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Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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to focus attention on environmental ethics, defends a “harder” realism regarding nature. While acknowledging that “All human knowing colours whatever people see, through our percepts and concepts” (1997: 38), Rolston believes that we can still know nature “out there” in a (relatively and locally) accurate manner. Thus, commenting on Neil Evernden’s description of nature as “a category, a conceptual container” (Evernden 1992: 89), Rolston contends that we invent the category nature and put things into it because “there is a realm out there, labeled nature, into which things have been put before we arrive” (Rolston 1997: 42). The word “nature” thus emerged in response to the need for a “container” to match the non-human “forces and processes” that exist prior to and apart from human intervention. Even if terms like “nature” are not universal, they may still have real referents, which we can come to know in a meaningful way.

For many religious thinkers and practitioners, nature has objective reality because it reflects divine powers and processes. To believe that creation has value or meaning only as a result of human activities, in such religious perspective, is thought to entail arrogance about the power and significance of humans in relation not only to nature but also to transcendent or sacred dimensions of life. Thus for the study of religion and nature, strong versions of social constructionism might need correction not only from naturalistic perspectives but also from theological ones. The goal might be to appreciate but not overestimate the significance of human symbolic and discursive activity in regard to nature.

Anna Peterson

Further Reading

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- See also: Callicott, J. Baird; Environmental Ethics; Rolston III, Holmes; Wilderness Religion.

Social Ecology

Social ecology is a contemporary social theory that investigates the interrelationship between social institutions and the natural world. A major project of social ecological analysis has been its attempt to demonstrate that local, regional and global ecological problems are created by authoritarian, hierarchical and exploitative social institutions. As a political ecology, social ecology has been concerned with promoting social changes that could end exploitation and domination within human society and establish an ecologically sound relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Philosophically, social ecology has adopted a holistic and dialectical position, while its politics have tended toward communitarianism, decentralism, anarchism and libertarian socialism. Its dialectical roots can be found in the tradition of Hegel, Marx and critical social theory, while its holistic and organicist dimension is in the tradition of thinkers such as Elisée Reclus and Lewis Mumford. Political theorist Murray Bookchin is its best-known contemporary proponent. Although some have used the term generically to describe all leftist political ecology, and there is also a rather eclectic interdisciplinary academic field of social ecology, the present discussion focuses on social ecology as a political ecology with a libertarian and communitarian social perspective.

Social ecology has gained widest recognition through the writings of Bookchin. Although Bookchin once expressed sympathy with various forms of spirituality, he and his collaborator Janet Biehl have over the past decade developed a strongly anti-spiritual and anti-religious position. On the other hand, some commentators (such as David Watson, Joel Kovel, and John Clark) have argued that various forms of ecological spirituality are not only compatible with the values of social ecology, but also can make an important contribution to its further theoretical development.

In his earlier work, Bookchin emphasized the ecological dimensions of many spiritual and religious traditions. He praised the nondualistic worldview of tribal societies (and specifically their concept of the “way”) for uniting custom, morality, sensibility and nature. He suggested that animistic imagination offered modern society an outlook that is not only complementary to that of science but also more “organic” than the latter, and looked forward to a “new animism” based on a respect for and symbiotic relation-

ship with other living beings. He also praised the libertarian, communitarian and ecological values of various radical Christian sects from the Middle Ages and early modern periods. And he wrote of a *telos* and a “latent subjectivity” in substance that led it to develop in the direction of mind and intellect, concepts that from the standpoint of mainstream philosophy have obvious connections with idealist metaphysics and spirituality.

Beginning in 1987, Bookchin began to attack what he saw as irrationalist, anti-human, regressive tendencies in the Deep Ecology movement. His criticism soon broadened into a general indictment of what he typified as “mystical” and “spiritual” ecology. For example, he characterized ecofeminist Goddess spirituality as an attempt to depict women as naturally superior to men and to replace male chauvinism with female chauvinism. In addition, he condemned “mystical ecologists” for a multitude of evils, including rejecting political activity, fostering passivity and fatalism, promoting neo-Malthusianism, encouraging anti-immigrant feelings, exalting irrationality, opposing civilization and technology, devaluing humanity, and believing in an illusory “pristine” nature unaffected by human beings.

Some have questioned the objectivity of such attacks. It has been pointed out that in dismissing ecological thinker Thomas Berry as “misanthropic,” Bookchin cites Berry’s reference to humanity as a “demonic presence” while failing to note that this depiction of human destructiveness was part of a larger discussion recognizing humanity’s capacities for joy, wonder, and celebration of the universe. Bookchin’s use of such selective quotation and the kind of sweeping generalities mentioned above have led critics to charge that his attacks on spirituality and religious thought are without scholarly merit.

Bookchin’s collaborator Janet Biehl is also a harsh critic of spiritual and religious thought. Biehl contends that theistic spirituality places people in a condition of dependence and subservience and turns ecological politics into a form of “therapy” that makes meaningful political action impossible. However, she focuses her attention heavily on non-theistic feminist, and especially ecofeminist, spirituality. She maintains that many ecofeminists idealize Neolithic Goddess religions and the cultures that produced them, thus promoting irrational beliefs and distorting the history of societies that were in many ways repressive and hierarchical. More generally, she criticizes ecofeminist spirituality (which she characterizes, even in its pantheistic and panentheistic versions, as “theism”) as a form of superstition with politically reactionary implications. Thus, she has attacked spiritual ecofeminists, including the well-known writer and political activist Starhawk and ecofeminist theologian Carol Christ, for adopting a spirituality that rejects any idea of historical progress, denies the possibility of development in nature, uses obfuscatory metaphors, and fosters fatalism and political passivity.

Despite the campaign by Bookchin and Biehl against spirituality and religion, a number of theorists who are sympathetic to social ecology as a general perspective have argued that it is compatible with certain spiritual and religious traditions. Joel Kovel, for example, argues that social ecology should pay attention to what can be learned from mysticism, which he holds to be in touch with a primary, pre-linguistic relationship to nature that is unavailable through ordinary consciousness. Kovel rejects what he sees as an overly simplistic ecological outlook that conceives of the relationship between nature and humanity purely in terms of “unity in diversity.” He contends that such an outlook, which has been advocated by Bookchin, overlooks the irreducible negativity within human experience and the necessary tension between humanity and the larger natural world. Kovel distinguishes between an *ego* that is associated with domination of the other, rationalization of experience, and dualistic splitting of the self, and *spirit*, which refers to the individual’s experience of relatedness to larger and deeper realities, including the whole of humanity and the whole of nature. The concept of spirit, according to Kovel’s formulation, expresses a negation of the dominance of the ego and connects the problem of human emancipation to the question of humanity’s relationship to larger realms of being. In Kovel’s view, an awareness of this connection was at the core of the insights of Lao Tzu, Jesus and Gandhi.

In making a case for a “deep social ecology,” David Watson argues that the spirituality of many tribal societies has embodied a view of reality that is more social and more ecological than that of civilization. Watson contends that social ecology must pay more careful attention to the voice of nature as expressed in the myths, rituals and shamanistic practices of tribal peoples. He sees tribal spirituality as an integral part of the egalitarian, cooperative nature of these societies. Watson cites examples, including the Hopi salt expedition, of rituals that are not mere practical or instrumental activities, but are also an expression of the quest for a harmonious relationship with nature and the sacred. According to Watson, animistic religion contained greater truth than the classic modern scientific and technological worldview. He notes that contemporary science has confirmed the animistic view that humans are physically and psychologically continuous with nature.

In arguing for a radically dialectical social ecology, John Clark argues that part of the task of a social ecology is to investigate the physical, psychological and ontological aspects of humanity that link it to other living beings, to the Earth, and to a primordial ground of being. He contends that some concepts of “spirit” have been a means of expressing humanity’s relationship to the constantly changing, non-objectifiable reality of nature and to its deeper ontological matrix. He argues that social

ecology is compatible with a spirituality that expresses wonder and awe at the unfolding of the universe's potentiality for realized being, goodness, truth and beauty. Furthermore, he finds in such spirituality an implicit critique of the abstract conception of selfhood and dogmatic rationalism found in some versions of social ecology.

Social ecology is at present associated strongly with Bookchin's theoretical position. Consequently, some who have explored the affinities between social ecology and spiritual and religious thought have subsequently gone so far as to disassociate themselves entirely from social ecology as a theoretical and political tendency. Thus, the future relationship of "social ecology" to spirituality and religion will depend in large part on whether the term will primarily connote adherence to Bookchin's system of "dialectical naturalism," or whether it will increasingly refer to a theoretically more diverse tradition founded on a common problematic for inquiry.

John Clark

Further Reading

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- See also: Anarchism; Berry, Thomas; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Ecofeminism; Environmental Ethics; Green Politics; Radical Environmentalism.

Social Philosophy – See Environmental Ethics.

Social Science on Religion and Nature

Religion: Good or Bad for the Environment?

"We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man." So argued historian of technology and medieval/Renaissance scholar Lynn

White, Jr. (1967: 1207), who effectively set the terms of debate over religion and environmental concern for the last three and a half decades. White did not mince words – "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1967: 1205) – and his powerful condemnation of Christianity as the ultimate cause of Western environmental crisis prompted the coming out of allies, as well as the inevitably countervailing response as believers, sympathizers, and reformers scrambled to bring out Christianity's greener hues.

Most scholarly commentaries on Lynn White's bald thesis have fallen somewhere between the two poles of attributing either outright guilt or utter innocence to religion – scholars generally prefer, rightly or wrongly, to complexify such matters – yet none has come close to the stature of White's 1967 publication. An early collection of top scholars of the era included arguments running parallel in some ways to White's thesis, qualified rejections of White's equation of Christian theology solely with dominion over nature, and a prototypical complexification argument claiming that capitalism, democracy, technology, urbanization, wealth, population growth, and resource tenure have all had environmental impacts on the Earth, with religion (in particular Judeo-Christianity) bearing only tenuous connections to this suite of causes. More recent responses have included philosophical and theological developments of the connection between religion and environment, attempts to bring science, religion, and environmental concern into closer dialogue, and inquiries into the ecological dimensions of a broad array of world religions and spiritual traditions.

Enter social scientists into the fray – after all, White's argument, and the counterarguments of White's opponents, are empirical claims concerning social and cultural reality, and thus could in theory be tested by means of rigorous, often quantitative, social science methods. Perhaps the debate over religion and environment would be settled by means of controlled empirical studies, or analysis of data from existing studies, using the powerful statistical methods social scientists routinely deploy. Perhaps science can help us decide whether White's thesis is correct.

This is the aura of science, but not the reality. Social science has done a tremendous service to the study of religion and environmental concern, but it has failed to deliver the conclusive chapter to the story. To understand why, we must first consider how social science approaches this topic, then examine applications of social science to the environmental dimensions of organized religion as well as the religious dimensions of environmentalism.

The Social Science Approach

The world sketched by White is one in which what he termed the "marriage" of Western science and technology,