

Religion, Modern Secular Culture, and Ecology

George Rupp

As an occasional participant in the meetings that led to this issue of *Dædalus*, I have been invited to sketch the historical, religious, and academic context that these deliberations on religion and ecology presuppose. I can summarize that context in two countervailing points: virtually all of our religious and cultural traditions have contributed to the gravity of the ecological threats we face; at the same time, both our religious traditions and our universities can marshal substantial resources for addressing those threats more effectively than has been the case so far. The challenge is to move from point one to point two.

Almost thirty-five years ago, Lynn White wrote an arresting essay entitled “The Historic Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” an article that was published in *Science* and has received widespread attention over the years from scientists as well as humanists. It is worth returning to White’s article more than three decades later because it continues to be instructive, not only through its telling insights but also through its equally revealing omissions. White correctly identifies the dominant strain or core structure of Western theism that represents God as transcending the world and humanity as exercising dominion over the natural order. Where White falls short is in failing to notice how other elements in the structure of biblical religion in effect counterbalance the invitation to exercise human sovereignty over nature. Two such elements are crucial: the affirmation of creation as the handiwork of God and therefore as good; and the record of humanity’s fall and consequent need for redemption.

That nature is God’s creation and therefore good calls for respectful care and stewardship. White is aware of what he terms “an alternative Christian view,” which he delineates almost exclusively with reference to Saint Francis of Assisi. But he does not interpret the theme of care and stewardship for the divine creation as a central element in the structure of Jewish and Christian religion.

Similarly crucial for counterbalancing the motif of human sovereignty over nature is the

biblical story of fall and redemption. The destiny of the faithful is, after all, not to be realized in worldly rulership. Especially in much of Christian piety, the human vocation is to be a pilgrim who is only passing through the fallen world and therefore is to tread lightly over the earth on the way to redemption in heaven.

This otherworldly orientation can, of course, cut both ways. It may lead to a disengagement that is, paradoxically, friendly to the environment from which it is estranged. But it may also result in the exploitation of the fallen world precisely because it is viewed as lacking intrinsic value. Thus, even very traditional Western religious worldviews have a deeply equivocal relationship to our ecological crisis.

What is noteworthy, though, is that the force of the structural elements outlined by White become only more pronounced as increasing numbers of people find the traditional narrative of fall and redemption less and less compelling. If salvation in heaven is not the central goal of human life, then the prospect of sovereignty over the natural world takes on greater urgency. And if the evident evil in worldly affairs is to be overcome apart from any redemptive divine action, then vigorous human effort will be required.

Similarly, if God as creator is believed to have established a general order to nature but is no longer thought to intervene in particular events, then human will and intelligence can seek to understand and in time even attempt to control the natural world. And if even the limited role attributed to this remote deity is no longer attractive or persuasive, then human effort is all the more crucial. Thus the rise of science and a correlative retreat by traditional theism from at least the late seventeenth century on accentuated precisely the anthropocentric elements that White identifies as characteristic of Jewish and Christian religion.

To put the point bluntly, it is only when the transcendent God of biblical religion is no longer thought to intervene in the world either as creator or as redeemer that the full force of claims for human dominion over nature becomes evident.

In the twentieth century this unrestrained human self-assertion over nature reached what remains its starkest expression in the literary and philosophical movement called existentialism. Like most broad cultural trends, existentialism has many variants that certainly do not agree in all their details. But the early thought of Martin Heidegger exerted enormous influence on the movement as a whole and in many respects illustrates its central tendencies. For Heidegger, the human self is, to use his metaphor, “thrown” into an indifferent universe

from which it must seize and shape whatever meaning can be attained. There is no created order to discover. Nor is there any redemptive community. Instead the self-reliant individual must establish authentic existence in stark opposition both to nature and to the mores of any and all forms of conventional social life—in particular the mass culture of modern society.

Existentialism offers a convenient illustration of both the glory and the travail of modern Western individualism. It summons one to authenticity, to self-actualization over against a conformist society and an indifferent nature; it resonates with the energy and initiative and independence of our most individualistic traditions. But existentialism also exemplifies the willful self-assertion and arrogance that all too frequently characterize Western attitudes both toward nature and toward the cultures of others.

There are, of course, substantial cultural resources for enriching this environmentally inhospitable and religiously impoverished individualism. The essays on religion and ecology in this issue collect and present impressive evidence of the vitality of those resources. Especially noteworthy are the contributions from a remarkable range of Asian traditions—from Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Shinto, and Confucian thought and practice. Indeed, one of the most remarkable achievements of this collection is the depth and variety of representation of those various traditions. But that very achievement at the same time demonstrates how diverse each community is, how disparate its historical impacts have been, and how untenable it is to present any tradition in self-congratulatory terms as consistently and effectively unified in its ecological orientation.

The result is that neither Asian traditions nor the relatively fewer environmentally friendly themes of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim action and reflection nor the orientations of indigenous communities in Africa, Oceania, and the Americas are by themselves adequate for addressing the environmental challenges we face. We cannot select and emphasize only environmentally friendly motifs from multiple traditions. Nor can we simply embrace a unified position that affirms the whole of reality just as it is. Instead we must grapple with the fact that modern Western individualism and its institutional expressions in social, political, and economic life have become major historical forces across cultures—forces that we cannot ignore or wish away but rather must engage and incorporate into an ecologically responsible stance appropriate to the centuries ahead.

One of the settings in which we must grapple with this ecological crisis is our universities. It is scarcely surprising, in view of the history of their development, that modern research universities exemplify an advanced form of the very individualism that we must overcome. This is so not only because individual members of at least Western academic institutions are

in their personal styles highly individualistic—though that is certainly often true; more important, it is because universities, in developing academic disciplines as central to the organization of domains of knowledge, exhibit a pattern that parallels the role of individualism in the broader society.

Disciplinary specialization is a significant achievement of the research university. It has been remarkably effective in generating understanding of both specific data and general explanatory hypotheses. But this attainment of analytical rigor has as its correlate a depth of specialization that renders connections with other disciplinary approaches difficult at a time when we are becoming more and more aware that many challenging intellectual problems, certainly including issues at the heart of our ecological crisis, do not fall neatly within the domain of a single discipline.

This state of affairs predictably has led to calls for interdisciplinary investigation. While completely understandable, such calls are problematic in ways that parallel the invocation of one or another religious or cultural tradition as the answer to our ecological crisis. Just as we cannot simply return to a state of innocence that antedates the historical emergence of modern Western individualism, so we cannot embrace a synthetic interdisciplinary approach that fails to incorporate the analytic strengths and achievements of disciplinary specialization.

What is required is therefore not interdisciplinary study but rather multidisciplinary investigation comparable in rigor and depth to specialized research within single disciplines. Such investigation offers the prospect of moving forward on two crucial fronts. The first requires us to understand and then also to demonstrate in compelling ways how current patterns of advanced industrial societies are not sustainable indefinitely—or even for very long. The second calls for participation in developing alternative technical approaches and economic incentives that allow and encourage movement away from unsustainable current practices.

Progress on both fronts clearly requires joint efforts on the part of scientists and engineers on the one hand and policy professionals on the other. That such joint efforts are being launched is promising. But the interests that favor continuation of current patterns of consumption are extremely powerful. Consequently, any campaign to conserve our environment must be solidly based on compelling scientific evidence and cogently expressed in terms of economic incentives and policy requirements.

Along with marshaling scientific, technical, and policy capabilities for addressing ecological issues, we must also enlist the full range of the world's cultural resources. This process must recognize the extent of pluralism not only among traditions but also within each of them. Because there are multiple voices within each of a rich variety of communities, effective collaboration across traditions entails greater complexity than has often been supposed—but, paradoxically, may also be more readily attained, at least in partial and stepwise fashion.

Pluralism within traditions testifies to the capacity for change in what remains a continuous line of development. Thus even the communities most inclined to invoke authoritative figures or texts in fact regularly take into account new data and respond creatively to the demands of novel situations. This capacity for change opens up opportunities for collaboration across traditions, as minor or even submerged motifs in one community gain a higher profile through interaction with other communities in which those motifs are more prominent.

To take a critical instance, in seeking to counter the Western tendency toward unrestrained individualism, a major resource is the insistence of many religious and cultural traditions that humans in the end are parts of a larger whole to which their personal interests and ambitions are subordinate. In Western religious and cultural traditions, this holistic affirmation has not been a dominant theme insofar as God has been construed as outside the world, and it has been muted still more as the divine has been relegated to the margins of natural life and human affairs. But even in Western traditions, there is a persistent testimony that God is intimately involved with the world and indeed incorporates the world into the divine life.

This testimony is not confined to Francis of Assisi and a few other revolutionary figures, as Lynn White suggests in referring to “an alternative Christian view.” Instead, it is a recurrent even if not dominant motif in the Bible and in Western theology and philosophy. In regard to this theme, Psalm 139 speaks for much Jewish and Christian piety:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”

even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.
(Ps. 139:7–12)

And for Christian theology, the central teaching of the incarnation affirms that the divine is integrally related to the human, that a deity who is distant cannot be the God who loves and embraces the world in Christ.

Modern secular appropriations of Western religion illustrate the persistence of this holistic affirmation. Spinoza and Hegel are probably the most influential examples of philosophers who sought to restate the truths of Jewish and Christian religion in secular terms after the erosion of belief in a God outside the world. But instead of retreating to the remote God of Deism, Spinoza and Hegel insisted, each in his own way, that any coherent conception of God must include all of reality in the divine.

This holistic strain in Western traditions may attract attention out of proportion to its historical prominence in the context of interaction among religious traditions, especially once the interaction has moved beyond self-congratulatory representation to a search for common ground. This seeking common ground does not imply an attempt to find a least common denominator to which the various religious traditions can be reduced. Instead, the aim is to enrich and develop further the resources in each community for resisting unrestrained individualism through the affirmation of an inclusive reality into which personal interests and ambitions must be integrated.

We in the West have much to learn from religious and cultural traditions that locate the human within nature and do not authorize the exploitation of nature to serve narrow human interests. At the same time, all of us as humans now confront ecological challenges that require vigorous effort to redirect the environmental impact of our species. Consequently, the energy and imagination that have contributed to the threats we face may also be a major resource for countering those threats.

In this respect, modern Western individualism in both its secular and its religious expressions may play a constructive role in ongoing deliberations on religion and ecology. While the recognition that the human is integral to a larger whole is crucial for cultivating an ecological ethos, this insight alone is not enough. In particular, this holistic affirmation of all that is does

not directly address the crucial ethical question of how a more equitable sharing of limited resources may be attained.

Here again, each tradition can bring impressive resources to bear. But along with counterparts from other traditions, Western religious and secular perspectives certainly can and should play a role in the common cause of restoring ecological balance while at the same time advancing toward a more equitable sharing of the earth's scarce resources. Only this joining of environmental concern with a commitment to justice is worthy of the best in each of our diverse traditions.

To integrate an ethos of care for the earth as our common home with an ethic that engages the issue of equity would be an optimal outcome for a series of deliberations on ecology and religion. This volume has certainly not yet achieved that integration. But in marshaling resources both from the academy and from an impressive range of religious traditions, it at least moves in the right direction.

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