THE RHIZOMATIC FIELD OF RELIGION AND ECOLOGY/NATURE

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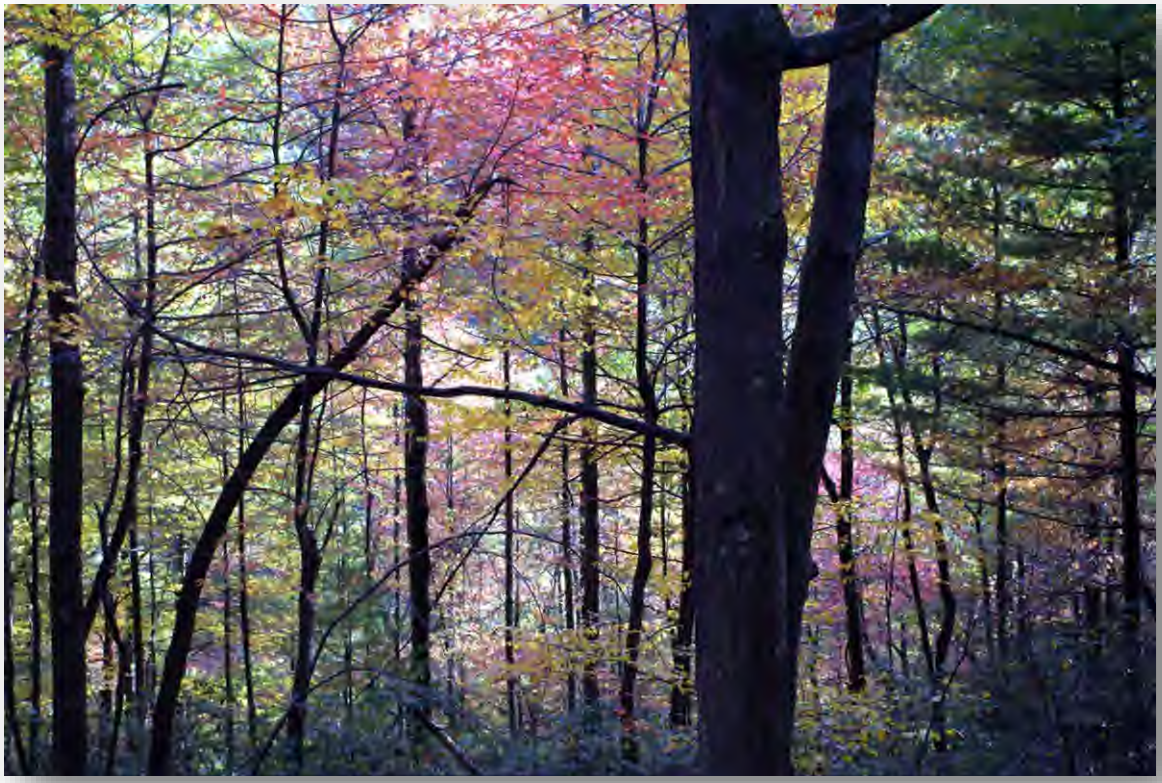

The emergence of a new field of study is anything but linear. This is certainly the case when it comes to the field now known as Religion and Ecology, or Religion and Nature. How one narrates that emergence matters. On the one hand, it seems silly to talk about the "start" of the relationship between religion and ecology because that relationship is as old as there have been some sort of creatures making meaning out of their lives in relationship to other life on the planet. My own definition of religion involves the process of meaning-making, or re-attuning to the bodies that make up the worlds around us, which all together make up the planetary community.[1] In this sense, religion is a part of our ecological contexts or a part of what some might call "nature naturing."[2] On the other hand, the study of "religion and ecology" or "religion and nature" does have a shorter history, and one that has branched out over the years as more and more scholars understand the importance of placing

[1] On religion as "re-attuning" see: Whitney Bauman, "Developing a Critical Planetary Romanticism: Re-attuning to the Earth" in *Religion, Materialism and Ecology*, ed. Peter M. Scott, Kate Rigby and Sigurd Bergmann (New York: Routledge, 2023), 13-28.

[2] This term is from the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza.

all things human within the greater planetary community, and understand the increasing threats we all face due to climate change. Here I want to discuss at least four different branches, or more accurately nodes, of this rhizomatic field of study, not in any sort of super-secessionist way in which one directly evolves from and surpasses the other, but in a way that helps to identify some distinct, though overlapping, approaches.

Node 1: **Environmental History, Pantheisms, Panentheisms**

One "node" of the rhizomatic field is perhaps best captured by the famous "Lynn White critique" of the dominion clause in Christianity.[3] White, a philosopher of science and history, argued that the emerging environmental crisis was at heart a spiritual crisis that had to do with the way in which some humans, in this case largely Christians, understood themselves as having dominion over the rest of the natural world.[4] From this place of "human exceptionalism,"[5] humans understood themselves as above the rest of the natural world and thereby justified in using the rest of the natural world. He further argued that we needed a new understanding of the human that sees humans as part of the rest of nature, and he argued that St. Francis would be a good model. Many within what emerged as the field of religion and ecology have started with this critique, then have moved on to find more eco-friendly texts, rituals, traditions, and ideas within Christianity and later other world religions. Even prior to the White critique theologians such as Joseph Sittler and Paul Santmire were ahead of their times in declaring the importance of theology for environmental thinking.

Environmental history played a large role in this node of the field. Clarence Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, one of the primary texts of environmental history provided one of the first comprehensive studies of how ideas about what it means to be human shape human-Earth interactions.[6] Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* combined such environmental history with feminist thought in an effort to show how patriarchal systems, such as those found in Greek thought and in Christianity, contributed to both the

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[3] For a critical discussion of the White hypothesis and its relationship to the field of religion and ecology, see: Anna Peterson and Todd LeVasseur, eds., *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The Lynn White Thesis at 50* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[4] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," in *Science* 155: 3767 (1967): 1203-1207.

[5] On human exceptionalism, see: Anna Peterson, *Being Human: Ethics, Environment and our Place in the World* (Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press, 2001).

[6] Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press, 1976).

instrumentalization and degradation of women and of nature.[7] This work was then enmeshed in works by early eco-theologians such as Sallie McFague and Rosemary Radford Ruether. They also took into account goddess traditions and process philosophy to think differently about the Earth as God's body (McFague) and the need for both Gaia and God (Ruether).[8]

Node 2: World Religions and Ecology

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A second node of the field is the world religions and ecology approach that has roots in scholars such as Thomas Berry. Berry, influenced by the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, really understood that humans are beings of the 14-billion-year process of cosmic expansion and the 4.5-billion-year process of geo-

[7] Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1980).

[8] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

evolution.[9] As such, religions are of and for this Earth. Many of his students would go on to be leaders of the emerging field of religion and ecology. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim organized the conferences and volumes within religion and ecology that would become a touchstone for this field in the 1990s, and they founded the ongoing Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology.[10] There was also the creation of a Religion and Ecology group at the American Academy of Religion 1976. The first year was organized by process-influenced theologian Schubert Ogden and according to the minutes from the Program Committee, the group was authorized to invite Barry Commoner as a keynote speaker that year.[11] The central point of this node of the rhizome is to ask how religions might enter their "ecological phase."[12] This comparative and pluralistic approach helped bring many other traditions, cultures, and people into the field of religion and ecology: including the important conversations that were happening at the intersection of religion and ecology, liberation theology, and Indigenous studies.

Node 3: Nature Religions / Religious Naturalisms

Yet another node of the field has to do more squarely with nature religions and emerging religious practices that are nature-centered. Again, influenced by narratives of big science such as ecology and cosmology, some "religious naturalists" argue that the natural sciences provide us with the only sources we need to make meaning out of our lives. This would include the *Story of the Universe* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, and also Ursula Goodenough's *Sacred Depths of Nature*.[13] It also includes concepts like the "Gaia hypothesis" by Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock, and "biophilia" by E. O. Wilson.[14] Wendell Berry's spiritual agrarianism would also fit within this node.[15] More recently

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[9] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008 edition; originally published in 1955).

[10] For information on the Harvard Religions of the World and Ecology book series, and the vast and tremendous work of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, visit: https://fore.yale.edu/.

[11] I am not sure whether Commoner attended, but this comes from the archives of the American Academy of Religion: RG 57 Box 32: American Academy of Religion Groups and Seminars 1976-1982.

[12] Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter their Ecological Phase* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2003).

[13] Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1994); Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature: How Life has Emerged and Evolved,* 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[14] James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); E.O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[15] Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 1977).

understandings of environmentalism or veganism as a spirituality, and hiking, surfing, and fishing as spiritual practices have been explored by various scholars. Many of these scholars within this node draw from the work of Bron Taylor on "dark green religion," and participate in the meetings of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture.[16]

Node 4: Critical Theories and Environmental Humanities

One other important node of the field has to do with the intersection of critical theories, religion, and the environment. Feminisms, Queer Theories, Decolonial and Postcolonial Theories, Disability Studies, and Animal Studies have all contributed to this node. The idea is that different bodies experience the worlds in which we live differently. Bodies, as Judith Butler argues, matter.[17] There is no one experience of nature, and who and what receives the brunt of ecological degradation (including climate change) is not equally distributed among living beings on the planet. Some bodies can be more "remote" from the costs of consumption, while others carry disproportionate environmental burdens.[18]

Still others within this node have found good conversation partners with theories such as the new materialisms, object-oriented ontology, affect theory, neo-animisms, and other more recent theories that understand all reality on an "immanent plane."[19] The idea is that if the modern Western world has separated humans from nature (and the humanities from the natural sciences), and this is part of the source of our ecological and social ills, then we need to rethink all things human back into the evolving planetary community.

Each of the Nodes Is Important

Though these are different nodes of a rhizome, they are not mutually exclusive, and they feed into one another. Most people in the field draw from each of these nodes at different times. In the future I suspect the methods and

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[16] Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality, and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009). The ISSRNC website can be found here: https://www.issrnc.org/.

[17] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[18] On ecological "remoteness" and "backgrounding," see Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[19] Two recent volumes deal with these themes: Karen Bray, Heather Eaton, and Whitney Bauman, eds., *Earthly Things: Immanence, New Materialisms, and Planetary Thinking* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023); and Peter M. Scott, Kate Rigby, and Sigurd Bergmann, eds., *Religion, Materialism and Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

sources of each node will be important for developing more planetary understandings of what it means to be human. The environmental humanities are just beginning to realize that religion and ecology/nature are important conversation partners. I think the future of the field (and even the study of religion in general) lies within emerging discourses that un-discipline our fragmented ways of thinking about humans and the Earth and thereby begin to develop something like planetary discourses.