

Religious Studies – Perspectives on Sustainability

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Major theme: what does religion tell us about the relationships and responsibilities between human beings and the natural world?

I'll look at three points. It's a sort of spot check. A number of people here at CRES and elsewhere have said to me over the years that it may not be possible for settler Australians to engage in sustainable ways with Australian ecosystems unless they develop some form of spirituality that fosters long-term respect for country. So, my focus today is to show, in very brief overview, what some of the relevant religious traditions have to say on these matters.

My **first** point concerns Christianity, and here I want to look at some extremes. The first is a form of ultra-fundamentalist Christianity – Domination. American Secretary of the Interior – God wouldn't have given human beings the capacity to invent chainsaws if he hadn't meant them to cut down forests. Here in Australia – the example of ultra-fundamentalist Christian irrigators on the Darling.

At the other extreme, I will say a few words about Mathew Fox and his University of Creation Spirituality. He's got a good website. This is a very

universalising religious agenda and works between the individual on the one hand, and the universe on the other. Like many contemporary religious people, Fox is seeking to meld world religions, indigenous spiritualities, and a sense of destiny or teleology, drawn from a religious interpretation of evolution. (Teilhard de Chardin) 'The Creation Spirituality movement seeks to integrate the wisdom of western spirituality and global indigenous cultures with the emerging scientific understanding of the universe and the passionate creativity of art.'

A more nuanced and, I think, more interesting form of this approach is being created here in Australia by the Catholic Priest Eugene Stockton. 'Spirituality for a Nation'. Stockton is starting from the position that the natural world is God's creation, and so he's asking: if the world is creation, then it must be in some sense sacred. Therefore, what are the relationships God wants us to have? Stockton comes straight up against the moral issue: that this continent already had a sacred geography before Christians ever got here. So he seeks in very innovative and meaningful ways to try to bring Aboriginal spirituality together with Christianity.

My **second** point concerns the loss of the sense that the natural world is itself sacred. There is a lot of work being done in this area: both historically, and theologically, looking toward the process of loss, and, in the new nature writing, seeking to restore or recover the sense of the sacred.

I'll just work with one example here, and this is the work of Richard Rubenstein, an American Jewish theologian, or former theologian, and now more prominently a philosopher and expert in religious studies. I'm drawing on his book *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*. Rubenstein contends that the loss of the sense of the sacred in human and environmental affairs began with early Judaism, in fact, with God's covenant. Monotheism, in his analysis, is the assertion that this God Yahweh, and only this God, is the source of sacred action in the world. Monotheism began the separation of that which is sacred, and that which is not sacred. Thus, for example, Yahweh demanded of people that they turn away from local gods, in-dwelling spirits, and places sacred to a plurality of divine influences. He sees this as the first step in what Max Weber much later came to call the disenchantment of the western world – its loss of sense of sacred connection with natural world.

I've just mentioned one scholar here in detail. Another scholar, the French historian Gauchet, makes a very similar point with respect to Christianity. His analysis works along similar grounds. He contends that loss of continuity between God on the one side, and humans and the natural world on the other side, led to the kinds of hyperseparation that Val Plumwood discussed in her work.

Rubenstein calls for new forms of immanence, and suggests a return to some aspects of paganism (which is probably why he has not been popular in Jewish theological circles).

And this brings me to my **third** and final point. I want to turn to a form of western religious thought that owes a large debt to the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Buber sought to rescue the religious impulse from formal religion. In his view, the sacred is the here and now of our lives, and our encounters with the sacred take place within this natural world of which we are a part. One reading of his work suggests that God and humanity and the natural world are partners in an unfolding story. We cannot discern the end of the story because it is full of uncertainty. We are in the midst of the process of mutually determining what our own future, and thus the future of God and the world, will be. Sustainability, in this view, could be seen as an interaction with the divine. Buber had a strong objection to organised religion, and is perhaps most noted for his statement that 'Man's prime peril is religion', his argument being that by focussing on religious traditions, and he was referring primarily to Judaism and Christianity, people see their tradition, where they should be seeing the world around them – human and non-human.

This leads me to my closing thoughts, which are based on a quote from an Indigenous person. This is a quote from the great Arnhem Land sage David Burrumarra. He explained many complex things in language that is so suggestive as to be always open to more engagement. In the essay I quote

here, he tells us about an Indigenous concept of power, which, he says, is the source of all life. In comparing his sense of power with Christianity, Burrumarra said: 'The Bible and the Cross help us to remember Christianity and to believe in God.... They are like eyeglasses. Without these glasses would we see God in our image (and vice versa) or would God look different? Would he look like the natural world?'

Burrumarra puts this as a question because he wants us to think about it. If God is totally embedded within the natural world, then, if one thought carefully about it, one would really want to consider what it means to exterminate species, to destroy biodiversity, to tear up ecosystems, and to assert dominance. The inescapable conclusion from this position is that in killing the world one is killing God. This conclusion gives an ecological and sustainability reading to Buber's famous statement: 'in our world is the fate of God fulfilled.'

What is Creation Spirituality?

Creation Spirituality (CS) honors all of creation as an original blessing. Creation Spirituality integrates the wisdom of Western spirituality and global indigenous cultures with the emerging post-modern scientific understanding of the universe and the awakening artistic passion for creativity which reveals the inter-relatedness of all beings. The Creation Spirituality movement seeks to integrate the wisdom of western spirituality and global indigenous cultures with the emerging scientific understanding of the universe and the passionate creativity of art.

Mathew Fox, www.creationspirituality.com

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