dismiss as irrational the rich contribution which religions can make towards an integral ecology and the full development of humanity. Others view religions simply as a subculture to be tolerated. Nonetheless, science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both.”

were surprised to find theology downplayed in this way in an encyclical, but the point seems to be that *Laudato Si'* is serious about speaking to everyone, not just Catholics. Indeed, the encyclical has gained attention from far beyond Catholic circles.

Another reason for the influence of *Laudato Si'* is the character and influence of the Pope himself. Francis's papacy has enjoyed relatively high worldwide approval ratings,⁷ including 70% approval among Americans and approximately 85% approval among American Catholics. Many have commented that had his predecessor, Pope Benedict, written an environmental encyclical (as many expected and hoped for him to do), it may not have been as well received or as influential. The fit between Francis and *Laudato Si'* is also highlighted by his choosing "Francis" as his papal name in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of those who study ecology; many of his readers were expecting and welcoming of an environmental encyclical given that it follows naturally from the environmental concerns Francis has expressed since becoming pope.

A detailed measure of the pope's influence via *Laudato Si'* is provided by "The Francis Effect" report published by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication. This study found that the Pope's teachings as well as his position on global warming have influenced the views of Americans significantly. "More Americans say that the issue of global warming has become very or extremely important to them personally" (for Americans in general, the increase was 7 percentage points; for American Catholics, it was an 8 percentage point increase); "More think global warming will harm future generations of people" (Americans: 10 point increase; American Catholics: 11 point increase). Additionally, more Americans identify global warming as a "moral issue" (Americans: 6 point increase; American Catholics: 8 point increase). In anticipation of Pope Francis's visit to Washington, D.C. four months following the publication of the encyclical, eleven Republican congressmen stepped out from under their party platform of climate skepticism to sign a resolution acknowledging humans' role in climate change. So, the encyclical has had a measurable impact on American environmental attitudes and commitments.

The influence of *Laudato Si'* can also be seen by looking at the many denominational responses and commentaries it has sparked.⁸ Study guides and commendations from multiple religions have emerged to join the dialogue sparked by the encyclical; a number of faith communities in the Ohio State campus area have sponsored adult study groups to read and discuss the encyclical, and Catholic communities across the country have undertaken initiatives to "implement *Laudato Si'*".⁹ Alongside the focused responses from religious communities are a number of similar endorsements from scientific and professional societies, in most cases with the president(s) of those societies commending Pope Francis for publishing the encyclical and applauding its content.¹⁰ It is safe to say that *Laudato Si'* had a considerable ripple effect.

So what does the encyclical say? Many commentators have been quick to point out that much of the content of the encyclical is not new, but consists in Francis summarizing and reviewing the various tenets of existing Catholic environmental teaching. Francis reiterates themes from his predecessors: Pope Paul VI's concern about human degradation of creation; Pope John Paul II's call for global "ecological conversion"; and Pope Benedict XVI's comment that a pernicious relativism of popular culture leaves us with no boundaries on irresponsible human behavior, leading to

7. Pope Francis U.S. approval ratings from Pew have risen to around 70%: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/18/favorable-u-s-views-pope-francis/>
8. A number of these can be found [here](#).
9. One example of the latter is the Diocese of Columbus, whose creation care efforts are highlighted [here](#).
10. Presidents of the Ecological Society of America, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Chemical Society, and the Society for Conservation Biology have all issued statements commending the encyclical, accessible [here](#).

both natural and social deterioration. Francis also endorses the sentiment of Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew that “to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God” (§8), echoing prior Catholic statements identifying environmental pollution as one of seven contemporary social sins.¹¹ Consequently, Francis says that we must replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, and move toward an asceticism of learning to give as a way of loving, of transitioning from “what I want” to what God’s world needs.

When Cardinal Peter Turkson¹² spoke about *Laudato Si’* at Ohio State in November of 2015,¹³ he highlighted this continuity with Francis’s predecessors as the first “C” of an “encyclical of C’s”:

- **Continuity** with predecessors, as noted above
- **Collegiality** in its reference to teachings of episcopal conferences from around the world
- **Care**, referring to the care of creation that Francis emphasizes as necessary. This point bears further note: Turkson said Francis prefers “care” to “stewardship” (a term only used twice in the encyclical); “stewardship” has otherwise been a resonant term for faith-based environmental work. Francis believes that “stewardship” can be dispassionate — we might do the right thing only because told to do so, even if we don’t actually care; the approach Francis takes is that we should rather care with our whole heart if our response is to be sufficient
- **Conversion**, meaning ecological conversion, as commended by Pope John Paul II and in response to ecological degradations taken to heart
- **Citizenship**, meaning environmental citizenship, which is to embrace and act on our responsibility and out of our love, and finally
- **Celebration**, of God’s gift of creation, which takes the form of our praise and wonder at the gift of all that God created

Turkson also highlighted some key themes of *Laudato Si’* in his speech at Ohio State. He said that *Laudato Si’* calls attention to the great environmental challenges of our time, sparking individual and political commitment to address climate change and other challenges while inspiring an “ecological conversion” towards an “integral ecology” that joins natural, social, and spiritual dimensions to effect positive change. Turkson emphasized the following points as central to the message of the encyclical:

- the relation between the poor and the planet
- the interconnection of everything

11. https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/vatican_bishop_points_to_modern_social_sins; Alternatively, consider the ecological implications of Fr. Robert Barron’s presentation on the seven deadly sins and the seven lively virtues, which contains links to Niebuhr’s commentary on the sin of pride, and looks forward to our consideration of environmental virtue in chapter 12: <https://catholicecology.net/blog/eco-implications-seven-deadly-sins>; Barron also comments on *Laudato Si’*: <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/robert-barron/a-prophetic-pope-and-the-tradition-of-catholic-social-teaching>.
12. Turkson is a valuable commentator about *Laudato Si’*, particularly since he was charged by Pope Francis to write the first draft of the encyclical and was the primary author of the theology chapter.
13. A commentary on Turkson’s visit to Ohio State is found [here](#), and the full text of his prepared remarks at Ohio State can be found [here](#).

- a critique of the new “technocratic paradigm”
- the value of all creatures and the importance of humans to ecology
- the need for forthright and honest debate and dialogue
- the serious responsibility of international and local policy
- the throwaway culture
- the need for new lifestyles
- an invitation to search for other ways of understanding the economy and progress



Container gardens used to feed the poor are an excellent example of how caring for nature and caring for the poor are connected through Integral Ecology. Photo courtesy of technologyforthe poor.com

Clearly part of the appeal of *Laudato Si'* is that it is a relatively comprehensive document. There is so much to study and reflect on within its pages — it is no simple statement of “we believe, thus we should do thus and so...” Rather, *Laudato Si'* lays out a thorough overview of current environmental degradations and concerns (Chapter One)¹⁴, and offers some relevant theological traditions (Chapter Two), while acknowledging that not everyone is moved by theology. The encyclical then discusses many complex social dynamics that impact the interplay of environmental and human factors (Chapter Three), which inspires a call for an ecological conversion towards an integral ecology (Chapter four) that takes account of all this complexity in moving forward. A refreshing element of *Laudato Si'*, as a result, is that it resists polarization into simple dichotomies by maintaining a nuanced and complex perspective. Francis concludes the encyclical by tracing “lines of approach and action” (Chapter Five) and encouragements for “ecological education and spirituality” (Chapter Six).

14. Chapter one provides an excellent summary of what Francis sees as the key environmental issues of our time, and it was clearly crafted in consult with a number of scientists; the chapter reads as one of the best overviews of this sort currently available, so I would recommend it for any environmental studies course.

One of the reasons *Laudato Si'* makes a good case study for this book is that it touches on most of the themes we'll examine moving forward and provides an opportunity to connect and integrate a range of ideas and concepts. Beyond some of the case study material on climate change, animal and food ethics, consumerism, and environmental justice, this book does not attempt to provide an overview of contemporary environmental concerns as Chapter One of *Laudato Si'* does, but it presumes such concerns as the motivation for examining religious influences on the environment and sustainability, just as many religious environmental policy statements begin by acknowledging and referencing scientific consensus about various environmental issues of concern.¹⁵

Laudato Si' also stands as a clear response to the Lynn White thesis that we addressed in Chapter Two of this book, both in its overall demonstration of western, biblical environmental views as well as in its specific attention to many of the points made by White in 1967. Chapter Three of the encyclical, titled "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis" clearly alludes to the title of White's famous article, and the encyclical's commentary on technology, the technocratic paradigm, and modern anthropocentrism addresses many of the themes discussed by White. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, for it was White who suggested that St. Francis should be named the patron saint of ecologists (and the Pope obliged in 1978) and commended St. Francis's perspective as a solution; with Pope Francis having adopted that name, this convergence of ideas was perhaps inevitable. *Laudato Si'* clarifies some points that White's thesis did not: while both publications critique anthropocentrism (see Part III of Chapter Three in *Laudato Si'*), the encyclical clarifies that a "misguided anthropocentrism need not necessarily yield to 'biocentrism', for that would entail adding yet another imbalance, failing to solve present problems and adding new ones" (*Laudato Si'*, ¶118). Akin to Pollan's gardener's ethic, Pope Francis suggests that "human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued" (*Laudato Si'*, ¶118), unique capacities that argue against the philosophical idea of biocentrism.

Pope Francis's comments about the human desire for power and control resonate with Richard Baer's commentary on ratio and intellectus that we discussed in Chapter Four, and his prescriptions for progress (*Laudato Si'*, ¶199-200) resonate with Baer's call for a better balance between scientific and religious modes of knowing. *Laudato Si'* also comments on "practical relativism" as being "even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism," asserting that "when human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative" (*Laudato Si'*, ¶122). With a similar logic to Allen Wood's (see chapter 4), Francis argues that "in the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds, and the fur of endangered species?" Francis bemoans what he called the relativistic logic of "use and throw away" that "generates so much waste because of the disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary" (*Laudato Si'*, ¶122). Much like Allen Wood, Francis also criticizes multinational businesses that do in less developed countries what they would never do in developed countries — something cultural relativism must permit — leaving behind "great human and environmental liabilities such as unemployment, abandoned towns, the depletion of natural reserves, deforestation, the impoverishment of agriculture and local stock breeding, open pits, riven hills, polluted rivers and a handful of social works that are no longer sustainable" (*Laudato Si'*, ¶51).

Laudato Si' also gives attention to various dimensions of a Catholic theological anthropology, which can be put into dialogue with the schemes of Reinhold Niebuhr and David Loy that we have previously explored. More attention to these parallels makes for great discussion, but clues lie in Chapters Two and Three of *Laudato Si'*, as well as in ¶s 155, 159-162 and Sections III-IX of Chapter Six. You may want to create some notes about any parallels you notice, based on your own reading of *Laudato Si'*.

15. For example, scientific sources like the Millenium Ecosystem Assessment and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports are referenced in some religious environmental statements.



Catholics aren't the only people who can subscribe to Integral Ecology! Temple Chai in Phoenix, Arizona uses this garden to teach kids how to love others, love the Earth, and love the Creator. "If you know the Earth intimately, you are much more likely to respect and protect it, and feel connected to the Source of Life. We donated many pounds of summer squash to our local food bank, and to Arizona Jews for Justice to feed asylum seekers." Photo credit: Nona Siegel

8.2 Looking Forward

Laudato Si' is a good reference for topics in this book, especially in the next few chapters, particularly in its themes relevant to consumerism (including “rapidification” and what Francis repeatedly refers to as a “throw away culture”) and environmental virtue. *Laudato Si'* ends with a chapter focused on environmental education and spirituality, which echoes the wilderness spirituality material we discussed in Chapter 7 and points both forward and backward to environmental education themes that underlie the framing of this book.

The encyclical is based on a review of the best contemporary ecological knowledge, but it is, at its heart, a moral document. It takes St. Francis of Assisi as the exemplar of creation care — someone who saw creation as a gift from God and saw in it a reflection of the goodness and beauty of God. St. Francis delighted in discovering God’s reflection all around him. Often, by taking note of the other, we are more able to be aware of divine presence in our lives. This basic orientation to God’s creation is an essential starting point and overall theme of *Laudato Si'*. A posture of appreciation, praise, and openness can make all the difference not only in *how* we respond to the need to care for creation but in *whether* we will make any effort to care for creation.

This hearkens back to Francis’s preference for the approach of care — care for our common home — as superior to stewardship. I said at the outset of this chapter that I thought *Laudato Si'* has been the most significant development in religion-ecology in decades, and while I maintain that claim, I would be delighted to see *Laudato Si'* pale in comparison to its fulfilment. Such a path would likely also involve the adoption of an integral ecology that draws both on natural ecology and human ecology, scientific and spiritual insights, and which faces difficult issues in all their complexity in order to support justice and flourishing for all life.



After helping to install solar at our church, we used the same solar contractor to install this array at our home, near our garden. It was inspiring to work in the garden with the solar array “watching over us,” and in this scene, after the garden was done for the season, the panels continued to transform sunlight into energy. Colgate, WI. Photo credit: John Helt

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Chapter 8 Discussion Questions

Pope Francis' Environmental Encyclical: *Laudato Si'*

Reflection Questions:

- “Integral ecology” is a major theme of the encyclical, and is the focus of Chapter Four. Describe what Francis means by *integral ecology* and why it is so important to the message of *Laudato Si'*.
- What specific elements of *Laudato Si'* resonate with things we've discussed already in ENR 3470, or that have already been covered in this book?

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think papal encyclical letters usually get such a broad response? Why do you think this encyclical has received the response it has?
2. What does Pope Francis mean by “rapidification”? (§ 18)
3. What does it mean to you to “become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it”? (§ 19)
4. Why does Pope Francis say that humans need to hear “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”? (§ 49)
5. What does the encyclical have to say about population control, which tends to be a delicate subject for Catholic environmentalists? (see § 50)
6. Why does Francis warn against a “false or superficial ecology”? (§ 59)
7. Do you think the “serene attentiveness” that Francis describes in § 226 is similar to the path of meditation that Loy describes in *Healing Ecology*? Why or why not?
8. How do you think the “intimate connection between God and all beings” described in § 234 and in § 240 compares to a Buddhist concept of the interconnection of all things?
9. What do you think of the vision in § 243 of eternal life?

Study Questions:

1. What is Pope Francis's critique of multinational corporations in § 51, and how does this relate to the Allen Wood chapter we read on “relativism”? (note also § 122)
2. What does Pope Francis mean by “differentiated responsibilities” regarding climate change? (§ 52)
3. Based on chapters two and three (other sections, like §'s 155 and 159–162, and sections III–IX of Ch. 6, may also help), what would you say are the essential elements of the theological anthropology presented in *Laudato Si'*?
4. What is the “technocratic paradigm” that Francis discusses in section II of Chapter Three?
5. Francis says in § 118 that there can be no renewal of our relationship to nature without a renewal of humanity itself, which requires an adequate anthropology in addition to ecology. He then says that we needn't replace our misguided anthropocentrism with “biocentrism”: how does he critique biocentrism, and how does this link to Pollan's notion of a Gardener's Ethic?
6. How do Francis' comments about religion in dialogue with science (§ 199) connect with readings from Baer and Barbour?
7. When Francis says that ecological conversion is also a community conversion (§ 219), how might you relate Francis' points in the following paragraphs to Loy's collective solution to the human problem in *Healing Ecology*?
8. What is the importance of the Eucharist as described in § 236?

CHAPTER 9: CASE STUDY: CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change more than any other issue highlights faith-based views about the environment, both because the issue is so comprehensive and global, and because most faith communities have engaged in some sort of response, making it a good case for comparing a range of faith-based environmental values. Readers may choose to insert this chapter after considering a gardener's ethic (chapter 3) and before moving ahead into epistemology and philosophy of science (chapter 4), to enhance the development of an overall approach to addressing religion and the environment. Regardless of reading strategy, climate change engages a full spectrum of religious perspectives.



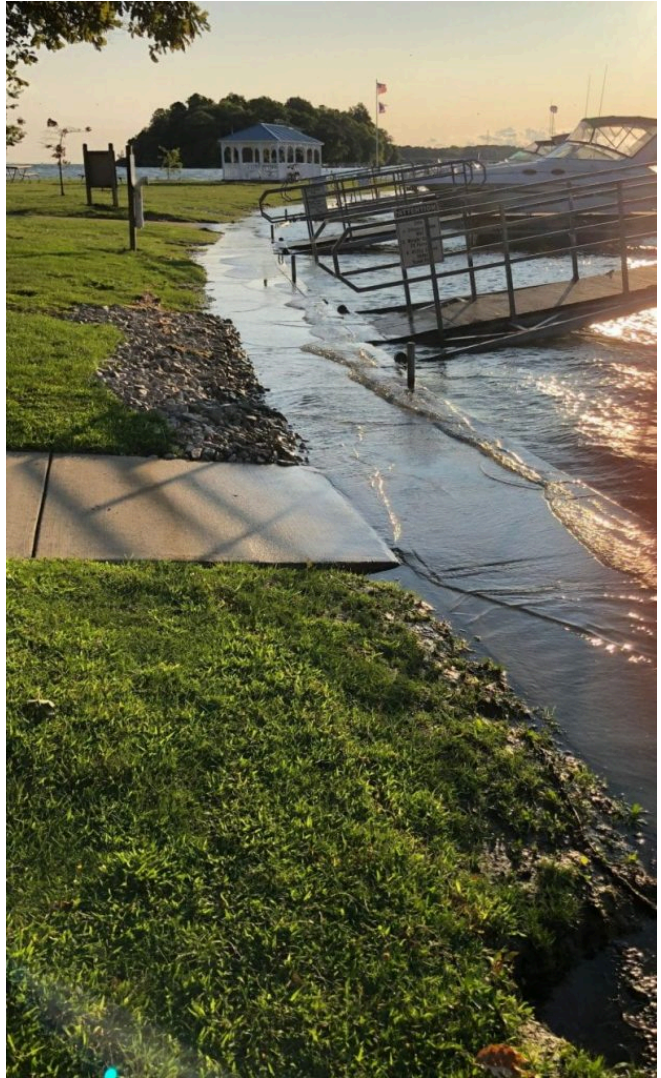
Faith Leaders at the Climate March. Photo credit: Bill Bradlee

Click the link below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Climate Change](#)

9.1 Religion's Role in the Response to Climate Change

Examining religious climate change perspectives will be helpful as a reminder that the arguments of Lynn White and others have played a role in how religious environmental work has developed, but those theoretical arguments will not continue to be the main focus of our examination of religion and the environment. While it is important to know about the arguments and ideas that have shaped the field, there have been extraordinary developments in how American faith communities engage in environmental education and advocacy. Climate change is one of the best cases to highlight that growth and can provide us with a more informed sense of some of the specific ways that faith-based values interact with environmental issues. The operative question is no longer *whether* faith communities engage in environmental work (or even whether their impact is negative or positive – it's mostly positive ¹), but what are the range of ways that faith



This photo was taken at Oak Point State Park, Ohio's smallest state park, on South Bass Island in Lake Erie. This year spring storms and winds from the northeast brought record high waters to the western basin of Lake Erie. Here at the park water washed over the sidewalk along the docks, eroding the soil, washing in debris and making boaters walk through water to get to their docks. It remained this high most of the summer. With our climate changing and weather events becoming more severe, is this the new normal? Care of creation becomes the topic. Title: High Water 2019. Photo credit: Ann Hitzhusen

1. Later we will take up the question of the extent to which special interest groups or politicians attempt to use religion to motivate or justify their agendas, recognizing that both pro- and anti-environmental groups might do so; this is relevant

communities engage in environmental issues like climate change, and how can a deeper understanding of this enrich the collaboration between science, policy, religion, and other partners to enhance planetary flourishing and reduce environmental and social degradations?

In my religion-environment class at Ohio State, I always complement our discussion of climate change with a guest lecture from one of my colleagues at the [Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center](#) at Ohio State. Byrd Polar is a world leading center for the study of climate and all things polar (like ice cores and glaciers); Byrd sponsors the State Climate Office of Ohio, and supports the office of State Climatologist for Ohio. An understanding of the basic facts of climate change helps set the table for our attention to this issue, and the faculty and researchers at Byrd are a great source of the latest reliable information about climate change.²



“Our Lady of Perpetual Help Creation Care Council members tour the Ohio State Byrd Polar Research Center to learn about global warming.” Photo credit: Sister Nancy Miller OSF

Attending to the science behind climate change also engages us in the most common pattern of how faith communities in America, at the denominational and local congregation level, approach environmental issues. A great deal of religion-environment literature, and especially curricula and official statements developed by religious communities, are motivated by and often begin with an overview of what we know about a particular issue or the state of the world (the science) and then proceed to apply their community’s values (eco-theology) to concerns that emerge from a scientific assessment of the situation.

to the question of how religion influences the environment, but I would just note that faith communities themselves would probably like to be freed of such manipulative influences.

2. Dr. Ellen Mosley-Thompson maintains a one-page online document listing reliable sources of climate science, which can be found [here](#).

This basic pattern is nicely illustrated by Kathy Dean Moore's short video on climate change as a moral crisis.³ Dean Moore makes the point that scientists (and environmental educators and activists) sometimes mistakenly think that the information they provide about environmental problems will suffice to inspire action to solve those problems. The expectation is that telling people "how the world is" (for instance, demonstrating that glaciers are melting and jeopardizing fresh water sources for many nations⁴), will motivate them to take countermeasures. She calls this a logical error.

Instead, what Dean Moore, a philosopher, helps us see, is that information about the world is not sufficient in itself to motivate action. People need to apply a second premise, namely their values, their beliefs about what is important and about how the world *should* be, before any conclusion about taking action will follow.

This may seem like common sense, though it may often operate in a hidden way. Many of our value judgements happen automatically, seemingly without thinking, on the basis of what we think is true about how we should live.⁵ In this way, environmental values complement environmental information (science) to determine what sort of policies and lifestyles we will support. Other barriers like pride, apathy, and greed might still stand in the way of action, but this basic sequence of information being activated by values toward action makes clear where faith-based values play a role.

This can be seen in many general examples, like [Steven Bouma-Prediger's](#) book, [For the Beauty of the Earth](#), an evangelical Christian environmental textbook, which spends the first two chapters providing an overview of global environmental problems and then proceeds to discuss the Christian values that support environmental action in response to those issues. Many of the general [environmental policy statements of denominations](#) follow a similar pattern, such as the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's](#) social statement on: [Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice](#) (1993), which frames environmental issues from a faith perspective and describes "the current crisis" from a scientific standpoint before describing a plan of hope and action.⁶

3. http://changingclimates.colostate.edu/movies/kathy_moore_796_kbits_150k.html

4. Ohio State's Lonnie Thompson was a contributing author to a glacier melt report of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: <http://www.casinapioiv.va/content/accademia/en/events/2011/glaciers.html>

5. This resonates with the aesthetic view of ethics highlighted in chapter 6, particularly in reference to the thought of Iris Murdoch, who believed that our vision of how the world is naturally shapes most of our ethical views.

6. In addition to the denominational policy statements available at the links above, the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale maintains a list of various religious environmental statements: [here](#) and [here](#)



Faith joins the Climate March. Photo credit: Bill Bradlee

Many faith-based climate statements follow the same pattern, and it is instructive to compare and contrast statements from across a range of traditions. Here are a number of illustrative examples:

- [Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change](#)
- [Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good](#) (A Statement of the the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops – print version available [here](#))
- [Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action](#)
- [Statement by Israel Orthodox Rabbis on the Climate Crisis; The Rabbinic Letter on Climate; Jewish Community Priorities for Climate and Energy Policy](#) (2008)
- [The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change](#)⁷
- [Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change](#)
- [Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew Encyclical](#) on the environment, including climate change

7. The most recent use of this statement was to support COP21 in Paris in 2015: <http://gbccc.org/>

These statements are just the tip of the iceberg⁸, but they help us see the diversity and consistency of religious concern for climate change. While the impact of these statements varies, they have not escaped the notice of legislators, such as U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, who delivered a talk titled: [Time to Wake Up: Faith Organizations Weigh in on Climate Change](#) from the Senate floor in 2013.

8. Some additional statements of interest include: National Climate Ethics Campaign: [Statement of Our Nation's Moral Obligation to Address Climate Change](#); [Muslim Green Guide to Reducing Climate Change](#); [Islamic Faith Statement on Islam and Ecology](#); [Hindu Declaration on Climate Change](#); [A Sikh Response to Global Warming and Climate Change](#)



Activists with Young Evangelicals for Climate Action meet with Senator Sheldon Whitehouse to discuss faith-based climate advocacy. Photo credit: Kyle Meyaard-Schaap

There are a number of ways to analyze religious statements like the ones listed above. First, there are a variety of types of statements to be found. Some denominations regularly create social policy statements about issues of contemporary concern, and many denominational climate change statements fall in this category. Other, similar sorts of denominational statements exist as well, like [Overtures in the Presbyterian church](#), including a recent one aimed at

divestment from fossil fuels.⁹ There are also statements organized or compiled by coalitions of religious organizations and denominations, like the 2008 Jewish climate and energy policy statement listed above. In other cases, one or more organizations may create a letter or a statement and seek signatures from a range of religious leaders, such as the Rabbinic Letter on Climate Change¹⁰ recorded above. Some statements are intended as commentaries about a particular bioregion, like the [Columbia River Pastoral Letter](#), and others carry a much wider authority, like Pope Francis's environmental encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'* (2015), which we examined in detail in chapter 8 and which makes significant reference to climate change.¹¹

Some of these statements are created by denominations as official expressions of their environmental values, others are created during moments of environmental advocacy when various faith communities join together to make statements about a particular contemporary issue; still others have resulted from conferences or reflective gatherings of religious scholars or theologians.¹² These statements therefore carry different types of authority. Most are aspirational. Some focus on ways that individuals can change their behaviors to care for creation, while others aim to influence policy at broader levels. Even in the case of official denominational social policy statements, which are usually ratified at an annual meeting of a particular denomination, rank and file members of those denominations may not even know that these statements exist. Most statements are not intended to *obligate* all members to particular views and actions. Instead, they often serve as resource documents for adult study groups or as justifications for policies or actions taken by local congregations.¹³ For instance, in the mid-2000s there was a national [United Methodist Church](#) resolution that called for all Methodist buildings to be models of energy efficiency (and to undergo energy audits toward that end) as a response to climate change.¹⁴ Because of this resolution, many local United Methodist conferences passed their own similar resolutions, like the [West Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church](#), which passed a resolution calling on their 1000+ congregations to undertake energy audits and steward their energy resources wisely. The [UMC Book of Resolutions from 2016](#) makes a nice study, as it begins with resolutions about the natural world, including energy policy.

Resolutions like these are intended to guide and inspire local congregational behavior and vision, but it remains up to local congregations to determine what issues they will focus on at any given time. By contrast, in a more hierarchical tradition like Roman Catholicism, a papal encyclical like *Laudato Si'* is intended to provide an authoritative overview of a social position that local Bishops and priests are expected to support; though here too, local autonomy allows local religious leaders to vary in the emphasis they might place on particular issues and teachings.

9. <https://www.fossilfreepcusa.org/overtures/overture-2018/>
10. This letter also reflects the liberal/progressive political views of its sponsoring organization.
11. *Laudato Si'* has also generated significant inter-religious dialogue about climate change: <https://u.osu.edu/religionandenvironment/2015/11/09/laudato-si-adds-catholic-voice-to-diverse-spectrum-of-religious-creation-care-views/>; some notable quotes are highlighted by Interfaith Power and Light [here](#).
12. For example: <http://www.webofcreation.org/religious-education/545-au-sable>
13. A religious statement that claims to obligate adherents to a particular behavior runs the risk of rendering that behavior morally shallow – if one behaves in a certain way only because they are told they must, are they really acting with much moral depth? This relates to Pope Francis' preference for the term “care” in *Laudato Si'*, as discussed in chapter 8, since a heartfelt response may be more genuine and enduring than one generated by a (potentially detached) sense of duty.
14. <http://www.umc.org/topics/topic-united-methodists-care-for-creation>

9.2 Faith and Skepticism: A Matter of Morality

Generally, religious environmental statements are a good indicator of how religious communities are self-reflexively defining and expressing their values, but exactly how much impact these statements have on environmental concern will vary.¹ Given its widespread promotion and its relatively high level of authority, *Laudato Si'* might be considered one of the more impactful religious environmental statements; as one indication of its impact, a Yale survey found that the encyclical influenced 35% of American Catholics and increased several specific measures of Catholic climate change concern by about 10%.² Similarly, Pope Francis's visit to speak to the U.S. Congress in 2015 was credited with motivating eleven Republican congressmen (most of whom were Catholic) to dissent from their party's stance on climate change and declare that they believed climate change is a serious issue.³

1. I have been invited to speak about the environment at some churches where the pastor introduced my talk with reference to that church's denominational policy statement on the environment, and many churches regularly host educational sessions with expert speakers who address contemporary social issues; thus environmental policy statements might reinforce the tendency of local congregations to host an expert environmental speaker or otherwise more closely attend to particular issues.
2. <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/news-events/35-of-american-catholics-say-the-pope-influenced-their-views-on-global-warming/>
3. US Senator Sheldon Whitehouse visited the OSU campus in 2016 and shared this information with an audience of students, faculty, and administrators during a talk on sustainability, and referenced this article: <http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/254021-11-republicans-seek-to-fight-climate-change>



Evangelicals from across the country lobby on Capitol Hill for a price on carbon in 2017. Photo credit: Kyle Meyaard-Schaap

Regardless of how much causal influence these statements might have in any given time or within any particular denomination in triggering environmental behaviors or values, these statements highlight and reinforce many of the basic tenets of eco-theology. For instance, a [summary of the basic tenets of several biblically-based climate statements](#) shows a number of common and unsurprising themes. Some statements, particularly those developed by evangelicals (whose politically conservative brothers and sisters tend to be more skeptical of climate science), immediately emphasize that climate change is real and is causing harm; they further reinforce basic notions of stewardship (Christians are called to take good care of creation) and environmental justice (Christians are called to help the poor and vulnerable, who happen to be affected disproportionately by climate change), and highlight resonant themes like love of neighbor, hope, prayer, and taking action to change our behaviors so as to reduce climate impacts. Catholic statements have also emphasized stewardship and justice, as well as appeals to the common good and to prudence (i.e., it is prudent to act to resolve climate change given the risks it poses now and for future generations), while also calling for increased dialogue and responsibility. Jewish statements have emphasized a number of biblical sources, also highlighting stewardship, justice, prudence, and action; in the case of the 2008 energy policy statement, the authors make a plea for flexibility, realizing that circumstances will change, technologies will improve, and ongoing measures of the problem and the adequacy of our response will need to be monitored so as to assure a sufficient

response. Jewish statements also sometimes invoke the ideal of [Tikkun Olam](#), the call to repair the world, as a guiding concept.

One point that becomes clear across the many religious statements on climate change is that virtually no religious community statements disagree with the scientific consensus on climate change. This comes as a surprise to many, because the assumption (echoing the age-old Lynn White thesis) tends to be that conservative Christian views will be environmentally skeptical; however, there appears to be only one denomination that maintains a [policy that is skeptical](#) of the scientific consensus on climate change: the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Indeed, there is strong overlap in this denomination with political conservatism, but this departure from the overwhelming scientific consensus has also caused a reaction from Southern Baptists, including multiple past presidents of the SBC and other prominent Southern Baptists, who formed the [Southern Baptist Environment and Climate Initiative](#) to counteract their denomination's stance.

Statements on such issues will continue to evolve. The status of climate science in American public and political opinion remains dynamic and no doubt will continue to be a hot topic for the foreseeable future. A recent Yale and University of Cambridge study found that among conservatives who are skeptical of climate change, learning of the vast scientific consensus around climate change tends to soften that skepticism, reducing it by 20 percentage points.⁴ This consensus is usually highlighted by pointing out that all national academies of sciences in the world agree with the climate science consensus (none disagree); that there is not a single [scientific or professional society](#) that disagrees with the consensus;⁵ that the Pentagon, Walmart, and most electric utility companies in the US agree with the consensus; and that 97% of climate scientists agree with the consensus.⁶

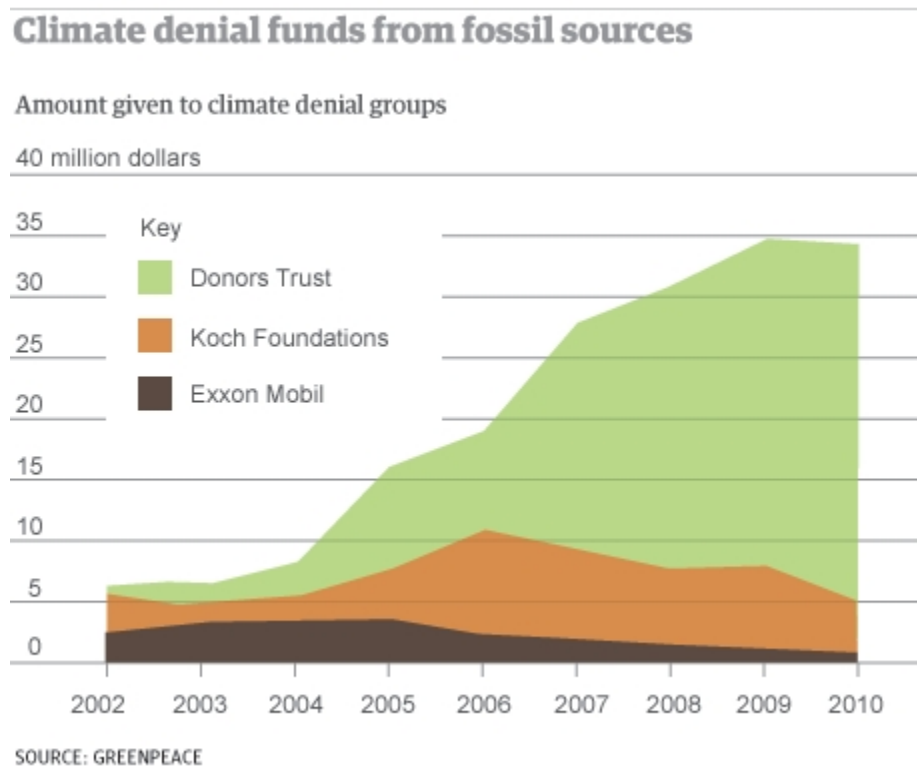
This consensus among scientists and among faith communities (save for the SBC) leads to an interesting question: if such an overwhelming consensus exists, then why do so many Americans (and politicians, who still overwhelmingly identify as members of faith communities) say they are skeptical of climate change? Climate denial is not a topic we will engage in great depth in this book, but some related moral and ethical points are unavoidable.

Historian Naomi Oreskes has been focused on this question of American climate skepticism for many years, and she provides a thorough answer, summarized [here](#) in a video of a presentation she made at Stanford University. She says that by and large, Americans accept global warming as a fact, but not the scientific consensus that climate change is mostly human caused. This is partly because media reports treat it like it's a debate, but it's also because there are forces at work to create the impression of debate. Oreskes documents some of these forces in her book [Merchants of Doubt](#), where she describes the tactics of climate denial organizations (often affiliated with fossil fuel interests), including explicit campaigns designed to create the impression of doubt that now exists in the American public. The presentation slides used by Oreskes in the video link above can be found [here](#), including more extended comments about climate denial PR tactics akin to those used in the past by the tobacco industry (those slides were edited out of the video link above). More recently, peer reviewed studies have paid close attention to the organizations and the funding that has supported

4. <https://phys.org/news/2017-12-facts-consensus-bridges-conservative-liberal-climate.html>
5. The American Association of Petroleum Geologists revised its 2007 statement, which was skeptical of climate change, in the face of overwhelming evidence published that year by the [2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change summary report](#), thereby ending its reign as the only scientific society to dissent from the scientific consensus.
6. The 97% claim is usually made with reference to a National Academies of Sciences report in 2010 (Anderegg et al), which can be found [here](#) along with a number of other studies that have examined climate consensus among scientists; more recently, a [study was done of the 3% of dissenting scientists/publications](#), and found all of them had errors in their assumptions, methods, or analysis.

climate denial information efforts, revealing that more than \$550 million was funneled to climate denial organizations between 2003 and 2010 through foundations that allow the donors to remain anonymous.⁷

One study documented donations from 140 different foundations; a similar figure for just three main sources is shown here:



Source: <https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2013/02/28/how-the-dirty-energy-money-funding-climate-inac/192829>

Factors such as these highlight the role of “dark money” channeled from special interests in order to support efforts to create doubt about the overwhelming scientific consensus about climate change. What moral and ethical issues does this raise? On the one hand, PR campaigns by special interests are not necessarily illegal, but are they unethical? [Dr. Donald Brown](#), author of the [Ethics and Climate website](#) at Widener University Commonwealth Law School, has questioned if – in the face of what is known about human-caused climate change, and the harms that are already apparent – climate denial is a new kind of crime against humanity.

These questions remain culturally charged. During the early 2000s as the founding director of Ohio Interfaith Power and Light, I was often invited to speak about climate change at Ohio faith communities. Around 2008, I was averaging one talk per week at an Ohio congregation, simply responding to interest from clergy who wanted to host a climate change discussion in their congregation. This interest followed in part from the fact that both Barack Obama and John McCain had campaigned for the presidency by supporting climate legislation. However, after Obama’s election, as efforts to oppose climate legislation escalated, a counter trend emerged. Within a year, clergy were asking for talks not about

7. Scientific American summarized some of this information [here](#), drawing on Robert Brulle’s study on “[Institutionalizing Delay](#)” in the journal *Climate Change*.

climate change per se, but about “how to talk about climate change,” because the topic was becoming controversial. By 2010, I regularly heard from mainline and evangelical clergy alike that climate change was too divisive a topic to discuss, and congregations began to shift their environmental discussions to subjects like food security and sustainable agriculture. Indeed, think tanks funded by fossil fuel money had also been at work creating materials to convince American faith communities⁸ that environmentalism is dangerous, un-Christian, un-American, or a threat to freedom, such as in the “[Environmentalism as a Green Dragon](#)” materials developed by the Acton Institute/Cornwall Alliance.⁹ Climate skeptics, it would seem, are aware of the power of religion to influence public views on environmental issues.

As a counter trend to these well-funded efforts to delay climate legislation, faith communities themselves across a range of traditions have been at the forefront of movements to divest from fossil fuels¹⁰ and have actively supported international climate legislation negotiations.¹¹ It remains to be seen how much such efforts and the existing array of faith-based climate change statements will offset the millions of dollars being spent by the world’s most profitable companies of all time,¹² who are not afraid to manipulate moral language to protect their profits. At the moment, climate ethicists like Donald Brown may be the most explicit voices calling attention to moral questions like these, but religious leaders continue to address these challenges as well, such as former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, Katharine Jefferts-Schori, who has also called climate denial immoral.¹³

It is easy to see why climate change makes such a dynamic case to see the many factors at play in religious environmental thinking and action – this is not a realm of simple answers and easy descriptions, but rather a topic of wicked complexity. Some might say that God only knows how this will all come out! We will have to stay tuned. But at the same time, the emergent character of faith-based climate change activity is representative of the larger movement of religious environmental and sustainability engagements: emerging, dynamic, diverse, evolving, norming, and linked

8. This example was presented in Chapter 1: <https://splinternews.com/how-fossil-fuel-money-made-climate-denial-the-word-of-g-1797466298>; another example is “The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels”: <http://www.moralcaseforfossilfuels.com/>
9. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/2011/may/05/evangelical-christian-environmentalism-green-dragon> A fund-raising letter from the Acton Institute around this time sought an “additional \$2 million” to add to a \$10 million donation from a “quiet partner” that was enabling them to generate more media reports, videos and DVDs, to multiply their messaging.
10. Examples here:
<https://globaldivestmentmobilisation.org/faith-and-the-global-divestment-mobilisation/>
<https://www.ecowatch.com/faith-institutions-divest-2492836438.html>
<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/faith-communities-are-dumping-their-fossil-fuel-investments>
<http://www.greenfaith.org/programs/divest-and-reinvest/listing-of-known-religious-divestment-efforts>
11. The reaction of multiple faith communities to US decisions around the Paris Agreement can be found here: <http://u.osu.edu/religionandenvironment/?s=paris+agreement>; other efforts include: <https://thinkprogress.org/250-faith-leaders-demand-nations-ratify-paris-climate-deal-c150f6a30ec3/>
12. <https://www.taxpayer.net/energy-natural-resources/oil-and-gas-industry-a-decade-of-record-breaking-profits/>
13. Jefferts-Schori’s comments are found [here](#).

to a mix of social, political, and historical factors. Just like those who seek to capture a moving target – keen attention is required!

Even with the dynamic and culturally charged character of climate change concern in the US, it remains the case that the vast majority of religions emphasize the importance of dealing with climate change:

“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day....There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy.” (Pope Francis, Chapter 1, paragraph 25 & 26 of *Laudato Si'*, 2015)

“Tibetans are patient and can wait ten more years. But the environmental and climate crisis are so dramatic that they can no longer wait for concrete action. Especially in Tibet, on the Roof of the World, we can feel the ecological crisis only too clearly. The climate change leads to a heavy glacier melt and thus to a dramatic water problem for more than a billion people in Asia. Nature cannot wait any longer. The ecological question is the central issue of the survival of mankind.” (Dalai Lama, Interview with Franz Alt¹⁴, 2011)

Climate change is a moral challenge threatening the rights of the world's poorest people and those who deny it are not using God's gift of knowledge. (Paraphrase¹⁵ of Katharine Jefferts-Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, 2015)

“Climate change is much more than an issue of environmental preservation. Insofar as

14. <https://www.agitano.com/franz-alt-im-interview-der-dalai-lama-in-deutschland/18447> ; an alternate summary: “Dear friend, the environmental problems are even more important than Tibet. We are patient as Buddhists and can wait a little longer for our freedom, but in the environment we have to act immediately. Nature can not wait any longer. The climate and sea level rise dramatically.” Other comments by the Dalai Lama on climate change are [here](#), and more of his environmental views are [here](#).

15. Summary article of comments by the presiding bishop is found [here](#).

human-induced, it is a profoundly moral and spiritual problem. To persist in our current path of ecological destruction is not only folly. It is suicidal because it jeopardizes the diversity of our planet. Moreover, climate change constitutes a matter of social and economic justice. For, those who will most directly and severely be affected by climate change will be the poorer and more vulnerable nations (what Christian Scriptures refer to as our “neighbor”) as well as the younger and future generations (the world of our children, and of our children’s children).” (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2005)¹⁶

With such a clear collection of moral voices calling for action on climate change, perhaps it is not surprising that climate denial efforts have accelerated so much in recent years. It remains to be seen what the long term policy impact will be of religious views on climate change.



Young Evangelicals for Climate Action march at the People’s Climate March in Washington, D.C. in 2017. Photo credit: Kyle Meyaard-Schaap

16. Patriarch Bartholomew has made similar statements on a number of occasions, including [here](#).

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Chapter 9 Discussion Questions

Reflection Questions:

- Describe the basic values, beliefs, and principles that faith communities are expressing in response to climate change. What commonalities do you see among these statements and traditions? What differences do you note? Do you think there are particular strengths or limitations to such faith-based statements? What importance do you think such religious climate statements have for public policy?

Discussion Questions:

1. Share the basic ideas of each of the climate statements you read. How do they compare and contrast? (A whiteboard or large piece of paper may be beneficial for compiling everyone's ideas).
2. Do you agree with the climate statement of your own religious group? If everyone subscribed to their faith community's climate statement, how would the discussion around climate change differ? Would it be enough to stop climate change?
3. Why do so many people disagree with the climate statements put forth by their own religious group? How might their minds change if they knew of their faith community's stance on the matter?
4. In which ways should climate change be an interfaith conversation? In which ways might that distance skeptics further?
5. Why is climate change such a divisive topic in America? How might taking measures to reduce that polarity be beneficial or harmful to the environmental movement?
6. How can we create a conversation around climate change that respects the intelligence and morality of skeptics and proponents alike?

CHAPTER 10: CASE STUDY: ANIMAL WELFARE AND FOOD ETHICS



Praying with and learning from a Tribal elder – Earth Ministry/ Washington Interfaith Power & Light invited people to share their prayers for the future of the Inland Northwest at the Nimiipuu River Rendezvous. The Nimiipuu (Nez Perce Tribe) held this gathering to discuss treaty rights, salmon recovery, and river restoration. Photo credit: Jessica Zimmerle

Since the late 2000s, there have been shifts in faith community attention to environmental issues. As director of Ohio Interfaith Power and Light from 2008 to 2010, it was a challenge to keep up with the active and growing interest of Ohio congregations to learn about and address climate change. But where climate change was perhaps the most popular issue in the late 1990s and early 2000s among environmentally-engaged faith communities, interest shifted in part towards sustainable food systems, as political controversy and well-funded climate denial PR campaigns made climate change more politically and culturally contentious.¹ By the 2010s, new attention and focus had emerged within faith communities to address food system issues, joining the existing engagement of the Jewish Food Movement on a range of issues, and intersecting with ongoing food and animal ethics movements.²

1. Chapter 9 discussed some aspects of the climate denial movement; Robert Brulle's work is the best known peer-reviewed study of climate denial funding: <https://drexel.edu/now/archive/2013/December/Climate-Change/>
2. There is a very broad background of religious engagement with food and animal questions, as many religions have dealt in highly specific ways with food and animal issues for thousands of years; the focus of this chapter, however, will tend

Traditionally, there have been several focal points in this area: animal rights and animal welfare; vegetarianism and veganism; food security and food systems associated with human health and nutrition; and environmental justice. Both secular and religious communities and organizations have been engaged in these issues, though with the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s, the most prominent voices in animal and food choice movements have tended to be non-religious. More recently, religious-environmental concern for food and animal issues has increased³, local food movements have multiplied⁴, and veganism and other food-conscientious ideologies have been on the rise.⁵

Diverse and overlapping perspectives give shape to these issues. “Animal rights” views pertain to the legal rights and standing of non-human animals (and typically strictly prohibit harmful treatment or consumptive use of animals) while “animal welfare” perspectives promote the well-being and standards of living and treatment of non-human animals (and usually focus on minimizing the suffering of animals, if not prohibiting the killing of animals). Vegetarianism and veganism are connected to these approaches, as many individuals choose those diets based on their viewpoints on animal rights and welfare, particularly related to farm and laboratory animals. Just as concern has been raised over the welfare and treatment of animals in livestock farming, as well as associated environmental pollution from high concentrations of manure, so too has there been concern for the quality of food and environmental impacts of contemporary food systems, including: concern for the welfare of farm workers (especially migrant farm workers); the nutritional impacts of food deserts in inner cities; opportunities for urban agriculture; and the shortening of farm-to-table food chains through promotion of local food systems. Although these topics deserve much more attention (whole courses and whole books are devoted to these topics), this chapter will aim to introduce some of the dynamics, concepts, and questions raised by these complex areas of concern, scholarship, and action.

Click the links below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Food](#) [Animals](#)

toward the environmentally salient features of religious, moral, and ethical concerns for food and animals that have vied for widespread attention in American culture since the 1970s.

3. The Jewish Food Movement (as described by Nigel Savage at the links above and also [here](#)) is one example; the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics [Religion and Animals Project](#) is another; the American Academy of Religion's [Animals and Religion Unit](#) is another.
4. The [Ohio and West Virginia Food Hub Network](#) is an example of some of the organizing taking place to support local food systems.
5. For example: <https://harvardmagazine.com/2017/07/the-rise-of-vegan-culture>

10.1 A Sampler: Religious Food-Environment Events

The following event flyers give a sense of some of the interests and approaches that have been emerging related to food systems in faith communities in recent years:

Food, Faith and a Sustainable Future: Eco-Judaism from the Ground Up



Wednesday, March 30th
Food at 6:30 p.m. | Program at 7 p.m.
Ohio Union, Barbara Tootle Room, 3156

Forum will explore Jewish obligations toward the environment and natural world. Jewish-environmental educator Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb will be our guest speaker, along with OSU Hillel's Rabbi Benjamin Berger. OSU's Dr. Tamar Rudavsky will moderate the session.

Supported by the Gretel Bloch Fund of the Melton Center for Jewish Studies, and co-sponsored with OSU's School of Environment and Natural Resources, Facilities Operations and Development department, Ohio Interfaith Power and Light, Ohio Council of Churches and OSU Hillel

www.meltoncenter.osu.edu



Rabbi Fred Dobb's Jewish sustainable foods lecture drew standing room only in the Ohio Union at Ohio State in March of 2011. Rabbi Dobb is from Bethesda, MD, and a leader with both the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life and Interfaith Power and Light.

Coincidentally, this event was the first “zero waste” event at OSU with support from the office of Energy Services and Sustainability. Event organizers did not expect such a robust turn-out; some have been surprised by growing faith community interest in food systems.

Omnivore's Dilemma: Eating Jewishly in the 21st Century

Thursday, March 20, 2014 - 6:00pm
OSU Hillel, 46 E 16th Ave.



The Melton Center for Jewish Studies presents:

Nigel Savage

Founder of Hazon, a world-leading Jewish based environmental group.

6 pm- kosher, eco-friendly snack and info. tables
7 pm- lecture and discussion

What happens when 3,000 years of Jewish food traditions connect with the complexities of eating in the 21st century? In this evening's address, Nigel Savage, the founder of Hazon, and one of the key leaders of the contemporary Jewish Food Movement will share some insights -- and tell a

story about three goats.

Supported by the Gretel Bloch fund. Co-sponsored by OSU's School of Environment and Natural Resources, Agricultural Ecosystems Management Program, Office of Student Life, Multicultural Center and Energy Management & Sustainability department, Hillel, and Ohio Interfaith Power and Light.

In March of 2014, Nigel Savage, Jewish food movement leader and founder of the Jewish environmental organization Hazon, drew even larger audiences at several events on the Ohio State Columbus campus, including a program at OSU Hillel and a seminar in the School of Environment and Natural Resources (audio available [here](#), transcript available [here](#)).



In November of 2018, the Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO), Ohio State, and Franklinton Farms co-hosted a [conference focused on developing regional food hubs](#). MTSO's [Seminary Hill Farm](#) has become a leading [eco-theology farm and teaching center](#), and MTSO plays host to regular faith-based food systems events.

10.3 Kashrut and Halal as Food Ethics Systems

We might think of the animal welfare movement — bolstered by the persuasive arguments of Peter Singer and others, reinforced by countless activists and citizens who care about the treatment of animals, and successful in bringing greater attention to the treatment of animals — as “religious” in the functional sense that was commended in Chapter 3. This movement is akin to a religion in being a community of practice, dedicated to various principles, fighting for social change on the basis of those principles, and commending a vision for how to live in relation to other life. We can consider similarities and differences between these movement views and what kosher and halal food systems have been saying for more than a millennia as the food ethics systems of Judaism and Islam, respectively. While Singer’s arguments provided a rationale for seeing animal suffering as more morally important than modern American culture had generally promoted, similar conclusions have long been part of the ancient food ethics systems of kashrut and halal and their sub-cultures in the US.

Kashrut

While we will not comprehensively cover Jewish food laws, there are several lines of approach we will pursue here — understanding traditional kosher/kashrut (meaning *fit*, *proper*, *correct*) laws, exploring the broader domain of “Eco-kosher” as a contemporary movement, and examining some of the dynamics of the contemporary Jewish Food Movement. As a starting point, I want to draw attention to part of the process by which Jewish food ethics have increasingly engaged with environmental values over the last 20 years.

For the sake of argument, let’s make the following claims: religions in America have always maintained values of creation care, though when major waves of the environmental movement broke in America in the 1970s, many religions were not at the forefront or were not necessarily quick to take up boards and ride those waves. Hanging ten on the front of the board was the secular environmental movement, which filled in the most visible, vociferous, and activist role of the movement. That movement, for all its growth, has alienated itself from certain major portions of the American public to the extent that, for some Americans (typically conservative Americans), being an “environmentalist” is a label to be avoided at all costs — it puts one at risk of being ridiculed as “green,” a “tree-hugger,” a “hippie,” a “bleeding-heart liberal” or worse. Simultaneously, religious environmental thinking, movements, initiatives, programs, organizations, and statements have continued to grow to the point where some of the leading voices for environmental change now come from faith communities, and most environmental groups now see faith communities as important allies. These points suggest that if advocates of the environmental movement would like to see better progress toward environmental integrity and sustainability in America, they should reexamine faith based environmental values and the communities that hold them, and perhaps widen or expand their own view of what counts as an “environmental value” or as an “ally” in progress toward sustainability. In many cases, it may be that faith-based environmental perspectives hold solutions to problems the secular environmental movement has been unable to address, and faith communities may have much deeper resources to offer the environmental movement than it has been able to generate on its own.

Likewise, even though Judaism has had a food ethics system in place for more than two millennia, most people don’t think of the animal welfare movement as a Jewish idea, nor did animal welfare advocates in the US draw heavily on existing food ethics systems to make their arguments. I’d argue that in part, as vegetarianism gained momentum in the US, over time, religious points of reference for animal welfare and vegetarianism have emerged more and more. Contemporary Jewish thinkers have explored the powerful points of resonance between kashrut (and other Jewish ideals) and sustainable food systems, and have increasingly highlighted and celebrated those tenets both as

an expression of environmental values and as a renewal of Jewish identity in engaging the issues of the day.¹ This sort of evolution has not been uncommon as a mode of religious-environmental program development — just as the preservation movement of John Muir's era made powerful use of resonant religious themes (of Edenic paradise) to promote the formation of national parks, secular or non-religious environmental arguments have been able to (consciously or not) make use of existing religious and spiritual values and to some extent may serve to re-awaken some of the values already implicit in traditional faith communities.²

1. A similar development was seen earlier in Jewish outdoor environmental education, where classic outdoor education activities were adapted into Jewish frames of reference. This yielded a dynamic sort of educational programming that benefited from the environmental efficacy developed by secular environmental practitioners; however, this programming added religiously/culturally reinforced roots by grafting those activities into Jewish traditions. A quintessential example of this is Michal Smart's Jewish outdoor education programs based on activities developed by Joseph Cornell. Smart realized the powerful points of overlap between Cornell's exercises and certain Jewish prayer and ritual practices. She re-wrote the exercises within a Jewish frame, and these and other activities like them became staples of the Jewish outdoor education world — see *Spirit in Nature: Teaching Judaism and Ecology on the Trail* for examples of these exercises (Biers-Ariel, M., Newbrun, D., & Smart, M.F., Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 2000). Another way to see these developments is to note the religious and spiritual intuitions (implicit and explicit) that were already present in a number of environmental education curricula, that resonated with existing religious traditions, or that found deeper homes in some religious traditions. A good overview of a range of such programs focused on environment and food are found in the [JOFEE Report](#) commissioned by Hazon, a Jewish environmental organization based in New York City.
2. Another case of this more generally might be the interplay between religious and theological values and the field of environmental ethics in America. H. Paul Santmire, Richard Baer, Norman Faramelli and others started the [Faith-Man-Nature](#) group in the mid-1960s, and it lasted until the mid-1970s. They wrote articles and books, hosted national conferences, and generally raised the profile of discussing the environment as an ethical issue, in many cases a full decade before the secular field of environmental ethics took shape. Secular environmental ethics scholarship tended to overshadow religious and theological developments in the 1970s and 1980s (for instance, Baird Callicott is often [credited](#) with teaching the first environmental ethics course in the world, in 1971, but this was five years after Richard Baer began teaching environmental ethics in the religion department at Earlham in 1966) while eco-theology and religion and ecology scholarship grew more slowly; however, in many ways, religion and ecology scholarship and religious environmental organizations have matured and filled in the thought-landscape of environmental ethics with views that not only support pro-environmental values, but are aligned well with predominant American religious communities and values.



This Jewish Star Garden in Phoenix, Arizona encourages first graders to think about where their food comes from. "We explore the ongoing miracle of life that gardens demonstrate so vividly, and all the kids learn to love eating fresh vegetables and flowers they grew themselves!! If you know the Earth intimately, you are much more likely to respect and protect it, and feel connected to the Source of Life." Photo credit: Nona Siegel

Kosher, or *kashrut* laws, many of which derive from passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, have long prescribed a Jewish wisdom of eating. As Arthur Waskow describes:

Part of that wisdom was the code of eating kosher food in which only the meat of non-predatory animals and birds was kosher to eat; the food of mammalian life (milk) and mammalian death (meat) could not be eaten together; even this restricted kind of meat could only be eaten if the animal had been slaughtered in a painless way with prayerful consciousness and ritual; and vegetarianism was viewed as the higher, but not compulsory, path.³

By the standards of animal welfare, kosher meat should be “kosher” (fit) inasmuch as the animal’s suffering has already been addressed by assuring a painless death at the hands of the [shochet](#), whose training and sharp instruments⁴ produce a fast, painless death for the animal in what is “widely recognized as the most humane method of slaughter possible.”⁵ Note that an animal rights view, which claims that animals have a right not to be killed, differs in belief from both animal welfare views and these Jewish views, so a community that adheres to certain animal *rights* beliefs might not believe it “kosher” to slaughter an animal regardless of method. For instance, vegans, who generally do not believe in the use or exploitation of any animal products, would not generally condone animal slaughter by any method.

3. See these links for more comprehensive descriptions of permitted and prohibited foods in kosher laws, and prescriptions of proper animal treatment: <http://www.jewfaq.org/kashrut.htm> ; <http://www.koshercertification.org.uk/whatdoe.html>. Also note an intriguing Jewish commentary that treats vegetarianism with an interesting caution — Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Chief Rabbi of Palestine in the 1920s) argued that meat eating was a concession to human weakness, which evokes Waskow’s comment mentioned earlier that vegetarianism is a “higher path”; according to [Berel Dov Lerner](#), Kook was also “careful to explain that full moral consideration for animals should only be implemented when humanity achieves its highest spiritual development in the messianic era.” Remembering that God’s original intentions as displayed in Genesis Chapter 1 were that humans would be vegetarian, “Kook claimed that while the earlier ban on meat would be reinstated in messianic times, a premature demand for vegetarianism and full justice toward animals would be spiritually destructive” (Lerner). The idea here is that presently fallen humans would misunderstand such a demand for vegetarianism as implying “the essential equality of humans and animals,” forgetting humanity’s unique spiritual vocation. Lerner elaborates on Kook’s perspective, explaining, “Tyrannical governments would use radical campaigns for animal protection as tools for the oppression of humans, and as propagandistic distraction from the injustices they perpetrate against people. Kook argued that absolute justice for animals should be demanded only after inter-human relations are free of violence, oppression and injustice.” One wonders, however, whether practicing justice towards non-human animals could help strengthen the impulse to also treat humans justly (consider the similar case where therapy dogs provide for human healing complementary to the efforts of human doctors and therapists). At the same time, these ideas echo comments by Wendell Berry in *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, where he argues that if humans can’t be faithful to each other, we’re highly unlikely to be able to be faithful to land and other creatures.
4. A perfectly sharp blade with no knicks is required.
5. Rich, T. R. (n.d.). Judaism 101: Kashrut: Jewish Dietary Laws. Retrieved May 18, 2018, from <http://www.jewfaq.org/kashrut.htm>.

Similarly, Hindu beliefs about the sacred nature of cows would not permit slaughter of cows, regardless of method, and though Hinduism does not strictly prohibit eating meat,⁶ it generally commends *ahimsa*, or non-violence toward all life, including animals, so Hinduism has long been associated with vegetarian diets.

Given the importance of diet to any life or culture, commentaries about religious food systems often mention the role of kashrut in setting the Jewish community apart as distinct and providing a communal identity that involves certain patterns and traditions of eating. The same might be said of vegan communities, whose dietary preferences and requirements have altered dining hall menus in universities and given rise to a wave of new urban/suburban restaurants that provide vegan menu options. Dietary traditions might not be championed for the sake of creating distinction, but dedication to distinct dietary traditions does tend to create food-related in-groups.

Halal

In similar fashion, Muslim food traditions establish distinct regulations for what is halal (acceptable) and what is not. Like Judaism, Islam does not prohibit meat eating itself, but in fact sanctions it (though like Judaism, with some restrictions) and cautions against anyone requiring vegetarianism of a Muslim.⁷ One interesting difference is that, in Islam, all non-human animals are considered Muslim believers (the same cannot be said for all humans), which underlines a sense of divine interest in all creatures. As with kashrut, in order for meat to be considered halal, the animal must have been slaughtered while invoking a blessing, and the slaughter is to be as painless as possible (halal requires a blessing be recited over each animal slaughtered, while kashrut requires blessings at the start and end of cohorts of animals, so some Muslims may avoid kosher meat because it might lack appropriate blessing).⁸ Halal is a term that only applies to meat (kashrut extends beyond meats), and in general, kosher laws related to meats are a bit more restrictive than halal, so kosher meat may be deemed acceptable to a Muslim if halal meat is not available. Islamic dietary laws forbid alcohol consumption (kosher laws do not), so whether Jews and Muslims sometimes accept halal and kosher substitutions will depend on these various specific distinctions and on the level of observance of any particular adherent.

While the term “eco-halal” has yet to gain a significant foothold, it is easy to see the potential for Muslim food ethics to play a role in the larger conversation about sustainable and ethical food systems. An excellent example of the environmental dimensions of halal is found in the documentary film *Renewal*, which includes a segment on Muslim food ethics, which is summarized [here](#). And increasingly, commentaries are emerging that highlight food-system-related environmental concerns that go beyond halal, by invoking the broader concern that everything a Muslim consumes should be *tayyib*, or wholesome and pure.⁹ These larger ethical concerns that are also rooted in Islamic tradition are

6. For Hindus who do eat meat, the preferred form of slaughter is the [Jhatka](#) method of processing, which involves a [quick and painless death](#).
7. At the same time, some are quick to point out that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) intentionally ate very little meat, and others will note that veganism has very close ties to many Islamic principles related to food.
8. Some additional differences and similarities between kashrut and halal are described here: <http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/difference-between-kosher-and-halal/>
9. Some other commentaries on Islam and food and environmental ethics include: <https://www.halalzilla.com/islam-environment-eco-friendly-muslim/87746>; <https://mvslim.com/>

becoming integrally linked to establish a thoroughly Muslim perspective on food ethics, in much the same way that eco-kashrut is expanding contemporary food ethics and ethos in Judaism.

Eco-Kosher and the Jewish Food Movement

Given that kosher laws have been established and codified for a long time, changes to kashrut itself aren't a likely prospect, but an "eco-kosher" perspective, a more comprehensive Jewish food ethics, can be developed by adding other Jewish ethical concerns on top of kashrut practices. For instance, it may not be kosher to mix meat and milk, but for an environmentally-minded Jew, should it be considered eco-kosher to eat vegetables that were grown using excess fertilizers that polluted a local waterway? By adding layers of ethical complexity, the patterns and traditions of one's kosher practices can be expanded to respond to the many environmental values that also matter regarding the food we eat. Eco-kosher food choices would aim to support agricultural sources that are just (e.g. not exploitative of migrant laborers), environmentally sound (not polluting by overuse of fertilizers or chemicals), and sustainable, for instance. How exactly individual Jews and Jewish communities might choose to ritualize or reinforce new and healthier food choices is undoubtedly a complex and various prospect. One example of how these ideas and conversations have been engaged is the Jewish Food Movement,¹⁰ promoted by the organization [Hazon](#), which has engaged contemporary Jewish communities in questions of Jewish identity in relation to environmental and food concerns. While this remains a new and emerging area of Jewish environmental culture, it is one of the better examples of how religion is shaping environmental and agricultural trends in America.

[introducing-the-green-muslims-why-halal-is-not-enough/](#); <https://theweek.com/articles/787788/future-sustainable-food-may-halal>; https://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2009/12/the_eco-halal_revolution/

10. A summary of some elements of the Jewish Food Movement is found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyRgFIL-pH8>



Participants in the girls book and social action club, Girls Read and Do, participate in the Jewish New Year ritual of Tashlich as part of an educational session on how to ensure that our Jewish practices are harmonious with the environment (in this case, casting bird seed in lieu of the traditionally used bread crumbs – not healthful for water fowl – into the water). Photo credit: Liz Vaisben

10.2 Animal Ethics



Blessing of Animals at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, Grove City, OH. Photo credit: Sister Nancy Miller OSF

Integrally tied to food ethics is a concern for animal welfare and animal rights; despite many earlier precedents¹ mainstream attention to these concerns likely correlates with the rise of vegetarianism in America in the 1970s. This rise followed popular attention to world hunger from [Frances Moore Lappé](#) and other popularizers of the vegetarian movement in America and was developed further by the ethical arguments of [Peter Singer](#) in his book, “[Animal Liberation](#)” in 1975, which we will consider in closer detail below. These arguments and movements, as if cued by the Lynn White thesis, proceeded with only limited attention to religious arguments; sometimes, if anything, vegetarians in America have run into disagreement with traditional or conservative Christians, Jews, and Muslims, whose religious traditions have always tended to permit eating meat. Indeed, one can easily imagine moral claims that *eating meat is wrong* clashing with claims from religious traditions that do not outrightly prohibit eating meat.

It is worth noting that some of the first organized attention and advocacy for animal welfare in the West, with the

1. In addition to more ancient examples, vegetarianism and concern for treatment of animals gained some attention in the 1800s and 1900s, with quite a lot of religious justification, though never established a widespread following, such that even today these concerns make up something of a minority movement, but with greater attention since the 1970s. See for instance: <https://michaelbluejay.com/veg/history.html>; <http://www.pbs.org/food/the-history-kitchen/evolution-vegetarianism/>; <http://blog.nyhistory.org/life-on-the-veg-early-vegetarianism-in-america/>; <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/news/six-percent-of-americans-identify-as-vegan/>

founding of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the UK in 1824, was motivated by Christian organizations, and based on basic Christian values of compassion extended to all creatures.² While contemporary ethical movements around vegetarianism or animal welfare and rights have offered strong and distinctive moral arguments about rights and wrongs regarding treatment of animals and foods, such questions are nothing new to religions.³ Christianity has not historically provided a distinctive food ethics system (despite the existence of Christian Vegetarian organizations⁴ and the influences mentioned above). Beyond limiting meat consumption during Lent (thus Catholic and other Christian Friday fish fry traditions), Christianity tends to not condemn meat eating in general and has not provided as much ethical leadership to deal with contemporary food and animal system concerns. Christianity is also fairly ubiquitously associated with conventional American farming, where moral concerns to “feed the world” have tended to accompany support for increasing agricultural yields and use of industrial agriculture systems with a focus on large-scale economic efficiencies,⁵ which involves numerous ecological risks that often pit agricultural industry and economics against environmental interests. Despite the ecological risks of these agricultural techniques, American Christian values of hard work, modesty, and service to others have been virtues that have benefitted and guided farmers within those systems. So Christianity, the dominant religious system affiliated with large-scale American food and animal agricultural systems, has never had a strongly developed view of food and agriculture ethics that also addresses ecological concerns linked to agriculture; if anything, Christianity has more often (wittingly or not) been a religious and cultural force for maintaining the status quo in America and supporting industrial food and agriculture systems that have long concerned environmentalists.

Judaism and Islam, by contrast, have highly developed food ethics systems that have operated for over 1,000 years, so these will be given more focus in this chapter, Islam now standing as the second most prominent religion in America, and Judaism maintaining significant political and cultural influence.⁶ Jewish food ethics are associated with kosher/kashrut (related to Jewish dietary laws) food systems, and a distinctive Jewish environmental food movement has emerged since the 1990s, invoking a wide range of Jewish teachings and raising the profile of eco-kashrut, a movement which overlays broader Jewish ethical concerns for justice, human rights, sabbath care of land, and other tenets upon the specific food laws of traditional kashrut. Likewise, the Muslim system of halal has picked up ecological concerns similar to eco-kashrut, though currently with less momentum and cultural development than in Judaism. With both kashrut and halal, meat (except for pork) is not traditionally forbidden, and many in both religions maintain that it is not permitted

2. This is highlighted by British Anglican priest and theologian Andrew Linzey in his books, “Animal Theology” and “Animal Gospel: Christian Faith as if Animals Mattered”
3. Ancient precedents trace to Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish and Muslim traditions, predating modern animal welfare concerns; some contemporary arguments might be considered secular recapitulations of earlier (and ongoing) religious arguments.
4. See for instance: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_vegetarianism ; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Vegetarian_Association
5. These systems often require dependence on inputs (chemicals, fertilizers, pesticide/herbicides, hybrid seeds, gmo seeds, etc) manufactured by large agriculture corporations, which shifts influence on land use from the practices of local farmers towards the products and profits of large corporations.
6. Consider that the Jewish term for acceptable food, “kosher”, has been adopted as a more general term for things that are acceptable.

to require someone to abstain from eating meat; nonetheless, the relatively well-developed food ethics traditions and reasoning in Judaism and Islam, together with their cultural salience in America, make them ideal case studies for how religion impacts and intersects these food ethics issues.⁷

Because religious food ethics began influencing contemporary American food ethics mainly after the secular environmental food and animal movements gained momentum, we'll look at some of the key arguments that have been provided by the American environmental movement. Indeed, in attention to food and animals, some of the more "religious" facets of American environmentalism (principled, devoted, and passionate) have been evident.⁸

Some of the basic moral arguments related to world hunger and environmental concerns are exemplified by Frances Moore Lappé's "[Diet for a Small Planet](#)" (1971), where she linked overproduction of meat with global food scarcity. Her basic point was that animal agriculture requires much more energy and resources to create the same number of human nutrition calories from plants;⁹ for instance, Lappé pointed out that at the time, 80% of US grain production was consumed by livestock, so if Americans simply ate 10% less meat, there would be enough grain to feed all the world's hungry. If we look at how much fossil fuel and other (polluting) inputs are needed to grow corn to feed cows (so people can eat cow meat) compared to how many people could be fed by just growing plants, it seems like a no-brainer that we should shift American diets to consume more food from plants and less from meat (especially given that heart disease and other health problems are correlated with American diets that are too high in meat consumption). If most of the corn fields across America are for feeding cows, not people, imagine how much more "feeding the world" could happen if the meat/plants ratio in American diets were to shift further towards plants.

One would imagine that figures like those above would suffice to spark a large-scale shift in diets, but many factors have worked against such a shift. First, meat is widely considered delicious. And meat is a part of traditions related to food that bring communities together. Second, many of the predominant religions in America still hold that it isn't necessarily wrong to eat meat, per se. And third, the meat industry in America has heavily influenced diet charts, and has a powerful lobby in Washington to keep the meat industry humming.¹⁰ Yet, the share of organic agriculture and concern for humanely raised animals and ecologically raised crops and healthy, "whole" foods has significantly increased in the US; there are trends in directions that environmental ethicists can applaud. This is significant cultural change —

7. Additional chapters and whole books could be added to explore Eastern religious perspectives on animals, and indeed religious vegetarianisms are more commonly associated with Eastern religions.
8. To the extent that extreme passions and moral statements are often associated with "religious" behavior or fanatic devotion, this is part of how these movements have become known — think of animal rights activists infiltrating industrial food system animal confinement centers to liberate animals, think of PETA and their attention-grabbing videos and bold moral claims. Moral passions can run high around these topics.
9. For many who put environmental health at the top of their moral concern list, any action that reduces environmental impact or use of natural resources is considered important, and for those keeping count of water and energy use in various systems, moving away from agriculture that feeds animals is something of a no-brainer. Skewed "food pyramid" charts promoted by the US meat industry (which argued for diets much higher in meat than have traditionally been considered healthy) have typically been blamed for institutionalizing such high meat consumption traditions in the US (<http://time.com/4130043/lobbying-politics-dietary-guidelines/>).
10. Some of these ideas are expanded upon in the New York Times article, "Unhappy Meals," by Michael Pollan.

however, to make U.S. food less a matter of “meat and potatoes” and more a matter of “veggies and potatoes” is easier said than done.¹¹

While attention to resource use in various forms of agriculture (as well as runoff and other pollution issues) has caused some to shift their diets towards less meat consumption, any larger shift is still a work in progress. Notably, a number of the original American leaders of the vegetarian movement have since shifted back to eating meat, so long as the meat comes from animals who were grass-fed or otherwise ethically and ecologically raised, in recognition of the value meat can have to diets, to taste, to culture, and to the aesthetic values of food.¹² Many also point out the importance of animal agriculture to cyclical and holistic food and agriculture systems — the waste of animals can indeed make fine fertilizer, which eliminates the need for artificial fertilizers whose widespread application have caused such water pollution problems like toxic algae blooms. In some regions of the world, the grasses that grow locally might not be edible (or digestible) for humans, but animals can eat those local plants, and the people can eat the meat of the animals, so a natural system of providing food from indigenous plants can be a virtue of small scale animal agriculture systems. Some who care for ecology and healthy environmental systems argue that it may well be the *scale* of livestock systems that most results in ecological issues — large scale industrial agriculture that doesn't have sufficient protections for animals or ecological systems (especially where large profits become a driving force) tends to sacrifice local ecologies for economic gain, while small scale animal agriculture can provide a more sustainable, holistic system that requires fewer synthetic inputs.¹³ Or so the argument goes.

11. Consider the story of Iowa Interfaith Power and Light founders of the “Cool Congregations” program, which popularized calculating the carbon footprint of congregation member households. This program inspired many people — and later spread nationally beyond Iowa — to take actions to reduce their carbon footprint. They spurred people to shut off unused lights, dial down their thermostats, and insulate their homes; but even though “changing your diet from more to less meat” is a significant way to reduce your carbon footprint (because animal agriculture involves a great deal of fossil fuel burning between production and transport), the Cool Congregations founders realized this wasn't an area they should emphasize. Why not? “This is Iowa — we wanted the program to succeed, not fail!” they said. Enough said. More recently, however, Iowa Interfaith Power and Light has developed a Food, Faith and Climate program that addresses these questions, which is a good example of how education and ethics campaigns evolve.
12. Elizabeth Telfer's “Food for Thought” provides arguments about the aesthetic value of taste and pleasure in eating food, and claims that while feeding the hungry is an essential concern, these aesthetic dimensions are not as insignificant as often they are made out to be by those arguing against eating meat.
13. MTSO Seminary Hill Farm is a good case study in this ethos. Wendell Berry also makes arguments for the economic sense of local economies and smaller scale agriculture in his book *Home Economics* (see especially the essays “Two Economies” and “A Defense of the Family Farm”).



A long-time volunteer at Shepherd's Corner Ecology Center gives the sheep a treat after pulling out old collard greens that are bound for the compost pile. The greens were fertilized by previous years of sheep manure. From manure they came, to manure they shall return. Photo credit: Julie Laudick

Peter Singer

With all of these contextual comments in place, let's look more specifically at some of the more significant moral and ethical arguments related to food and animals, specifically the arguments of Peter Singer. The main reason to focus on Singer is that his animal welfare arguments from "[Animal Liberation](#)" are probably the best known and have been the most influential intellectual arguments about animal treatment in America and beyond.¹⁴ His effective and persuasive claims spurred the animal welfare movement and saw it succeed in improving treatment of animals in animal agriculture. Singer is a secular philosopher, and his arguments do not tend to invoke religion — if anything, Singer's classic animal

14. The publishers of *Animal Liberation* tout it as "the book that started a revolution"...

welfare arguments disregard religion as outdated, and largely ignore religion save in a footnote. However, the ethical ideas Singer supports do overlap with religious moral and ethical tenets, so there is room for dialogue.

In Singer's first chapter of "Animal Liberation," "All Animals Are Equal," he states that the ethical principles that support human equality *require* humans to extend equal consideration to animals, too. To set up his claim, he relates an 18th century view that we clearly would scoff at today — [Thomas Taylor's](#) satirical argument that because equal rights for animals is absurd, thus equal rights between women and men is absurd.¹⁵ Singer discusses what the basis of equal rights might be — men and women might have rights that animals don't share, because women, unlike dogs, can make rational decisions, so male-female human equality might be based on men and women being similar in ways that non-humans are not. Yet men and women are still *different*, Singer says — men don't need a right to an abortion, just as dogs don't need a right to vote. Thus, "the extension of the basic principle of equality from one group to another does not imply that we must treat both groups in exactly the same way, or grant exactly the same rights to both groups. **The basic principle of equality does not require identical treatment; it requires equal consideration.** Equal consideration for different beings may lead to different treatment and different rights." Therefore, there is nothing absurd about extending equal rights to brutes, says Singer, because it's based on the same principles by which we grant equality to genders, sexes, and races.

To diverge for a moment, I will say that, for the most part, I agree with Singer's arguments and the moral principles he discusses, but in one important way that impinges on Singer's relevance to religious thinking, I think his arguments less persuasive. In particular, Singer comments in a footnote that in examining the basis for moral arguments about animals, humans, and equality, he is not considering religious arguments that humans are made in the image of God. His reasoning, no doubt resonant among secularists and perhaps bolstered by sociologists of the time,¹⁶ was that since religious views don't "offer a reasoned explanation" of why humans in particular might have immortal souls, or because religious doctrines are "no longer as widely accepted as they once were," it is safe to ignore them.¹⁷

However, it is probably much more likely the case that the very principle of equality, for many Americans, is defensible precisely because of the moral idea that all people are created in the image of God and are equal in the eyes of God.¹⁸ It is also possibly the case that the idea of equality itself became established because of such religious views (Singer does not deny this — he acknowledges that these views have probably been historically important, but nonetheless assumes that they have lost relevance). This is a fine point, admittedly, but I diverge to point out the following: Singer sees fit to

15. Taylor, a Cambridge philosopher, published his comments anonymously, as a parody of Mary Wollstonecraft's arguments for the vindication of the rights of women (1792) – he thought the argument for equality between men and women was absurd, so he tried to demonstrate that Wollstonecraft's same arguments could be made for equality between humans and animals ("brutes"); because Taylor's culture would think any argument for human-animal equality absurd, he hoped to persuade readers that his biases against male-female equality were sound by drawing a connection between the claims.
16. Some sociologists subscribed to the idea that religion might just fade away, such as Peter Berger, who later said his conclusion that religion would fade was the most mistaken conclusion of his career, given how religion has not only not faded, but rebounded worldwide in the meantime (see Berger's book, [The Desecularization of the World](#)).
17. Singer's anti-religious bias is also clearly on display in chapter 5 of his book: "Man's Dominion: A Short History of Speciesism..."
18. Richard Baer was fond of making this point in his religion and environment courses at Cornell.

cast these views aside, but never supplies an alternative basis for the principle of equality itself. Borrowing on equality as an established principle, he argues to extend the principle beyond humans to all sentient beings by force of logical arguments about the similarity of sentient beings; but without basis for equality, there seems to be no logical reason to accept Singer's basic case.¹⁹

Nonetheless, as Singer argues, equality is a moral idea, not an idea based in some fact of equality by physical or intellectual standards. For many, that moral idea has authority because it is supported and supplied by religions, which propose the equality of humans in the eyes of God. These systems also propose that animals should be valued, not because they are equal to humans in the eyes of God, but because they are deserving of fitting treatment as creatures of God, valuable in the eyes of God just as humans are (even if not as much as humans).²⁰ A moral principle such as this, which is already broadly agreed upon by American religious communities and supported by the predominant religious traditions of America, might have a much better chance of gaining widespread acceptance by Americans than a set of arguments that marginalizes religious principles.²¹ Here again, the wisdom of re-examining these 1960s and 1970s biases against religion becomes clear, and indeed a growing literature has done so.²²

Despite the confusion in Singer's arguments about the role of religion and the basis of equality, his reasoning about the implications of equality is helpful on many levels, especially in improving the treatment of animals. He clarifies that to say that "all humans are equal" isn't to say they are the same — if the demand for equal treatment were based on sameness, Singer says we would have to stop demanding equality (some are faster than others, some smarter, some more artistic, some larger, some smaller, etc). To claim that people should be treated equally does not depend on equal intelligence, moral capacity, physical strength, or similar matters of fact or ability. As a *moral idea*, not an assertion of fact, Singer says the principle of equality of human beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among humans, it is a prescription of how we should treat human beings, and differences in ability among people do not justify any difference in the amount of *consideration* we give to their needs and interests. Concern for well-being of children requires us to educate them; concern for well-being of pigs requires us to give them room to root around.

Singer hearkens back to [Jeremy Bentham](#), founder of the utilitarian view of moral philosophy, in the belief that each person "counts" for the same. In terms of moral consideration of animals, Bentham said "The question is not, Can they reason? Nor Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?" The idea here is that the capacity for suffering — or more strictly, for suffering and/or the enjoyment of happiness — is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in a meaningful way. It's nonsense to say a rock has an interest in not being kicked. But with the capacity for suffering and enjoyment, Singer says, a being has interests — at an absolute minimum, an interest in not suffering. Bentham spoke of rights, but Singer is careful only to speak of welfare; he's an

19. Ironically, Singer is making much the same move that Taylor made in the late 1700s.
20. Omar Saqr, a guest lecturer on Islam and the Environment in my class at OSU, emphasizes the point that Islam is both anthropocentric and biocentric, and shares with the other Abrahamic traditions, overall, a theocentric orientation.
21. The problem is this: claiming that the likes of "equality in the eyes of God" is irrelevant, but then depending on the principle of equality anyway, seems like a biased move; perhaps a similar bias has underlain some animal rights and welfare arguments that have tended to be set in opposition to traditional moral views and mainstream moral communities in America.
22. See for instance Peter Berger's book *Desecularization of the World*: <https://www.amazon.com/Desecularization-World-Resurgent-Religion-Politics/dp/0802846912>

animal welfarist, not an animal rights advocate.²³ He says an animal doesn't need rights to be given moral consideration. If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. For Singer, the limit of sentience (the capacity to suffer and/or experience enjoyment) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others.²⁴

Animals feel pain, says Singer, so we can't morally justify regarding the pain an animal feels as less important than the same amount of pain or pleasure felt by humans.²⁵ For those who object, Singer raises the criticism of *speciesism* — to give more consideration to our own human species than others — which Singer paints as equally morally blameworthy as sexism and racism.²⁶ Against the resistance by many people to accepting his accusation of speciesism, Singer capitalizes on a notion that many people believe that humans are more valuable because of their higher degree of intelligence than other creatures. He confronts this notion, saying that since a high degree of intelligence doesn't entitle humans to mistreat less intelligent humans because of that capacity, how can it entitle humans to mistreat non-humans for the same reason? Most people would accept some of this reasoning, but this needn't be persuasive — who said anyone thinks humans are entitled to *mistreat* animals because we value humans more than other animals? While Singer maintains that equality must be extended to non-humans, just like it's extended to all humans, this argument only makes sense if you believe that viewing nonhumans as inferior to humans will permit humans to mistreat animals.

Singer does nod to more traditional views on human value when he considers the morality of *killing* animals versus humans. If suffering is avoided, says Singer, then the moral ideals he outlines about welfare are not violated, so killing an animal quickly and painlessly avoids the moral wrongness that Singer identifies. Humans, on the other hand, says Singer, can plan for the future, can have their plans foiled, and can suffer from anticipating their death; for those reasons if one had to choose between killing a human and a dog (or another non-human sentient animal), it would be better to avoid killing the human. Singer comes to a conclusion that our lives may be more valuable than a pig, but our suffering is not more valid. The conclusions of animal liberation come from the idea of minimizing suffering alone.

These conclusions provide a powerful argument for reducing animal suffering in animal agriculture, but it is unclear

23. Lilly Marlene-Russo published an article as a special supplement in the May/June 1990 Hastings Center Report entitled, "Ethical Theory and the Moral Status of Animals." This article does a nice job of describing the contributions of a range of ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and deontology, to reasoning about the morality of experimentation on animals. Russo describes a thought process that often leads to a "judicious combination of theoretical commitments" — as humans, we tend to draw from different bases of concern to justify our actions and values. Thus, we may draw on a utilitarian argument like Singer's in some cases, on deontology in others, on contract theories in others, etc, demonstrating that an adequate ethical theory for food and animal (or any other) concerns will most likely draw on multiple ethical perspectives. Religious perspectives will also be in the mix for most humans when they think about such issues.
24. Singer spends five pages establishing and defending that animals do suffer — despite claims to the contrary — based on what we know about physiology.
25. Singer further qualifies this in terms of equal consideration — a swat on the rump of a horse would be equivalent to a soft tap on a human baby, equally considered.
26. Here I suspect that people may take issue and disagree — Singer's argument of speciesism would only be true for those who accept an ultimate belief in the moral equality of humans and non-humans, which many people do not. A more palatable belief for many humans would likely be that, just as Singer says, animals are deserving of consideration of their suffering and well-being, but that needn't require a belief in human/non-human equality.

whether such an approach is likely to gain significantly more allies than those who already favor secular environmental concerns. Many people aren't devoted to Singer's rational principles and approach; others do not resonate with his dismissal of religion as outdated, or they may not buy "utilitarianism" (which is Singer's basic stance) as the best overall perspective. And despite making claims that he avoids emotional arguments, his readers have been able to respond with compassion, emotion, and care to the horrific photos he included in his book that substantiate the terrible treatment of animals that he described. However, Singer's arguments have been thoughtful, academically and socially prolific, and have very likely resulted in a great deal of good, including change for the better in animal agriculture systems. He is a giant of contemporary moral thinking by any measure.

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Chapter 10 Discussion Questions

Reflection Question:

Summarize Peter Singer's argument and choose either the Judaism readings or the Islam readings to compare with Singer (if you want to read about both Judaism and Islam, we won't stop you). To what extent do you think Singer's position is complementary to or opposed to the views of animals supported by Judaism or Islam? Are there any points of Singer's argument that you agree or disagree with?

Discussion Questions:

1. Singer writes that "The only thing that distinguishes the infant from the animal, in the eyes of those who claim that it has a 'right to life', is that it is, biologically, a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, whereas chimpanzees, dogs, and pigs are not." Do you agree with Singer? If not, why not?
2. What does Singer mean by speciesism? Do you agree with Singer that speciesism is on a moral par with sexism, racism, and other isms? Why or why not?
3. What distinction does Singer raise between equal treatment and equal consideration? What is the significance of this point in Singer's argument.
4. Singer says "equality is a moral idea, not an assertion of fact." Do you agree with Singer, and why do you think this is important?
5. What are the differences between an animal welfare view and an animal rights view? Which view does Singer hold? Which view is more strict in terms of the treatment of animals?
6. Why do you think Singer spends so much effort explaining whether or not animals feel pain? How do suffering and sentience play a role in Singer's arguments about the treatment of animals?
7. What difference, if any, does Singer say there is between causing suffering to an animal and causing an animal's death?
8. And some kashrut and halal questions:
9. What is eco-kashrut? How do kosher and eco-kosher differ?
10. How similar are the rules of kashrut and of halal for the treatment of animals slaughtered for food? How do they differ?
11. How might the Islamic principle of *tayyib* relate to food ethics for a Muslim?

CHAPTER II: CASE STUDY: ENVIRONMENTAL VIRTUE ETHICS

The previous chapter on animal and food ethics revealed an important facet of moral reasoning: often those who disagree about “how we should live” are basing their views on quite different beliefs about how ethics *should* be done. Someone who believes humans have no right to kill animals may believe that using an animal rights framework is the correct ethical approach, while a livestock farmer who treats animals well and butchers them as painlessly as possible may believe that an animal welfare view should be the basis of our judgement. Often, those who argue about sensitive issues like these talk past each other if they don’t acknowledge (or realize) that they are starting from different ways of reasoning. And as we discussed in chapter 4, even if they acknowledge different approaches to ethical reasoning, opponents in an argument can also differ, often without realizing it, in what they believe counts as knowledge, or as reasonable, in the first place. This deeper level of ethical foundations and beliefs can make all the difference in understanding the views of someone who holds “opposing” views on environmental issues.

For instance, regardless of whether one argues from an animal rights or animal welfare view, both systems remain within the scope of modern rational choice systems of ethics, which sometimes simply disregard other systems of reasoning as invalid (for example, Peter Singer’s animal welfare arguments simply disregard religious views based on a belief that such views are not rational and can safely be ignored; meanwhile, most of the world’s people identify themselves as members of some religious tradition, and likely do accept at least some religious beliefs as valid). The belief that secular systems of philosophy and ethics could or should be sufficient, such that religious views can be ignored or disregarded, is itself a belief, however. Much like the verification principle of logical positivism, which posits that only things that can be verified can be known – a principle that fails its own criteria, because it can’t be verified! – these (also ultimately faith-based) views have held an influential place in universities and modern secular states, but they¹ can miss (and might even be disrespectful to) the ethical perspectives that most people hold. Rational choice theories of ethics are not the only basis for moral reasoning and figuring out the right answers to ethical questions, and while such approaches can be helpful in some contexts, or in resolving some ethical disputes (utilitarian reasoning is helpful in many cases, for instance, as is considering rights), they often fail on the whole to provide answers across an entire worldview.² To the extent that most people draw on different ways of thinking to live and understand their lives, this isn’t noteworthy, but to the extent that it is implied that these systems should be privileged above other forms of moral reasoning, it may be wise to broaden our thinking.

This chapter aims to explore an alternative approach to ethical reasoning – virtue theory. We will not explore virtue theory, however, just for the sake of adding another theory to the pot. My interest is to give equal consideration to an ethical theory that seems more resonant with the moral/ethical approaches and instincts and traditions of many religious communities. We will do so by way of the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993) and a book chapter by Joseph Kupfer that renders the movie explicitly in virtue terms.³

1. This is not to suggest that philosophers typically dismiss other views, or that secular thinkers aren’t often inclusive and respectful; rather, it is just to note the privileged view that sometimes is promoted.
2. The conventional American farmer who finds some agreement with animal welfare views likely finds much more resonance with religious or virtue-based perspectives on ethics.
3. With special thanks to Jim Tantillo and Richard Baer for developing many of the insights discussed

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[Virtue Ethics](#)

in this chapter. Kupfer, Joseph H. “Virtue and Happiness in Groundhog Day.” In *Visions of Virtue in Popular Film*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999, 35-60.

11.1 Joseph Kupfer: Virtue and Happiness in Groundhog Day

The movie Groundhog Day, starring Bill Murray, might not strike you as a deep source of ethical instruction, but Joseph Kupfer¹ plumbs its storyline to reveal some delightful ethical insights. He notes that the movie starts with Nietzsche's idea of the eternal return² as a prompt about reflecting on our life and whether it is good – are we living the “good life”? What is the “good life”? The ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle said that living virtuously is the good life. And while the meaning and purpose of life may be debated – is it peace? Love? Happiness? Nothing? – the philosophers identified the good life and happiness as eudaimonia,³ human flourishing. They said virtuous action can't guarantee eudaimonia, but acting virtuously is central to happiness and is the only thing within our power to secure our happiness.

In contrast to eudaimonia, the beginning of the movie Groundhog Day follows the life of Phil Connors (played by Murray), whose path is egoistic hedonism – the life of self-centered pleasure seeking – which is the perennial rival to virtue and happiness. Such a life illustrates that goodness is distinct from pleasure. In the movie, due to some karmic twist of fate, Phil Connors, a self-centered weatherman from Pittsburgh, finds himself stuck in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, repeating the same day, Groundhog Day, over and over. Stuck as he is in a repeated series of daily events, he soon realizes (to his delight) that there are no consequences to his actions – if he breaks the law and ends up in jail on one day, he'll still wake up the next morning and start the same day over again in Punxsutawney. His first impulse, as an egoistic hedonist, is to use this karmic quirk to his advantage in seeking as much pleasure as possible. Drinking, stealing, breaking the law, seducing women – Phil maxxes out on these pursuits, perfecting his skills of manipulation as he gains an advantage over the law, women, and mortality. But he soon realizes that these pursuits do not bring lasting happiness. He begins to despair, becomes suicidal, and then is even more depressed to find that he is helpless to even kill himself – after multiple attempts to take his own life, he always wakes up the next day to live it all over again. So this becomes one of the first key lessons in the movie about the path to a good life – a self-centered life of pleasure seeking ironically frustrates its own goals. Eventually Phil develops excellence of character, and becomes an exemplary person through virtuous pursuits, but not before learning the hard way that his selfish impulses toward immediate gratification undermine his ultimate happiness.

Thinking back to the discussion of spiritual anthropologies in chapter five, Niebuhr and Loy would likely agree that self-centered pleasure seeking would only mire us deeper in our delusion of self-importance, and indeed, deluged as Americans are by modern marketing messages, the delusion of self-importance carries a sort of empirical inertia that is hard to shake or un-do. So being forced to live a day over and over is indeed a rare way to gain some perspective on our daily lives,⁴ and Groundhog Day's suggestion, together with Aristotle, is that exercising the virtues leads to happiness

1. Kupfer's chapter on happiness and virtue in the movie Groundhog Day forms the basis for much of the discussion in this chapter: Kupfer, Joseph H. “Virtue and Happiness in Groundhog Day.” In *Visions of Virtue in Popular Film*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999, 35-60.
2. <https://www.thoughtco.com/nietzsches-idea-of-the-eternal-recurrence-2670659>
3. Eudaimonia comes from the roots eu (good) and daimon (spirit) – having a good indwelling spirit, which leads to happiness and human flourishing. This is the highest human good, so ethics and political philosophy aim to achieve it.
4. The daily repeat helps because it reveals what daily life conceals about pursuing pleasure.

because it develops our best potential, our true nature, our path to flourishing and to achieving, realizing, perfecting, and enjoying our natural potential.

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While the movie *Groundhog Day* does not develop any overt environmental themes, a potential link here to environmental flourishing is that such a virtuous way of living might have the side-effect of being environmentally virtuous. By living a human flourishing that needn't exploit others and the Earth and that finds contentment in excellence of character and the development of an enriching and intrinsically satisfying way of being, Americans might build into their lives a greater capacity to resist culturally and economically reinforced impulses to buy, consume, and waste. And because the virtues train us away from egocentrism, by inculcating a way of life that is not self-centered and does not reinforce the delusion of the self, they help us overcome the "human problems" that perennially keep us from individual and collective happiness.⁵

Kupfer has more to say on happy living. He suggests that the good life consists in:

- doing things that develop our distinctively human abilities,
- engaging in activities that bring our natural endowments to fruition, such that we choose them for their own sake,
- cultivating intellectual pursuits (such as in abstract reasoning with math proofs, scientific theories, or philosophical reflections), and
- exercising *phronesis* – practical wisdom – the intellectual virtue concerned with moral action, so that we can live out the good life and appropriate responses to the knowledge we possess about "what's going on."

The good life also involves realizing that our aesthetic potential further contributes to our happiness, such as deepening our capacity for artistic appreciation, or developing talents for creating art (through music, poetry, painting, and the like). Kupfer also notes that the intellectual and aesthetic are non-moral dimensions of human nature, but the moral virtues of discipline, resourcefulness, and tenacity are needed for their cultivation.⁶ Kupfer says developing our distinctly human abilities is valuable, for these abilities are our natural potential, which virtuous activities enable us to realize or perfect. The virtues correspond to the essential features of human nature and well-being.⁷ Exercised and developed in these activities, the virtues are themselves human excellences and also make possible the perfecting of our natural gifts. For example, Plato says the virtue of justice is psychic order – reason, emotion, and appetite working in harmony. Such an ordered soul is the realization of our potential, and facilitates the overall flourishing of the individual.

Kupfer says that the natural results of the various intrinsically enjoyable activities are also good, such as health, knowledge, artistic beauty, and justice. We find these diverse activities worthwhile in themselves because they all

5. One iteration of the "human problem" is that despite generally having a sense of how we should best live, we tend to fail to do so; another is the tragic tendency to defeat our own best potential due to fear or by failure to trust one another; another is the question "why can't we just get along?"
6. This point might need further elaboration. Why, after all, are the intellectual and aesthetic seen as non-moral? Here the sense is likely that in pure form, aesthetic appreciation has an objective dimension to it, as do intellectual pursuits. Learning something that is a simple matter of fact (as in science, for instance, or in learning that some music (like that by Bach) is better than other music (like that by Hitzhusen)) is not a claim about what is right or wrong morally, it simply acknowledges what is. However, undoubtedly there are intellectual and aesthetic claims that can be made with moral intent, or that have moral implications.
7. See Kupfer, p. 40.

develop our inherent abilities, and the beneficial results of the activities reinforce this development. As such, the goodness of life is found in activity: in the moral doing, the artistic making, the rational thinking. Pleasure is not the reason for engaging in the activities, but we naturally take pleasure in them. Because these activities are intrinsically worthwhile, they are self-sustaining. We do not have to look beyond them for pleasure. We don't need further pleasure as an added attraction. Kupfer adds that we achieve happiness only by trying to do good for others. In pursuing moral ends we do virtuous things; becoming more virtuous, we forget ourselves and enjoy life.⁸

8. [Karl Johnson's article](#) about how fishing cultivates virtues is also instructive (Johnson, K. (1998). The Virtues of Fishing. In Genova, P., [First Cast: Teaching Kids to Fly-Fish](#), pp. 6-8, Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books. Reprinted 2002, Texas Fish & Game, 17(12). Reprinted as "Time Well Wasted" in 2004, New York State Conservationist, 58(5)). We might also question the earlier lines about goodness being found in activity – in doing, making, and rational thinking. This seems to be the “western” ideal, which is often contrasted with an “eastern” ideal more tuned to contemplation, of *being* rather than doing. Typically, we criticize a “western” approach as lacking balance – of favoring doing/making/rationality – ratio – over being/receiving/intuition – intellectus – instead of balancing the two. But note here that Kupfer is highlighting the “unselfing” that results from virtuous pursuits. Perhaps it is the fact that we understand that these pursuits shape us, and form us into something better, rather than assuming that we are already the measure of goodness and excellence, that allows such doing to have an unselfing capacity? Note that Kupfer here is also highlighting altruism – doing good for others – which has a self-liberating effect.



A community of Christians enjoy the “good life” as they, for a full week, discontinue the use of electricity, natural gas, and running water and use only renewable resources. Photo credit: Wilhelmina Witt

11.2 Egoistic Hedonism, Meet Stanley Hauerwas

Egoistic hedonism is necessarily self-defeating and filled with ironies. The goal of life for an egoistic hedonist is to maximize pleasure, especially one's own. As a result, hedonists miss out on the enjoyment of activities done for their own sake. "The irony," says Kupfer, "is that a life of hedonism is actually much less pleasant than a virtuous one." A hedonist may seek power because power confers the ability to dominate others so as to better gratify one's appetites. But Socrates says a life of egoistic hedonism is like filling a leaky vessel: ¹ satisfied desires require continual replenishment. One cannot make progress because appetites increase and multiply. We're always left wanting more, and suffering because of our craving. These insights accord well with Buddhist philosophy, which describes this state as being caught in the cycle of suffering and death. Deluded into thinking that our self is a subject deserving elevation, we remain unable to see the truth, unable to ground our lives in any real path.

Hedonistic pleasure is also essentially subjective – it can't really be known or planned for, and this matters, because in order to seek what's good, we must think about it. As Socrates claimed in Plato's dialogues, the unexamined life is not worth living. This is similar to what Thoreau was after when he headed to Walden Pond and said he intended to live deliberately. Examining ourselves allows us to see human nature, disabuse ourselves of false beliefs that undermine our happiness (the Buddhist would include the "self" as one such belief), and of our mistaken opinions about pleasure and power. We have to have rational control over our appetites and emotion to carry out our self-investigation with equanimity. As Kupfer says, hedonists focus on pleasure as their primary interest, but pursuit of it leaves them without "the self-control provided by reason to pause in their reaching for pleasure to ponder what might give them the most pleasure overall or in the long run" (p. 39). The desirability of hedonism is revealed as illusory once individuals are deprived of novelty of situation or circumstance. The sweetest things in their novelty must become tedious when indefinitely repeated, exactly as Phil Connors discovers in *Groundhog Day*.

Another important point is that friendship is key to the good life, too. Aristotle noted that friendships based on utility and pleasure are inferior types of friendship. "The only genuine friends are those who love each others' virtuous character." Such friends value one another for their own sakes. Kupfer notes that the film presents an image of virtuous friendship blended into romantic love. The film doesn't explore this, "but in illustrating a concept of romantic love enriched by virtue, the film is suggestive about an important component of the good life."² Egoistic hedonists can't have genuine friendships because they view people as simply a means to their own pleasures.

For similar reasons, Stanley Hauerwas (in his chapter about Iris Murdoch in the book *Vision and Virtue*) notes that romantic love often is not enduring because it is selfish. One loves the way the other makes them feel – as a boost to their own self, not because they really love the other. As M. Scott Peck says in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, once the honeymoon period of romantic love wears off is when a couple must learn to truly love one another for who they are. Similar to Murdoch's views on love and unselfing, Plato, Aristotle, and *Groundhog Day* suggest that happiness is achieved only when we forget about ourselves. This doesn't amount to claiming to definitively prove that a virtuous life is better than its hedonistic counterpart, so they add narrative support for their view with myths, fables, and stories of famous people.

Plato's *Republic* tells the tale of Gyges, whose magic ring makes him invisible. He can please himself at the expense of others with apparent impunity, much like Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*. Phil begins the movie as an egoistic hedonist – only Rita, his producer, is impervious to him. He bores of all the pleasures he pursues; he despairs, he tries to take his life, but in vain. Only when Phil shows concern for other people and starts developing his own talents does he begin

1. David Wilcox's song "Break in the Cup" addresses a similar notion ([video](#); [lyrics](#); [other Wilcox songs](#)).

2. See Kupfer p. 40.

to enjoy life.³ In the movie, virtuous living and genuine regard for others and himself free Phil from his despair and, as providence would have it, from the eternal return of Groundhog Day. One wonders: has Phil escaped the cycle of craving, suffering and death? The movie's ironic twist is that once Phil is finally mortal again, he can be free to live without fear of death.

Stanley Hauerwas, in "Character, Narrative, and Growth in the Christian Life" adds a Christian gloss to some of these ideas. He says that the experience and necessity of moral growth has always been the subject of philosophical reflection and theological inquiry, and of course has been embodied in actual religious practices and disciplines (p. 129). He says religions haven't used the language of "moral development" so much as terms like spiritual growth, holiness, a pilgrimage of the self, perfection, and being faithful to the way. The fruits of this manifest the conviction that we belong to another. We learn to describe life as a gift rather than as an achievement. We see autonomous freedom, an ideal of Western individualism, as only slavery to the self and the self's desires. For Hauerwas, the Christian belief is that true freedom comes by learning to be appropriately dependent, that is, to trust God, who wills the final good of all. In such a belief, true freedom means being perfectly obedient;⁴ it means rendering perfect service. This freedom is a gift, and it is accepted as disciples learning to imitate a master.

For Hauerwas, growth in the Christian life is not required only because we are morally deficient, but also because the God who has called us is infinitely rich. Therefore conversion denotes the necessity of a turning of the self that is so fundamental that the self is placed on a path of growth for which there is no end. The narrative that forms the background for the vision of Christian growth requires conversion, since the narrative never treats the formation of the self as completed (conversion is also needed because we are forced to give up false accounts of ourselves). These insights echo the theme developed by Pura's article "The Divine Game of Pinzatski," which describes a virtuous game that can never end, much as Groundhog Day in the movie is the day (and lesson in virtue) that never ends. One may never reach completion as a self, but growth, love, and happiness characterize the relational connections of a life well-lived.

Hauerwas would conclude that virtue and character are key to the notion of Christian moral growth. Hauerwas tells the story of missing the moral point once when his father gave him a rifle that he'd made himself. It was a beautiful gesture, a finely made rifle, made with love. But Hauerwas responded with indignation – he was a pacifist who didn't like guns – and only later realized how he had missed the point. He lacked the moral maturity and grace to accept his father's gift. It is challenging to understand life as a gift – we need to be trained to develop certain habits. But it is equally important to be introduced to stories that provide a way to locate ourselves in relation to others, our society, and the universe. Stories capable of that, says Hauerwas, are adventures, for there can be no self devoid of adventure. What we crave is not dignity as an end in itself, but participation in a struggle that is dignifying. And we don't just need a story, but a true story – a story in which the self can find a home.

Here perhaps we can see part of why Hauerwas played a role in reinvigorating virtue theory. In effect, modern ethical theories sort of fall down, because they don't equip us well enough, or resonantly enough, with how we tend to "do ethics" – how we need to be part of a story. This aligns with how, as Lilly Marlene-Russo says, we organically integrate various ethical approaches in living our lives. These and other thinkers helped spark a renewal in virtue because virtue, applied to our actions, may succeed in cultural and spiritual transformation where ethical theories and analysis do not. Perhaps in addition to our solutions and technical fixes to environmental problems, we need to be unselfed, in a way that nature, art, music and love can do for us. And we need to discover the paths of virtue that lead to our natural fulfillment.

3. See Kupfer p. 42

4. This point reminds us of one of the findings of Martina Vonk in her dissertation about sustainable communities: she found that religious communities that might well be singled out as exemplars for sustainable living ironically do not hold "being sustainable" as their goal. Instead, they tend to be focused on obedience to God, faithfulness to the truths they hold dear, and commitment to their community within which they find fulfillment, security, and comfort in their relationships.

11.3 Religion and Phil

A related point can be emphasized here in how we think about religion and spirituality in relation to the environment. If we only see spirituality and religion as emotional boosters to get environmental policy passed, then that might be a helpful social force, but it seems to miss the religious and spiritual point. One way of being interested in religious influence is to see it as a complementary advocacy force to environmental or other movements. Another way of seeing religious practice is as a transforming force for individual and collective good living – reducing control issues, exploitative urges, and the like. Religions can serve as a source of the cultural and spiritual transformation that Gus Speth says is needed to address environmental issues.¹ As elsewhere in this book, this is not to say that religion should be promoted as *the* answer, but our science and policy approaches by themselves have not and will not be adequate to the task of solving our environmental problems, so it behooves us to seriously consider the complementary means of spiritual and cultural transformation that religions offer towards environmental citizenship and sustainability.

Recall, however, that when we say “religion” here, we intend the functional definition alluded to in chapter three, which goes beyond those organized groups typically labeled as “religions.” Rather, we think of religion as whatever system of thought provides the answers to life’s big questions of meaning, purpose, and the nature of reality. So systems of philosophy and other “not-typically-deemed-religious” worldviews can also be highlighted in this dialogue. Certainly the perspectives of philosophers themselves, like Aristotle, deserve equal consideration as well. One helpful introduction to classical philosophical ideas about the good life (among scores now available on the internet) is the Aristotle and Virtue Ethics Crash Course video, which describes Aristotle’s virtue ethics (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrvtOWEXDIQ>). Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day* seems to be just the sort of person, by movie’s end, who strikes a balance between extremes as a living example of Aristotle’s golden mean. Phil’s character learns to be gracious and helpful, knowing just what to say every time – he is self-deprecating when others praise him for helping them; he puts others at ease while being helpful; he helps others perform at their best by providing support like a true friend. Phil has gained practical wisdom, *phronesis*, through habituation, and becomes an exemplar for others.

Phil’s character resonates with the lessons taught in many religions – indeed, the directors of the film have been delighted to receive many letters from religious adherent around the world, thanking them for capturing the essence of their religious perspectives on living a good life. Yogi’s, fundamentalists, Buddhists, Catholics, and others have all found points of resonance. Phil has seen reality for what it is – unselfed by his experiences, he no longer pursues the vain impulses of the self, but rather strikes a middle path between extremes, finding balance and happiness along the way.

The example Phil provides in the movie gives us much food for thought. Viewers themselves may be drawn to the idea of using their (endless?) days to pursue virtue and perhaps find lasting happiness. Salvation, enlightenment, unselfing, peace – humans tend to only dimly see the secrets to happiness, often mistaking treasures for inconveniences when mired in self-preoccupation. The self-forgetful fruits of pursuing virtue, as Phil discovers, lead to excellence and contentment, to a good life of *eudaimonia*.

1. As referenced in chapter 2.5, [Speth stated that](#) “The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.” If we all lived our values, would we need any environmental policies?

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Chapter 11 Discussion Questions

Reflection Questions:

Kupfer (1999) discusses the movie *Groundhog Day* in terms of Phil Connors' growth in virtue — from a stage of egoistic hedonism to a state of eudaimonia born of a virtuous life. Summarize the Kupfer chapter and spend at least a paragraph discussing how the story of *Groundhog Day* resonates with Johnson's chapter on "The Virtues of Fishing." Feel free to add any critique of Kupfer or Johnson based on your own interpretation of the movie or your views on virtue.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Kupfer mean by, "Egoistic hedonism," and which examples of this can be found in the movie *Groundhog Day*?
2. What do you consider the primary turning point in Phil Connors' personal transformation?
3. Kupfer states that, "A life of egoistic hedonism is necessarily self-defeating and filled with ironies." What does he mean by this?
4. How do relationships between virtuous people and relationships between egoistic hedonists differ according to Kupfer? How does Phil and Rita's relationship demonstrate this? Would the message of the movie change if their relationship was purely platonic?
5. What is eudaimonia, and how was Phil ultimately able to achieve it?
6. Kupfer spends a significant share of time speaking about the power of participating in activities for their own sakes. How do *Groundhog Day* and "The Virtues of Fishing" demonstrate this?
7. In what ways is this week's material relevant to the discussion of Religion and the Environment?

Connection Questions:

1. How does Kupfer's article relate to Iris Murdoch's idea of "unselfing?" Is unselfing always a path to virtue and happiness?
2. Would David Loy and Reinhold Niebuhr agree with this article? Why or why not?
3. How might Baer's concept of *Ratio* and *Intellectus* explain why enjoying art, literature, and music is an effective way to build virtue?

CHAPTER 12: CASE STUDY: CONSUMERISM



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This chapter addresses one of the most challenging aspects of American environmental values and behavior: our incredibly consumptive lifestyles and norms. We'll explore critical perspectives from the 2007 video, *The Story of Stuff*, connecting them to concepts we've already discussed in this book, such as Loy's and Niebuhr's anthropologies as well as Baer's analysis of our need to control. The voluntary simplicity movement has both secular and religious/spiritual dimensions, and provides some reference points for how different values communities have approached these issues. The majority of this chapter summarizes a little known study of consumption commissioned by the National Religious Partnership for the Environment in the 1990s, which drew from several theologians across different traditions. The themes these theologians address are as relevant today as they were 20 years ago. So long as Americans cannot extract themselves from the addictive patterns of wasteful consumption that currently provide the convenience and satiation that pose as American well-being, environmental degradations will continue apace. Spiritual resources and disciplines will be needed in the quest for meaningful change.

Click the link below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Consumerism](#)

12.1: Religion and Consumption in America

There is in Western culture a shared restlessness, a vague sense that we are “off-center.” We have achieved more, created more, conquered more, and realized more than anyone in the history of the world could have ever imagined. And yet, for many of us, there remains a longing within. How can this be? How can we have so much and still be wanting? I suspect a kernel of the answer lies in the very human tendency to try to fill our longings with things, material and otherwise, that never fully satisfy. -Mike Schut¹



Image obtained through the public domain.

In 2006, then President George W Bush claimed that we in the United States are addicted to oil, and called for us to wean from oil consumption. American per capita oil consumption since 2006 has declined...but remains much higher than most of the rest of the world. Widespread awareness of American over-consumption grew and its concomitant impact on environmental sustainability was repeatedly announced as a primary concern of the environmental movement in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, but per capita general consumption of Americans still dwarfs much of the world, and far exceeds that of many other developed nations with higher quality of living standards. In 1995, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) launched a Consumption Project to examine the wasteful and compulsive patterns of consumption in America, with the intent of inspiring better patterns for living through the wisdoms of religious

1. Schut, M. (1999). *Simpler Living Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective*. Living the Good News: Denver, CO. pp. 10.

traditions, but that project never got beyond the proposal and initial drafting stage (the never-before-published insights of the project's authors will be summarized later in this chapter). In each of these cases, it might seem that overcoming the compulsive patterns of resource overconsumption in the US is an insurmountable challenge. It's easy to say we're "addicted to oil" when few will hold us accountable for doing little about it. It's lovely to criticize consumption patterns, but are there viable alternatives that can take hold in American culture that would more sustainably provide for the well-being of both people and land? And can faith communities even offer alternative ways when the prospects of shifting American lifestyle patterns are slim, and every good suggestion (use less toxic cleaning materials, for instance) just becomes the next consumer fad (buy green cleaning supplies!)?

I began to work for NRPE right around the time that the Consumption Project was ending. The sense we had at the time was that it was just too big and too difficult a topic to address by critiquing over-consumption and offering religious ideas as an alternative. Or perhaps the prospects of any initiative that seeks to limit consumption, and thus put a drag on American economic productivity, simply loses momentum as it works against the much stronger current of American economic growth patterns. It is nearly 25 years since the NRPE Consumption Project attempted to outline some religious points of resistance to over-consumption. Those points were never well publicized, and are as relevant today as ever.

At the same time, in the meantime, local/sustainable/organic food systems have become a 800+ billion dollar segment of the economy. The automobile market is moving rapidly as of the past few years towards a shift to electric vehicles (indeed, GM and Ford have announced significant intentions in this direction). More than 6% of energy production in the US now comes from wind, and the share of coal production is down from over 50% in 1997 to less than 30% in 2018 (largely replaced by natural gas, though some of this share is being taken by new wind and solar). In Ohio, the proportion of coal in our energy source mix is down from close to 90% to less than 60% in 2017, a shift that seemed unlikely in decades past. Conceivably, therefore, the environmental impacts of American consumption may be pivoting toward much more sustainable energy and materials sources, and care for creation plays a role in motivating those changes. At the same time, eWaste (electronic waste) has become a global problem, as has plastic trash (which is polluting our oceans like a vast plastic soup that has begun to fill the bellies of whales that wash up dead on beaches) – even if we continue to reduce the *impact* of our consumption, and shift to less polluting sources of energy, it seems we will still need to simultaneously significantly *reduce* our consumption.

Frustrated by decades of good intentions and talk but little major change, I hold no illusions about the strength of human convictions to overcome our over consumptiveness; however, given the current momentum towards sustainability, it seems a good time to revisit some of the moral and ethical resources we have to temper our compulsively consumptive tendencies. If we heed the suggestions of previous chapters in this book, and take seriously the need to address the healing of persons – to address the emptiness and anxiety we live with, which billions of dollars of advertising money aim to convince us can be filled by more consumption – then maybe rather than just making progress in making our consumerism more green, we can also continue to work toward reducing the greedy and unhappy consumeristic elements of our society. Retrieving religious wisdoms to help support such goals can be one part of that movement.

12.2: Religious perspectives on over-consumption in America

The introduction of the NRPE Consumption Project summarized the reasons why religious-spiritual attention to consumption was needed and why it could be helpful:

- Significant numbers of people seem dissatisfied with the current materialist ethic. They connect it to a whole range of forces driving social and moral decay.

- Many Americans feel their lives are stressful and out of control, caught in a cycle of “work and spend.” People’s concerns about family life, economic security and “quality time” may be entry points for them to start questioning current consumption patterns.

- People are searching for happiness and well-being but have largely failed to find it in more consumption. Our religious traditions offer an alternative vision of happiness and well-being which might help guide us to different paths.

- Responsibility toward future generations resonates in our religious teachings, as does the scriptural call for better stewardship of God’s creation.

- Most Americans, religious or not, believe in certain ethical values which, when more fully explored, can be viewed as antithetical to current patterns and pressures for consumption. Among these are frugality, moderation, self-control, and temperance.

- The great imbalance in consumption between different groups of people — in the US and globally — offends shared values of particular importance to religious communities, including equity, social justice, charity, and generosity.”¹

1. Archives of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. National Religious Partnership for the Environment: Consumption Project: Stage One Proposal, August 5, 1994, p. 3-4



Christian students in a program where they learn how to reduce consumption by researching, building, and testing various technologies, such as solar cookers and rocket stoves. In this photo a group of students are learning the principles of sand-water filtration. Photo credit: Wilhelmina Witt

The points above do not exhaust the possibilities of how religious perspectives can shed light on or promote alternatives to consumerism and overconsumption, but they can provide some important beginnings to point a direction. The Consumption Project drew from multiple American religious perspectives and highlighted the following key and critical concepts from different religious communities to address consumption:

- the holiness/sacredness of the created order and material reality
- use of resources should be for the common good
- biblical adherents have a call to be “the people of God” in covenant
- stewardship
- preferential option for the poor
- idolatry and over-consumption
- frugality and temperance
- scriptural perspectives on wealth
- Sabbath

-an ethic of solidarity and authentic development²

These points are considered in greater detail in the commentaries from different faith perspectives that were included in the Consumption Project report, starting with a supporting essay from Michael Brower, titled: “Looking for Balance: Materialism, the Environment, and Our Way of Life”:

Brower’s comments were drafted to complement the report’s different faith-based essays. Brower went on to [publish a book on consumerism](#), so he expanded his arguments there, but he encapsulated many of the moral dimensions of his argument in the essay.



Image obtained through the public domain.

Brower notes that America is a land of contradictions – lots of wealth, but also great income inequality. Lots of religion, but a seeming breakdown of moral and religious values across the culture. Brower said that Americans react against what seems a greedy materialism all around us, but we nonetheless pursue our own careers seeking money to buy what we need, and often get caught up in the status and appeal of acquiring more and better goods. He notes that America has always seen itself as a land of opportunity. He quotes de Tocqueville as observing of America: “I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men.” He says our culture is preoccupied with “physical comfort and pleasure, with glamour and youth, with having more goods this year than last and more next year than this. It preaches the gospel of the free market, with nearly unrestricted consumer choice and nearly unrestrained corporate autonomy.”

Brower points out that American personal income levels doubled twice in the 20th century, so the rise of consumerism has come with parallel increases in income, and also increases in life expectancy, educational achievement, and home ownership. But at the same time, Brower notes that critics have said that Americans’ increasing attachment to

2. Archives of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. Proposal to The Pew Global Stewardship Initiative from The National Religious Partnership for the Environment, March 3, 1995, p.4-5.

material goods “undermines families, friendships, and communities,...distracts from higher moral and spiritual pursuits, and...rarely brings lasting happiness.” It appears to also widen the gap between the rich and poor, and heighten anxiety among workers about losing jobs and livelihood, and yet, says Brower, these downsides have not dissuaded Americans and government policy from a path of maximizing consumption. Brower claims that “the United States remains one of the most consumer-oriented societies in the world.”

Annie Leonard, the creator of the Story of Stuff, argues that this is no accident. Her research revealed that advertisers in the 1940s and 50s, in concert with the coordinated efforts of the military-industrial complex and policymakers, explicitly sought to make consumption the American identity, like a religion. Although de Toqueville already had observed materialistic tendencies in American culture, the experience of the depression in the 1930s had helped much of America re-discover the virtues of frugality and moderation in its return to national economic health following the excesses and market crash of the 1920s. It would take well-funded marketing efforts and changes in economic policy to shift these American ideas away from these less consumptive and more contented patterns to patterns of overconsumption and rising materialism. Notably, this is also the point in time when American levels of well-being and happiness began to decline from a high point in the 1950s to the present day. Simply put, the agenda of getting Americans to link their well-being with ever more consumption may have resulted in economic growth (and a good deal of profit from those who control and supply consumer markets), but it also directly reduced the well-being of Americans.

Brower writes that unease with this situation has not faded – we are still living through the legacy of declining well-being that comes with over-consumption. Many working Americans have expressed growing dissatisfaction with the quality of their lives. The “American Dream” seems to be diminished: “where one income was enough to support a family thirty years ago, two incomes now seem barely to suffice.” And even worse, “growing numbers of people – especially people of color – feel altogether left out of the American Dream, dehumanized by brutal hours spent in minimum or sub-minimum wage jobs, incapable of providing adequately for our children, increasingly unable to hope for a better future. The marginalization and alienation of the poorest segments of society are widely perceived as a major cause of family breakdown, drug abuse, and violence, but few draw any connection to our consumer culture and to the individualistic ethic that underlies it.”

Brower wrote these lines in 1995, but more than 20 years later, this sentiment has only been reinforced as income inequality has risen, and issues of racial equity have become even more intense in America.³ These problems relate in several direct ways to environmental concerns. Indeed, just by virtue of being Americans, our average ecological footprint (or carbon footprint) is much higher than that of people from most other countries – double that of Japan and Germany, for instance – we consume twice as much energy per capita than the average German or Japanese, while our standard of living is lower than theirs. So while other developed nations have become more efficient in energy use, reducing their emissions two-fold compared to the US, more wasteful and more polluting patterns of energy use have been maintained in America, and low-income Americans have borne the greater proportion of burden in the form of air quality and toxic waste exposure (and at the checkbook level, it seems we are paying for twice as much energy consumption as we need to be equally well off).

Brower is careful to add that even though we need to give careful attention to consumer culture and its role in social and environmental issues in America, it would be a mistake to blame a consumer philosophy for all that ails us. But, says Brower, “we must recognize its influence and consciously seek to relate it to other moral, religious, and social values we hold dear.” The remainder of the NRPE Consumption Project draft papers did just that, commenting on Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Black Church, and Evangelical perspectives on consumption.

3. Richard Florida examines recent trends in American well-being in the following article, and it remains somewhat unclear what drives these trends: <https://www.citylab.com/life/2018/03/the-unhappy-states-of-america/555800/>.

12.3: A Protestant Perspective: Life in All its Fullness: Christian Faith and the Dilemmas of Consumption, by Dr. Sondra Wheeler

Sondra Wheeler's essay on Christian faith and consumption provides many excellent points, and is worth reading in its entirety ([text will be linked here](#)). She notes that environmental problems may seem new, but the questions we wrestle with related to consumption are old – as old as our religions and connected to basic theological questions about the nature of God, humans, and the world in which we live. So rather than construct a “new” theology of consumption, she suggests that our task is more like seeing a new vision of our ancient traditions, which may help us see ourselves differently, and help shape our lives in new ways. She focuses on several theological perspectives:

The World as Creation – God's creative work implies a “fundamental goodness and holiness of material reality” (23). All things have value as God's creation – not just value for human use, so our use of the world's resources must give moral weight to the natural world. God intends that the all life should flourish and be sustained, so degradation of Earth's resources flouts God's will and threatens our well-being “as we overwhelm the planet's resources for self-healing” (23).

The Earth is the Lord's – God retains final claim on the cosmos, and the role of humans is precisely as caretakers – stewards of God's world. As such, we are to care for the world for the good of the whole household (all life), and as God's stewards we are accountable to God for doing so. Current income and well-being inequalities show us that not all are flourishing, so our rates of consumption in the developed world are an issue of environmental and economic justice. Given such inequity, we need to “focus our efforts on creating a greater balance among persons, and between persons and other creatures” (24).

To Be the People of God – If we are God's people, we honor God's intention that all can flourish, and so we should judge our conduct on the standard of the well-being of the whole community. Community and cultural life are rich parts of human well-being – the ideal is not a lone hermit in the wilderness – but cultural life can become chaotic, hurried, stressful, and focused on material accumulation that doesn't actually lead to happiness. Instead of chasing after things that do not make us happy, Wheeler says we need to remember that our flourishing comes from relationships, from community life and faith, from focusing on things we truly need.

God of the Poor – Wheeler reminds us that biblical traditions establish a preference for the poor, where the poor are to be cared for as bearers of Christ. Wages for labor should be just. When patterns and structures of consumption and commodity pricing favor the well-fed at the expense of the poor, injustice is the result. To fail to attend to the plight of the poor, “the prophets insist, is to invite the wrath of God.”

Idolatry and Bondage – The Perils of Overconsumption – Idolatry is putting something else in place of God, and in a consumerist society, the “irony is that while purchasing power may successfully displace God as the source and guarantor of our well-being, it offers, in fact, neither abiding happiness nor any secure promise of safety” (26). Putting our faith in material things also leaves us craving and coveting the things that others have. Wheeler says that “the genius of our advertising-based economy and the culture that supports it is the fact that consumption creates not satisfaction,



Peace Church, a Lutheran church established in Bowling Green, OH in 1969, celebrates the installation of solar panels on their roof. This is just one example of a Protestant community who cut down on energy consumption and looked at old traditions in a new light... literally. Photo courtesy of: Deb Conklin

but the desire for more consumption” (27), and we are always left wanting more, seeking “some new object to provide the happiness that eludes us. And all the while we ignore what our religious traditions teach us is the real nature of human beings: that we are embodied spirits, created to receive their real good and their lasting happiness in the joys of communion with God and with one another” (27).

Free to Live and Work Together – Wheeler says the most significant contribution of Christian faith to our struggle with consumption “is its very different account of what is worth striving for....Of those relatively few material things we genuinely need: food, drink, shelter, and clothing, we are told, ‘seek first God’s kingdom and God’s justice, and all these things will be given to you as well’ (Mt 6:33). The good news that we call the gospel is the declaration that in Jesus Christ, God has come to rescue and reclaim us, and that our genuine well-being and deepest satisfaction are found in clinging to that truth above every other thing.” (27) We are free to work with others and with God towards the reconciliation and redemption of all things. And “freedom from the anxious pursuit of more things frees us for the work and the celebration of creating a new culture; teaching ourselves and our children new stories, songs, pictures of ‘the good life’; speaking out and living out new values which see all creatures truthfully, as ‘joint heirs of the grace of life’ (I Pet. 3:7)” (28).

12.4: A Catholic Perspective: The Good Life from a Catholic Perspective: The Problem of Consumption, by Msgr. Charles Murphy

Murphy notes that American culture is particularly wasteful, and that generally, “the industrialized countries, with only a fifth of the world’s population, consume two-thirds of the world’s resources and generate 75 percent of all the pollution and waste products.” The differences between the haves and the have nots help us to see this as a social justice issue, but also, Murphy says, as an ecological tragedy as we consume at a rate that exceeds the limitations of the planet. But most of all, he says, “excessive consumption is driven by a misperception of what the good life really is all about and this makes it a religious question. What and how much we consume manifests our conception of who we are and what our lives are for” (29)¹. Murphy says the materialistic notions we hold of well-being reveal the spiritual and cultural impoverishment that consumerism has wrought, and he suggests three ways that Catholic faith can help us find a more satisfying life that is also more socially responsible.

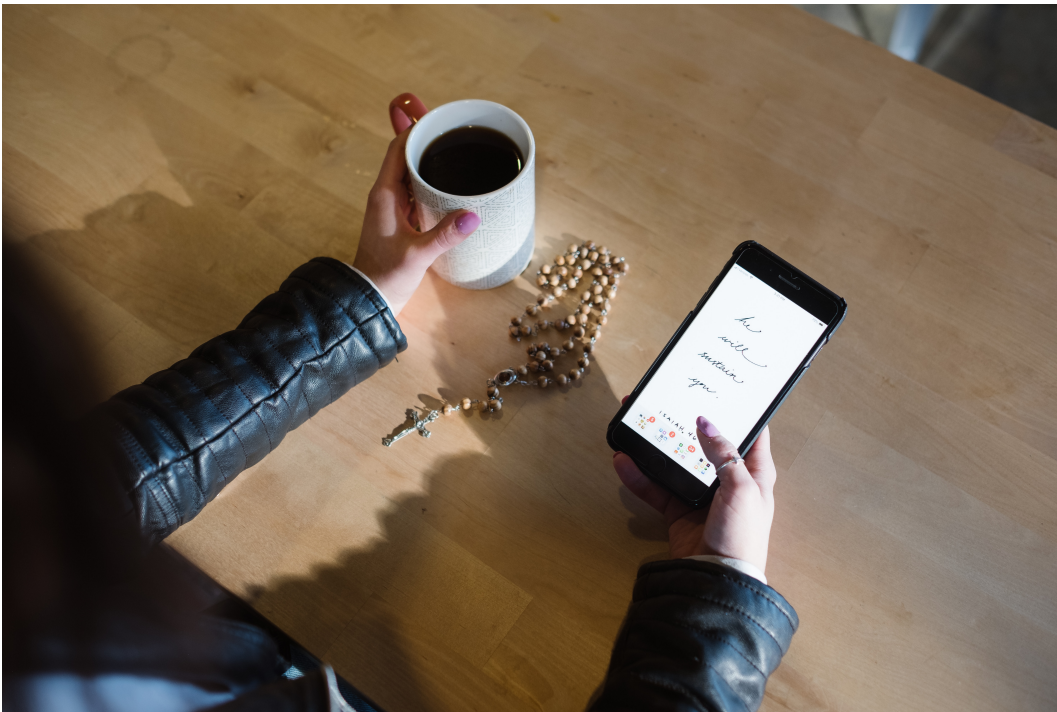


Image obtained through the public domain.

Temperance as a Virtue for Living – Murphy commends the cultivation of temperance among other virtues to provide “the inner strength needed to live happily and successfully” (30). Without habits of virtue, “we are at the mercy of any kind of external stimuli and victims of our own disordered needs and passions.” By contrast, the virtues provide a structure to allow us to use our gifts in a sustained way as creative and contributing members of society. Murphy notes that among the four “cardinal” virtues, temperance (alongside prudence, justice, and fortitude) “has been regarded

1. All page numbers in this chapter refer to the NRPE Consumption Project essays.

as one of the hinges on which depends the gate to a happy life” (30). Temperance is more than just moderation, says Murphy, rather it is what gives order and balance to our lives, and arises from a serenity of spirit within ourselves, which allows us to walk gently upon the Earth. Temperance helps us respect natural limits, and “heightens the pleasure we take in living by freeing us from a joyless compulsiveness and dependence. In contrast to the “never enough” trap of consumerism, temperance means knowing when “enough is enough.”

The Gospel and Wealth – Murphy quotes Pope John Paul II’s homily in Yankee Stadium in 1979: “Christians will want to be in the vanguard in favoring ways of life that decisively break with the frenzy of consumerism, exhausting and joyless. It is not a question of slowing down progress, for there is no human progress when everything conspires to give full reign to the instincts of self-interest, sex and power. We must find a simple way of living....It is in the joyful simplicity of a life inspired by the Gospel and the Gospel’s spirit of fraternal sharing that you will find the best remedy for sour criticism, paralysing doubt and the temptation to make money the principal means and indeed the very measure of human advancement” (31). Murphy also notes the preference for the poor, and gospel warnings about the dangers of wealth. Why are the poor blessed? “It is because in the Bible the poor ones have only Yahweh to look to for their help; thus they are able to recognize the radical human dependency which is the condition of every creature before God. Wealth on the other hand creates the illusion of independence and self-sufficiency, a dangerous posture” (31).

Murphy notes that the Gospel goes beyond virtues like temperance and “demands a ‘higher righteousness.’ In what may be the most poignant Christian scripture for American consumerism, “Jesus tells the rich young man who says he has observed all the commandments since childhood, ‘There is still one thing that you lack. Sell everything that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; then, come, follow me (Lk 18:21-23). Jesus demands detachment from wealth and social justice in its use. As later Church teaching will highlight, he asks that our preferential love go particularly to the poor” (31). As St. Ambrose said, “the world is given to all, and not only to the rich” (32). “Included today with the poor and the exploited must be the whole natural world” (31).

Consumption in Light of Church Social Teaching – Murphy notes Pope Paul IV’s call for a fundamental human right to development after visiting India and witnessing extreme poverty there. Pope Paul saw the flourishing of the poor as impeded by overdevelopment in some parts of the world. The right to development, he said, is “the right not to ‘have’ more but to ‘be’ more” (32). He quotes John Paul II’s concern that “consumer attitudes and lifestyles [can] be improper and also damaging both physically and spiritually”....“Is life all about working and spending and working more to have more to spend? Couldn’t it rather all be about contemplation, what the pope calls ‘a disinterested, unselfish and aesthetic attitude that is born of wonder in the presence of being and of the beauty which enables us to see in visible things the message of the visible God who created them?’” (32).

Murphy concludes with some reflections about the good life, noting the insidious American cycle of “work and spend, where “households go into debt to buy products they do not need and then work longer than they want in order to keep up with the payments” (33). The good life, rather, should allow people to work at things which are personally satisfying and expressive of themselves....There should be opportunities to contribute to the common good as well as pursuing personal happiness. There should be time for family and friends, for worship and prayer.” (33) Murphy concludes with an appeal to the benefits of fasting, cautions against today’s conquistadors of ‘development’ and advertising, the media, and tourism, and suggests that we can discover “‘ancient futures’ in the abundant resources of Catholic social teaching and make our own choices about living based upon it” (33).

12.5: A Jewish Perspective: “Sanctify Yourself Through What is Permitted to You”: Jewish Perspectives on Limiting Consumption, by Rabbi Eliezer Diamond

Jewish commentators on social topics often remind readers that if you want eight opinions on a matter, ask two rabbis...and Eliezer Diamond echoes the same as a preface to discussing consumption in Jewish thought. He says there are two main sentiments about consumption: ambivalence and confusion. “We have been taught all our lives – in part, as we shall see, by Judaism – that abundance is good. We take pride in the standard of living that our economic and political system makes available, at least in theory, to all Americans. At the same time, we feel significant dissatisfaction, either because we are not as affluent as we had hoped to be or, ironically, having achieved the hoped-for affluence, we still feel a sense of emptiness” (34)¹.

Diamond focuses first on a definition of the “good life” according to Judaism in connection with limiting consumption. A Jewish vision of the good life includes partaking in the world’s pleasures as an essential good, as in Deuteronomy 11:14-15: ‘I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil. I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle – and thus you shall eat your fill.’ Diamond adds that “Rabbinic literature, though it exhibits more ascetic tendencies than does the Bible, is replete with positive assessments of physical pleasure,” so it is not about deprivation per se, but for moral reasons we are to abstain from some consumptions. But “this positive view, however, must be placed in the context of biblical and rabbinic theology.

Both the Bible and the rabbis assert that the earth is God’s; in partaking of it, therefore, we are receiving a divine gift that must be utilized in accord with God’s will” (36). And “part of God’s intention regarding human use of the world’s resources is that there should be periods of activity alternating with times of rest and retreat” (36). Thus the Sabbath laws, which prescribe six days of work and one day of rest each week. The six-and-one cycle also applies to years – every seventh year is to be a year of rest for the land, free from cultivation, and “whatever grows of its own accord is to be distributed among the needy” (37).

“Limitations are also placed on other realms of human experience. At least 10% of our income must be given as *zedakah*” (charity in a spirit of justice)... “and we are urged to share our blessings with the poor in times of celebration” (37). Diamond adds that Halakhah (Jewish law) also “restrains one from becoming a gastronomic or sexual gourmand. In both these areas there are extensive restrictions which are intended to lead one to see the acts of eating and sex as instruments for creating psychic and physical well-being rather than opportunities for narcissistic self-indulgence” (37).

Diamond says that there “seem to be larger purposes to which these regulations contribute jointly. The first is gratitude. We are all too prone to take the world as we find it and then complain about what we find lacking in it. Halakhah’s limitations remind us that we receive the world as God’s gift, and in accordance with God’s will. Rather than carping about what we lack, we are called upon to thank God profoundly for what God has given us, beginning with the gift of life itself. ‘Who is wealthy?’, ask the rabbis rhetorically. ‘One who is happy with one’s lot.’ This perspective is an important corrective to a society in which success and meaning are often defined almost exclusively in monetary terms” (37).

Furthermore, “our gratitude for God’s gifts is to be accompanied by mindfulness. Halakhah calls upon us to lead a life of constant self-examination....We are called upon to follow in God’s footsteps...we should act in such a manner

1. All page numbers in this chapter refer to the NRPE Consumption Project essays.

that we are known by the same ‘names’ – merciful, gracious, righteous, pious and so on – by which God is known....The restrictions mentioned above are also intended to contribute to our sense of serenity and spiritual well-being. By limiting our indulgence in material and sensual pleasures, we are able to have a better sense of balance in our lives” (38). This provides contrast and protection against the barrage of images and ideas that marketers surround us with, because “our addictive attempts to satisfy our impulses, a phenomenon very common in our world of saturation advertising and ubiquitous malls, begin not with action but with thought”; so, circumscribing our patterns of action and thought can provide a serenity that guards our spirits from the consumerist tide.

Diamond quotes Abraham Ibn Ezra, a 12th-century Spanish biblical exegete, in his commentary on Exodus 20:14: “Therefore one who is wise will neither desire nor covet...He will be happy with his lot and not set his heart on desiring and coveting that which is not his, for he knows that if God does not wish to give it to him, he cannot take it with all his strength, schemes and cleverness. Therefore he will trust in his Creator to provide for him and do what is good in God’s own view.” (39) The Torah calls upon us to limit our consumption, and it views unrestrained consumption as a path to self-destruction.



Image obtained through the public domain.

Diamond provides some additional Jewish perspectives: Jewish communities have often established legislation to limit the extravagance of Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations. This is partly to “prevent those less well off in the community from feeling pressured to arrange celebrations beyond their means.” It is also “an attempt to restore the celebration, and its personal and religious significance, rather than the material spectacle, to the center of attention” (39) (Christians witnessing the overwhelming materialism of Christmas might take note!). And finally, Diamond asks: “what does the Torah have to say about the use of earth’s resources?” One of the most commonly recognized principles from Torah about the use of Earth’s resources is “the prohibition of bal tashhit (‘you shall not destroy’ [or waste]), as the rabbis call it, which appears in Dt 20:19-20 and prohibits cutting down fruit-bearing trees in a time of war.... Fruit bearing trees may not be cut down even for the purpose of using their wood, because this would destroy forever their regenerative capabilities. Rabbinic interpretation of these verses both extends and qualifies the biblical law. Extensions include the application of this prohibition, bal tashhit, to the entire material world....Thus the Talmud says that one who does not adjust the airflow of one’s lamp properly, thereby causing unnecessary consumption of fuel, has violated the bal tashhit prohibition.”

Diamond adds that these principles have “clear implications for how we conduct ourselves individually and collectively in the consumption of resources. Not every whim justifies using the resources available to us. Perhaps although we would prefer driving our own car to work, we need to give more serious thought to carpooling or public transportation. Even when we are justified in using those resources, moreover, we must do so efficiently. This means supporting technologies that lead to more efficient uses of fuel and other raw materials and active participation in recycling.” (40)

Diamond says we can also “turn to halakhah as a prophetic voice that can address many of the consumption issues we face as a society. The Torah’s intention is to prevent the possibility of untimely destruction and rather to encourage creation to exist as fully as possible. All of the earth is God’s; does it not deserve, in its entirety, the care and concern of our tradition? We have sacrificed the natural for the commercial and found that tradeoff wanting; is it not time to strike a more fruitful balance within God’s world?” (41-42).

12.6: A Black Church Perspective: Consumption from an African American Perspective, by Thomas Hoyt, Jr.

Rev. Dr. Thomas Hoyt, Jr. addressed consumption from an African American Christian perspective, and with mixed concerns. Hoyt asked: Why are some Americans concerned about consumption? Are they mainly concerned with overconsumption? Is it mainly a concern of upper to middle class people? “If persons are contending that persons should live simply so that others can simply live, what is to be said about those who have no alternative but to live simply since they have no ability to over consume out of their economic deprivation?” (44)¹. Hoyt presupposes “that African Americans and the majority culture in America have different experiences with the market economy. Consequently, the valuations and effects of consumption are different. In fact, African-Americans’ experience of slavery and the struggle to survive and maintain their humanity among those determined to define them as property to be consumed, contribute in some measure to the differences in valuation of consumption.” (44)

Hoyt adds that “in the American economy, consumers obviously have vastly different purchasing powers. Equitable distribution of resources is the only way that all human beings will be able to consume the world’s good with any sense of justice,” and yet, Hoyt says, this remains challenging in our capitalistic system. Hoyt then describes a theory of stratification among African Americans referred to as Circles of Entrapment. Rather than just compare African American economic and social statistics to other American sub-groups, this theory recognizes differing levels of economic independence and dependence, and social freedom and repression, which results in seven distinct types of entrapment, including the following: 1) The Black Wealthy or Independent Class, 2) The Black Street Class, 3) The Black Working Class, 4) The Black Middle Class, 5) The Black Welfare Class, 6) The Black Military Class, and 7) The Black Jail Class. Different patterns of consumption and economic relationships are displayed in each category, and Hoyt details the relevance of consumption in each.

The Black Wealthy or Independent Class – Hoyt identifies African American entrepreneurs, businesspeople, athletes and entertainers who have gained significant wealth, and says this class “often advocates for the individualistic, self deterministic, capitalistic mindset: ‘If I did it, so can you if you just work, try hard enough, and let the system work for you.’” (46) This class may be just as prone as anyone to downsizing and seeking the cheapest labor possible to stay in business, since staying in business is necessary if one wants to be able to do the greatest good for the greatest number. And yet, Hoyt says, “there is an insidiousness about profits, the more one gets the more one wants. The question of how much is enough is just as real for the African American entrepreneur as for any other person in business.” (46)

Hoyt acknowledges that many African Americans who have great wealth give to charity and worthy educational projects, or create jobs for others. But he also notes the quintessential passage about wealth in Christian scriptures, that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get to heaven (Mk 10:21), a notion that the rich man in the story cannot quite internalize. If the ideal is to “sell what you have and give to the poor,” the rich man walks away sad. Hoyt comments: “the subtle peril of wealth, as Jesus perceived and taught, lies in this truth of which prosperous persons are unable to perceive its relevance for themselves. Material possessions imperil one’s spirit because possessions can render one incapable of realizing one’s peril. Wealth can imperceptibly overcome us, until we are unaware that our ‘disposition toward wealth has gotten out of hand. It is this subtlety of material possessions that Jesus warned against.’” (47)

The Black Street Class – this class is “made up of the large number of young black men and women who do not have

1. All page numbers in this chapter refer to the NRPE Consumption Project essays.

jobs in the inner city and in rural America” (47). Some spend their days rapping on street corners, others deal dope; some join gangs for social purposes, seeking belonging and identity. Some get involved in crime, some wind up in jail. Some have killed for gold chains and name-brand sneakers, says Hoyt, and fine cars, name-brand clothes, wads of money and other materialistic symbols can confer prestige. Here, “consumption and identity are identical.” Still, “the Christian knows that a person is more than what one possesses or consumes. Yet, there must be the basic necessities of life. The Christian teaching that life consists of more than what one possesses, should not escape those who are seeking to enhance their self esteem through possessions and purchases.” (47)

The Black Working Class – Hoyt says this class “has been the backbone of much of the American economy. From slavery to the present,” African Americans have worked hard for low or no pay. Income equity issues, influxes of illegal immigrants, and an increase in low-paying service jobs dim the prospects for economic well-being in this class. Yet this is the class that “gives disproportionately to the Black churches, buys goods and services for the welfare of their families, manages to send their children to school through sacrificial savings and austerity budgets, and still finds time to give their time and money to community ventures.” (47) Yes, they also sometimes incur credit card debt, usually in an attempt to merely get the necessities of life. But this group will “often hear the Black preacher proclaim a ‘somehow theology:’ God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. The earth is God’s and the fullness thereof. God will make a way out of no way and I know we can make it somehow.’ Inherent in this Christian affirmation is that to consume is necessary and is, indeed, a part of the intended good life God will provide.” This view affirms that “anxiety and worry about the necessities of life is an un-Christian position.” (48)

The Black Middle Class – This class “is that group made up of doctors, lawyers, nurses, business and corporate executives, ministers, funeral home owners, politicians, teachers, scientists, vocational and technical professionals, and others with certain educational and financial resources.” (48) Hoyt remarks that economic statistics suggest that the civil rights movement “helped basically only the Black wealthy and middle classes. These people are very conscious of their social status. Trying to ‘keep up with the Joneses’ calls for owning one’s own home” and having other fine possessions. Hoyt claims that “advertisers aim their ads at the middle class mentality. Some of the promoted commodities and services are necessities and some are luxuries; yet, through advertisements, those who produce them have done a good job of making us feel that indeed we cannot do without the luxuries.

One of the chief reasons why advertising has been so successful in causing consumers to over consume is because [of] its appeal to the basic selfish attitudes of human beings. Frugality, once considered a religious virtue, is now regarded as a social threat. Debt incurred for extravagance, ‘trying to keep up with the Joneses’, once considered sinful, is now looked upon as the basis of prosperity. Greed, once castigated as the enemy of the common good, is now exalted as the servant of social welfare. Jesus said: ‘You cannot serve God and mammon.’ The advertising industry says: ‘You serve society best by serving mammon.’ The New Testament says the love of money is the root of all evil. The politicians assure us that the love of money is the secret of national prosperity.”

“In a sense, we ought to applaud technological achievements, for in those achievements persons are participating as co-creators with God. This fact should not be a cause for hubris or pride but rather a recognition by persons of the gifts of God, which are discovered by those who utilize responsibly their physical senses, imagination, and intuition. According to the Genesis accounts of Creation, God gave to human beings dominion over the creation. However, this does not mean domination but freedom to tend responsibly to the good creation and discover the creative energy inherent in what God has created. As stewards of God’s good earth, we are not to desecrate, plunder, pollute, or overuse the earth in order to satisfy our wants.” (48-49)

Hoyt says the danger for this class is their economic vulnerability, though ironically, when the economy lags, consumption drops for the middle class.

The Black Military Class – Hoyt notes this class’ economic prospects are tied to the military industrial complex. He concludes that the “the philosophy regarding consumption seems to be that if one serves the country with honor, one will have enough of this world’s goods to survive and to live comfortably, having one’s physical needs and many wants met by the government. However, one cannot have this power without giving complete loyalty to the military.” (50)

The Black Jail Class – Hoyt bemoans that this is one of the fastest growing classes in America today, and resists suggesting that there is a group that deserves to be so called. But the economic and social reality of prisons is making

this class more and more of a reality. Hoyt notes that prisoners help produce commodities for societal consumption. He raises the spectre of the tradeoff between investing in job training and opportunity versus incarceration. He concludes: “a consuming public would have more money to spend on projects of meaning to the community by stressing training for jobs rather than expenditures to jails.” (50)

Hoyt adds a concluding point to his discussion of the seven levels of social stratification, namely that for some in the African-American community, where many have long been denied the luxuries and goods that many others take for granted, there can tend to be a correlation between self-esteem and commodities, goods and services. Hoyt notes: “the desire for things is normal, but when the desire becomes an obsession even at the expense of human life [as in the case of killing another for a pair of Reebok tennis shoes], another value system needs to be interjected.” (50) Hoyt concludes with some insights from biblical perspectives.

A New Value System – Hoyt highlights a message from Luke’s gospel that an “all consuming concern or confidence in material goods is covetousness, a violation of the” biblical moral code. The “Kingdom of Heaven is immeasurably more significant than any earthly goods. Therefore, the disciples must sacrifice earthly blessings to be rich in heaven.” (51) Thus earthly wealth is a spiritual danger. Furthermore, as the passages about “considering the lilies” encourage, Christians must have faith, and are admonished to “trust God and ignore anxiety over worldly possessions.” (51) Luke’s gospel suggests that anxiety over things of life is more characteristic of pagans – Christians are to “seek first the Kingdom of God” and material concerns will be taken care of; “it therefore seems that the kingdom is entered in Luke’s theology only by way of poverty and detachment and by receiving it as a little child.” (52)

For Luke, the fear of not having the necessities of life can be relieved by the fact that the Kingdom of God is already present and yet to come. The Kingdom reality of abundance and justice is “partially realized in the Spirit-filled community but fully consummated in heaven. This means that the fear and threat of poverty need not cause anxiety, for presently the gifts of the Spirit will motivate sharing of possessions and thus take care of the basic necessities. The basic needs of the community would be satisfied. As participants of the present kingdom, participants seek a greater good for they have a treasure in heaven resulting from the surrender of their heart to God and the sharing of their possessions on earth.” (52)

This orientation of faith suggests a powerful form of social security within one’s community of faith. Hoyt’s final point relates back to the challenging temptation for Americans (which Brower highlighted as obvious even to deToqueville 150 years ago): the love of money. Hoyt quotes I Tim 6:10, which states that “the love of money is the root of all evils.” Hoyt replies by quoting the larger context of this passage in the New English Bible, “because it shows clearly the magnitude of the subtlety of a growing affection for money while offering a challenge to consume with the neighbor in mind. This quote offers both a summary and a challenge for the future consumption of all:

They think religion should yield dividends; and of course religion does yield high dividends, but only to the man (or woman) whose resources are within him (or her). We brought nothing into the world, because when we leave it we cannot take anything with us either, but if we have food and covering we may rest content...Those who want to be rich fall into temptations and snares and many foolish harmful desires which plunge people into ruin and perdition. It is ‘the love of money’ which is the root of all evil things. Instruct those who are rich in this world’s goods not to be proud and not to fix their hopes on so uncertain a thing as money, but upon God, who endows us richly with all things to enjoy. Tell them to hoard a wealth of noble actions by doing good, to be ready to give away and to share, and to acquire a treasure which will form a good foundation for the future. Thus they will grasp the life which is life indeed.” (53)

12.7: An Evangelical Perspective: Issues of Consumption, American Culture and Evangelical Faith, by Tom Sine

Tom Sine begins by acknowledging religious concerns about excessive consumption and diminishing spiritual and family values, and highlights the diversity within evangelical Christianity. On one end of the spectrum are more progressive evangelicals,

“such as the ‘Sojourners’ community, Anabaptists, and a number of faculty in evangelical colleges and seminaries, [who] are very concerned about issues of social justice, peacemaking, and changing patterns of consumption. There is also a growing interest among younger evangelicals in the care of God’s creation....On the other end, there is indeed the Christian Right, which is large....While they favor voluntary efforts to help the poor, they are strongly opposed to initiating government funded programs to that end. This group has little motivation,” Sire says, “to change their behavior regarding consumption. Moreover, a number of evangelicals, caught up in the prosperity gospel are very much focused on their own lives and tend to regard high consumption patterns as a sign of God’s blessing. Most evangelicals, however, are clustered between these polarities and embrace a compartmentalized faith that addresses issues of personal piety and private morality, but not patterns of consumption.” (55)¹.

In regard to basic theological commitments, Sire says “evangelical Christians strongly emphasize the Lordship of Christ and try to order their lives in such a way as to reflect what they understand that Lordship demands. Usually that understanding impacts their moral behavior very directly but it seldom seems to impact their consumption behavior.” (56) Sire notes that “evangelical Christians believe that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ were central to the Creator God’s purposes to redeem a people and restore a world...Most evangelicals believe that God’s primary mission in the world is, through the grace of Jesus Christ, to redeem those who turn to Him in faith....Until the early seventies, American evangelicals believed that the mission of the church had to do almost exclusively with the spiritual dimension—evangelism, church planting, and discipling new believers. However, in 1974, the World Evangelical Fellowship convened an international conference on the mission of the church, and published the ‘Lausanne Covenant.’” (56)

“The Lausanne Covenant reflected a new, broader sense of God’s purposes in the world that were no longer limited to just the spiritual realm. The covenant stressed the relationship between evangelicalism and social responsibility. It read in part: ‘The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.’... This document not only signaled a broadening view of mission, it also reflected an expanding view of the doctrines of creation and redemption stirring among evangelicals. Increasingly, evangelicals started developing a theology of creation” that includes recovering “the ancient biblical truth that the Gospel is Good News to the whole creation.” (57)

Intimately related to the theology of creation is the theology of redemption....More progressive evangelicals see God not only redeeming individuals, but also transforming structures and restoring all of creation:

A few choose to live in intentional communities² that seek to flesh out values that look more like God’s kingdom than American culture....Most of us, however, still live in the same single family, detached residential patterns as everyone else. But a few more progressive evangelicals are struggling to change their lifestyles and patterns of consumption

1. All page numbers in this chapter refer to the NRPE Consumption Project essays.
2. One example of an intentional community in Columbus can be found [here](#).

in ways that reflect what they believe are the values of God's new order." (58) A good example is "An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle," a document drafted by a worldwide group of evangelicals in 1980. "The concluding resolution reads: '...having been freed by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, in obedience to His call, in heart felt compassion for the poor, in concern for evangelism, development and justice, and in solemn anticipation of the Day of Judgment, we humbly commit ourselves to develop a just and simple lifestyle, to support one another in it and to encourage others to join us in this commitment.' Regrettably, this statement and its important message received very little visibility among American evangelicals. Most evangelicals," Sire claims, "make virtually no connection among their patterns of consumption, their lifestyles, and their Christian faith." (58) So even though some evangelicals struggle seriously with consumption and lifestyle issues, Sire thinks this remains a difficult issue with which to grapple for evangelicals.

Sire concludes by describing obstacles and opportunities for American evangelical engagement in addressing consumption. It may be the case that evangelicals, generally, were mostly 'poor' in the last 100 years, so gaining wealth has seemed desirable, but Sire says "evangelical Christians, like other people of faith, have allowed secular American values to determine largely the aspirations that drive their lives and the values on which their lives are premised. In other words, the fundamental problem is that most people of faith have allowed American culture and the upwardly mobile aspirations of the American dream, instead of the values of their faith tradition, to define their notions of the good life." (59) Sire says evangelicals also face a huge obstacle to the extent that some evangelicals have "succumbed to the message of the prosperity gospel," whose adherents "sincerely believe that higher levels of conspicuous consumption are evidence of God's increased blessing in their lives." (59) Sire also warns that some evangelicals remain solely focused on "saving souls" and feel little need to focus on issues like consumption. And he says that since some evangelicals allow conservative political and economic ideologies to influence them more than biblical faith, "they frequently blame the poor for their situation...and unlike evangelicals in other countries, they strongly oppose using government funds to initiate programs to help the poor." (59) Sire says others have been influenced by conservative economists who "are in total denial that there are any serious environmental problems," so they focus little concern on the impact of their consumption on the created order. (60)



Young Evangelicals for Climate Action march at the People's Climate March in New York City in 2014. Photo credit: Kyle Meyaard-Schaap

Sire concludes that “if evangelical Christians are going to be drawn into a conversation on the topic of consumption and Christian responsibility, the issue cannot be attacked head on with much hope of success.” (61) Sire suggests a starting point is to address people’s time and stressed lives and the pressures they are feeling on their families. Then focus on a return to biblical faith and scripture to highlight alternative values that can shift lifestyles and enhance family life. Sire suggests that if we can build new models based on values found in scripture, “we can enable believers, in all our faith traditions, to create lifestyles that are both more festive and celebrative but also less driven and consumptive.” (61)

12.8: The Ongoing Challenge of Consumption in America

At the same time that NRPE was gathering the perspectives of theologians from multiple traditions, it was also conducting focus groups to verify the perspectives of Americans about these issues. The key findings from the focus groups included the following points:

- There is a widespread feeling among religious Americans that we're on the wrong track — that our whole society and culture are out of whack, out of balance.

- People readily connect their concerns to the issue of consumption in two ways:

1. They see many of our problems as rooted in materialism (some prefer to call it excess or greed) — a tendency to want too much, to go overboard.
2. They feel that our cultural emphasis on buying and consuming things has displaced the more enduring values of family, faith, and community.

- At the core of this issue is how to define the “good life” and what values lie at the center of it. Material things are failing to fulfill us or make us content.

- As people explore this issue, they struggle with deep ambivalence. They are proud of and accustomed to the material achievements of our society, even as they decry materialism and question the priorities we have set.

- People are looking for balance, not self-deprivation or asceticism.

- People feel trapped, unable to live their beliefs. Their own lives do not correspond to their aspirations for what life should be about.

- People are looking for a sense of possibility – a chance to think and talk about how things could be better.¹

Even though the NRPE's Consumption Project never reached maturity, it holds important insights for us today. A more widespread and successful project was a curriculum developed by Mike Schut that led to the development of the book: [Simpler Living, Compassionate Life](#). Written from a Christian perspective as a study book for communities seeking to reduce their consumptiveness and lead healthier lives, Schut's book took inspiration from the voluntary simplicity movement. While this topic remains a challenging one for Americans, one might think about challenging issues of the past, such the abolition of slavery. You might say America, at least the American south, was addicted to the slave economy, just as we are now addicted to oil. In that campaign for sweeping social change, both secular and religious communities complemented each others' efforts to build new models for communities and economies. This is likely to be an unavoidably long-term struggle to shift to less consumptive ways in America, and it may come at a cost. It may be that religious communities will need to play a key role if our chances for change have a prayer.

1. Archives of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. Proposal to The Pew Global Stewardship Initiative from The National Religious Partnership for the Environment, March 3, 1995, p.4-5.



"Me and my friends were picking up trash out of a forest for class extra credit and we stumbled across this glass jar with plants growing through it, showing how even when we treat nature bad it still finds beauty in the forgotten treasures such as this glass jar being home to new life." Photo credit: Mikayla Benjamin

Chapter 12 Discussion Questions

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do faith communities care about consumerism? What are some of the reasons that religious leaders are concerned about consumerism?
2. Thomas Hoyt questions “who” is most concerned about consumerism – the have’s or the have not’s, and why? Why do you think consumerism is an issue, and for whom?
3. What does Annie Leonard say in *The Story of Stuff* about the role of advertisers in the 1940s and 1950s in America, and how they promoted consumerism?
4. Discuss the main points that each of the following authors made about consumerism and their faith tradition.
 - Dr. Sondra Wheeler, a Protestant perspective
 - Msgr. Charles Murphy, a Catholic perspective
 - Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, a Jewish perspective
 - Tom Sine, an Evangelical perspective
 - Thomas Hoyt, jr., a Black church perspective
5. Hoyt describes multiple classes of African Americans who are trapped by consumerism in different ways. How does consumerism affect a black street rapper differently than, say, a black lawyer, a black cashier, a black CEO, a black prisoner, or a black soldier?
6. How big of an issue do you think consumerism is in America? To what extent should humans see themselves as consumers? Why does basing your identity on your material possessions—or not—matter? And how do these points relate to material from earlier in the book?

CHAPTER 13: ECO-JUSTICE: A KEY RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL FOCUS



Clergy climate-energy advocacy at the Ohio Statehouse. Photo courtesy of Ohio Interfaith Power and Light.

Eco-Justice has long been a central concern of faith-based environmental thinking and action. The prefix “eco” signals that ecological and economic dimensions of environmental issues are inseparable. The justice dimensions of environmental concern — primarily that the impacts of environmental degradation disproportionately impinge on the well-being of the poor and vulnerable (who have historically had little voice in the environmental movement) — were a critical entry point for faith communities to begin focusing on environmental matters in the 1960s and 1970s. Particularly in the areas of climate and food, justice issues remain at the forefront of eco-theological thinking and action. Few issues more clearly demonstrate the complex relations of factors that characterize our local and global sustainability challenges than eco-justice, which highlights the intersectionality of environmental, economic, racial and other factors that require an integral approach to achieving sustainable and thriving communities.

Click the links below to explore these topics on the RESTORExchange database.

[Eco-Justice](#)

[Racism](#)

[Justice/Poverty/Racism](#)

13.1: Justice as the Crucial Linking Dimension

In his book [Simplicity as Compassion](#), author Mike Schut notes that addressing overconsumption and environmental degradation is a challenge that touches on many dimensions, including spirituality, theology, food, and justice. Schut would later become the environmental and economic affairs officer for the Episcopal Church USA, a position that was named specifically to emphasize the inseparability of environmental and economic elements of sustainability concerns. Similar links have shaped the discourse around climate justice, and for many faith-based environmental leaders, addressing the intersecting dimensions of environmental, economic and ethical factors is the heart of their work.

View a sample of the spectrum of EJ statements by different denominations by clicking on the links below.

- [- United Church of Christ](#)
- [- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)
- [- Creation Justice Ministries](#)
- [- Unitarian Universalist Association \(1994\)](#)
- [- Jewish Council of Public Affairs \(1996\)](#)
- [- Presbyterian Church \(USA\)](#)
- [- Presbyterians for Earth Care Eco-Justice Network list of faith-based Eco-Justice Organizations](#)

While justice is a key focus in faith-based environmental circles, it hasn't always been a key focus of the environmental movement. As George Middendorf, one of the founders of the Environmental Justice (EJ) Section of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) says, environmentalism in the US was born through the preservation and conservation movements of the late 1800s, but it wasn't until the 1980s that the impacts of environmental conditions on urban communities began to emerge significantly in popular environmental consciousness, with the activism of a group of African American women in North Carolina.¹ And similarly, most ecologists up until that time had focused on wilderness and other "natural" systems, with very little involvement in studying the ecosystems that include urban areas and the balance of flora and fauna in such human-dominated environs.

Charles Nilon, later ESA EJ-Section chair, notes that some of the early EJ examples of linking ecology with urban environments did not involve ecologists, but he also highlights some of the productive projects that have given shape to the field (including studies in Brooklyn, NY, on impacts of environmental contaminants through subsistence fishing, and ecological restoration surveys in Philadelphia involving the perspectives of school children and seniors). Middendorf highlights some of the key developments that put EJ more officially on the map in the US: the "People of Color Summit in 1992, the establishment of the EPA's Office of Environmental Equity (now Environmental Justice) that same year, and Executive Order 12898, "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations", issued by President Clinton in 1994" (154). These provided support for further developments, though as Middendorf and Jablonski and Poling point out, a key point of crystallization that provided crucial momentum was the

1. As Dieter Hessel says: choosing to address both ecology and poverty "was not characteristic of the emerging environmental movement, which even today too often lacks passion for, or adequate principles of, social justice" (from: <http://fore.yale.edu/disciplines/ethics/eco-justice/>)

1987 study commissioned by the United Church of Christ on toxic waste and race in the US.² Jablonski and Poling, who direct the Marianist Environmental Education Center in Dayton, OH, further note that faith community involvement has played a crucial role in raising the profile of justice issues within environmental concern – they note that among the 500 people arrested in Warren County, NC in 1982 for protesting a toxic waste landfill in a low-income, minority community, were the director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice and the co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference".³

These reflections parallel the history of EJ development in the ecumenical movement as noted by many authors. Bakken, Engel, and Engel (1995)⁴ note three main stages: 1) emergence in the mid-1960s and policy studies in the 1970s, 2) the mixed results of implementing the theme of "Just, Participatory, and Sustainable Society" in the World Council of Churches in the 1970s and 1980s, and 3) WCC's convenancing on "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation" and a widening and deepening of the eco-justice movement as it became more global and cross-cultural. Dieter Hessel, one of the chief architects of early Christian ecumenical attention to EJ issues, notes some of the theological underpinnings of the movement:

*E-J ethics have deep biblical roots in the Bible's opening vision of creation's Sabbath, the story of God's rainbow covenant with "all flesh on earth" after the flood (Genesis 9), and key summaries of moral obligations to respond to the poor, to give animals Sabbath rest, to let the land lie fallow, and to cancel debts periodically, if not to redistribute land (see Exodus 23, Leviticus 19 and 25, and Deuteronomy 15). The same spiritually-grounded ethical posture permeates Jesus teachings (e.g., in the Gospel of Luke) about living into the kingdom of God (today we might call it "kindom"). Abrahamic monotheists informed by this fresh view of the human-earth relationship should comprehend that all beings on earth are one household (oikos) requiring an economy (oikonomia) that takes ecological and social stewardship (oikonomos) seriously.*⁵

2. United Church of Christ. 1987. Toxic waste and race in the United States: a national report on the racial and socioeconomic characteristics of communities with hazardous waste sites. London: Church's Commission for Racial Justice.
3. Middendorf, Nilon, and Jablonski/Poling articles are found here: <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1890/1540-9295%282003%29001%5B0159%3ATCOEJ%5D2.0.CO%3B2>
4. Bakken, P.W., Engel, J.G., and Engel, J.R (1995) *Ecology, Justice, and Christian Faith: A critical guide to the literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press).
5. Hessel's comments can be found here: <http://fore.yale.edu/disciplines/ethics/eco-justice/>, where he also outlines what he calls the basic norms of eco-justice:
 - * solidarity with other people and creatures – companions, victims, and allies – in earth community, reflecting deep respect for diverse creation;
 - * ecological sustainability – environmentally fitting habits of living and working that enable life to flourish, and utilize ecologically and socially appropriate technology;
 - * sufficiency as a standard of organized sharing, which requires basic floors and definite ceilings for equitable or "fair" consumption;
 - * socially just participation in decisions about how to obtain sustenance and to manage community life for the good in common and the good of the commons.

Hessel also highlights the important role that Presbyterian social ethicist William Gibson played in launching the Eco-Justice Project and Network at Cornell University starting in 1973, and its quarterly eco-justice publication, *The Egg*, as an important venue for scholarly dialogue.



Image obtained through the public domain.

Dick Baer recalls the role of justice similarly from his involvement in the 60s and 70s in helping pioneer and deepen American theological reflection on environmental causes. As noted in the introduction of this book, Baer and his colleagues in the Faith, Man, Nature group of the National Council of Churches found it hard to publish in the ethics and theology literature in the early 60s because “the environment” was not yet considered a serious ethical issue. The rise in awareness and concern that followed Earth Day in 1970 accounts for a significant shift in those perceptions, but Baer says it was also crucial to begin to explain the justice dimensions of environmental issues. Whereas faith communities did not have existing offices and traditions around environmental care, there had long been a concern for justice, and a good deal of social action infrastructure and literature already existed in faith communities to address justice issues. Once the implications of environmental degradation for poor and vulnerable communities became clearer, faith communities were more readily able to engage the issue and mobilize a response in dialogue and action through their existing social justice networks. It is no surprise then that two of the four partners of NRPE, the USCCB’s EJP and the NCC’s Eco-Justice Working Group (which gave rise to the NCC’s Eco-Justice Programs, which gave rise to today’s Creation-Justice Ministries), framed their environmental concern in terms of justice. This focus was reflected in an effort to raise the profile of EJ concerns and engagements across faith communities through a project led by the NRPE in the late 90s, which gleaned the best examples of EJ work at that time across the country and summarized them in a directory of “models of engagement” in EJ. The directory of projects can be viewed [here](#).

13.2: Environmental Racism: Honoring Marginalized Voices

In addition to the growing concern for environmental impacts particularly on the poor and vulnerable – toxic sites and dumps and incinerators and sources of industrial emissions have tended to be disproportionately located near poor communities – the lack of marginalized and minority voices in environmental decision-making and rhetoric has been notable. As Pope Francis made clear in *Laudato Si'*, we need the participation of everyone if we are to successfully care for our common home, and it is ironic that those who are affected most by environmental pollution have had less of a voice in guiding the environmental movement. Hearing the cry of the earth while overlooking the cry of the poor cannot suffice.



Image obtained through the public domain.

Moreover, Larry Rasmussen points out that environmental injustice happens to particular groups and has systemic causes – a lack of shared power and access to self-determination has been a root cause of environmental injustices.¹ Rasmussen recalls that the term “environmental racism” emerged out of parallel trajectories of the civil rights movement

1. Rasmussen, L. (2003) Environmental Racism and Environmental Injustice: Moral Theory in the Making? Paper presented at the 2003 meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics; available at: <http://www.ecojusticenow.org/resources/Eco-Justice-Ethics/Environmental-Racism-and-Environmental-Justice.pdf>

and resistance to environmental injustice, during a 1982 protest in Warren County, NC, against another PCB landfill in a predominantly African American county (3-4). Rasmussen sees the deeper roots of such exploitation in the European heritage of conquest, colonialism, commerce, and Christian implantation, forces that established advantages in the 15th century that continue into the present (4). He says that the legacy of slavery and the plunder and colonization of Native peoples is not necessarily the leading concern of all EJ thinkers, but “in sharp contrast to the consciousness and narrative of white environmentalists, these burning memories live on” (4) in the view of EJ leaders. Rasmussen bemoans the way that power and access have played out:

“The consequences of varied socio-eco location play out in deeply ironic ways. The peoples who have the deepest cultural-spiritual ties to the land on this continent, the very peoples whose “great work”¹⁵ was to achieve intimate rapport with the powers of the continents themselves—namely, the First Peoples of the Americas—occupy the most devastated lands. And a people enslaved to work the land and learn its ways intimately as its toilers—African Americans—are more landless after their emancipation than any other segment of the U. S. population.¹⁶”

2

Rasmussen says preservationist and conservationist movements have worked for an assumed common good related to ecosystems and humans and creatures, but a concentration on race/class/gender/culture analysis and a focus on urban conditions and the plight of urban, rural and reservation poor has not been a significant element of that common good narrative.

In the meantime, however, some improvement in these gaps has grown over the past decade. Dorceta Taylor raised awareness of the extreme underrepresentation of minorities in the leadership of conservation and environmental organizations, and likely in response to her work with Green2.0, such representation has trended upwards (see her 2014 report: *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations, and Government Agencies*: http://orgs.law.harvard.edu/els/files/2014/02/FullReport_Green2.0_FINALReducedSize.pdf).

2. footnotes in quote:

15: The phrase and example are taken from Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 2.

16: In 1910, 218,000 African-American farmers owned 15 million acres. In 1992 only 18,000 African-American farmers remained; they owned 2.3 million acres. Later statistics are not available but the farm crises of the 1980s and 1990s shifted ownership to larger and larger, corporate entities. It is thus likely that even fewer African-Americans own even less farm land in 2002. “We Are What We Eat,” A Report Approved by the 214th General Assembly (2002), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 11.



Dorceta Taylor, Senior Associate Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Yale School of the Environment, and Professor of Environmental Justice. Photo courtesy of University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability, CC BY 2.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Franciscan Sister Joan Brown points out that in the present day, women's leadership has been "startlingly absent in making decisions," but she highlights the voice that women have recently had in climate justice activity, for example:

At the UN COP21 (Conference of Parties 21) in Paris, it was a woman leader from the Carteret Islands who explained how they led their island people, who are the first climate change refugees, to a new home where they are now creating a viable future by planting trees for food and commerce. She said, "Women must not dwell in despair. They must lead."...It was Bangladeshi women who explained their national plan to install solar panels in order to bypass fossil fuel energy and ensure energy for the poorest households. It was the women of Durban South Africa, from the global south, who stated the importance of and the failures of the Paris agreement while emphasizing that "it is the best we can do at this time."

Brown characterizes the eco-justice situation as follows:

*As Mother Earth gasps for life, so do economically marginalized individuals, women, and children who experience lasting health and lifestyle effects of fossil fuel extraction. Implications of rising sea levels, increased heat waves, droughts, floods, storms, food insecurity, and violence increase. Women, children, and future generations are disproportionately affected. Life depends upon making the links between economic policy, trade, extractive industries, and energy, immigration, food and water security, war and peace, and climate change. Borrowing again from Laudato Si, what is needed is an “integral ecology” as we address policy and laws.*³



Dr. Melanie Harris is professor of Religion, Black Feminist Studies and Womanist Theology and director of the Food, Health and Ecological Well-Being Program at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Image obtained in the public domain at: <https://prod.wp.cdn.aws.wfu.edu/sites/68/2021/06/MelanieHarris.png>.

Melanie Harris and others have raised the witness of the ecowisdom of women of African descent in the emergent movement of ecowomanism, and suggests that the roots of African American environmentalism lie in African cosmology, “which “connects the realms of spirit, nature, and humanity into one flowing web of life.”⁴ Attending to these voices seems crucial in the long road to environmental reparations and inclusivity.⁵ Through

3. From: <https://spsmw.org/2017/04/26/what-is-eco-justice/>

4. p. 69 in Harris, M.L. (2017) *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books)

5. Amanda Baugh’s review of Harris’s book wonders: “What if we discussed ecowomanism as the

the bold work of a growing community of scholars and activists, more attention and effort is being directed at changing past trends and developing a more diverse, more equitable, more representative dialogue. These are beginnings, and hopeful, but doubtless there remains a long, long way to go.

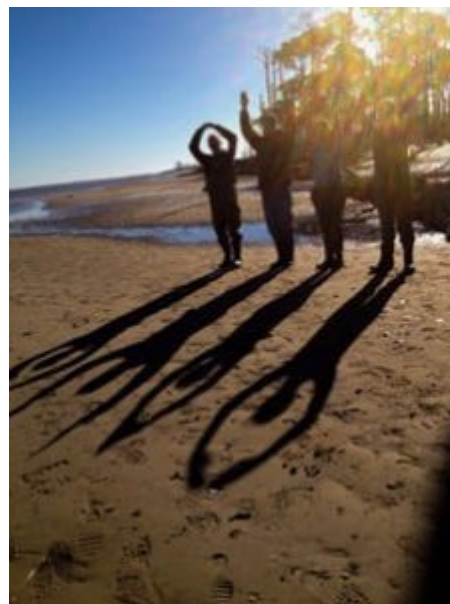
dominant perspective in courses on Religion and Ecology, and saved ‘mainstream’ white, colonial perspectives for a unit on ‘other’ voices?” (From: <http://readingreligion.org/books/ecowomanism>)

13.3: Moving Forward

Given how essential “justice” has been to motivate the entry of faith communities into ecological concern, it should be no surprise that eco-justice remains not only a key concern, but is an overarching framework that highlights the connections among many complex factors – economic, environmental, race/class/gender and other moral concerns. Such complexity requires an integral ecology, and demands an approach that recognizes and works amid the intersectionality of these many factors, some of which have not historically been comfortable or regular topics of environmental discourse. Moving in this direction requires opening the dialogue and shifting emphases within organizations to raise up voices and leadership that haven’t been central in the past, and whose absence has kept the environmental movement more narrow and less effective.

I see many promising signs, though without doubt, this is a long road to travel, and will require long-term commitments, perseverance, and an ongoing renewal of vision. One hopeful note is that many of the steps we might take to implement new policies are not unfamiliar. Legislation that was proposed in 2009 (but failed to pass at the federal level) to deal with climate change and the injustices it causes globally was also sensitive to the injustices that could be caused as the US shifts to reduce the share of fossil fuels in energy production. Such shifts will hit the poor in fossil-dependent states like Ohio and West Virginia more than those in states like California, and so measures can be developed to tend to justice concerns locally as well as globally. Having the political will to move ahead in these realms is not a wild shot in the dark, as robust networks of social concern and community development stand ready to work together to build a more just and sustainable future.

One of the most inspiring visions for justice in our world was a biblical passage invoked by Martin Luther King, Jr: “Let justice roll down like waters”; and the next phrase in the Hebrew scripture intones: “and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). We hope that our best efforts to build a more just world can be aided by the faithful work and response of people working together, and if a cascade of justice begins to raise the tide of flourishing, we hope those waters are clean, and not clogged with toxic algae blooms or poisoned by lead; we hope those waters are freshly flowing, not spontaneously combusting in rivers of industrial effluent; we hope those waters are life giving and pure, not laden with sulfuric acid from the burning of coal; we hope these waters bring life to parched landscapes, and not carry mercury into the tissues of fish; we hope these waters house an abundance of creatures, not choked in plastic trash; we hope those waters are ample, and not dried up like an overdrawn aquifer; we hope those waters bring life, not water-borne disease to poor villages; we hope those waters can be accessed and shared by all, not just by those with enough money to purify the polluted waters of our globalized, industrialized world. That any system of providing resources and sustenance for the people of the world does so by polluting the world, its people – especially its poor and vulnerable people, in contrast to the rich people who profit from this system – and the larger community of life, is not a just system. If you are bothered by such injustice, then you too are called to respond to the challenges of eco-justice.



OSU students take a moment to enjoy the natural beauty of the gulf coast of Biloxi, Mississippi, while serving the poor during a Buck-I-Serve trip in 2013. Photo credit: Tony Losekamp

Chapter 13 Discussion Questions

Discussion Question:

In what ways does eco-justice tie together much of what you've learned about Religion and Environmental Values in America? In what ways might eco-justice need to be addressed in its own right?

Readings you may wish to start with: Wood's idea of fallibilism, Murdoch and feminism, Laudato Si and exploitation, Kupfer and virtue

EMERGING PERSPECTIVES: STUDENT CHAPTERS

Starting in 2018, Ohio State students in ENR 3470, Religion and Environmental Values in America, were given the option to focus their term papers on writing a sub-chapter for this book. The first printing of the book (Religion and Environmental Values in America (REVA)) in autumn of 2019 included Natalie Pax's sub-chapter and Sophie Manaster's co-authored main chapter ([chapter 6](#)). Eight more student chapters were under review by December of 2019, under the editorship of Dr. Hitzhusen, and more chapters have followed each semester since. On Earth Day in April of 2022, on the last day of class in ENR 3470 that semester, a new book consisting entirely of student-authored essays was published, including all of the chapters that had previously been published here as sub-chapters of the REVA textbook. That book, [Emerging Perspectives in Religion and Environmental Values in America](#) (EPREVA) had already attracted several thousand readers as of August of 2022, and its construction owes mostly to the work of three student editors: Georgia McLachlan, Hallie Stelzle, and Emerson Gifford. If other readers or students would be interested to submit a chapter for possible inclusion in the new book, please contact Dr. Hitzhusen. It would be wonderful for EPREVA to increasingly resemble the larger dialogue that will be needed with *everyone* if we are to collectively meet the challenges of sustainability and flourishing that face all life on Earth, so contributions from far and wide are most welcome.

The topic of religion and the environment is almost infinitely diverse, and no one book could ever cover all of the worthy and interesting topics connected to this subject. We imagine that a volume II of EPREVA will follow in future years, but even that will only scratch the tip of the iceberg. Even so, these student essays highlight the much wider dialogue and range of ideas that make up the landscape of religion and environmental values in America and beyond. You are welcome to join the dialogue!

Note: Student editors will be working to develop more formal links between REVA and EPREVA, and to add an introduction to all 28 (and counting!) of the chapters in EPREVA to this student chapter appendix section in REVA. Stay tuned for more developments, but in the meantime you can access all of the student chapters in EPREVA [here](#).

Manifest Destiny: The American Dream or an Ecological Crisis?

GEORGIA MCLACHLAN

A quintessential part of the “American dream” is freedom. Whether it be freedom of religion, freedom of speech, or simply freedom to pursue one’s own dreams, Americans have always idolized the United States as a sort of utopia for individual freedom. “Manifest destiny” is a mindset that embodies this belief. A staple term in every elementary, middle, and high school student’s American history textbook, it might be considered the epitome of what it meant to be American at the start of American imperialism. The idea of manifest destiny gained popularity in the mid-19th century and was built upon the notion of freedom. Advocates for manifest destiny believed that Americans were free, even bound by fate, to conquer the North American continent and expand the realm of democratic republicanism and Christianity. Under the guise of religious, political, and economic motivations, manifest destiny allowed Americans to pursue the “American dream” and subdue the “wild west.” The environmental and humanitarian implications of manifest destiny were frequently overlooked or not considered, resulting in ideology that still today seeps into our behaviors and perceptions regarding domination and superiority...

...In reality, Christian religion (or any religion) does not condone this sort of dominionistic, condescending attitude toward the natural environment. This way of thinking cannot be considered a “Christian” perspective; it is motivated by entirely other reasons. As Theodore Hiebert (1996) explains, isolating this one verse of Genesis ignores the rest of the Creation story – that God has entrusted humans to take care of the earth and its living creatures. “Dominion” in this sense is God giving humans a responsibility to act justly and righteously, not to destroy what He has created. Humans are at the top of the hierarchy in terms of intelligence and morality, so we are given the task of exercising stewardship of the earth through God’s instruction (Hiebert, 1996). The actions of individual settlers – cutting down trees, relying on railroad development, countless growing settlements – culminated in a dominion- and development-inspired movement that resulted in far more significant consequences than anyone likely envisioned. However, the notion of taking unrestrained control of the land (especially taking it out of the control of indigenous people who had lived there for centuries) contradicts the whole premise of stewardship that is an essential tenet of Christianity and many other world religions...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

Reconnecting with Creation Through Regenerative Agriculture

EMERSON GIFFORD

For tens of thousands of years, humans have survived in many environments all around the world. Through thick and thin, humans have been able to fight against predators, weather, and starvation. The unlikely survival of humans can be heavily attributed to one thing: agriculture. With a stable food source, people have been able to do almost everything, live almost anywhere, and support billions of hungry stomachs all across the world. Agriculture is the science of cultivating plants or animals for human use, and it hasn't changed much since the beginning. Starting around 9500 BCE, humans planted crops for a controlled harvest, planting rice, grains, and chickpeas for stable and healthy societies in the Middle East.

Almost 12,000 years later, I continue to perform the same actions in my own backyard, with very little changes. I started a garden with my Dad about 10 years ago. We squared off a 3×1 meter section of my yard, lining the outside with some decayed logs we found in the park. Carefully, the two of us buried seeds from pocket-sized bags we got at a garden store. I was sure to spoil them with loads of fresh water from inside the house every morning. I checked multiple times a day to see if I could spot any green sprouting through the brown. When there was nothing to see, I prayed and asked God to show some sprouts soon, just as the ancient civilizations I had learned about in school would do. Even after some small issues with hungry rabbits and a premature harvest, the whole idea of growing your own food from nothing but soil, water, and sunlight just fascinated me. Now, I'm much more experienced, and I still grow my own vegetables every year, even in a tiny studio apartment...

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Groundhogs, Integral Ecology, and the Meaning of Life

MADELINE FOX

Every year, my family hosts a celebration that emphasizes hope, freedom from depression, and a love of Creation. This celebration is so intense and widespread that there is not a soul who has known my family for a full year who doesn't know of it. Most calendars name this holiday on February second Groundhog Day. We have erroneously called it "Groundhog's Day" since we began celebrating it over 15 years ago, which is likely a Freudian slip to show that the day belongs to the rodents, not to us. Many people are surprised when they step into my house in the month of January, as they find a groundhog flag, a dozen groundhog plushies, Bible verses about hope hung on the walls, live plants with twinkle lights, and hundreds of cupcakes and cookies decorated to look like groundhogs. Often, the movie Groundhog Day (Ramis, 1993) will be playing on the TV. This is not simply because the movie is about groundhogs, but because it represents many of the values my family celebrates: overcoming the depression of a selfish lifestyle, embracing our creative leanings, and finding worth and pleasure in doing good for others. February second reminds us that by abandoning ideals of egoistic hedonism and embracing a life of virtue, we will not only see our own lives grow richer and more joyful, but the social and ecological world around us will flourish as well.

At the beginning of the movie Groundhog Day, the main character Phil Connors views everything and everyone around him as a means to an end, that end being pleasure...It's easy to condemn Phil because we can easily see the negative consequences of his vices, but many of us demonstrate the same attitude toward the environment as Phil does toward Punxsutawney in a way that's more difficult to see. It's easier to be gluttonous when we consider overconsumption a part of the American dream; it's easier to be arrogant when technology has given us the confidence to believe we're invincible to climate change (despite the warnings of 97% of climate scientists); it's easier to be greedy in our extraction of public resources when the prosperity gospel has woven its way into our culture to glorify the rich; it's easier to be apathetic to the plight of exploited communities when we have never visited them and we are living comfortable lives ourselves. These vices are all consequences of egoistic hedonism, or self-centered pleasure seeking...

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Embracing Mystery in the Search for Truth

NATALIE PAX

The evolution of the human brain over the course of history has permitted the mind to achieve consciousness—an awareness of ourselves and the universe that prompts humanity to question the mystery of our own experiences. The complex nature of the brain, according to author Diane Ackerman is “to liken and learn, never resist a mystery, and question everything, even itself” (Ackerman, 2004). All forms of knowledge and discovery are ultimately based on unverifiable presuppositions, and an element of uncertainty is present whether it be in the field of scientific research, theological beliefs, or artistic expression. Perhaps then, just as multiple instruments and notes are woven together to form a complete sonata, multiple disciplines, perspectives, and ideas can provide a more holistic understanding of the world. There are certain mysterious qualities of the human experience that cannot be reduced to a single concrete understanding of truth. However, this does not imply that truth and morality are purely relative. One can appreciate multiple lenses when understanding the phenomena of our own existence, yet still recognize that truth and understanding are not purely subjective and some ideas hold more merit than others. There is beauty in the never-ending journey towards understanding ourselves and the world we live in—after all, the very process of science induces new discoveries and understandings that then lead to even bigger questions and mysteries...

...Just as religion and myth can be a search for truth and guidance in human existence, so too can science and experimentation. In his presidential address to the Royal Society of South Africa, A.W. Sloan (1979) stated that science is a “search for truth” and that science depends on certain pre-suppositions, including a belief in order and harmony even though science itself is never static and constantly undergoing transformation (Livingstone, 2013). In an essay titled “Religion and Science” that was written for the New York Times Magazine in 1930, Einstein described a ‘cosmic religious feeling’ as a phenomenon when the “individual feels the futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order that reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence impresses him as a sort of prison, and he wants to experience the universe as a single significant whole.” Einstein believed that there was an order to the universe, which he experienced in a sense of awe and veneration before nature. He held a strong conviction that there is a cosmic order, which he felt was essential to the scientific outlook (Gamwell, 2002). There may be a certain natural harmony to the world and human experience, but it is the mystery in this harmony that prompts us toward inquiry and discovery...

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The Spirituality of Art: Finding God at the End of a Paintbrush

ANNA ROSE

What did I get myself into? These were the first thoughts in my head as I squinted to get a better look at the glacier I was supposed to hike up to... almost too far away to see. With a group of other artists, I was supposed to trek up the steep side of a mountain to Lake Louise and the receding glacier behind it around 8,000 feet above sea level. Here in the Wind River Range in Central Wyoming, the nearest town was a couple hours away so there was no turning back now. We gathered our tripods, panels, brushes, and paint and hoisted our art supplies onto our backs and strapped bear spray to our fronts for easy reach. It was my first 'advanced' Plein Air hike, and I was about to discover just how difficult this art form was...

...Now, here I was, on a treacherous trail carrying haphazard boards and paints while worried a Grizzly bear might jump out and eat me. Nevertheless, we all made it up to the glacier, and I set to work on my painting... only for a swift gust of wind to blow my oil paints, art piece, and tripod all into my face. Despite some ruined clothes and a ruined painting, I had a marvelous journey. Something changed in me after staring at that lake for hours, I had spent so long quietly observing that I felt more connected to nature than I had ever been before. That is when I began to get an idea that drawing and painting nature may be a way to better understand and connect to the environment...

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The Meaning of Music

LOGAN WILLIAMS

From a young age there have only been a few constant presences in my life: school, sports, and music...Music makes you feel, it evokes emotion, it forms connections, it answers the questions that all of us face in life. It was in this realization that I truly understood, I do not just really like music, it is through the culmination of countless experiences that I have found a substantial connection between music and my own spirituality. To truly understand this, I had to think as far back as I could, to the beginning. One of my earliest memories from childhood revolves around music. I vividly remember a warm summer afternoon, bright but overcast. The kind of overcast that makes the colors of everything around you seem to burst as if you were seeing the world through a set of polarized lenses. My family was heading to my grandparents' house. I remember looking up out of the backseat window and passing the old moose lodge before the signature sharp turn on Route 9 when my favorite song at the time came on. The song was "[Red Dirt Road](#)" by Brooks & Dunn. I remember singing along to every word, and once the song had run its course, I made a bold declaration, I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. The first thing I ever wanted to be was country music star. While I still fantasize about the limelight and continue to sing and attempt to learn to play the guitar (rather unsuccessfully albeit), it is easy to see how this one memory began to shape my reverence for music at a very young age. Years later I rediscovered the song, and the memory along with it, but this time I looked deeper into the song. The gist of the song details a set of important moments in the singer's life and how they all revolved around one, "Red Dirt Road." It turns out that I connect to this song resoundingly well; coming from a rural area, many of my memories, some significant, all started on some road that I have been on a million times. As I grew up, music continued to play an important role in my life and provided what I believe was my first "spiritual" connection to music...

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Nature as the Compass of the Heart: A Poetic Autobiography

LIAM NIGRO

Dear Reader,

How shall you live today?

Will you watch the sunrise? The sunset? Will you drive your car with the windows down, sticking your hand out the window to catch the fresh air passing through your outstretched fingers? Maybe cook a meal with a friend in a kitchen filled with delicious smells and sounds? Or will you call a loved one? Hear their voices, their stories...

...Through this portfolio, I hope to contribute to the agency of the humanities to revise sustainable development by bonding the qualitative to the quantitative. Below, I present four poems that speak to the intersection of personal experience and the systems of environment and religion, followed by four expansions that delve into how these works relate to the course material of Religion and Environmental Values in America...

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The Kitchen as a Classroom: Recipe to Unearth Life's Simple Virtues

ADDY ZENKO

The art of cooking is a timeless practice, a ubiquitous unifier since time immemorial: in an age of limitless diversification of pressing demands, eating remains one of the few things that we all must do. This venerated act is crucial for cultural continuance and deep spiritual exploration for people all over the world, a practice whose rich appeal and infinite adaptability esteem it a craft for all to enjoy. The delicious epitome of self-care, deliberate preparation of whole ingredients is the antidote to thoughtless consumption of mass-produced, ultra-processed foods, whose impersonality and generally unhealthy nature worsen physical and mental well-being (Lin et al., 2018). The benefits of spending quality time in the kitchen, alone or with others, permeate myriad aspects of life: by choosing to cook, one is “unplugging to plug back in” by engaging with a simple, mindful practice to restore personal and familial health, build connections and instill a strong sense of community, preserve ethnic heritage, challenge a growing dependency on corporations, and fix our broken food system...

...There exists a common misunderstanding that one must be a master chef to properly cook a meal, possessing skills to craft Baked Alaska of Michelin-star quality and perfect Beef Wellingtons that could make Gordon Ramsay sing. This high perceived barrier to entry often inhibits newcomers from trying their hand at preparing simple, nourishing dishes. As author and Columbus native Daniel H. Pink notes in his book *Drive* (2011), “mastery is an asymptote” – even if we log ten thousand hours in the kitchen à la Malcolm Gladwell, achieving total mastery is impossible because there will always be more culinary niches to explore, more techniques to unearth, more wisdom to be gleaned from new mentors. No one has ever been or will ever be a perfect cook (though Guy Fieri has surely come close, his abominous midsection a triumphant reminder of his ten-thousand-hour feat). However, displaying enough compassion to grant yourself permission to be a beginner, to surrender to the unknown of the culinary universe, is already a critical step towards realizing its therapeutic power...

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President Carter's Environmental Roots

ROBERT RILEY

Former President Carter, the peanut farmer turned president, has a long and well-known record. He's been everything from a farmer, navy man, state senator, then Governor of Georgia, President of the United States, Noble Peace Prize winner, and bible study teacher. What's not as recognized as his noble peace prize winning post-presidency, or his political career, is his strong environmental policies. In his 4 years in the White House, President Carter did more for the environment than many presidents before and after him. He faced many challenges throughout his presidency, most notably the hostage crisis, and the energy crisis. These major challenges in his tenure have hogged much of the attention of his presidency, and people seem to forget his message of good environmental attitudes. The question is, where did his environmental attitudes come from?

I would argue that his attitudes and beliefs are rooted from his deep religious faith. President Carter is a well-known devout Christian, and a southern Baptist one. Whether you love or hate him, most would know that Jimmy Carter was a strong believer. How did he draw on those beliefs throughout his life, and especially when he was in the White House? He talks frequently in his books and bible study lessons of his admiration of Reinhold Niebuhr. Carter frequently quotes Niebuhr in his books and lessons, especially when mixing public office and religion. "In Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, the theologian wrote, 'To establish justice in a sinful world is the whole sad duty of the political order...'. Niebuhr's obvious point is that the highest possible goal of a government or a society is to treat people fairly, to protect their safety, to guarantee their individual rights, to guard against discrimination, and to resolve disagreements peacefully. Most of us would agree that these goals are common to church and state" (Carter, 2018, pg.147). These principles of justice and service draw clear connections between his religious beliefs and political viewpoint. Carter avoided ever showing privilege to Christianity though, so it's rare to find him using faith as reasoning for any policy. Although it's not easy to find direct religious reasoning for environmental policy, it is possible to find the origins of his good environmental ethics by taking a closer look at his background and theological roots...

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My Spiritual Journey: Dissolving Barriers Through a Conscious Connection with Nature

LIZ HENEGHAN

I am constantly inspired by nature and the idea that taking care of myself means taking care of the environment. Whether I realized it or not, religion has always shaped my beliefs about personal identity and responsibility in the world. I went to Catholic school my entire K-12 career, but never truly resonated with the beliefs taught to me. It was not until high school that I became more connected to a higher power. A service retreat to Louisville, Kentucky, sparked this spiritual awakening. That was nearly four years ago, and today I am still exploring topics like animal welfare, environmental ethics, death, the need to control, and unselfing.

After walking for what seemed like days, I was thankful to finally escape the sticky heat that accompanies Louisville summers. As I entered the dilapidated building, the only thing I could think about was the welcoming embrace of the crisp air conditioning. My moment of peace was short-lived as I caught sight of a baby gate a few feet ahead. Traces of nervousness crept up my body as the curiosity of what lay behind it overwhelmed me. “B-12...O-64...I-19.” I heard the distant sounds of bingo. I looked around and noticed the crayon-colored drawings that plastered the walls. I felt as if I were in a Kindergarten classroom, but the room was filled with adults. My wandering mind was quickly interrupted by shouts of welcome as the staff introduced me to my new home for the week...

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Shifting Focus: Meditative Reflection on the Self and Connectedness

JUSTIN SMITH

In the beginning of a meditation, focusing on breathing provides rhythm and a connection between body and mind. My experiences in both guided and solitary meditation begin this way to ground myself and clear my mind, accepting any thoughts that may come through but not dwelling on them. From this awareness of breath, attention is then shifted throughout the body, gradually working from the feet to the forehead. Now that I have pushed up against the boundaries of my body, the next step is to reach out just past myself and focus on the space around me. But what are these boundaries? Meditation practices have roots in various religious ideologies, which analyze these boundaries and deconstruct the notion of the self. While I usually avoid having an end goal in my own meditation, learning about the dissolution of the self has changed my perspectives and techniques when meditating, as well as how I think about myself and my place in the world in general. Meditation now serves as a way of opening my mind and breaking down the perceived barriers around me, in a way that allows me to grow and ground myself...

...Academic writing and institutional learning typically discredit personal experiences as forms of learning, advocating instead for strict scientific methods and analyses that limit and detract from the value of knowledge. As Baer might argue, a balance between strictly scientific thinking and purely spiritual/experiential learning may be necessary (1976). This even aligns with the Buddhist idea of The Middle Path, where an ideal route lies somewhere between extremes and is unique to every circumstance (Josephson, 2021). Anecdotal experiences serve to supplement and strengthen academic ones, and the reverse applies as well – my own experiences with spirituality and nature inform my interests and passions, and studying writing and academic work done in these fields has shifted how I view and seek out these experiences...

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The Consequences of the Ego and the Potential of Unselfing

ETAIN BRUNNER

Consumption is one of the favorite pastimes of our developed society, but it is also the source of many environmental problems. As technology has advanced, our society and economy have developed into one dependent on the mass consumption of things. Our habits of mass consumption have acted as a vehicle of destruction by increasing the amount of resources we use and waste we produce, leaving parts of our environment severely degraded. As a result, the people who have more and seem to be successful make more environmental impact, while the environmental consequences of their actions tend to be felt by the have nots. Our symbols of success that we prop up seem to be part of the problem as they have serious environmental downsides, and even though we recognize these downsides we continue to glorify consumptive habits that are destructive. But have you ever considered the roots of our need to consume?

I would argue that one aspect of our need to consume is egocentric ideas that view the consumption of things as a way to satisfy a particular identity or sense of self. This is just one observation of how the ego fuels our desire to consume, and there are many other perspectives on this as well. For example, Buddhist scholar David Loy argues that our incomplete sense of self drives our desire to consume, as we seek things outside of our selves to fill the gaps of what we believe is missing. Or in the contemporary business atmosphere, where more money and more consumptions are symbols of status, thus propping up the ego, the ego may be one of the main forces driving consumption and resulting environmental degradation. Given the role the ego may play in this environmental issue, a deeper look into the ego may present helpful insights into the origins of our current relationship to the environment and how attention to the ego can help reshape this relationship...

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Houseplants and the Balance of Life

PRISCILLA HOWLAND

Growing up I was not a particularly religious person. I grew up in a Christian household, but we rarely went to church. My siblings and I were still somewhat involved in the church, we attended Vacation Bible School. When I outgrew the program, I volunteered as a group leader for the kindergarteners and first graders. I did this for about 4 years but was unable to continue volunteering due to my jam-packed high school schedule and extracurricular activities. Although I grew up learning the very basics about the bible, my knowledge and understanding are limited to the lessons taught to younger children. When asked about my specific denomination, I do not know how to reply. I simply say my church is the Ridgeway Church of Christ...

...Continuing my reflection of my childhood and upbringing, I did not grow up with many houseplants. My mother had one hanging indoor plant that she received at my grandfather's funeral. But other than that one plant, the only experience I had growing plants was with my dad out in his garden. My father would grow tomatoes and peppers every year. But it took many years of "training" before my father let me partake in caring for the crops. Some of the best conversations I have had with my father came while he was watering his tomato garden. I grew up in an agricultural community where we learned about how plants grow and where our food comes from. This kind of agriculturally based education is different than the education of my peers who grew up in a primarily urban community. So, even though I did not have specific in-depth experience with tending to plants, I have a good foundational understanding of plants and their needs...

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The Gardener's Ethic: Countering Alienation from Nature

CHLOE DONOVAN

In my first reading of *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, Michael Pollan challenged the environmental ethic that I have unconsciously held for as long as I can remember.

His chapter, "Nature Abhors a Garden," particularly sparked this evaluation. In this chapter, Pollan states that, "gardening quickly teaches you to distrust...absolutes, to frame the question a little differently"(p. 49). To me, the broader absolute Pollan challenges is that many Americans have grown up with a 'wilderness ethic' but do not know exactly how they came to hold it, or the implications that come along with it...

...In place of the wilderness ethic, Pollan (1991) recommends the gardener's ethic, an integrated approach which accepts changing the environment as a part of human nature. The gardener's ethic is anthropocentric, which includes accepting that we have choices, morality, and values. This ethic accepts the struggle between nature and culture (Pollan, 1991, p. 193). It also includes the idea of local answers, or proposing "different solutions in different places and times." There is an emphasis placed on accepting that there are distinctions between varying degrees of human intervention in nature. The combination of these principles culminates with Pollan's main thought about the gardener's ethic. The garden (nature) provides the materials to find solutions to the problems you may face...

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Humans as Part of Nature: The Benefits of Time Spent Outdoors for Mental Health

BRITTON JENNINGS

In the summer of 2019, I was a high-school junior going to be a senior the coming year, going on a SCUBA trip out of state with my specialized environmental science class so that I could finish up my certification. This time in life at the end of high school but before college is widely regarded as the most fun and free time for a young person. A time where you're so close to the end of the life that your parents and the state have laid out for you and still far from the stresses of choosing for yourself in life and dealing with the repercussions of those choices. This expectation was far from where I was at that point in my life...

...That night I slept and again I woke up worse for wear but that's where the cycle of mental degradation seemed to stop. I went out that day with the rest of my class to get our certifications to Mermet Springs, an old rock quarry in Illinois that got filled with water and a bunch of props from movies and turned into a diving location. On the first day, I had fun for the first time in a month at least. I got to focus on something entirely detached from my sad life at home. I got to be outside for a full day learning how to properly use the apparatus, I got to swim for hours, interact with and pet fish, and I think most importantly I got to spend time in a serene outdoor environment surrounded by fish, massive trees, and my classmates that were acting surprisingly kind to me, even inviting me out to dinner and to swim with them in the hotel pool after that day's certification work. Even the guy I was rooming with was being nice to me and asking my opinion on things on tv. That night, I went to bed actually feeling better than the day before and finally ending or at least taking a break from the month-long cycle that had been wearing me out so heavily...

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An Unfamiliar Outlook: The Partnership of Ecofeminism and Daoism

ASHLYN HU

It's not clear how many Daoist ecofeminists are in the world, but I think I may be one of them. Though I was raised as a Baptist Christian, I have found the insights of Daoism, the predominant religion of the homeland of my family, and ecofeminism, the perspective that centers women's relationship to nature, as complementary to my Christian faith and concern for the environment. I have been able to incorporate this philosophy into my life and found that they are interrelated. My interest in these thoughts was partly sparked by applying to the China Program summer internship with Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), which piqued my interest in learning more about Chinese cultural beliefs. Daoism has played a huge role as a philosophy within Chinese culture for thousands of years, and I am interested in ecofeminism because it is a topic that strongly resonates with me being a woman and its relation to the earth. As someone who grew up having a spiritual and personal relationship with the natural world, I find that many of my values align with the Daoist ecofeminist perspective.

As it turns out, I got the position at EDF, and perhaps not surprisingly, Daoist Ecofeminism was not a focus of the program or of my work, but I remained intrigued. Notably, my research led me to get in contact with several ecofeminist Daoist scholars who shared their personal perspectives of integrating Daoist and ecofeminist practices into their own lives...

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Finding Waters: Spirit of Fly Fishing

TREVOR STOTLAR

One of my greatest memories is from a trip up to the northern region of Michigan. It was mid-October and in the prime of fall. The leaves were fluorescent oranges, yellows, and browns. Water clearer than the Bahamas. There were king salmon free-swimming up and down taunting me to throw a fly at one. But I just had to sit back and embrace this moment of true peace between the fish and their home habitat. I just could not throw a line in without admiring the beauty that was painted on a natural canvas in front of my own eyes. These are moments that stay with you and make you rethink your place on this Earth. Fly fishing has given me many different moments just like this one. Fly fishing is not just a hobby for me, but it is an escape from the concrete jungle of everyday life. When you fly fish, it gives you a form of peace within your life and a sense of spiritual solitude that stays with you. Sometimes, the beauty of nature simply awes us, and lifts us up; at the same time, there is a lot of history and technique that make fly fishing such a worthwhile pursuit.

Fly fishing is an outdoor art form that has been around for thousands of years, and a whole set of specialized equipment has evolved with the sport. It is mostly known for river and stream trout fishing for a variety of fish species. There are many different stream types that can be fly fished. From high up freestone mountain streams for brook trout, all the way to large flowing rivers for migratory salmon. Fly fishing equipment includes an 8-13 foot rod to make the perfect and smooth swings to get that fly where it needs to go. It also includes the use of a round single action reel that has backing (heavy-duty fishing line) that is then connected to a fly line. Unlike traditional methods of fishing, instead of using heavy fishing lures to help cast your light fishing line out, you are using a weighted fly line. Each casting motion from front to back lets out more line to allow the nearly weightless fly to reach its target...

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An Insight into Wilderness Therapy

HANNAH DIBLE

Nature has so many captivating qualities. Whether it be the rustle of summer green leaves, the indescribable blue of the sky on a clear day, or the countless creatures that scurry across the earth's floor, I always find myself amazed by its peculiar yet familiar structure. Nature is something that is often taken for granted. Yes, individuals are constantly reminded of its presence, but do we often think of its value? For me, the wilderness has been a place of refuge and comfort. Somewhere that I look to when I am feeling lost and confused.

Recently, I had the pleasure of embarking on an eight-day canoeing trip in The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota with a group of my peers. Being surrounded by such beautiful and seemingly untouched land (as seen in Figure 1) was an unfamiliar yet incredible experience. While I have always immersed myself in nature for times of reflection, I had never experienced it on this extreme level. In the absence of technology and development, my mind had never felt so open and curious. Realizing how small of a speck I am in this vast, beautiful, and awe-inspiring world helped me gain perspective on my actions and eased many of my worries. During this time, I unconsciously found myself becoming more contemplative about my past, present, and future. I was able to wrestle with the feelings I had pushed to the back of my mind, such as a recent family illness, and I was able to clearly define what I wanted to do with my life: attend college and eventually work in an environmental field. During this trip I was challenged (both mentally and physically) in ways that I didn't know were possible. After completing this experience, I was amazed at my newfound confidence and appreciation for the strength of both my body and mind. Boundary Waters was the place where I was truly enlightened about nature's healing and meditative characteristics and after returning from this trip, I was curious if others felt the same way...

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Pilgrim's Progress: A Spiritual Journey Along the Appalachian Trail

WILL BABB

The Appalachian Trail meanders 2,190 miles through the forest between Springer Mountain, Georgia and Mount Katahdin, Maine. Of the more than one-thousand hikers that attempt to walk the entirety of the trail in one year, known as thru hikers, only about a quarter will complete their trek. Despite the grim odds of success, every person that attempts a thru hike—whether they finish or not— comes away from the experience changed. Time in the wilderness, particularly on long adventures such as a thru hike, is spiritually impactful and life changing. The changes aren't always readily apparent, but it is impossible to embark on a thru hike and not walk away a different person. Hikers may view these changes through a religious or spiritual lens, or they might not notice them at all, but regardless, Appalachian Trail thru hikers partake in a spiritually transformative experience during their four- to six- month crusade...

...I wasn't a person of strong faith when I set out on my thru hike, although I did identify as Christian. However, the AT made it difficult not to believe in something bigger than myself. The impressive views, star-filled skies, genuine community, kindness of strangers, and difficult climbs left me feeling humbled and selfless. With ample time for reflection, I found an awakened sense of spirituality on the trail. I often felt a part of something greater and looked out over the sublime views of the White Mountains knowing that there was a god out there that created the majesty I beheld and provided me with the opportunity to experience it. Even just seeing the kindness of strangers—trail angels—that offered rides, meals, a bed, or simply words of encouragement gave me a profound feeling of hope...

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Near Death Experiences and their Implications for the Afterlife

MJ LEVIN

What happens after death is a mystery that humans all over the world have speculated on since the beginning of time. In many religions, there is a sense of certainty among the followers regarding what to expect when they pass, as promised by God or a higher power they worship. Although no one really knows for sure, the closest we have come to proving the reality of the afterlife are the stories told by people who have had near death experiences, or even died temporarily and came back to life. Spiritual revelations during these incidents are a cross-cultural phenomenon felt all over the world, with details that overlap and hint at the answer to this unsolved mystery.

Near death experiences, or NDEs, are a profound and divine phenomenon in which someone, typically in a life threatening context, transcends the normal human experience as we understand it into another realm with heightened cognitive capacity and different laws of nature. The most common characteristics that describe NDEs include a sense of peacefulness and acceptance; seeing a bright, unfamiliar light; meeting religious figures or late loved ones; transcending space and time; and leaving your body, with the ability to see yourself from the outside. Other common reports describe moving through a tunnel towards the light, entering a new domain and reviewing one's life. These incidents are oftentimes described in an overwhelmingly positive manner, yielding beneficial results; however, our society generally disregards them as false perceptions with little value that can be explained away by psychological or neurobiological factors (Facco et al., 2012)...

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A Glimpse at the Reality Existing After Ours Through Near-Death Experiences

MACKENZIE SHELTON

Near-death experiences (NDEs) are gateways for the soul—a profound, transformative experience that has taken place for some who have kissed death and returned. It is estimated that NDEs affect 1 in 10 people (The European Academy of Neurology, 2019). At best, these experiences are dismissed as wild dreams or hallucinations, but we struggle to make sense of what they are. One way some scientists have been trying to explain the reality of near-death experiences is in the connection between psychedelics and psychology. Dr. Rick Strassman (2001), a psychologist who has done extensive research on the topic, is one among many hypothesizing that NDEs are a result of the hallucinogenic chemical dimethyltryptamine, or DMT for short. He suspects that DMT is produced in the pineal gland of the brain, which is an area of the brain we still know little about. Because of the pineal gland's connection to light (what we do know is that it produces melatonin, a hormone that regulates both the reproductive system and the circadian rhythm), it has been spiritually associated with many ideas of a higher conscious and enlightenment such as the third-eye, crown chakra, and the seat of the soul. Strassman infers that DMT is produced in times of birth, near-death, death, and intense pain.

Psychology and science don't always agree. The largest issue with near-death experiences in the scientific realm is that these experiences are not experiments that can be conducted, tested, or repeated. They are subjective, random, and unique to the individual. However, it would be presumptuous to expect science to have the answer to all things at one time: throughout history, science has evolved to answer and challenge preconceptions. We now have a scientific understanding of natural events like gravity, the orbit of the universe, the timeline of the earth, and the human impacts causing climate change at a scale beyond past expectations. But just because these concepts were not scientifically known at one point does not make them untrue. Thus, the case for the existence of near-death experiences is compelling...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

The Intellectual Martian Society of "Stranger in a Strange Land" by Robert Heinlein

ETHAN ROSS

In 1961, the accomplished science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein shared his latest work with the world. In the fashion of a fairytale, *Stranger in a Strange Land* begins "Once upon a time," and goes on to describe the fantastic culture of Mars and its impact on human society. The timing of its publication in the early 1960s allowed for a short digestion period, so that it was ripe in the mind of the counterculture in the latter half of the decade. Themes of religious reform, free love, and a oneness with the cosmos permeate the book, and coincidentally rose to popularity during this time. The alignment of the novel with the counterculture cannot be understated: in 1967, the Freak Scene recorded a song entitled "Grok!," an homage to the word coined by Heinlein in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and a year later the Byrds referenced water brotherhood in their song "Triad." The verb "grok" even found its way into the vernacular of the counterculture (Blackmore, 1995). Messages about the sanctity of clean water and the positive potential of religion reached tens of millions, securing the legacy of *Stranger in a Strange Land* as one of the books which shaped religious and environmental values in the United States (Library of Congress, 2012)...

...When Smith comes to Earth, he offers water to those he groks are good, and convinces them of the truth behind "Thou art god," the closest approximation of the Martian outlook he can express in English. Furthermore, his presence on Earth is suggested to be an incarnation of the Archangel Michael, carrying out a holy duty not unlike Moses. Through the offering of water and endowment of divine law, his character is essentially a theophany espousing creation spirituality, although such a philosophy was unlikely known by name to Heinlein at the time of his writing *Stranger*. Nonetheless, this is evidence of a growing environmental consciousness in America which Heinlein noticed and reinforced...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

Technological Takeover or Technological Makeover?

ALANA BOWSER

Is it just me or does it feel like the whole world is going crazy? From a global pandemic, to a civil rights revolt, to talk about election fraud, it seems like everything is spiraling out of control and technology seems to be adding fuel to the fire. It feels as if technology is the invisible hand that controls us all on every level, individually and as a culture. As technological advancements push further, the concern for the problems perpetuated by them rises as well. I am not trying to be labeled as a “Karen” of my generation, but technology is slowly eating away at our brains and degrading the fabrics that hold our society together...

...The United States all of a sudden feels like we are on the brink of a civil war. While things were not all sparkly before 2020 hit us, the fire this year is raging more out of control than ever before. I mean literally, the west coast fires this year were some of the worst yet! Each year the traumatic events and culture wars get continuously worse. So, what is adding fuel to the fire? If we take a step back and observe the factors that are in play, the only factor growing exponentially each year is technology and its role in the lives of millions of Americans. Although technology is not the root of the problem, a lot of the issues would not be as detrimental as they are with it...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

An Existential Analysis of Environmental Values and the Other

CAEL JONES

Foremost, the existential doctrine is one of choice and freedom. This creates an interesting set of implications for the area of environmental ethics, as the existentialists believe we are responsible for everything we do. In fact, we are not only responsible for ourselves, but the world around us and the effects our actions have on it. Likewise, as with environmental issues, existentialism reveals the intimate relationship one has with others. Just as Sartre expresses, we are always with the other. Similarly, our environmental consequences affect every person in the world, in a multitude of ways. Furthermore, nature itself has been treated as an other and I argue that this is coherent with many existentialist notions. In this sense, I believe existentialism and environmental values share some important similarities which could illuminate how one should act. Moreover, the philosophy of existentialism is one that is deeply related to the human condition, especially as it questions the meaning of existence. For this reason, I will devote a brief portion of this endeavor to reflect on my own relationship with existential values and how they have influenced my worldview. Meanwhile, I provide a substantive comparison with David Loy and Buddhist thinking. In order to develop an understanding of existentialism, I will predominantly draw on the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Franz Fanon. Finally, I place this existential environmentalism in the context of multiple moral paradigms, including: an existential ethics, virtue ethics and social justice movements. Thus, existentialism provides a unique framework for understanding our relationship with “the other” and nature, by defining the meaning of our actions. Therefore, I intend to show how this philosophy is particularly useful for directing environmental values, especially with the assistance of ethical theories which bridge the gap between reason and action...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

The Place of Pets in our Lives: Some Christian and Buddhist Perspectives

BRIAR GOLLADAY

If you ask a person to tell you about their favorite pet they've had, no matter how long it has been since it lived, their faces will most likely light up with joy as they tell you a humorous or heartwarming story about "the best cat" or "the best dog in the world!" Love and appreciation for our pets seems to be a relatively universal trait that, for many of us, is also interconnected with our religious or moral values and feelings toward nature.

Take for example my first cat, T.T. My parents adopted T.T. in the early 1990s, several years before I was born, so by the time I was old enough to play with him, he had become quite the old man...

When T.T. finally passed away, he taught me new lessons about my family's spirituality. Although I was only five at the time, I remember my mom placing his still body in a little shoe box and saying a prayer for him before closing the lid. Later that day, we buried him under a large, flat rock in our backyard, and placed a statue of a praying woman on top to mark his grave. About ten years later, when my family decided to do backyard renovations, we dug up his little bones and reburied them in a more natural area. I remember seeing my younger brother mark his grave with a cross made out of two twigs tied together with twine.

The funny thing about this story is that my family is not particularly religious, but T.T. brought out their spiritual side just by existing. His life and death also inspired me to ponder certain questions related to religion, spirituality, and our pets. Although many of these questions are incredibly difficult to answer, I believe exploring them from the perspectives of different religions is incredibly worthwhile...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

The Essential Presence of Faith-Based Organizations in Sustainable Community Development

DARBY PETHRICK

The presence of faith-based organizations as social, human, and cultural capital within every community, regardless of demographic dimension, politics, race, and income demonstrate the resilience of religion as an asset essential to the cultivation of sustainable community development. Throughout history, religious groups have served as providers of essential services for the less fortunate, and advocates for social justice and equity in both rural and urban communities. Despite trying circumstances, this resolute effort over time and their relative success in providing support to those in need, has afforded faith based-organizations credibility, and in some cases their role is indispensable.

My passion for community development began when I had the opportunity to serve the community of Philadelphia, PA by working with [The Philadelphia Project](#), a Christian service organization, in the summers of my teenage years. As a faith-based organization with the mission to partner with local churches, serve their most vulnerable neighbors and provide transformative service opportunities, the project actively strives to offer hope to those they surround...

...Just as The Philadelphia Project serves their urban area, thousands of faith-based organizations have made it their mission to serve communities across the entirety of America through expressions of their religious beliefs and values. The adaptability of faith-based work contributes to its success and resilience, ranging greatly in size, faith, and expression in response to the demographic diversity of America. In rural American communities, faith-based organizations present themselves most popularly through traditional Christian faiths. As shown in a study by The Harvard School of Public Health, Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic faiths account for approximately 73% of rural American religious affiliations (Harvard School of Public Health, 2019). Traditional Christian churches have woven themselves into the rural American identity, and many times act as the vital organ of these communities...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

Origins of the Pro-Religion, Anti-Environmental Conservative Stereotype

LIZ VUKOVIC

The conception of someone who is “anti-environment” usually evokes one of two images: 1) a fat cat in a suit, smoking a cigar while lining the pockets of the fossil fuel industry, or 2) a truck-driving rural American scoffing at the Prius-driving liberals in the cities who preach about their recycling practice. This chapter focuses on the second image...

...The distinction has been made clear in our minds: liberals care about the environment and conservatives don't. This, along with another common conception that conservatives are religious while liberals aren't, paints an inaccurate picture that drives religious conservatives out of the environmental conversation. How did this happen?

As discussed by Hitzhusen (n.d.), religion has widely been understood amongst environmental thinkers as a “significantly anti-environmental force,” mostly due to repeated citations of the Lynn White thesis, which claims that the roots of the environmental crisis stem from the Judeo-Christian reading of the Bible, which suggested that man should “dominate” nature (White, 1967). White's thesis has been refuted by plenty of scholars and theologians, and Evangelical minister Tri Robinson's reading of Genesis 9 succinctly explains why: “God established a covenant with His creation...it was a covenant which commissioned all of His people to become stewards of creation. For those who read their Bible and believe it, this should have been a no-brainer” (Robinson, n.d.)...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

Love and Environmentalism

SOPHIA SHANNON

My mother had one general rule for me as I was growing up: to respect others, respect myself, and respect the environment. Obviously there were more rules that fell under this— “clean the dishes after school” being one I was just as frequently reminded of—but they all fell under this principle in some form. This was also the basis of my environmental education: respecting the environment, showing it the care, love and awe that it deserved, was a fundamental aspect of our lives. Every time we would go outside or take a hike, I would be reminded not to touch anything I didn’t have to, to leave things the way I found them, and to appreciate the beauty of our surroundings. These ideas of respecting others and your surroundings are common themes in religious doctrines as well—“love thy neighbor” is a common refrain, and one that is often used in religious environmental arguments. As can be seen in many religious statements on environmental crises, protecting those less fortunate than yourself (respecting others) and protecting the gift of creation (respecting the environment) are the focal points of religious arguments in support of environmental action. Yet the love of nature is often underappreciated or overlooked when it comes to discussions of the environment, despite its universality. Perhaps because the concept is emotional rather than scientific, love is more easily dismissed as a weak persuader, but because it is so basic to humans it stands to be one of the more powerful forces we have available to us. As a common religious and moral value, the love and respect that people are asked to treat their surroundings with is a significant driver in environmentalism, both to better understand the environment and to create a sense of responsibility in preserving it...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

The Sacredness of Water

HALLIE STELZLE

Pick up any religious text and you are likely to find at least one reference to water. Whether it is used to cleanse, bathe, heal, restore, replenish, or purify: water is one of the most prolific symbols in major world religions, stretching through time, place, and culture. As human beings, this may come as no surprise seeing how our bodies are composed mostly of water, and we rely on it for our very survival – a truth that continues to become more resonant as the effects of climate change take hold in the forms of drought, rising temperatures, and natural disasters. Like many religious symbols, water appears in scripture, ritual and tradition through its simplicity and use in everyday life. In examining a variety of major world religions, namely Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity, connections between water as a common resource, and water as a sacred and holy gift become apparent. Drawing from these unique and similar understandings of water, we can begin to consider the spiritual motivations one might have in engaging in water conservation efforts. Furthermore, in exploring these religions specifically, we can identify some beliefs about water that may provide helpful wisdom in the face of more rational conversations surrounding water conservation. Because these religions have such strong relationships with water and large followings worldwide, there is hope that these connections between scripture and our contemporary crisis may be brought to life to move toward a more secure and just future...

...While unique in the specific details, each of these religions place emphasis on water as an essential component of their creation stories, noting its ability to bring forth or restore life. These themes of birth, rebirth, and restoration will come back into the conversation about water later, especially in the context of rituals and traditions...

Find the rest of this chapter in *Emerging Perspectives on Religion and Environmental Values in America* [HERE](#).

Glossary

Comments following an asterisk (“”) are further ideas that connect with particular material in this book

Anatta

Buddhist doctrine of the “non-self”; idea that there is no soul; “there is in humans no permanent, underlying substance that can be called the soul.” ([Anatta Buddhism](#), *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2013))

Animal welfare

1. The health and well-being of an animal; an idea aimed at reducing animal suffering

*Peter Singer’s argument for the condemnation of speciesism and the support of equal consideration for animal interests is an animal welfare argument

Animal rights

1. The idea that animals should have equal consideration as humans in terms of possession of their lives and legal interests
2. Moral and legal entitlements bestowed upon non-human animals

*A stricter view on animal protection than animal welfare

Anthropocene

The era characterized by the impact of humans

Anthropocentrism

An ideology that places humans as the central focus of the universe

*This ideology is seen as problematic for environmental values, but exactly what is meant by “anthropocentrism” when environmental thinkers argue about it is not always clear; for instance, caring about other humans might follow from anthropocentrism

Atonement

Making reparations or amends

Atonement Christology

The study of reconciliation of humans with God through Christ’s death and sacrifice in Christian theology

Autonomy

A Kantian ethic “based on rational self-esteem and respect for the human capacity to direct one’s own life according to rational principles” (Wood, <https://philpapers.org/rec/WOOAAT>); self-governing; self-directing; the state or condition of self-governance, or leading one’s life according to reasons, values, or desires that are authentically one’s own (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/autonomy>)

* Existential self-dependence that directly contrasts Reinhold Niebuhr and David Loy’s anthropologies which call for a recognition of the interconnectedness of the universe (for Niebuhr, an interconnectedness through God); sought after in American society in accordance with the concept of extreme individualism

Biocentrism

An ideology that places all living things as the central focus of the universe (add here some comment about the preference for a biocentric (or ecocentric) environmental ethic that has typified much environmental thinking, and possibly a link to Bron Taylor’s recent statement about biocentric ethics)

*An ideology championed by the Earth First! movement which sees the interests of non-humans as prioritized above the interest of humans

Bodhisattva

The [Sanskrit](#) term for anyone who, motivated by great compassion, has generated [bodhicitta](#), which is a spontaneous

wish and a compassionate mind to attain [buddhahood](#) for the benefit of all [sentient beings](#) (*The Bodhisattva Vow: A Practical Guide to Helping Others*, page 1, [Tharpa Publications](#) (2nd. ed., 1995) [ISBN 978-0-948006-50-0](#))

Consequentialism

An ideological branch theorizing that decisions are made based on the outcomes or consequences of that decision

*An ideology displayed by Peter Singer in his publication on animal welfare, *Animal Liberation*

Conservatism

An ideology bearing the disposition to preserve or restore what is established and traditional and to limit change (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/conservatism?s=t>)

*Conservatism might connote a desire to preserve and restore established ecosystems and environments and would be highly resistive to climate change

Consumerism

The concept that an ever-expanding consumption of goods is advantageous to the economy (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/consumerism?s=t>)

*Annie Leonard's "The Story of Stuff" video provides a probing commentary on consumerism, including the following quote from Victor Lebow: "Our enormously productive economy... demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption... we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate" ("[Price Competition in 1955](#)", [Victor Lebow](#)". 2008-07-28.)

Creation

In Christian theology, the Universe and all its inhabitants, particularly the Earth

*E.O. Wilson argues that using this term for the natural world acknowledges the beliefs of most humans that there is some divine source of all things, thus creating a bridge of respect to the views of most people, which can foster mutual respect

Deontology

The branch of ethics dealing with duty and moral obligation based on rules

*Includes Kantian ethics

Dogmatism

The expression of an opinion or belief as if it were a fact: positiveness in assertion of opinion especially when unwarranted or arrogant (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogmatism>)

Dukkha

In Buddhism, the suffering caused by attachments and desires

*As there is no self, *dukkha* affects us all – damage to the environment is damage to each living creature (David Loy comments at length on *dukkha* in chapter 5)

Eco-Kashrut

Also known as eco-kosher; a movement to extend the [Kashrut](#) system, or [Jewish](#) dietary laws, to address modern environmental, social, and ethical issues, and promote [sustainability](#) ([Arthur O. Waskow](#), "[Eco-Kashrut: Environmental Standards for What and How We Eat](#)", [MyJewishLearning](#), Originally Published in the [Jerusalem Report](#).)

Ecology

The study of interactions of natural systems

Emotivism

A way of understanding moral knowledge that asserts that: "Ethical statements do not make assertions at all, but instead express emotions or attitudes" (Wood, "Relativism," Stanford University)

*Unlike relativism, emotivism is not threatened with self-refutation

Environment

"the aggregate of surrounding things, conditions, or influences;

surroundings";

"Ecology: the air, water, minerals, organisms, and all other external

factors surrounding and affecting a given organism at any time" (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/environment>)

Equality

The moral idea of equal consideration for the interests of all creatures with the capacity for experiences, namely suffering (according to Peter Singer)

Ethics

The branch of philosophy dealing with defining right/wrong and goodness/badness

Normative ethics: “the study of ethical action” (normative ethics focuses on what we should do, how we should live, and the arguments related to views about that...) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Normative_ethics); deciding the criteria for what is right and wrong; includes Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

Applied ethics: “the philosophical examination, from a moral standpoint, of particular issues in private and public life which are matters of moral judgment” (or just “applying ethical principles to particular situations or fields” (e.g., medical ethics, sexual ethics, etc) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Applied_ethics); sorting out the right and wrong courses of action in everyday life

Meta-ethics:

The study of the nature of ethics and moral reasoning

Eudaimonia

Thriving, happiness and joy, derived from living a virtuous life, “the good life” (according to Aristotelian Virtue Ethics); having a good indwelling spirit

Fallibilism

“We might always be mistaken in what we believe” (Wood, “Relativism,” Stanford University)

Four Noble Truths

1. Suffering Exists
2. Suffering is caused by excessive attachments and desires
3. Suffering ceases when attachments to desires cease
4. Freedom from suffering is possible via the Noble Eightfold Path

Freedom

1. “The state of being [free](#) or at liberty rather than in confinement or under physical restraint”; “exemption from external control, interference, regulation, etc.” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/freedom>)
2. “A function of the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly...to be free is to exist without fear, to perceive what is real” (Vision and Virtue, Hauerwas and Murdoch)
3. “Freedom is knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves” (Vision and Virtue, Hauerwas and Murdoch)

Gardener’s Ethic (according to Michael Pollan)

Humans must tend to the earth and care for it as a gardener cares for a garden instead of taking a hands-off approach that leaves humans as the enemy to the environment; this ethic contrasts a “wilderness ethic” that sees humans as opposed to nature and mainly destructive of it

The Good

1. According to Aristotle, “the good” is the correct or virtuous action to take in any given situation; “The Good” can also refer to the broader scope of virtuous living
2. For Iris Murdoch, “The Good” is “transcendent reality” not necessarily ever exemplified in our world (Vision and Virtue, Hauerwas)

Grace

In Christianity, “the love and mercy given to us by [God](#) because God desires us to have it, not necessarily because of anything we have done to earn it” ([Our Wesleyan Theological Heritage](#))

Halal

Permissible; allowed; in Islamic context, fit to eat

*Often includes safe and humane practices in dealing with animals for food, although is not inherently environmentally friendly

Hedonism

The doctrine that pleasure or happiness is the highest good;

devotion to pleasure as a way of life

(<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/hedonism?s=t>)

Egoistic hedonism: actively seeking happiness and pleasure by fulfilling personal urges and indulgences

*A doctrine of irony as the only sure way to be certain one will never be happy is to directly seek it through egoistic hedonism (at least according to virtue theory...)

Humility

1. "The quality or condition of being [humble](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/humble); modest opinion or estimate of one's own importance, rank, etc." (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/humility>)
2. "Not a phony attempt at constant self-effacement, but the selfless respect for reality" (Vision and Virtue)

Ideological taint

1. Human's inclination to reduce *the* truth to *our* truth
2. The human's temptation to deny the limited character of his knowledge and the finiteness of his perspectives (ala Reinhold Niebuhr); human's inclination to assume acquisition of a degree of knowledge beyond the limit of finite life

Integral ecology

An "openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human" (Laudato Si'); incorporating not only biological and chemical scientific information in dealing with environmental issues, but also social sciences, arts, and spirituality; championed by Pope Francis, it is to consider both natural and human ecology in addressing environmental problems

Intellectus

"The power of direction intuition and was associated with the passive receptivity of the contemplative" (R. Baer, Our Need to Control)

*Often exemplified by the intellectual pursuits of the humanities and the arts more so than the sciences; perhaps linked with right brain functions

Kosher

In accordance with Jewish dietary law; fit for consumption

*Like Halal, includes many safe and humane practices in dealing with animals for food, although is not inherently environmentally friendly

Laws

In the scientific community, "a statement based on repeated experimental observations that describes some aspects of the universe" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ScientificLaw>); that which has never been disproven

Love

1. "A profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person"; (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/love>)
2. "The discovery of reality...any relationship through which we are called from our own self-involvement to appreciate the self-reality that transcends us" (Vision and Virtue)

Morals

“Of, relating to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct or the distinction between right and wrong; ethical” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/moral>); one’s personal set of beliefs about right and wrong

Nature

1. “The [natural](#) world as it exists without human beings or civilization”; “The material world, especially as surrounding humankind and existing independently of human activities” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/nature?s=t>)
2. “The universe, with all its phenomena” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/nature?s=t>) including humans and their creations
3. “That which gives birth” (Loren Wilkinson)

Naturalism

The worldview that takes account only of [natural](#) elements and forces, excluding the supernatural or spiritual; the belief that all phenomena are covered by laws of science and that all teleological explanations are therefore without value (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/naturalism>)

Religious naturalism: the doctrine that all religious truth is derived from a study of [natural](#) processes and not from revelation

Nihilism

An extreme form of skepticism: the denial of all real existence or the possibility of an objective basis for truth; nothingness or non-existence

Ethical nihilism: “All ethical statements are false,” because there are no moral facts (Wood, “Relativism,” Stanford University)

Nirvana

Freedom from the endless cycle of personal reincarnations, with their consequent suffering, as a result of the extinction of individual passion, hatred, and delusion (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/nirvana?s=t>)

Noble Eightfold Path

In Buddhism, the way for a person to achieve enlightenment including eight practices:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

Objectivity

Not influenced by personal feelings, interpretations, or prejudice; based on facts; unbiased; intent upon or dealing with things external to the mind rather than with thoughts or feelings, as a person or a book; being the object of perception or thought; belonging to the object of thought rather than to the thinking subject (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/objective>)

*The goal of the scientific community in studies and experiments; in an attempt to be more honest and accurate about the practice of objectivity in science, Ian Barbour re-defines objectivity as “intersubjective testability with commitment to universality”

Papal encyclical

A “specific category of papal document, a kind of letter concerning Catholic doctrine, sent by the [Pope](#) and usually

addressed especially to patriarchs, primates, archbishops and bishops who are in [communion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communion) with the Holy See” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Encyclical>)

*Exemplified by *Laudato Si': On Care For Our Common Home* by Pope Francis

Planned obsolescence

According to the Story of Stuff, “designing and producing products in order for them to be used up (obsolete) within a specific time period. Products may be designed for obsolescence either through function, like a paper coffee cup or a machine with breakable parts, or through “desirability,” like a piece of clothing made for this year’s fashion and then replaced by something totally different next year. Planned obsolescence is also known as “design for the dump”; “a method of stimulating consumer demand by designing products that wear out or become outmoded after limited use” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/planned-obsolescence>)

Perceived obsolescence

“The part of planned obsolescence that refers to “desirability”. In other words, an object may continue to be functional, but it is no longer perceived to be stylish or appropriate, so it is rendered obsolete by perception, rather than by function” (Story of Stuff)

Pride

1. “A high or inordinate opinion of one’s own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct, etc” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/pride?s=t>)
2. A sin of thinking of oneself as superior to another or idealizing oneself as divine

Power pride: the belief that an individual bears superiority over another due to their position(s) of power

Intellectual pride: the belief that an individual bears superiority over another due to his/her intelligences and knowledge

Moral pride: idealizing one’s beliefs and moral systems and considering them superior to others’ moral views

Spiritual/religious pride: idealizing one’s religious and spiritual beliefs and considering them superior and ultimately final, and favored by the divine

Rapidification

“The continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity and the planet, coupled with a more intensified pace of life and work” (Laudato Si’)

Ratio

“The power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and examination, of abstraction, or definition and drawing conclusions” (Pieper 1963 – found in Baer (Our Need to Control))

*Includes the sciences focused on objectivity, for example the physical, biological, and chemical sciences; perhaps linked to left brain functions

Relativism

“A belief that says only how things seem to someone, and how they seem to anyone is always how they are (to that person)” (Wood, “Relativism,” Stanford University)

*A self-refuting concept, as one could never truly assert relativism because that would make it an absolute, and in relativism, there are no absolutes

Ethical relativism: “There is no absolute truth about ethics, but only relative truth” (Wood, “Relativism,” Stanford University)

Cultural relativism: “Different cultures have different ethical standards and the standards by which the conduct of any individual should be measured are the mores of the community to which that individual belongs” (Wood, “Relativism,” Stanford University)

*Gives no grounds for making moral judgements against cultural norms such as slavery, rape culture, institutionalized domestic violence, etc.; Wood finds all of these forms of relativism problematic

Religion (functional definition)

Whatever serves to answer the “big questions” about life and the universe

*Includes ideologies not normally considered “religious,” such as Marxism, scientism, naturalism, atheism, etc.

Resources

“Something to be used” (Loren Wilkinson)

Science

“Knowledge, as of facts or principles; knowledge gained by systematic study”; “systematic knowledge of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/science?s=ts>)

Self-deification

Seeing oneself as a god or as divine; considering oneself to have divine knowledge and judgement

Sensuality

Diving into material senses to deal with the anxiety of the human condition; inordinate devotion to limited goods

Sin

1. “Transgression of divine law”; “any act regarded as such a transgression, especially a willful or deliberate violation of some religious or moral principle” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/sin?s=t>)
2. Any manifestation of the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth
3. A distancing of oneself from God; being out of relationship with God
4. A way of life not in accordance with the God’s will

*Patriarch Bartholomew referred to a “crime against the natural world” as being a sin, and Pope Francis agreed with this view in *Laudato Si’*

Skepticism

“All beliefs are uncertain; no belief is justified” (Wood, “Relativism,” Stanford University)

Ethical skepticism: “No ethical belief is certain, all ethical beliefs are unjustified” (Wood, “Relativism,” Stanford University)

Speciesism

“A prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Singer, Animal Liberation)

Stewardship

“Earthkeeping”; taking care of the planet and its environments; taking on a role of care as that of a steward of a master’s property

Subjectivism

“The doctrine that all knowledge is limited to experiences by the self, and that transcendent knowledge is impossible” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/subjectivism?s=t>)

Technocratic paradigm

The way that our society, including our economic systems, views technology and uses it to dominate the natural world; a reductionist life perspective that denies the interconnectedness of all things

*This has led to a belief that technology will save humanity from the threats of climate change and environmental issues, but this is not realistic or practical

Tenet

Any opinion, principle, doctrine, dogma, etc., especially one held as true by members of a profession, group, or movement” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/tenet>)

Theories

“A coherent group of tested general propositions, commonly regarded as correct, that can be used as principles of explanation and prediction for a class of phenomena” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/theory>)

Unselfing

Taking pleasure in self-forgetful, moral and virtuous actions and experiences; releasing oneself from the idea of themselves as an individual (Vision and Virtue)

Utilitarianism

1. “The doctrine that the morally correct course of action consists in the greatest good for the greatest number, that is, in maximizing the total benefit resulting, without regard to the distribution of benefits and burdens” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/utilitarianism?s=t>); all things have the same worth, no being is worth more than another being
2. A type of consequentialism created by Jeremy Bentham

*Utilized by Peter Singer in his publication, *Animal Liberation*

Values

That upon which we place weight and importance in our lives

Virtue

1. “Moral excellence; goodness; righteousness” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/virtue?s=t>)
2. “The self’s correspondence to reality” (Vision and Virtue)

Virtue theory/Virtue Ethics

Aristotle’s moral philosophy, part of normative ethics, focused less on a specific moral system, but rather on character and virtue as it applies to everyday scenarios

*The virtuous person interacts with the world in a manner of care and stewardship, including passion for maintaining environmental health; a virtuous person may not be focused mainly on caring for creation, but is the kind of person who will choose to be a good steward of creation

Wilderness

“A [natural environment](#) on [Earth](#) that has not been significantly modified by [human](#) activity” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilderness>)

Wilderness Ethic (according to Michael Pollan)

The ethic of taking a hands-off approach to the environment by placing human culture as the enemy of nature and the natural world (contrasted with gardener ethic, defined above)

Zabihah

Islamic law concerning the slaughter of animals for food (<http://www.isahalal.org/Content/Halal-Information/Halal-Education/-Halal-or-Zabihah.aspx>)

*Goes hand-in-hand with Halal; meant to be humane and healthy; not inherently environmentally friendly, but includes many environmentally friendly aspects