

REFLECTIONS ON RELIGION AND ECOLOGY: TROUBLES, CONFERENCES, EDUCATION

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This brief essay will touch on three aspects of the current ecological dilemma, followed by reflections on two conferences that I attended and on the ongoing important role of education.

Troubles

Three topics have entered the sphere of public and scientific conversation: climate change, the ubiquity of plastics, and diminution of species diversity.

Climate change has now become part of the warp and woof of policy, technological advances, and economic innovation. Germany and California have become leaders in the generation of solar energy. Electric automobiles, once shunned, have become commonplace. Though not fast enough, the rate of the increase in emissions has been reduced and is expected to plateau and decline.

Plastics suffuse the planet from the Arctic, to the oceans, to the blood flowing through humans and other animals. Unknowns abound. Do microplastics affect

cancer rates? Do endocrine imitators—which alter the genitalia of frogs who swim in heavily plasticized waters—have a parallel effect on humans?

The weight and mass of farm animals and human bodies exponentially exceed the weight and mass of free-range non-domesticated mammals, reptiles, and birds.¹ Aside from rare shark and bear attacks and the hundreds of deaths each year from tigers and elephants in India, humans have fulfilled the biblical injunction to gain dominion. Fear of wild animals has been replaced with other forms of human fear manifested in anxiety and depression.

How can ethical and spiritual discourse contribute to relieving the amalgam of malaise delineated above? Most humans share concern for the common good obtained through long life and good health despite the rise of clannish identitarianism, various forms of xenophobia, and seeming disengagement from political life due to disaffection. Religious authorities decry human sin as the origin of all woes—greed, covetousness, deceit, calumny, hypocrisy—calling for personal and social change. Fiction writers, journalists, and filmmakers call attention to situations and scenarios in ways that move the human heart. Politicians grapple with creating effective legislation to address systemic issues. Scientists work to develop replacement and remediation technologies that address the myriad ecological challenges that abound.

Conferences

At the May 2024 conference of the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment, several scholars gathered in Potsdam to share their thoughts, research, and accomplishments on behalf of Planet Earth. Inspiring stories were shared about mountains saved from mining in the Hebrides and in the Colorado Rockies. Philosophically, the assembly celebrated the shift toward a movement variously characterized as the new materialism, new immanentism, and new animism, heralding the dawning realization of interconnectivity and the rejuvenation of systems thought. The implications are immense. Naïve mechanistic assumptions have been overthrown by keystone thinkers. Policy changes will follow.

At the June 2024 Berggruen Institute gathering on Planetary Metaphysics, convened by Boris Shoshitaishvili in Venice, scholars from various disciplines explored three intersecting topics: Gaia, the Noosphere, and the Anthropocene. Gaia theory builds on the work of James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, who established that living systems on Earth were made possible by a reciprocity between microbes, atmosphere, and rocks. Bacteria digesting minerals released

¹“Mass of Humans, Livestock, and Wild Mammals: A Stunning Comparison,” *Yale E360*, <https://e360.yale.edu/digest/mass-of-humans-livestock-wild-mammals>.

oxygen and nitrogen upward and excreted limestone downward. The Noosphere, theorized by the Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, celebrates human consciousness as a culmination of the Earth making sense of itself. The idea of the Anthropocene bleakly announces that the rise of human-generated technologies has altered the stuff of the planet leading to alteration of landscapes, inner and outer. A call-to-action results: how will humans respond to the realities of climate change, pollution, and loss of the psychic and physical benefits of other-than-human species?



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Education

Education holds the key to bringing needed change. Throughout the Catholic milieu of 1.5 billion souls, *Laudato Si'* offers a roadmap toward healing the planet through its combination of economic analysis and ethical exhortation. Similar

proclamations, spreading the news of difficulty and urging prudence regarding the use of natural resources, have been issued by leaders of other faith traditions.

For more than four decades, I have been teaching and publishing within the field of religion and ecology. My methodology includes student immersion in local environments. This includes learning about local flora and fauna and the stories of first peoples, as well as beach cleanups and chaparral restoration. In addition to *Laudato Si'*, we also study the many potential ecological insights found in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. We move and we meditate as part of the curriculum.

Sometimes we teachers hear from students how their education has shaped and formed their life work. Connor de Vane, who completed my class on World Religions and Ecology in 2016, took a gap year after graduating from Loyola Marymount University to walk the continental divide from Canada to Mexico. He made a film called *Hike the Divide*, documenting his discoveries and conversations with ecological activists from Montana to New Mexico. Subsequently, he continued to engage the Great Work imaginatively, as shared in this message from February 12, 2024:

I am working on a just transition for Indigenous and immigrant farmworkers out of the wine industry into climate resilience work and care for the land (prescribed fire, ecologically sound forestry, watershed regeneration, habitat restoration, etc.) through the grassroots labor coalition I work with, North Bay Jobs with Justice, and the New Orleans based nonprofit Resilience Force. Lots of exciting stuff in the works! I wrote two successful grant proposals this fall to CAL FIRE and the Labor and Workforce Development Agency for just shy of \$1.9 million to support the training and employment of workers at family-sustaining wages of at least \$35/hr.

Such work gives me hope for the future!

In fall 2024 I taught a class and required the reading of two books: Carl Safina's *Alfie and Me: What Animals Know, What Humans Believe* (Abe Books, 2023) and Roseanna Xia's *California Against the Sea: Visions for Our Vanishing Coastline* (Heyday Books, 2023). In *Alfie and Me*, a screech owl named Alfie was rescued by Carl and his wife Patricia, hand-reared during the pandemic, and successfully released into the wild. The authors give point and counterpoint conversations regarding the history of world culture, contrasting what Thomas Berry characterized as the life-denying "collection of objects" worldview with the life-affirming "communion of subjects" worldview. We connected with our on-campus naturalist to spend time with the owls that nest near the Loyola

Marymount (LMU) bell tower. We will also learned about connecting with nature at the Ballona Wetlands, a six-hundred-acre state ecological preserve adjacent to LMU—the last remaining wild coastal remnant in Los Angeles County, which is being restored. In the second, Xia describes many other beach communities. She does not, however, cover the amazing story of how forty-eight nonprofit organizations banded and bonded to successfully spare the Balloona Wetlands from a city council-approved plan for a seaside golf course and marina, a story researched and written by students in the class.

Education elevates and liberates. Through tools of discernment, everyday decisions can be oriented toward the greater good. To do so requires hard work and the cultivation of independent thinking and personal power, as seen in this quote by Howard Thurman (1899-1981) delivered at the 1980 Spelman College commencement following his experience studying and consulting with Mahatma Gandhi and Gandhian leaders in India from 1935-36:

There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will, all of your life, spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.²

² Howard Thurman, “The Sound of the Genuine,” Baccalaureate Address, Spelman College, May 4, 1980. Text edited by Jo Moore Stewart, *Spelman Messenger* 96, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 14–15.