

Green Values, Religion and Secularism – Moving beyond the enlightenment division between science and religion:

Only a science, politics and economics that has the living world at its heart will be truly sustainable.

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**Edited extracts from conference papers, with an introduction
by Nuala Ahern**

CONVENORS:

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KEY CONFERENCE TEXTS:

"Enlivenment: Towards a fundamental shift in the concepts of nature, culture and politics"
by Andreas Weber

http://www.autor-andreas-weber.de/downloads/Enlivenment_web.pdf

"The Care-Centred Economy"

by Ina Praetorius

https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/the_care-centered_economy.pdf

Both texts are published by Heinrich Böll Stiftung and are available in English.

INTRODUCTION: Green Values, Religion, Secularism and the question of meaning

Only a science, politics and economics that puts the living world at its heart will be truly sustainable argues Andreas Weber in his key text 'Enlivenment'. Human beings are not "outside" nature but we are astonishingly unaware of ourselves as living beings. This absentmindedness is a logical outcome of our rational culture. Our inability to honour "being alive" as a category of thought in economics, public policy and law means that we do not yet understand how to live well with both ourselves and other beings on our planetary home.

We now face at the beginning of the 21st century interlinked planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and human dislocation. But we also face a serious crisis of meaning; why work if working amounts to nothing more than functioning for absurd, other-directed purposes? Why keep living or bearing children if there is no future? Questions about meaning are giving politics a new momentum today and giving rise to surprising alliances. Even if the boundaries of the natural have not yet been reached, the idea that they soon could be triggers not only fear and despair but also creative and energetic responses.

However in thinking about meaning, Western societies find themselves confronted with the dichotomy between the privatised search for meaning and the public political sphere. In the European Enlightenment powerful church institutions were pushed back, for rather good reasons. While religion and spirituality were not abolished, they were explicitly declared a private matter. The consequence of this was that, in the words of Ina Praetorius, "the religious communities remained patriarchally organised in terms of the traditional order, but at the same time mutated into places which were occupied by the privatised sex, while men of science applied themselves to researching and objectifying the world and regarded religion as unenlightened, trivial and superstitious."

Assigning questions of meaning to the private sphere, however, declares that the public sphere, and with it politics, is more or less meaningless, therefore merely technocratic and managerial. As Jürgen Habermas wrote shortly after the attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, "they are cut off from the resource of meaning, upon which even a religion-free politics remains dependent, leaving it to management of the market, which does not permit any collectively posed question of meaning because it pulls all human relations into a question of consumer choice."

What should it mean that seven billion human beings unsustainably inhabit the fragile living space of earth together with countless other living beings? No longer can each individual decide themselves on the basis of contingent, for instance religious preferences, and no longer can anyone delegate the answer to an idealised private sphere in which, ostensibly completely different rules apply: love not money, donation not exchange, ethics not profit. The question of the meaning of the whole is, by necessity, becoming the subject of public debate again. With this, the arrangement of a public sphere that is immune to meaning and an unenlightened, religious and feminised private sphere of meaning collapses, and the question of meaning insistently reappears in the public sphere (Ina Praetorius).

MORNING SESSION – Chair: Geraldine Smyth



Geraldine Smyth is Adjunct Associate Professor at the Irish School of Ecumenics in Trinity College Dublin. She is from Belfast, where she is involved in research and action on conflict transformation, ecumenical and interreligious reconciliation. A former Director of the Irish School of Ecumenics, Geraldine is on the Board of Directors of Healing Through Remembering, Northern Ireland and has acted as theological consultant to the World Council of Churches (projects on Justice, Peace and the integrity of Creation, and Theology of Life). She is a member of the Dominican Order, and was Prioress of her international congregation (1998-2004).

Andreas Weber PhD, biologist and philosopher, has contributed extensively to developing the concept of enlivenment in recent years, notably through his essay *Enlivenment: Towards a fundamental shift in the concepts of nature, culture and politics* (published by the Heinrich Boell Stiftung in 2013), and through his latest book, *The Biology of Wonder. Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Press, 2016).



"What is life, and what role do we play in it? What relationships do we have, or should we have, to the natural order?"

One could say that rational thinking is an ideology that focuses on dead matter. Its premises have no way of comprehending the reality of lived experience; our civilisation has forgotten what it means to be alive. Should it be so surprising, then, that the survival of life on our planet has become the most urgent problem?

The Cartesian separation of reality into a hidden, subjective *res cogitans* on the one hand – our minds – and a visible malleable, calculable, but dead *res extensa* on the other – the material world – enables the science to focus on separating reality and all its parts into discrete building blocks – atoms and algorithms. This tendency has cursed our civilisation with a "King Midas" touch: this mythical king transformed any object he touched into gold, causing him to starve to death. All things that our civilisation touches with the x-ray vision of the scientific method likewise lose their aliveness. Science has erected metaphysics of the non-living to analyse the most remarkable aspect of our being in the world – our aliveness. This is what we need to change if we are to transform our culture.

Enlightenment norms are not arcane historical matters, but deep structural principles in modern culture that have a powerful effect in ordering how we perceive, think and act. Our economics, legal systems, government policies and much else are firmly based on Enlightenment principles. The reasons why conventional economic and political thought is unable to solve this crisis is that it contains serious errors in understanding human thought (epistemology), relationships (ontology) and biological functioning.

If we look back to the last fifty years of sustainability politics, we can observe a lot of progress – the enactment of laws to protect nature, the setting of safety thresholds for toxic materials, the ban on fluorocarbons, and so on. But the basic contradiction remains, that we consume the very biosphere that we are a part of and that we depend upon. From this perspective, we have not been able to come closer to solving the sustainability question; we remain trapped in its underlying, fundamental contradictions. The biggest obstacle to the vexing questions of sustainability is the fact that science, society and politics have for the last 200 years lost their interest in understanding actual, lived and felt human existence. Lived experience, embodied meaning, material exchange and subjectivity are key factors that cannot be excluded from a scientific picture of the biosphere and its inhabitants.

No one will be very impressed if you answer the question "How is your marriage?" with "Oh, it's sustainable." But everyone would turn his or her head if you replied "Well, it's energising. It makes me feel alive." The different view of sustainability, therefore, does not emphasise technical improvement or sound treatment of scarce resources as a priority. Rather, it sees in the goal of "leading a fuller life" the most important stepping stone toward changing our relationships with the animate earth and among ourselves. Can we begin to see that something is sustainable if it enables more life – for myself, for other humans, for the ecosystem.

Instead of the science and philosophy that treats the world as "dead matter", we need an Enlivenment that sees a pluralist world of living beings constantly entangled with each other within an unfolding biosphere. This has profound implications for contemporary politics and public policy frameworks; in the Enlivenment vision of the world, we human beings are always part of nature. But this nature is much more like ourselves than we might imagine: it is creative and pulsing with life in every cell. It is creating individual autonomy and freedom by its very engagement with constraints. On an experiential level, as living creatures on this animate earth, we can understand or "feel" nature's forces if only because we are made of them.

An analytical approach that separates and externalises problems to make them technically manageable is precisely why these troubles have arisen in the first place. Nature is not efficient, it expands and declines, it is edible and consumable, it lives and dies. Nature is a living commons and is not only about competition, but also about the commoning activities of a myriad of individual agents living in an ecosystem. Living beings are one interrelated, embodied whole, of which humans comprise only a fractional portion. The real flaw of the efficiency approach to sustainability is that nature is still seen as something outside that can be used for human ends. But nature is not outside of us. It is inside of us – and we are inside of it. There is a threshold limit for any increase in efficiency, and that limit is the natural imperfection of embodied being.

If natural processes inevitably yield subjectivity, meaning and feeling, our science, and our science-based policy and economy, must take these lived dimensions into account. What is needed is a "second Enlightenment" an "Enlivenment" – a new stage of cultural evolution that can safeguard our scientific and social ideals of common access to knowledge and science and technology, while at the same time validating the defining essence of embodied experience.



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We need to supplement, not substitute, rational thinking and empirical observation with empathy and meaning from our cultural and spiritual heritage. The work of the German poet Novalis shows that the critical tradition of the Enlightenment and the longing for a world that is whole has always belonged together. They can both contribute to an inclusive humanism today.

Every generation is confronted by the question what it means to be human. Today, we notice that our understanding of being human is challenged by the speed in which our world turns; market forces and technological developments like social media, robotisation and new medical possibilities. They raise questions like: where are the limits of a human being? How do we look at ourselves and at other humans? What are our core values? Do we see ourselves as autonomous individuals or as deeply relational beings, who cannot be themselves without others?

In the search for answers, we rely on our traditions, which we reshape from our different perspectives. Right-wing populists for example, tend to claim the history of the Enlightenment as an exclusive Christian European story of liberty, and hold it against people from other cultural and religious traditions. Others see the Enlightenment as a story of individual freedom and secularisation, in which religion cannot have a public place anymore. Greens and Left-wing people tend to defend the ideals of the French Revolution as the universal strive for Freedom, Equality and Solidarity from which nobody should be excluded.

Even within a relatively homogenous group like the Greens you can see the split thinking: "Greens tend to see human beings as part of a larger whole living in connection with each other and with their ecological environment. As political parties though, they very quickly focus on the responsibility to act, looking at wrongs which must be righted. The Greens have a split image of the human being: people are seen as part of a bigger constellation but, at the same time, they are the masters of that same constellation." (*Green values, Religion and Secularism*).

Rationality versus Romanticism

This divide within the Greens is an old one in our European history. It goes back to a vision of the human being as either an autonomous individual or a relational being, that is anchored within a community. It can be recognised in the conflict between socialism and liberalism, and some also see it in the contradiction between secular and religious philosophies of life. Its modern archetype is the contrast between the rational Enlightenment and the mystical Romanticism. The Enlightenment is the thesis, representing ideas like 'I think, therefore I am', seeing the human being as the centre and the master of the universe', deriving its knowledge from the critical anatomisation of everything that lives.

Romanticism is the antithesis, emphasising love, unity and the religious bond between humans, and between humans and nature, striving to overcome all divisions, even if this seems impossible. But the contradiction between those two European currents of thought is false.

In the story of the poet Novalis and his friend August Cölestin Just, an administrator who was a modern spirit, and who believed in rationalism and pragmatism. He was no radical and regarded the extreme ideas of his romantic friend on love that could literally overcome death as fanatic enthusiasm. His young friend's name was Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as the romantic poet Novalis, who became the administrator of the Saltines in the region of Jena in South-East Germany. Not exactly what you think of when you call someone a romantic poet. Yet Novalis is widely seen as the most pure representative of Early Romanticism. His whole being was about desire. He longed for the reconciliation of the world in which he lived. He believed in the unity of the whole universe and the power of fantasy.

Novalis had hoped for the French Revolution, with its political emancipation of citizens, to be realised in Germany, but when it did not happen he and his friends retreated from politics into poetry. They wanted to keep their hopes alive, at least in a literary way. The early Romantics were hoping to save the dream of freedom, equality and the promise of humanity as one family by 'romanticising' relationships. Novalis believed that the power of love would prevent his fiancée Sophie from dying. It is his friend August Just who shows how the radicalisation of the ideas of the Enlightenment makes them romantic. In his biography of Novalis he writes: "The thesis that a human being can realise whatever he wants is right in itself, but cannot be generalised. This thesis tempted Novalis to believe that his Sophie could not die."

Both August Just and Novalis shared the modern belief in the omnipotence of the human capacities, but Novalis took this optimistic conviction a step further. He did not want to confine it as usual to the rational capacities of the human being, since he believed that everything in the world is related. So he applied it to everything, especially to love, the driving force of the universe. The phrase 'you can realise whatever you want' became in his language: "What you really love, you will preserve." This unalloyed romanticism is therefore not a contradiction to the Enlightenment, but its radicalisation.

Novalis was critical of the Enlightenment's tendency to turn everything into an object, to use it for one's own profit: nature, history and other people. He foresaw that even the most autonomous modern citizen is in danger of becoming the object of rational processes over which he or she has lost control. His warning to the Enlightenment not to overrate the rational capacities of human beings and detach them from emotional and historical knowledge is still valuable today.



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Environmental Ethics, Technology and Nature-Romanticism

The French philosopher Bruno Latour claims that a 'true political ecology' is currently paralysed by established categories of thought and current models of production¹. We must choose between modernity and ecology, they are not compatible. This project has many laudable aspects not least being critical of the dangerous partiality that sees the rational self-interested individual as the measure of all things². However there can be a grave lack of clarity in green nature-Romanticism, and in ecotheology, about this desire to reconnect nature and culture. And there is even less clarity about how shifts in categories of thought might support and engender ecological models of production. Romantic expressions of unity with nature have the potential to make humanity as 'natural as the dinosaur' if all they manage to offer is to plunge us into a different version of a just-as-unattainable future.

Bruno Latour mirrors and reworks Romantic philosophies of the counter-Enlightenment, which lamented the philosophy of 'reflection' that separates phenomena from the unity ordering them, creating a rift between *anthropos* and *cosmos*, between human and nature. This move in philosophy is also mirrored in ecotheology. But his *lex continui* may prove too abstract and impotent to halt the destruction of capitalist consumer societies³.

Some ecotheologians, who might share his diagnosis, if not his conclusions, seek to transcend this distinction between *anthropos* and *cosmos* by introducing a necessary third position, theocentrism⁴. Are we to conclude then (as Martin Heidegger once did) that 'progress' is a juggernaut only God can save us from?

Another distinction also received from the Enlightenment is that between the right and the good: between questions of obligation and duty and the idea of the good life. In recent decades in ethics there has been a growing de-emphasis on moral obligation and re-emphasis on the rediscovery of virtue. The focus on virtue and visions of the good life in community are to be welcomed but these too can be cripplingly unspecific and mystifying.

¹ Latour, Bruno, *To modernize or ecologize? That's the question* in N Castree and B Willems-Braun (editors) *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium* (London and New York: Routledge,1998), 221-242.

² Russell, C., *Demography, Poverty and Planetary Boundaries in Laudato si'* in McDonagh, Séan (ed) *Laudato si' An Irish Response* (Dublin: Veritas, 2017).

³ cf Lewin, David, *Technology and the Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Scholars Publishing, 2011).

⁴ This positioning is not new, we can recall the ancient narratives of the pride of Adam in the Hebrew Bible and the defiance of Prometheus in the Greek tradition.

And in the current context of assaults on public reason and of renewed tribalisms it is not the particularity of Romantic visions of the good life that are holding the line in environmental policy. Rather it is the legal and moral international agreements that grew painfully from past disasters, and which are rooted in shared obligations to the dignity of the person and latterly the integrity of earth systems.

Technology does condition our lives for good or bad, and to be functional, by definition deworlds. In foregrounding functionality it conceals complex and fragile interactions, displacing otherness and spontaneity⁵. Environmental approaches respond to this in many directions: 'rewilding' ecosystems, rebuilding integrity, resilience and flexibility in production systems; and also lamenting this lost spontaneity in literary and ecocritical form⁶. It is an age-old part of human culture to anthropomorphise actors in the landscape, mountains, rivers, flora and fauna, and to think and operate in narratives, including scientific ones. The narrative of 'room-for-the-river' in flood management in the Netherlands and recently adopted in relation to the Shannon catchment here in Ireland, is a welcome replacement of earlier concepts of control that encouraged engineers to 'bully the Rhine'⁷. In this sense we can talk of the river as subject, as a person in our neighbourhood, without literalising the analogy.

Technology and technologies need to be evaluated in terms of 'agency in context' and human capability⁸. Cycling, for example, is taken seriously in many of the rich nations of Western Europe as a low energy, efficient and healthy transport option, but in context. In the Netherlands in late 1970s, more than 1,000 people, over 400 of them children, were killed while cycling on the roads. In response to this carnage the Dutch made a political choice to build cycling infrastructure into all their transport plans, not as an add-on but as a core aspect. An 'agency in context' approach to cycling does not just endorse cycling in an abstract way as the virtuous practice of the committed environmentalist, regardless of the dangers. The Dutch painstakingly supported this shift over decades and with such success that from an outsider's point of view the Netherlands has ever been a cycling culture. The capability to use any technology well can be supported or hampered by other limitations too, for example the difficulties for women cycling in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Extolling cycling as an ecological virtue is one thing; finding mechanisms that allow agents to convert goods into capabilities is better.

We need to explore and make mainstream the good practices that already fit in terms of productivity and environment; for example there are substantial opportunities in recovering agroforestry on soils vulnerable to land degradation. This is a question of technology scaled to fit, 'utility in context, not one size fits all'. And this requires also new 'networks of knowledge'. The human development and multi-dimensional poverty indices are part of one such 'network of knowledge'. We need to continue to develop, to the same degree of sophistication, a set of indices for ecosystem services – up to and including existence value.

⁵ Ibid, 64.

⁶ Louv, Richard, *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2005).

⁷ Russell, Cathriona *Environmental Perspectives on the Genesis Flood Narrative* in Silverman, Jason, *Opening Heaven's Floodgates: The Genesis Flood Narrative, its Context and Reception*, (USA: Georgias Press, 2013), 461-486.

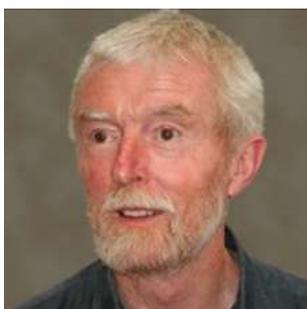
⁸ Lewin, David, *Ricoeur and the Capability of Modern Technology* in Mei, Todd and Lewin, David (eds) *From Ricoeur to Action* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 69.

Theological contributions to these objectives can be mapped under three headings: stewardship economics; environmental ethics and justice; and what can be called contemplative approaches. These are irreducible and nested in each other and go from the less theologically dense to the greater. We cannot short-circuit to the contemplative; we do not need to depend on our conceptions of mystery to live together. Nevertheless religious foundations are crucial resources for responding in these three dimensions.

Bruno Latour's *lex continui* is a thought experiment that could bear interesting fruit, and is reflected in many of the contributions to this publication, but we do not need to choose between modernity and ecology – we live there! And there is still something absurd about the kind of nature-Romanticism that endorses a unity between subject and object. It can remain abstract and impotent in the face of more brutal forces. This unity has been famously and farcically parodied in the absurdist *The Third Policeman* written by the mighty Flann O'Brien.

The gross and net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who are nearly half people and half bicycles...when a man lets things go so far that he is more than half a bicycle, you will not see him so much because he spends a lot of his time leaning with one elbow on walls or standing propped by one foot at kerbstones.
The Third Policeman, 1966

There can be no displaced human subjectivity. Persons are not things. All the same, for those of us who love rivers and landscapes and animals and plants and our bicycles – but are not our bicycles – things are not just things either.



John Feehan is a geologist, botanist, author and broadcaster receiving his PhD from Trinity College Dublin on the geology of the Slieve Bloom Mountains. John is an award-winning environmental communicator whose work is driven by a deep commitment to the maintenance of rural biodiversity, cultural heritage, and the sustaining of rural community. He now devotes himself to the interface between religion and science, on which he has lectured at All Hallows College and the Columban Ecological Institute at Dalgan Park. His book on creation spirituality, *The Singing Heart of the World* (Feehan, 2010), was published in Dublin by Columba Press and in New York by Orbis Books in 2012.

Science, Spirituality and the Tao: Inching towards a deeper consilience

Our beliefs, values and behaviour must be informed by reason, which is guided by the way of understanding that is the hallmark of modern science. However, although that mode of knowing is fundamental, it is insufficiently attentive to the universe of our experience, and a deeper and closer attention is indispensable if we are to articulate a more profound response. Reason is not compromised by faith: there is indeed reciprocity between reason and faith: but it only comes into focus with a widening of the embrace of rationality on the part of reason; faith also needs to embrace and fully incorporate the deeper appreciation of the creation and our new understanding of cosmogenesis and evolution.

Modern scientific enquiry fits into this in the way in which, with ever increasing depth and scope, it penetrates and elucidates the fabric of reality. We can be misled by our use of that word 'science', identifying it with the hyper-sophisticated intellectual achievement we see in particle accelerators, sophisticated drugs and medical procedures, in digital technology. And indeed it does include all of this. But what it is essentially is fearless and dedicated use of the human intellect we all have. The more deeply the progress of science peers into creation – on every level, from mathematics to sociology, the more awe-inspiring our awareness of complexity, diversity, beauty, intelligibility, becomes. True spirituality must never be afraid of the discovery science unveils: and indeed it feeds upon it, is enriched by it, matures through it.

In a seminal-important book Edward Wilson acknowledges that by today's ethic, the value of the abundant, scarcely-known, natural world may be limited, but that as biological knowledge grows, the ethic will shift fundamentally so that everywhere, for reasons that have to do with the very fibre of the brain, the fauna and flora of a country will be thought part of the national heritage as important as its art, its language, and that astonishing blend of achievement and farce that has always defined our species.

When the Christian tradition speaks of 'revelation', we are talking about how God reveals himself to us, how God enables us to come to know him, to see him in so far as our eyes can see God. Traditionally more familiar to us of course is 'scripture', written in human words and concepts by human hands, and a product of history. And requiring therefore the tools and devices of hermeneutics to interpret what they mean, what they meant to say, to discover the truth in them; and so, potentially misleading.

Then there is creation itself, the 'other book', the 'magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness' as Pope Francis describes it in his *Laudato si'* encyclical; God has written a precious book, whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe. Already in the 5th century St. Augustine wrote: 'some people read a book in order to discover God. But there is a greater book – the actual appearance of created things. Look above you and below you and note and read. The God that you want to discover did not write in letters of ink, but put in front of your eyes the very things that he made.'

We read this book of creation through sensory, intellectual and spiritual encounter. That requires attention of us. The first and most essential ingredient in developing the appreciation that fuels the affirmation that lies at the root of religion is attention to those whose presence in our lives – plant and animal in all their mesmerising diversity – we are largely blind, largely unaware of what is being said through their being in the world. This wordless affirmation is the essence of the human spiritual response, common to all traditions.

AFTERNOON SESSION – *Chair: Andrew Pierce*



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Ina Pretorius: A Protestant theologian, Ina was a research fellow at the Institute for Social Ethics at the University of Zurich (1983-1987). She obtained her doctorate in Heidelberg in 1992; her dissertation was entitled *Anthropology and the image of women in German-language theology*. A freelance writer and speaker, she has been living in Wattwil, Switzerland, with her family since 1987. Her website is at <http://www.inapraetorius.ch/e/>



The opposition between "man" and "nature" constitutes part of the history of the West and can be traced as far back as classical Greece. Hyper-separation is the structure of dominance that drives western binaries, including nature-culture, female-male, and matter-mind, savage-civilised. Hyper-separation accords value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other side to a position of oppositional subordination. Thus in western philosophy since the classical period, spirit has been conceived as in opposition to and superior to the earthbound and carnal. Moreover spirit has been located in the male mind; and sexuality and materiality in the female body.

The Care-Cantered Economy: Rediscovering what has been taken for granted

Human beings are not, as some philosophers believe, and some economists argue, tossed into the world by chance, but are born into an ordered fabric of relationships; they are born of woman; helpless, they are fed and held and taught to speak their mother tongue and thus enter into human life. This is the underlying reality that is subversive to philosophies which argue, as the Platonic Socrates does, that born life is a burdensome antecedent of actual spiritual being, which only begins at death.

Anyone who advocates sustainable human coexistence in the fragile cosmos must as a consequence work towards dismantling the dualism between humans and nature. There is no question that the opposition between "man" and "nature" constitutes part of the history of the West. It can be traced as far back as the classical Greek era and it is one of the fundamental causes of the precarious situation into which human civilisation, despite all its progress, finds itself in.

However, critics of dualism err when they consider the dichotomisation of human culture and nature "endless". The construct in question always ended precisely at the point where human beings, aspiring to spiritualisation and independence, want and need to be provided with their daily needs – with warmth, love, protection, meals, purpose, cleanliness, and more – and when they want to procreate. Human needs, which cannot be eliminated and are unceasing, impose boundaries everywhere and always on the idea of the independence of *homo sapiens* from nature. But philosophers are loath to acknowledge this.

As influential thinkers experienced their own naturalness – and thus the limits of their removal from nature – as a nuisance, as a humiliating deprivation of liberty, they have not only conceived of themselves as the site of an immortal spirit, but at the same time have invented compensatory human ways of existence that are supposedly closer to nature and thus not structured for a life in freedom and equality but for serving in subordination.

How and where people began to separate higher, free, symbolic and masculine spheres of humanity from lower, dependent, "feminine", natural ones, what came before, and when it was superseded on a lasting basis and for what reasons by the symbolic order still in effect today, is contentious and the subject of a vast field of speculation. Perhaps it is not so much the subjugation of women that is primary, but rather the seizure through war and enslavement of entire peoples. However the fact is that in the classical world, a construction of the world was established and stabilised in countless texts, the key points of which can be summarised as follows:

There are two kinds of humans, free and unfree, and there are two sexes, men and women. Men are more important, smarter, stronger, and freer than women. The benchmark for defining what is human is the adult man. There are people – wives, children, slaves – who are legitimately possessed by other people – their masters. That there are free and subordinate people corresponds to the natural or divine law (*logos*) and is thus unalterable.

The failure of the Enlightenment to turn the mechanism of dichotomisation itself on its head had particularly serious consequences in the founding discourse of economic liberalism. Adam Smith (1723-1790) in his theory of the "wealth of nations" made the innumerable unpaid hands of women and colonised people working outside the "manufactures" vanish into the fiction of a mechanism of supply and demand functioning automatically for the purpose of satisfying the needs of all. All the labour that goes into the production of life, including the labour of giving birth to a child, is not seen as the conscious interaction of a human being with nature, that is, a truly human activity, but rather as an activity of nature, which produces plants and animals unconsciously and has no control over this process.

This definition of women's interaction with nature – including her own nature – as an act of nature has had and still has far-reaching consequences. What is mystified by a biologically skewed concept of nature is a relationship of dominance and exploitation, dominance of the (male) human being over (female) nature. That these doctrines of the particular naturalness of certain human beings, often formulated in a mild, sentimental form, are open for extreme race and gender ideologies has been demonstrated a number of times in the history of the 20th century.

In classical economic thinking, this lifeworld is sentimentalised, subsumed into nature, and trivialised as external to the system right up to the present day. It is precisely the work without which economic activity makes no sense, inasmuch as it provides and restores the *raison d'être* of all economic activity: human beings who consume and produce. We need to remind ourselves that our economy has only purpose and meaning in the context of human life and needs. Environmental and social policies are inextricably causally linked, and economics needs to again place at its centre the need to preserve and sustain all life on earth, including human life.



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Mercy not Sacrifice

Religions can be thought of as vestigial states, which have been displaced by newer regimes but continue to function. The displacement, particularly the removal of the power to use violence, creates attenuated state-like groups within dominant states. These former states are renamed 'religions' and are accorded a certain status and certain rights and privileges as long as they stay in their place. However vestigial states tend to be restless and dissatisfied with the limits placed upon them. It is the conduct and appearance of women that mark the boundary between the institution of the state and what the state calls 'religions'.

This aspiration to control women derives from times when 'religions' did have the power to put women in defined and subordinate places. In contrast, more contemporary states have, since their inception, been rather puzzled about where to put women. Questions such as – Can they own property? Can they vote? Are they citizens? Should they be educated? Can they be judges or lawyers? Can they run for office? – have animated national histories for a long time. It is only in the last century that women have been accorded some powers and positions within what are known as nation states.

It is a huge problem is that the dominant religions of our time cultivate patriarchal mythological images and ideas such as blood sacrifice. There is an indistinct separation between the mythology of blood sacrifice which is valued by some Christians and the practice of blood sacrifice which is exercised in war by the state. So we cannot say uncritically what the relationship between religion and state is, because the question is confused by the fact of the overlap between patriarchal mythology and contemporary religion.

The dominant rituals, theologies and symbols of the main monotheistic religions focus on blood sacrifice and we see the effects of that at the moment where horrific acts of terror can be justified in the sanctified name of sacrifice. In the First and Second World Wars (and subsequent wars across the globe) the rhetoric of sacrifice permeates the narrative of all sides. The language of sacrifice, therefore, continues to legitimate war. Even in so-called post-religious societies, people are immersed in a kind of a psychic field from which they cannot extricate themselves even today.

Sacrifice has been a potent symbolism of nationalism in Ireland in the 20th century, and the death of hunger strikers during the 1980s, including that of the Westminster MP Bobby Sands, resonated deeply into Irish political life. Self-sacrifice is also the prevailing ideology of Jihadism whose ideology of terror and sacrifice threatens us all in unpredictable ways. It is therefore important to counter this ideology of sacrifice at many levels.

The role of sacrifice in the political world had hardly been interrogated by academics until the shocking events of 9/11 in the US. However, in recent years there has been an explosion of academic writing on the topic of sacrifice. However, as sacrifice is used in today's world it is a gendered language (a predominantly male religious and political fertility myth) but it is not recognised as such. Very few take seriously the question of gender and are dismissive of feminist theorists who say that sacrificial rituals and sacrificial language and discourse is one of the ways in which we split the world between male and female, between the ethics of the public and the private, between the language of rights and the language of responsibility. Because people use the word sacrifice in multiple ways, such use completely obscures the extent to which sacrifice serves to legitimate the current social order. In other words (and very broadly speaking) men usually sacrifice in the public realm and women sacrifice themselves through various forms of forms of private self-sacrifice which mask female subordination (and actually reinforces the dominant structures of symbolic violence).

A theology of sacrifice can be contrasted with a theology of mercy. While the former is ubiquitous (and theoretically, theologically and ritually elaborated – performed – in the monotheistic religions, a theology of mercy (arguably based on a matri-centric ethics) can also be found in them all. For example the Arabic terms for divine mercy, *ar-Rachim* and *ar-Rachman*, can be traced back to the word for womb. For their part, *ar-Rachim* and *ar-Rachman* are related to the Hebrew root *rhm*, which already designates divine and human mercy at the beginning of the First Testament.

There are many examples from both the Jewish Christian and pre-Christian Irish tradition of symbols of mercy as a counterpoint to sacrifice. At the present time, monotheistic traditions – perhaps in all religions – alternative doctrines and practices can be found that contradict the hegemonic doctrine of the independent, spiritual masculine. These must now be recuperated, and theoretically and theologically elaborated in order to challenge the potential re-emergence of the vestigial states under a deeply problematic notion of equality or diversity.



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strong views on the destruction of the environment endemic to modern civilisation, and the concept of incremental growth

Has the papal encyclical *Laudato si'* begun to change the location of sin in the western tradition from sexuality and carnality to the desecration of the material world?

My brother Peter (aka Dom Christopher Dillon of Glenstal Abbey) likes to provoke me by laying the blame for Christianity's traditional attitude to women and the female on Plato and the Platonic tradition. While being a piece of tendentious buck-passing, this proposition also contains, I fear, some grains of truth. The fact is that, when Christianity was 'coming of age' as an intellectual movement in the first and second centuries AD, Platonism (with Aristotelian or Stoic elements attached) was the dominant philosophical movement in the Greco-Roman world – and it was rather 'dualistic' form of Platonism, postulating a strong antithesis between a divine creative Intellect (*nous*), which was masculine, and a receptive, productive, but essentially irrational element, Matter (*hyle*), which was feminine. Furthermore, such thinkers as Plutarch and Numenius, in particular, postulated an irrational World-Soul (*psyche*), feminine, which desired ordering by intellect, but was itself by nature disorderly.

A particularly pertinent example of the use of these theories employed with reference to the Bible, in a way that was indeed taken account of by certain of the better-educated Fathers of the Church, is the exegesis by one of my favourite guys, the Jewish Platonist philosopher Philo of Alexandria, in the first century AD, of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, allegorising Adam as the human intellect and Eve as sense-perception, or the irrational, materialistic soul, who tends to drag the intellect toward material concerns, and requires ordering and disciplining by intellect.

It is against such a background of cosmic thinking that the young Christian movement may be seen, I think, as developing. Plato, of course, as is to be expected from a Classical Greek, subordinated the female to the male on the individual level – despite some interesting proposals in the *Republic* about the equal status of men and women at the level of Guardian or Philosopher-King/Queen – but it is really the cosmic level that is decisive, I think, when it comes to such questions as women priests, or even married priests. More significantly, though, from an ecological point of view, is that it subordinates the Earth, as female (*Gaia*), and a passive, material receptacle, to being imposed upon, and subjected to the interventions of, the rational, intellectual, *male*, force of Man. This, it seems to me, along with the pernicious doctrine of linear and infinite material Progress, or Growth, has led to the prevailing tolerance of the raping and ravishing of our Mother – or Sister (in Francis' terms) – Earth which is the dominant characteristic of 'advanced' civilisation.

It is against this background that Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* may be hailed, I think, as a major contribution to righting an historic imbalance in the attitude of the Church to our material environment. If one regards this world as simply 'a vale of tears', or a kind of material prison-camp for immortal souls, then one may treat it with scant respect, and the godless, materialistic cultures which have arisen in an increasingly post-Christian era seems simply to transpose this attitude to another key while abandoning any thought of another, better plane of existence. He utters many admirable sentiments, and has plainly consulted good authorities. I find him to waffle a bit just in on the subject of world population, but what can he say, after all? It is not good enough, though, just to attack the luxurious life-styles of the advanced world, justified as that might be. It is still the fact that unlimited population increase will nullify all other good efforts that might be made to save the planet – and he quietly recognises that at the end of the paragraph, in fact. All in all, though, *Laudato si'* is a most admirable document!

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The religious imagination must wrestle with grief for planetary destruction, and think about resilience, eco-justice, joy, and beauty in the wake of climate change.

How do religions lead and organise new spiritual practices that respect the earth and its creatures; how do we acknowledge helplessness and grief, moving beyond negative pronouncements to meaning making? How do we encourage the exploration of alternative ways of living on the planet that are pleasurable and non-destructive of life? We need to find a place for grief and lament, but also creativity and storytelling about our kinship with the world around us and the creatures with whom we share that world.

In the 21st century humans shape the planet in large and fundamental ways. This has led to massive biodiversity loss and now seemingly irreversible climate change, to which we need to respond with resilience and humility. Pope Francis in his letter *Laudato si'* reflects on anthropogenic or human-caused global warming, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, the dangers of unlimited consumerism, "a misguided anthropocentrism", economic growth. We hear those litanies of devastation often these days; however there's something in the affective language of this letter that is different. The letter's laments are couched in the language of praise. Francis the pope lures the reader in with the poetry of Francis the saint.

What he is haunted by most in reading this letter is its connecting disparate realms of life; the encyclical's balance of tragedy and human sin alongside love, hopefulness, joy, and possibility. Despite the vast ecological devastations, the letter evokes the beauty of our ecological contexts in its descriptions, and its logic argues that learning to see beauty in the everyday is an intrinsic part of an ecological conversion to the earth.

Laudato si' refuses to make the choice between human and ecological life a zero-sum game. Pope Francis writes that we must realise that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*.

CONCLUSION

Nature is not 'mute'. It is eloquent, meaningful, saturated with messages and stories, including ourselves and our language. Meanings and values are not "outside" nature, but have always been integral to its constitution. And human participation is not an optional extra; it is entailed by being alive. How do we engage with non-humans once we accept that they are not either mindless brutes or machines is a critical question.

The narrative of mind-matter dualism which allocates all mind to humans, and leaves all the rest of the living and non-living world in a state of mindless matter cannot be sustained. Enlivenment includes other animate beings, which share the same capacities for embodied experiences. The hyper-separated dualism that would claim that there are no relevant continuities between the minds of humans and the minds of other living beings is not founded in evidence. To the contrary, evidence across many life forms including plants, is increasingly indicating the widespread existence of sentience.

In 1972, Gregory Bateson in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* described the delusion of human separation from nature. "We are not," he warned, "outside the ecology for which we plan". Bateson sought the development of an "ecology of mind", the steps towards which might be taken through the arts; by music, literature and the visual arts, and by attention to what he called "ecological aesthetics".

In the 21st century an ecology of mind is beginning to emerge that is extraordinary in its diversity. In film, music and the arts a remarkable turn has occurred towards Bateson's ecological aesthetics; a culture of nature has sprung up, born of anxiety, fear and anger at the destruction of the living world and its creatures and is passionately invoking human kinship with other living beings.

It was once considered the highest exercise of the human intelligence to explore what life means, to debate which relationships create and maintain it, and to ask how to live it. This is once again our challenge; through philosophy and religion, the arts and science, that is through our species-specific way of dealing with the world – symbolic culture.