Religious (Re-)Turns in the Wake of Global Nature: Toward a Cosmopolitics

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"God is Back," exclaims the cover of a recent book by *Economist* journalists Micklethwaite and Wooldridge (2009). In the years following September 11, 2001, it seems that what a minority of scholars had been quietly telling each other has now become something shouted from the rooftops: not only has religion not gone away, as modernizers and secularization theorists—those who committed the deeds that contributed to God's removal, and those who just observed and narrated them—both assumed it would; no, it appears that religion has returned with a vengeance.

But is religion resurgent, or had it never really gone away, except among the secular intellectuals who had prematurely announced its demise? Whatever the case with religion itself, what is less deniable is that there has been a religious turn among philosophers and social scientists, including some of the most prominent intellectuals of our time, from Jacques Derrida and Jurgen Habermas to Charles Taylor, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Slavoj Zizek (cf. Davis, Milbank, and Zizek 2005; de Vries 2006, 2008; Latour and Weibel 2002). And while at least part of this theo-philosophical turn preceded the events of 9-11 (de Vries 1999), those events have surely

contributed to the explosive charge that cultural and religious differences—"civilizational" differences, for some—have come to carry. This is no less the case in Western liberal democracies, where many fear the intrusive encroachment of "others" whose cultural values appear threateningly different from the mainstream, than in those parts of the world where foreign armies impose wars that are believed to be over religion as much as anything else.

If there is a "before" and an "after" implicitly marked by the kinds of things described throughout this volume, this religious turn is a good candidate for such a moment. But there are at least two other before-and-after moments lurking in the background of this collection, each related to the relationship between religion and nature. The first moment followed the publication of historian White's (1967) *Science* article, in which he had famously argued that the Judaeo-Christian tradition shared a heavy burden of responsibility for the crisis in relations between humans and the natural world. In the article's aftermath, historians, theologians, and others have responded in one of three predominant ways: by trying to prove White wrong, whether about the ecological disvirtues of Christianity or Judaism or about the presumable virtues of other religions; by agreeing with him and calling for an alternative to replace the Judaeo-Christian world view; or by taking up the charge to research the matter in greater depth. Thus was born the field of "religion and ecology," and thus began what Nash (1996) has called the "greening of religion" (Folts 2003, 2005; Gottlieb 2004, 2006b; Hessel and Reuther 2000; Kinsley 1995; Palmer and Finlay 2003; Sponsel 2007; M. Tucker and Grim 2001, 2007; Watling 2008). The immediate results of religion's greening are most evident in a series of international meetings and publications, such as the Religions of the World and Ecology conferences held at Harvard University in the late 1990s and the book volumes that followed them (for example, Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin 2003; Grim 2001; M. Tucker and Williams 1997), the publication

of *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (B. Taylor 2005), and initiatives like the *Earth Charter*, a global values statement endorsed, to date, by over 8,000 organizations around the world.

A second, related moment of this "greening" began in the 1980s, when the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) invited leaders of the world's major religious traditions to gather in Assisi, Italy, home of the founder of the Franciscan monastic lineage, to discuss the role of religion in responding to the ecological crisis (WWF 1986). Other environmentalists followed the lead of the WWF, tired of trying to convince others with science alone and recognizing that religion is too potent a force to leave aside in the effort to raise environmental consciousness (Kellert and Farnham 2002; Oelschlaeger 1994; E. Wilson 2006). Some called for religious-environmental alliances; and, in no small measure, religious groups responded. Daneel's account in this volume of the African Earthkeepers of Zimbabwe is merely one such instance of a much broader trend, which ranges from the "Redwood Rabbis," the Sisters of Earth, and the "What would Jesus drive?" anti-SUV campaign to the Sarvodaya Movement of Sri Lanka and the Tzu-Chi Foundation of Taiwan (Daneel 2001; Dudley, Higgins-Zogib, and Mansourian, 2005; Gardner, 2006; Gottlieb 2006a).

Together, these three moments—the turn to ecology (provoked by White 1967) within communities of faith, the turn to religion among environmentalists, and the return of philosophers to the full force and meaning of religion in the post–Cold War and post–9-11 world—frame a set of shifts in the relationship between religion, nature, and science, which this volume probes with case studies and which I attempt to contextualize in this chapter. Specifically, I intend to think through what exactly the religious component of these shifts might be. But first let us examine more closely the question raised by White, a question that has never

been conclusively answered: *Does religion shape or affect environmental practice, and if so, how?*

Religion and the Environmental Crisis

Two types of scholarly responses to White's challenge are worth distinguishing (see Derr 1975; Livingstone 1994; Minteer and Manning 2005; Whitney 1993). The first has been to focus on ideas, beliefs, and cultural resources—texts, narratives, rituals, images and iconographies, psalms and sutras, and other materials conventionally tagged as "religious"—with an eye to either interpreting their ecological significance or using them to generate ecologically productive meanings. In interpreting inherited elements of religion, these responses engage in some form of religioecological *hermeneutics*, often alongside an *apologetics* for the tradition they follow. In generating new meanings, they engage in *theology*, specifically ecotheology, where the theological is taken to be a constructive project intended to help religious believers and practitioners meet the new needs of the present day. These make up the scholarly part of the "religious turn to ecology."

The second kind of response to White's question has been to undertake empirical assessments of the ecological practices of particular, religiously marked societies to determine how those societies' beliefs and world views shaped their environmental practices. While analogous questions motivated the quantitatively focused work of cultural ecologists such as Rappaport (1984), Vayda (1969), and Reichel-Dolmatoff (1976), more recent research has shown the relationship between beliefs and ecological outcomes to be complicated and, for the purposes of environmental polemics, unreliable. Historians, geographers, anthropologists,

archaeologists, and historical ecologists, among others, have found that species loss due to overhunting, deforestation, erosion, and other forms of habitat destruction and environmental deterioration have occurred even among indigenous peoples and others with seemingly organic-holistic world views, such as the ancient Greek, Maltese, and Chinese, and the classic Mayas (Burkert 1996; Denevan, 1992; Diamond 2005; Gomez-Pompa and Kaus, 1992; Krech, 1999; Pyne, 1997; Redman, 1999; Tuan 1968). In a more contemporary context, sociologists have surveyed groups of people to uncover to what extent their expressed values are consonant with their behaviors (Kempton, Boster, and Hartley 1995; Minteer and Manning 2003; Proctor and Berry 2005). The results of both kinds of research have been inconclusive beyond demonstrating that most societies, irrespective of their beliefs, are prone to overdrawing on their natural resource bases, and that the reasons for this are less likely to be religious than they are material and economic, social-structural, technological, or matters of intergroup competition and warfare. Religion may be connected to all of these, but if it is not the primary causal element, then it remains unclear what its role is.

That said, there are examples that appear to demonstrate a connection between religion and a society's ability to respond to environmental challenges. The fates of Classic Mayan and Greenland Norse cultures are two that come to mind, if only because their cases have been reiterated in popular books. In Diamond's (2005) assessment, religious beliefs, because they are forcefully held within a society, are seen to play a conservative, and therefore maladaptive, role in a cultural group's ability to address the kinds of challenges brought about by climatic or other environmental changes. But in each case the specifics of the religions in question may not have been at issue so much as the fact that it is *religion itself*—that is, culturally sanctified and ritualized practices and the vested, institutional interests associated with them, all of which had

been developed over time and under different conditions—that became ill-suited for generating the adaptive creativity that altered conditions called for. This raises the question of what makes those beliefs and practices religious, and whether it may be that the culturally sanctified and ritualized practices of another time and place *appear* religious to us because they look different from our modern and, by definition, *non*-religious beliefs and practices.

A variant of both the empirical and the hermeneutic kinds of scholarship can be seen in the study of the world views and practices of traditional and indigenous peoples, often encompassed under the rubric of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). A common assumption undergirding much of this work is that such study can provide insights into the kind of "greening" that our own society desperately needs (for example, Berkes 1999). With small-scale indigenous societies, which by definition have been around for awhile if they are indeed still around today, there is at least a good prima facie case to be made that locally based, adaptively evolved "knowledge-practice-belief complexes," as Berkes calls them, result in relative "sustainability." Debates over "noble savages," "ecological Indians," and theories of "Pleistocene overkill" have marked recent discussions of this topic and are unlikely to be settled anytime soon (Harkin and Lewis 2007; Krech 1999). But if some measure of authority is conceded to a sophisticated TEK version of the ecological Indian hypothesis, the conditions in which such societies developed are, in every instance, not the conditions in which the descendants of those societies find themselves today, so we cannot look to them in any straightforward way for answers to *our* socioecological dilemmas. In real-world situations involving indigenous groups, it is difficult to disentangle the religious factors from others—material and environmental factors, such as the perception of a shared environmental emergency, as in the Zimbabwean case study discussed by Daneel (this volume); social and psychological

factors, such as the role of charismatic personalities, organizations with their needs for growth and expansion, social movements, interest groups, social-structural conditions; and so on. Research on the roles of religion, ritual, belief, mythic narrative, and the like within institutions of cultural-ecological practice remains important, and perhaps essential—a point made or assumed by most of the authors in this volume—but the precise relationships between any of these pieces (ritual, myth, and so forth), like their definitions, remain elusive.

So we have two common approaches to White's dilemma—a strategic one that asks "How can we put religion (of one or another kind) to the service of environmental goals?" and an empirical-evaluative one that asks "How has religion (of one or another kind) actually shaped environmental practice?"—and neither alone seems to have gotten us very far. There is a possibility that if we define religion in a specific way that speaks to the conditions that might be helpful in our social context—for instance, by taking religion to be something like "those dimensions of experience that provide fundamental motivation for people to direct *and to redirect* their lives"—then we might have a helpful definition for our own circumstances. But "religion" is not identical with that kind of motivating force, even if it appears that way in some instances.

Having broached the question in this way, let us take a few steps back and think about religion, as it were, from the ground up. In the comments that follow, I refer to "religion" as something more like "religion, etc."—a category that includes not only *organized* religion but also faith or belief (though not necessarily all forms of faith or belief), religious identity and affiliation (which begs the question of what is religious and what isn't), ritual practices (though probably not all such practices), prayer or supplication directed toward certain kinds of non-human entities (though *which* kinds of entities will have to remain unspecified), and perceptions

or experiences of "sacredness" or of "transcendent meaning"—and all these things both as concepts, or signifiers, and as things and processes being referred to, or signifieds. And while I use "religion" as the hinge around which to bend and shape the main themes found in the chapters of this book, the same could be done with the other two topics indicated in the title: "science" and "nature" (for example, Evernden 1992; Fischer 2009; Ivakhiv 2002; Proctor 2001, 2004, 2009; Soper 1995; Stengers 2000). "Religion" is an appropriate starting point, however, because it serves as more of a common exploratory site, a wild card of sorts, in these discussions: it is the object that will least stand still and that calls most clearly for theorization.

There are at least four ways of breaking down this task. The first two, which I will treat alongside each other, are the onto-epistemological and the historical: *What is religion and how is it related to what it isn't? How did this set of relations between religion and non-religion come about?* The third is a sociological or anthropological approach, which inquires into *what it is that is happening with religion today.* Last, there are theoretical and strategic questions to do with *what we, as (engaged) scholars, should do about these things.* In what follows, I proceed through each of these approaches and propose some directions for thinking about the changing relationships between religion, science, nature, and politics in a world where each of these terms is fraught with uncertainties.

What is religion and how is it related to what it *isn't*? How did this set of relations arise?

Religion is notoriously difficult to define. Scholars have variously sought to define it according to the objects of devotional practice and belief, such as deities or superhuman entities or powers; the moral systems or answers to questions of "ultimate concern" (Tillich 1959) arising from

narratives about superhuman or exemplary figures; the cosmological or other propositions to which believers give assent; the rituals and cultic practices that provide a community with a sense of social solidarity (Durkheim 1976[1912]) or of belonging to a particular "chain of belief" (Hervieu-Léger 2001); or the "webs of significance" connecting human thought and behavior and providing both with the "aura of factuality" that makes life meaningful (Geertz 1973). When treated as a force in people's lives, especially by those with an interest in spreading a particular religion, the focus will be on the experiences that embody and express that force and the accounts thereof. When treated as a system of meaning revolving, for instance, around such opposites as salvation and damnation, blessedness and profanity, or transcendence and immanence, religious language and its transformations will be the focus (Beyer 2003; Laermans and Verschraegen 2001; Luhmann 1995).

Numerous theorists have argued that there is in fact no stable and historically invariate definition of religion, since both *religion* and *the sacred* are terms that emerged historically as categories distinguishing certain things from others: religion from magic and superstition, or from science, politics, and "the secular"; "*a* religion" as an identifiable system of related beliefs and practices that is clearly distinguishable from other such systems; the sacred as against the profane or secular, and so on. Each of these terms emerges through efforts to articulate differences perceived to exist in the world, but in the process they become tools to fix and entrench those very differences (Asad 1993; Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 1997, 2000, 2007; McCutcheon 1997).

Some scholars, such as Karl Barth and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, have argued that the term *religion* is too humanistic and anthropocentric for what constitutes the religious domain for believers, or that it is a modernist concept that enframes and reifies, and thus ultimately

threatens, the most private and subjective domains of personal faith (Schussler Fiorenza 2000). Others have highlighted the role that the concept of religion has played in colonial, imperial, and missionarizing projects: for instance, with indigenous people first described as lacking religion, and later identified as in fact having religion of the most base kind (defined as "fetishism," "totemism," "paganism," or "animism"). Their initial *lack* of religion signified their difference from colonizing Europeans, while later it was precisely the *presence* of religion that came to signify that difference (Chidester 1996; Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 1997; B. Saler 1993; Smith 1998). In his influential genealogy of the modern anthropological concept of religion, Asad (1993:29) noted that "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes." These processes, for Asad, were associated with the history of a European Christian world that, sometime between the late Medieval and early modern eras, separated religion from politics, law, science, and aesthetics, and that distinguished between religion as a phenomenon and religions as specific instances of that phenomenon. In his examination of the history of the terms *religion*, *religions*, and *religious*, Smith (1998:282) concluded that "'religion' is not a native [that is, emic] term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology."

Smith's argument may be an overstatement, since the word *religion* is in wide use today not only by scholars but in the lay public culture of most societies around the world. But the broader point may be that religion is defined through its uses, and that its uses have changed over time. Any assumption that the differences between religion and other spheres of life, such as

science, politics, and art, have always been with us can only be taken to be a projection backward through a contemporary, conceptual lens: it is ahistorical, ethnocentric, and inaccurate, a kind of Whiggish history at the epistemological level. Current scholarship largely concurs that this differentiation, at least as it has emerged over the last few centuries, is a Western one, shaped in part through developments internal to European colonial and Euro-Atlantic societies and in part through developments occurring at the borders of these societies and their non-Western—or, literally, their western, eastern, and southern—neighbors. Thinkers such as Luhmann (1995), Latour (1993), Beyer (2006), and Styers (2004) have variously considered this history as one of "disembedding" and "functional differentiation": a process by which the "religious" has been separated from the "political," the "scientific," and the "magical," through some sort of carving up of spheres followed by an iterative consolidation of each in reference to the others (with the exception of the "magical," which has ostensibly faded out as a remnant of the past).

Religion's differentiation from politics, for instance, emerged in the tug-of-war for authority between ecclesiastical houses and emerging national elites, the latter taking advantage of new print media for the purposes of political statecraft (though Luther and the Protestant reformers made similar use of print in their efforts to carve out a new space for religious alternatives). Secularism, however, was not merely a result of *freeing* public space *from* religion, as it was profoundly influenced by medieval theological and canon-law notions of the saeculum. Church-state separation, in time, also became the product not only of religion's antagonists, but very much also of the activism of dissenting religious sectarians—as in the development of the American Constitution. Similarly, demarcating science from religion was a goal of the new scientific societies, which tried to establish their own authority with respect to the empirical, sensible world, as against the churches' authority over those things that were neither visible nor

particularly powerful in the world. At the same time, the concept of religion took on different uses at the borders of the Eurocolonial world, changing over time from being a tool of measurement and speciation (Do Amerindians have souls?) to one of comparative evaluation (Where on the ladder of evolution do they fall?) to one of cultural management (How do we make room for them?). As Lambek (2008) points out, religion emerged as a category that both circumscribed Western or European forms of religion within discourses of politics and statecraft, and simultaneously inscribed and institutionalized these forms of religion as normative and universal.

In the end, however, what has been foreground, especially in Anglo-American contexts, is a view of religion as a matter of private beliefs—a view that is very much a product of Protestant Christianity and its relations with Catholicism, science, and capitalism. Arguments over secularization and its relationship to modernity have taken on a problematic and, at the very least, infinitely nuanced cast in recent years. Where the modern "secular myth" sees secularism as an achievement, one by which Europeans learned to separate religion, politics, and science following the religious wars of the seventeenth century (for example, Lilla 2008), Casanova (2008:110) convincingly argues that the religious wars actually only led to "state confessionalization and religious territorialization," with the Spanish Catholic state and its expulsion of Spanish Jews and Muslims as a paradigmatic model, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as a rare counterexample, the exception that proved the rule. "Ethno-religious cleansing, in this respect, stands at the very origin of the early modern European state," and for the next three hundred years or so, "European societies continued exporting all their religious minorities overseas" (Casanova 2008:110). The relationship between religion and politics took on different histories depending on their national circumstances, with histories of "collision"

taking place in Latin American contexts and histories of "collusion" dominating in Anglo-Protestant contexts (Casanova 2008). But while all these developments describe the evolution of the *idea* of religion, we might say, with Latour (1993), that religion as a pure form, separate from politics, science, art, economy, and the rest, has *never existed*, because in practice we have "never been modern": we have always been hybrid and syncretic, *bricoleurs* and practical reasoners drawing on whatever is at hand to respond to the challenges facing us. Religion, like science and nature, is always both more and less than it claims to be.

Several features of religion are given heightened examination in the chapters of this book. Religion's function or role within a cultural or socioecological system is a prominent and recurrent theme. As popularized in the cultural ecology of Steward (1955), Rappaport (1984), and others, as well as the TEK paradigm, ritual practices might be seen as institutionalized, belief-practice complexes that maintain stability, order, and reciprocity in relations between humans and the perceived or conceived transhuman world. While cultural ecology is thought to have foundered on its functionalist and quantitative assumptions, there are those who continue proposing some variant of cultural-ecological-religious holism (Anderson 1996; Messer and Lambek 2001; Peet and Watts 1996; Robbins 2004). Such is Parajuli's (1998, 2001) notion of "ecological ethnicities," according to which religious or cultural sensibilities tie together shared values, cosmological ideas, social-organizational principles, and some relationship to land or territory and to identity. Roughly analogous is Dasmann's (1988) distinction between "ecosystem people" and "biosphere people." The postcolonial literature features a range of interesting, if not uncritical, engagements with this kind of distinction, from Mignolo's (2000) "border gnoseology" to Escobar's (2008) "territories of difference." In this spirit, Norget's contribution to this volume proposes that such terms as *cosmovision*, *moral ecology*, and

ecological cosmology carry a useful sense of the continuity between a small-scale society's lived cultural phenomenology and its non-human environment.

Some of the authors here, including C. Tucker, Robbins, Schnell, and Hallum, appear to be probing the usefulness as well as the limitations of the model articulated by White (1967), according to which traditional or indigenous beliefs and practices place constraints on people's behavior—constraints that shape the environmental efficacy (or "ecological footprint") of a given community, whether they are intended as such or not. In this model, traditional peoples live within an animate world of mutual obligations with spirits or non-human beings, and this constrains the behavior of members of the community, ideally limiting their environmentally destructive behavior. Modernization processes, on the other hand, , disenchant and despiritualize that world to enable a life without those constraints and obligations.

More commonly, however, religion is seen in this volume as a set of mobile references. Ritual, in Robbins's chapter on the Urapmin of New Guinea, is a traveling set of artifacts that takes on new functions in new contexts. The ecorituals developed by the African-Initiated Churches and the Shona Traditionalists in Zimbabwe, in Marthinus Daneel's account, are generative; they forge new relations even as they revive broken ones. Other chapters articulate religion more diffusely, as religiosity, spirituality, and the sorts of things that scholars have referred to as "diffuse" or "implicit religion," "nature religion," and the like (Ivakhiv 2006). Ballestero (this volume) speaks of "faith" in similarly diffuse terms, without any reference to the trappings or the practices of religion per se. This apparent shift toward a diffuse sense of religiosity, "spirituality," or "faith," might be taken as evidence of a desire for a more open-ended alternative to the religious-secular duality. But perhaps more so, it evinces a desire for a broadened understanding of science, knowledge, and practice, a way of articulating the shared

space in which people, lacking the firm and final knowledge that science always promises but never quite delivers, can make do with a politics of a world-to-come that always remains a not-yet, a *cosmopolitics*, as Stengers (1996–97) calls it, that grows in the interstices between rival knowledge systems, rival cultures, and (crucially) rival *natures*. I will return to this argument in the final section of this chapter.

In practice, then, religion remains difficult to separate from other cultural forms and activities, and the more appropriate question for scholars may in the end be this: What kinds of possibilities do the discourses of "religion," "sacredness," "faith," "spirituality," "myth," "enchantment," "cosmovision," and the like provide for theoretical engagement with situations where religions, sciences, and natures encounter each other on the unstable grounds of a rapidly changing world?

[The remainder of the article, including the sections "What is happening with religion today?", "What, if anything, should we as engaged scholars do about it?", and "Clearing a space for the cosmopolitical," will come out in the book to be published by SAR Press.]

Note: Portions of the section "What is religion?" were published in a previous version in Adrian Ivakhiv, "Toward a Geography of 'Religion': Mapping the Distribution of an Unstable Signifier," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96 (1), 2006, pages 169–175. This article is available online and from the author.