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Deep Religious Pluralism in an Era of Ecological Decline

Sandra B. Lubarsky, Appalachian State University

Introduction

In his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Jared Diamond tells us that while war is often the proximate reason why a society falls apart, it is not the most fundamental. In case after case he makes it clear that environmental decline often precedes civil or international conflict. Such was the case with the Easter Islanders whose legacy, apart from their enormous stone statues, was an island completely denuded of every last tree and tree species that once covered its highlands. After what had been a subtropical forest was leveled and neither firewood nor rope nor canoe ladders (an essential technology for accessing ocean waters) were available to the islanders, when rats became a primary food source because bird populations had been destroyed and crop yields diminished, religious instability arose, followed by civil war. Captain Cook arrived on the island in 1774 to find those enormous stone statues face down, broken at mid-body by warring clans, a trope for the intersection of environmental and political wreckage. It is a story with ghastly replay – Haiti and Rwanda are two contemporary renditions.

Western Europe and North America have escaped such fate, thus far, not because of any long-term ability to outsmart the relationship between population growth, food supply, and natural resource renewal but because of our “ability to control an increasing share of the world’s resources,” importing them at our convenience (Ponting: 115). Such have been the rewards of power. But it is very possible that the West will not escape for long. If the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is even mostly correct, carbon dioxide is now concentrated in our atmosphere at 392 parts per million. That is much more than pre-industrial levels (which were about 275 ppm). Most importantly, according to hundreds of scientists, it exceeds the highest safe level of CO₂ in the atmosphere by 42 ppm. Beyond 350 ppm, we will see more of what we have begun to see, and worse, as newly understood feedback loops accelerate and decelerate various system trends, leading to what Christian Parenti calls a “catastrophic convergence.” “By catastrophic convergence, I do not merely mean that several disasters happen simultaneously, one problem atop another. Rather . . . problems compound and amplify each other, one expressing itself through another” (7).

In his latest book, *Eaarth*, spelled with two a’s, Bill McKibben argues that we now live on a planet that has been so altered by human activity that it warrants a different name. “It’s not as nice as the old one,” he writes (2012). Rising sea levels, exaggerated weather patterns including more powerful hurricanes and more frequent tornados, the rapid melting of glaciers – such are the environmental events now making things less friendly to life on earth. These are the elements of a quickly developing literature of catastrophe, modeling various “descent scenarios.” Many, indeed most, are scenarios of increased dislocation of populations, hunger, disease, and extreme barbarism and militarism (see, for example, Holmgren; Parenti; Heinberg and Lerch). The projections for wellbeing in the 21st century and beyond are not promising.

At a time when leadership on global climate change is desperately needed, Pope Benedict XVI’s public statements on this and other significant environmental issues are a contribution of great importance. Revealed in the Pope’s statements is an appreciation of the complexity and centrality of ecology, the confluence of human and planetary systems, and the urgency with which we must recognize the endangered condition of this intersection. His statements about the environment go far beyond single-issue advocacy to an analysis of the social dimensions of environmental decline and a summons to restructure relations of resource distribution and consumption. In calling climate change a “worrisome and complex phenomenon” and then linking it to global security, social and economic justice, and the health of current and future generations, the Pope has turned a contentious environmental issue into nothing less than a moral challenge and nothing more than the requirement of a biblically based theism. His call to protect the earth is not a salvo into political debates between conservatives and liberals or a volley into economic debates between neoliberals and social progressives; it is a theological summons that flows from a vision of the world as God’s creation. The heart of his theology is this: If you want to love God, love the world. In so doing, you will cultivate peace, diminish suffering, and become more fully human.

Pope Benedict believes that religion is necessary to the cultivation of these values. “In order to protect nature,” he writes, “it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents . . . These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*” (2009a: 51). That moral tenor springs from “a universal moral law” that is embedded in what

the Pope refers to as “authentic religiosity” (2010). “The patrimony of principles and values expressed by an authentic religiosity is a source of enrichment for peoples and their *ethos*. It speaks directly to the conscience and mind of men and women, it recalls the need for moral conversion, and it encourages the practice of the virtues and a loving approach to others as brothers and sisters, as members of the larger human family” (2010: 9). For the Pope, “authentic religiosity” has a particularly important role to play in a time of environmental and social disruption. In contrast to authentic religiosity are belief systems that undermine “integral human development.” They include “religious fundamentalism,” “religious syncretism,” “paganism,” “neo-paganism,” and “new pantheism.” These are described as “forms of ‘religion’ that, instead of bringing people together, alienate them from one another and distance them from reality” or “fail to respect the dignity of the person,” or encourage “attitudes of subjugation to occult powers” (2009a: 34). They are considered inauthentic because by denying either human freedom or the transcendent dimension of life, they drive a wedge between people and undercut human dignity. “In these contexts, love and truth have difficulty asserting themselves, and authentic development is impeded” (2009a: 34).¹

It is the notion of “authentic religiosity” and its obverse that I want to explore further in this essay. Surely, the Pope is right in asserting that religion has a fundamental role to play in an endangered world. Others, too, have recognized the importance of religion in galvanizing public support for environmental issues and in shifting modern culture toward an ecological consciousness. And many have begun to “green” their home traditions, renewing and elaborating on the ecological strands within their sacred literatures and rituals. But in distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic religiosity, we are taken to the rocky ground of interreligious relations just at a time when those relations can either help to manage global decline in a positive way or contribute to social disintegration and an increase in violence and suffering.

Religious Pluralism and Religious Dialogue

The sorry story of relations between different religions hardly needs recounting. It is not news to say that religion has not always been an ally of peace, justice, and goodness, though it has almost always contended that it speaks for truth. And it is the case that often when religion has not been an ally of peace, justice, and goodness, it has asserted itself to be the singular or superior bearer of truth and the elected channel through which salvation flows. The disfigurements of religion have been, to a large extent, the purchase of exclusivism, of claims of “authenticity” and judgments of “inauthenticity.” When the Pope speaks in the 21st century of “authentic” and “inauthentic” religions, it cannot be heard apart from this fierce and terrible history. And when this history is joined to the projected adversities of global climate change and ecological disaster, we have the makings of a humanly devised feedback loop with its own forms of “catastrophic convergence.”

In a world at risk of severe environmental decline and social upheaval it will be important to develop relations between religious traditions that are neither antagonistic nor

¹ The Pope also mentions secularism and relativism as inauthentic, but clearly, these are not religious traditions, per se. Relativism is addressed below. Secularism presents a different set of challenges, deserving of their own attention, including a variety of forms of secularism.

superficial. Pope Benedict calls repeatedly for an expanded role of religion in shaping society. In an era of disruption, what will that role be? Will religion be a force for good or evil? Will it be a catalyst for extremism or will it participate in containing extremism? Will it be a source of strength for world unity or the well from which righteous domination is drawn? Knowing what we know about the power of religion, knowing what we know about the ease with which religion can fuel extremism even in times that are not extreme, we must do what we can to insure that the role religion plays in the difficult decades ahead will be a life-affirming one.

And so it is important to intertwine what have been separate conversations: a conversation about religion and the environment, a conversation about religion and social justice, and a conversation about religious pluralism. Benedict's leadership in linking climate change, diminishing natural resources, poorly distributed wealth of all sorts, and poverty, violence, and political instability has been exemplary. With his approval, the Church decreed seven new "deadly sins," including "polluting the environment," "creating poverty," and "contributing to a widening divide between rich and poor" (Nizza). There is no question that the Pope sees issues of environmental integrity and economic justice to be intertwined. He has, however, given far less attention to the relation between caring for creation and respecting the plurality of religious ways. He is not alone in having neglected this new configuration of issues. But for those who are concerned about such things as peak oil and its aftermath, projected water wars, and the rise of ecological refugees, regard for inherited ways of thinking about other people and their traditions must now be part of a new theological geography, an undertaking without precedent. We already have plenty of examples of wars that have been reframed in religious terms when in reality, they are fundamentally about resources. Part of attending to the new geography of ecological and social decline is attending to our theological understanding of other religions and the way they guide us to interact with people of different faith orientations.

While dialogue between traditions has thankfully become a part of modern discourse, its yield so far has been largely sociological. Representatives of various traditions have often sought out the common ground that comes with facing social needs together. Members of churches, synagogues, and mosques have joined together in supporting food kitchens and sheltering the homeless. And they have organized interfaith action projects on the environment. All this is for good. But, for the most part, they have not undertaken a robust theological rethinking of their self-understandings based on a serious consideration of religious pluralism. In fact, for many that is the beauty of such projects. As Joshua DuBois, executive director of the White House office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships noted in regard to an interfaith service effort, participants "don't have to agree about theology, they don't have to agree about their different beliefs, but we feel they can agree on issues of service" (quoted in Banks). This is the kind of dialogue supported by the Pope. He recognizes the importance of "universal fraternity" in securing worldwide peace, in overcoming the exploitations of the current global economic system, in combating ecological decline, and in bolstering family life. There is, he believes, a common cultural foundation that can and ought to be strengthened through "intercultural dialogue."

Much good can, indeed, come from intercultural dialogue. Strategies for solidarity and cooperation on issues that exceed the boundaries of religious institutions, issues like social

justice, environmental protection, and the securing of peace, can be designed and initiated through such dialogue. But the limitations of intercultural dialogue can cast a shadow over its potentialities. For intercultural dialogue is explicitly designed to look past the differences between traditions, differences that have, in the past, been the basis of intolerance, and to emphasize commonalities and likenesses. But in not examining either the history of relations between different religions or the theological principles regarding other religions, in simply declaring solidarity around a “common enemy” or a “common good,” intercultural dialogue runs the risk of masking important differences. Part of the naivety of modernity has been just this: the assumption that it is a good and possible thing to overcome difference. And the making of common cause has often been the pretext for doing so.

But in ways that are seldom explored, facile assumptions of likeness float like hot air balloons over an opaque body of water. As long as we are buoyed by a strong wind, we do not have to worry about what swims below. Yet it is in those deep, theological waters that differences arise, differences between traditions that embrace a transcendent divinity and those that embrace sacred immanence, differences between traditions that worship a being and those that are oriented toward emptiness; differences between traditions that reach for eternity and those that aim to realize impermanence. These are differences that have mattered historically. Indeed, lesser metaphysical and theological issues have led to significant bloodshed. Time after time, differences like this do not disappear, even when the common cause is noble and the effort successful.

In a world at risk of severe environmental decline and social upheaval, tolerance that is not reinforced by the insights and affection that can come from difficult theological exchange can be quickly deflated. In full knowledge of the fact that religious convictions have contributed to the tragedies of the past and in full knowledge of the formidable challenges before us, we would be remiss if we relied solely on intercultural dialogue to secure the well-being of the world.

Neither Exclusivism Nor Relativism

The effort to go beyond dialogue that is merely intercultural entails the reworking of what had been, for the vast majority of believers, the inviolable premises of religious absolutism and exclusivism. Religious exclusivism and inclusivism preserve the self-identity of traditional religions as the singular bearers of truth and the claims made by these traditions regarding truth. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, makes it clear that “The Church . . . ‘proclaims, and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6); in Christ, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, people find the fullness of religious life’” (2010: 11, citing *Nostra Aetate*). According to the Pope, the Church rests on this claim to truth and salvation; any lesser assertion is fraught with the dangers of “relativism or religious syncretism” (2010: 11).

Yet, the idea that only one religion is the bearer of truth and salvation has been entwined with violence against people of other faiths. Those who hold to an exclusivist position have maintained that the one true God revealed one true religion; followers of other ways to live are religiously inferior. At best, in its inclusivist form, it has been asserted that an all-loving God will love non-believers in spite of themselves; at worst, exclusivists have taken it upon themselves to forcibly convert or punish those who deny the one true way. While

religious absolutism offers great comfort and strength to its adherents, it increases the vulnerability of others. When it takes the form of cruelty, as it so often has, it becomes impossible to defend.

Yet, as Pope Benedict contends, the idea that truth can be found among many traditions runs the risk of what has been called, “a debilitating relativism.” This is the predicament that all truth claims are equally valid, equally apposite explanations of reality, and thus also equally invalid (Race: 88, 98). The “problem of relativism,” then, is the flip side of the “problem of exclusivism.” Relativism affirms the legitimacy of all truth claims, thereby subverting all claims; exclusivism affirms the truth claims of only one tradition, thereby delegitimizing all others. In either case, only a weak form of tolerance ensues, one as dangerously passive as the other is dangerously aggressive.

Erik Reese, author of a sensitive account of mountaintop removal in Kentucky, reflects on the central lesson to be taught in a time of ecological decline: “As we enter an era of dwindling resources and potential mass migration due to climate change, we are going to need much more empathy – perhaps more than ever before – if we hope to retain our humanity. Empathy must be the measure of our students’, and our own, emotional and ethical maturity” (Reese). Recent literature on rescuer behavior and moral theory supports this insight. In her book, *The Hand of Compassion*, Kristen Renwick Monroe found the decisive factors in the behavior of Holocaust rescuers to be the “belief in the sanctity of human life,” “the sense of one’s self *in relation to other people*,” and “the tremendous power of identity” that precluded not acting on behalf of the one who needed help (260-61).

How does the moral psychology operate? Much of this process remains speculative, but certain critical factors are clear and suggest the following components play vital roles: (a) the desire for self-esteem and the need for continuity of self-image; (b) core values stressing the sanctity of life and human well-being; (c) the integration of these values into our underlying self-concept or sense of who we are; (d) external stimuli that activate those parts of our multifaceted and complex identity that relate to this basic self-concept; and (e) an emotional component to the way we notice the needs of others so that we feel a sense of moral imperative to respond to another’s suffering (Monroe: 260).

Monroe seeks to understand how some people came to be morally exemplary in situations of civilizational collapse. It is not far-fetched to see the relevance of her research for the challenging period in front of us. We will need to be devoted to the sanctity of life and we will need to imbed this devotion in our sense of self and our relatedness with others. Can we do so while holding on to either an exclusivist or a relativist framework? The fact is that within both frameworks, the values of sanctity of life, love for fellow creatures, and love for the world have long been advocated. But they have been advocated alongside values that disparage or dismiss the core values of others, judging them to be false or regrettable, unimportant or uninspired. There is reason to believe that these frameworks are too precarious, too unstable for the task at hand.

What is needed is theological scaffolding for valuing religious pluralism, where love is not expected to overcome difference but to respect and appreciate it. Those who advocate

for religious pluralism are aware of the failings of exclusivism and its softer version of “inclusivism.” They begin with the assumption that there is likely more than one tradition possessed of value, bringing a variety of theological and sociological arguments to bear on this proposition. Pluralists approach their own and other traditions with a vivid sensitivity to the limited nature of human understanding and a critical awareness of the limits human understanding has placed on God’s agency in the world. This starting point alone, both in its posture of humility about human understanding and in its extension of possible legitimacy to other ways, overrides the animosity and acrimony that accompany claims of exclusivism and inclusivism. Other traditions are not in need of receivership, but are responsible in their own right, capable of mediating truth and providing guidance to their adherents.

Unfortunately, religious pluralism has been associated with relativism. John Hick, the thinker most closely identified with pluralism, does indeed end up with a position that, in wishing to respect all traditions, cannot differentiate between any of them. For Hick, theistic and non-theistic experiences are two variant approaches to the same ultimate reality and all religions are oriented toward the same salvific goal – moving from self-centeredness to “Reality-centeredness.” Though he refers to his position as “pluralistic,” the end result is that what appear to be very different experiences of reality (e.g., between God-centered theism and nontheistic sunyata) are judged to be the same. Hick’s position of pluralism does in fact exhibit a “debilitating relativism.”

In contrast, John Cobb, David Griffin, and Marjorie Suchoki, all process theologians, have formulated a theology of religious pluralism that avoids debilitating relativism. While they begin with the assumption that truth likely exceeds the bounds of any single religious tradition, they do not begin with the assumption that all religions say the same thing about either the structure of reality or the goal of life. There is good evidence that other traditions possess truth and that the truth they possess is not simply the same truth in different garb. Buddhist notions of emptiness are not the same as theistic notions of God. But that does not mean they are necessarily contradictory notions, either. These process theologians propose a third option – different from either reducing the differences between religions (and thus concluding that they are all equally true) or setting traditions in opposition so that if one is true, the other is necessarily false. What if, these process thinkers ask, reality exceeds our ability to know it fully? Most traditions admit such intellectual humility in the face of divine wisdom, cosmic mystery, or the infinite. What if there are “diverse modes of apprehending diverse aspects of the totality of reality?” (Cobb: 74). Certainly, the propositional assertions made by various traditions gives credence to this position. The Buddhist notion of emptiness seems to point to an aspect of reality that is very different from the Jewish notion of a covenanting God. And what if claims that seem contradictory “are really answers to different questions?” (Griffin: 48). If any of these queries yield an affirmative answer, then we have the possibility that 1) different religions really are different, 2) that they may reveal a universally valid insight, 3) that these insights may be complementary rather than oppositional, and 4) that, taken together, they give us a richer understanding of reality than we might otherwise have. This form of pluralism does not default to relativism; on the contrary, it assumes the real possibility that different religions have legitimate claims to universally valid insights. Different religions can each be seen as proclaiming universally valid insights, which can come to be appreciated by others. “Are we

forced to choose between an essentialist view of religion, on the one hand, and conceptual relativism, on the other?” asks Cobb, “I think not. The actual course of dialogue does not support either theory. One enters dialogue both as a believer convinced of the claims of one religious tradition and as a human being open to the possibility that one has something to learn from representatives of another religious tradition” (66). “Complementary” or “deep religious pluralism” offers a way for people to honor the value within their own traditions and the value that may lie within the traditions of others.

Within this model, it is possible to enter a deeper form of dialogue, one that includes intercultural exchange but grounds it in a serious consideration of the multiple ways of interpreting and responding to reality. Acknowledging from the outset both *the possibility* that more than one religion has value and *the actuality* of the limitations of human understanding, this form of dialogue can help us to be more aware of the insights and shortcomings of our own traditions and those of others. It can help us to see that there is real benefit in the fact that a plurality of traditions exists. And it can help us to be more responsible for the well-being of those who differ from us, not only because *our* traditions counsel love of the other and the sanctity of life, but also because *their* traditions mean something positive to us. As we develop our “sense of who we are” (even acknowledging that no identity is static), we do so in regard to the legitimacy of our own and other traditions.

It is thus not necessary to reassert the primacy of theocentric traditions in an effort to erect a bulwark against relativism. Nor is it necessary to restrict “authentic” religiosity, in principle, to theocentric traditions. Deep religious pluralism provides a model for relating to other traditions that supersedes exclusivism without yielding to conceptual relativism. It can help us to establish relationships of dependable solidarity with people of different cultures and traditions – relationships we will need more and more in the decades ahead.

Conclusion

Pope Benedict XVI understands the correlation between diminishing natural resources, poorly distributed wealth of all sorts, and poverty, violence, and political instability. And he is aware of the global nature of environmental and economic crises. In making it clear that ecological responsibility is a moral imperative, the Pope weaves ecological values into the fabric of traditional, sacred values. A look at the recent literature on the social and cognitive role of sacred values in decision-making underlines just how important this emphasis on the environment as a sacred value can be. “In potentially violent situations of inter-group conflict,” writes the anthropologist Scott Atran, “sacred values appear to operate as moral imperatives that generate actions independently, or all out of proportion, to their evident or likely results, because it is the right thing to do whatever the consequences.” He and his fellow researchers have studied “holy warriors,” supporters of terrorist groups, and conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, Pakistanis and Indians, Protestant Unionists and the Catholic IRA, among others, and each time have found that “participants ignore cost-benefit calculations, relying instead on sacred values.” Though decision-making involves judgments about opportunity costs and economic incentives as well as the influence of social networks on individual actors, Atran has found that there is a “moral logic” at work that trumps the power of economics and social norms. This moral logic nests in a bed of sacred values on which we draw, especially in difficult or threatening times. We become not simply “rational

actors,” but “devoted” actors, morally motivated to risk our well-being for the sake of a higher cause (Atran: 43-44).

When the Pope declares that protecting the natural environment is “a duty incumbent upon each and all,” he insures that the environment is tightly woven into the sacred narrative of the Catholic tradition, central to the story that controls self-identity and guides behavior (2009b). And in linking quite firmly environmental values with social justice, he constructs the kind of moral reframing on which the movement called “sustainability” depends. But if these sacred values do not include the value of deep religious pluralism, they may not, in the end, be in service to the good of the world. “Devoted actors” who care about the environment but do not fully respect religious traditions that differ from theirs, who are unwilling to recognize that wisdom may lie both within and beyond their traditions, may find a moral logic that justifies injury and harm to those of other faiths. We have far too many historical patterns that suggest what happens between faith communities when resources become scarce. And we have various “descent scenarios” that suggest a replication of these patterns. An important part of our task in a time of serious environmental decline is to insure that the values we hold sacred, the values that motivate “devoted actors,” are directed toward the protection of all. The importance of cultivating deep religious pluralism as part of our environmental work cannot be underestimated.

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