Is 'green' religion the solution to the ecological crisis?

A case study of mainstream religion in Australia

by

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Candidate's Declaration

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author’s knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Steven Murray Douglas Date:

Acknowledgements

"All actions take place in time by the interweaving of the forces of nature; but the man lost in selfish delusion thinks he himself is the actor." (Bhagavad Gita 3:27).

'Religion' remains a somewhat taboo subject in Australia. When combined with environmentalism, notions of spirituality, the practice of criticality, and the concept of self-actualisation, it becomes even harder to 'pigeonhole' as a topic, and does not fit comfortably into the realms of academia. In addition to the numerous personal challenges faced during the preparation of this thesis, its very nature challenged the academic environment in which it took place.

I consider that I was fortunate to be able to undertake this research with the aid of a scholarship provided by the Fenner School of Environment & Society and the College of Science. I acknowledge David Dumaresq for supporting my scholarship application and candidature, and for being my supervisor for my first year at ANU. Emeritus Professor Valerie Brown took on the role of my supervisor in David's absence during my second year. Dr Robin Tennant-Wood acted as my supervisor during the remainder of my candidature. Head of School, Professor Peter Kanowski, supported my scholarship and provided valuable administrative assistance. Acting Head of School, Associated Professor Janette Lindesay, also provided much appreciated support towards the end of my candidature.

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“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

(Robert Frost, cited in Gunderson & Holling, 2002 ‘Panarchy’ p 419)

Abstract

A significant and growing number of authors and commentators have proposed that ecologically enlightened ('greened') religion is the solution or at least a major part of the solution to the global ecological crisis. These include Birch, 1965 p90; Brindle, 2000; Callicott, 1994; Gardner, 2002, 2003, 2006; Gore Jr., 1992; Gottlieb, 2006, 2007; Hallman, 2000; Hamilton, 2006b, a, 2007b; Hessel & Ruether, 2000b; Hitchcock, 1999; King, 2002; Lerner, 2006a; McDonagh, 1987; McFague, 2001; McKenzie, 2005; Nasr, 1996; Oelschlaeger, 1994; Palmer, 1992; Randers, 1972; Tucker & Grim, 2000; and White Jr., 1967. Proponents offer a variety of reasons for this view, including that the majority of the world's and many nations' people identify themselves as religious, and that there is a large amount of land and infrastructure controlled by religious organisations worldwide. However, the most important reason is that 'religion' is said to have one or more exceptional qualities that can drive and sustain dramatic personal and societal change. The underlying or sometimes overt suggestion is that as the ecological crisis is ultimately a moral crisis, religion is best placed to address the problem at its root.

Proponents of the above views are often religious, though there are many who are not. Many proponents are from the USA and write in the context of the powerful role of religion in that country. Others write in a global context. Very few write from or about the Australian context where the role of religion in society is variously argued to be virtually non-existent, soon to be non-existent, or profound but covert.

This thesis tests the proposition that religion is the solution to the ecological crisis. It does this using a case study of mainstream religion in Australia, represented by the Catholic, Anglican, and Uniting Churches. The Churches' ecological policies and practices are analysed to determine the extent to which these denominations are fulfilling, or might be able to fulfil, the proposition. The primary research method is an Internet-based search for policy and praxis material. The methodology is Critical Human Ecology.

The research finds that: the 'greening' of these denominations is evident; it is a recent phenomenon in the older Churches; there is a growing wealth of environmentalist sentiment and ecological policy being produced; but little institutional praxis has occurred. Despite the often-strong rhetoric, there is no evidence to suggest that ecological concerns, even linked to broader social concerns (termed 'ecojustice') are 'core business' for the Churches as institutions. Conventional institutional and anthropocentric welfare concerns remain dominant.

Overall, the three Churches struggle with organisational, demographic, and cultural problems that impede their ability to convert their official ecological concerns into institutional praxis. Despite these problems, there are some outstanding examples of ecological policy and praxis in institutional and non-institutional forms that at least match those seen in mainstream secular society.

I conclude that in Australia, mainstream religion *is* a limited *part* of the solution to the ecological crisis. It is not *the* solution to the crisis, at least not in its present institutional form. Institutional Christianity is in decline in Australia and is being replaced by non-institutional Christianity, other religions and non-religious spiritualities (Tacey, 2000, 2003; Bouma, 2006; Tacey, 2007). The ecological crisis *is* a moral crisis, but in Australia, morality is increasingly outside the domain of institutional religion. The growth of the non-institutional religious and the 'spiritual but not religious' demographic may, if ecologically informed, offer more of a contribution to addressing the ecological crisis in future. This may occur in combination with some of the more progressive movements seen at the periphery of institutional Christianity such as the 'eco-ministry' of Rev. Dr. Jason John in Adelaide, and the 'Creation Spirituality' taught, advocated and practiced by the Mercy Sisters' Earth Link project in Queensland.

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Glossary of key terms and concepts

I have arranged most of the following terms and concepts alphabetically, but some are otherwise-grouped because they are best understood together.

Anthropocentric - I use ‘anthropocentric’ to refer to an ideology or policy in which humans are placed at the centre of moral considerability, i.e. concerns for humans are prioritised over concerns for other beings or non-beings. I also use the term ‘anthropoexclusive’. This is an extreme form of anthropocentrism in which *only* humans are considered.

‘Anthropocentric’ should not be conflated with ‘anthropogenic’. The latter term means ‘created by a human or humans’. Something that is anthropogenic need not be anthropocentric. Rush, 2004 p33, points out that ‘anthropocentric’ and ‘anthropogenic’ are regularly confused in ecophilosophical literature. Citing Plumwood, 2002, p134, Rush says that “Although it is clearly impossible to abandon a human epistemological location, and therefore, human attitudes will always be anthropogenic,… anthropocentrism is far from necessary: ‘it is no more necessary for humans to be human-centred than it is for males to be male-centred, or for whites to be Eurocentric or racist in their outlook. Human-centredness is no more inescapable than any other form of centrism’.”

Biocentric - I use ‘biocentric’ to refer to an ideology of policy in which the life of an individual, a population, or a species, is given moral considerability on an equal footing to that of humans. It is an ecologically naïve orientation that does not give weight to ecosystem functions. For example, it can prioritise the protection of an introduced animal species ‘because it has a right to life’ over the impact that this species has on other species, populations, communities, and ecosystems. It perceives individuals or individual species outside their ecosystemic context. Biocentrism is often seen in the animal rights movement and can be contrasted with the more systemic, though not necessarily ecocentric view of the broader environmental movement.

Ecocentric - I use ‘ecocentrism’ to refer to an ideology or policy that prioritises the moral considerability of the ecosphere or ecosystems over the interests or perceived interests of individuals, populations or species. It a holistic and systemic perspective and in my usage of the term, includes but does not specifically favour humans, rather than being inherently hostile to humans as it is sometimes argued to be. I do not use ‘ecocentrism’ as defined by Hay, 2002 p8, i.e. “Nature as a vast community of equals”. For me, ecocentrism is not necessarily egalitarian.

Theocentric - I use this term to mean an ideology that places 'God' at the top of what is usually a hierarchy of more considerability. For example, in normative Western Christianity, 'God' is given primacy, followed by humans (being made in the image of God), followed by the rest of Nature. Strict theocentrism rarely exists, if at all, because God is not afforded moral primacy without any reference to humans (God being at least interpreted in human terms). Therefore, I sometimes use hybrid terms such as 'theoanthropocentric'. This particular term means that 'God' has ultimate primacy but humans are at the centre of the ideology – being viewed as essentially deputies, stewards, or children of 'God'. Other hybrid terms include 'theobiocentric' which is biocentrism subsumed by theocentrism. 'Theoecocentrism' is where 'God' has ultimate primacy but ecosystems or the ecosphere is the central focus.

Often these concepts run into each other and they can be best understood as a spectrum moving from anthropoexclusivism through to ecocentrism but with theocentrism being an optional overarching orientation (see Figure 0.1 below).

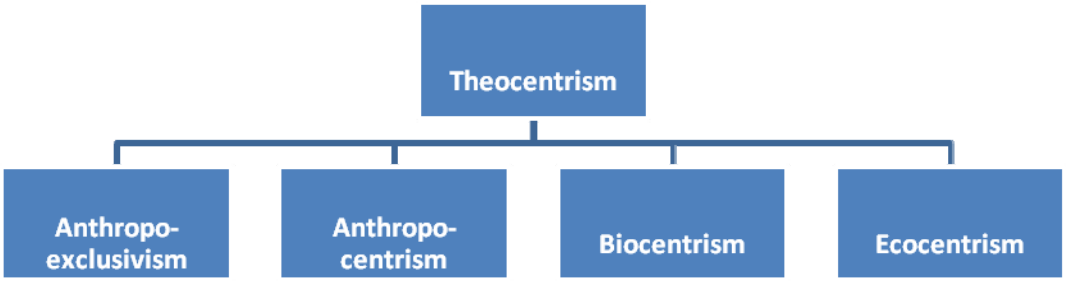

Figure 0.1 Relationship of philosophical orientations

Agrarian/ism - 'Agrarianism' has several recognised meanings1. I use it to mean 'pro-farmer', 'pro-farming' and 'pro-agricultural productivism'. Historically, agrarianism was contrasted with industrialism (see for example Quinn, 1940). Today, industrial agriculture may see no direct contact between the farmer and the soil, let alone with natural systems (meaning those not converted primarily or solely to serve human productive purposes). Modern agriculture is often simply industrialism of land and food production such that any contrast between farming and industrialism is marginal at best, though much less so in broad acre grazing (as opposed to feedlots). As such, the Church's agrarianism, which sees farming as an activity that brings one closer to God, is now largely an outdated romanticism.

[1] See for example http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_/agrarian.html, and for a more substantial explanation http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agrarianism.

I raise the problem of Christian agrarianism because in its present form, it amounts to the Church endorsing farming irrespective of its ecological impact, and indeed its social impact in many colonial nations.

Contextual theology - "As a theological method, *contextualism* may be said to be that way of doing theology which seeks to explore and exhibit the dialectical relation between the *content* and the *setting* of theology. When Schleiermacher suggested that Christian doctrines are to be understood as accounts of Christian religious affections set forth in speech, and that they are limited to a particular time, he was emphasizing the dialectical relation between content and setting in the doing of theology, with special stress upon *contemporaneity*" (Lehmann, 1972 p3-4).

Ecojustice - This term, also spelt 'eco-justice' in some of the literature, relates to the recognition that the previously notionally separate and potentially antithetical fields of social and ecological justice are linked to varying degrees depending on the extent to which one philosophically separates humans from the rest of the ecosystem. Social justice has conventionally focussed on human welfare with little or no regard to or at least understanding of ecosystemic factors. For example, social justice campaigners may argue that it is appropriate for Amazonian peoples to clear rainforest for grazing because the associated economic benefits are seen as essential to those people's well-being. Environmentalists may have sought to stop the deforestation and been totally or largely unconcerned for the economic well-being of local people. More recently, it was recognised that trying to fuel economic development with ecologically devastating practices often had all sorts of negative consequences, on various time scales, for the people it was supposed to be benefitting. From such a realisation emerged ecojustice – the linkage of social and ecological justice.

Ecospirituality - Refer to the definition of 'religion & spirituality' given later in this section. I use 'ecospirituality' to mean a metaphysic in which there is no fundamental division between humans and non-human Nature, and in which Nature (therefore inclusive of humans) is sacred. It can be deemed sacred because it is, at least in part, divine, or because it is the product of the Divine. It could even be sacred simply because it came into being irrespective of any divine input, i.e. an atheist ecospirituality (somewhat like Buddhism).

Ecumenism (ecumenical) – literally means 'one house' (Gk) and refers to the coming together of the Christian denominations in any collaborative effort.

Pantheism - "Pantheism says that God is embodied, necessarily and totally; traditional theism claims that God is disembodied, necessarily and totally (McFague, 1993).

Panentheism - "Panentheism suggests that God is embodied but not necessarily or totally" (McFague, 1993).

Policy - This term is used here to mean a statement of intent or orientation. It can relate to actions that have been taken, or are intended to be taken. It can also state a general position rather than being operational in the sense of directing particular works or practices.

Policies can be formal and can be named as a policy by their author or publisher, for example, 'The Catholic Church policy on climate change', or the 'Diocesan Policy on Environmental Building Standards'. Policies can also be less formal such as published letters, for example, 'An open letter to the Prime Minister in regards to climate change'. Policies can also be symbolic or operational or a mix of these.

Symbolic policy - is that which is not directly functional or operational but which is essentially intended to indicate a particular stance, rather than converting that stance to action. For example, the Catholic Church in Australia has a policy relating to the stewardship of the Murray-Darling River Basin, yet the Church is not in a position to directly influence the Basin's management. In contrast, a parish may have a policy that states that all church buildings will switch to 'green power' electricity within a given time.

Praxis - Essentially means the same as 'practise', 'implementation', or more specifically, the process of putting theoretical knowledge into action. Whilst 'praxis' is not a term in common usage, it is the term used in ecotheology and related literature, being of ancient Greek origin.

Process philosophy – I use the definition provided by (Rescher, 2002):

> "The philosophy of process is a venture in metaphysics, the general theory of reality. Its concern is with what exists in the world and with the terms of reference in which this reality is to be understood and explained. The task of metaphysics is, after all, to provide a cogent and plausible account of the nature of reality at the broadest, most synoptic and comprehensive level. And it is to this mission of enabling us to characterise, describe, clarify and explain the most general features of the real that process philosophy addresses itself in its own characteristic way. The guiding idea of its approach is that natural existence consists in and is best understood in terms of *processes* rather than *things* -- of modes of change rather than fixed stabilities. For processists, change of every sort – physical, organic, psychological – is the pervasive and predominant feature of the real".

Religion and spirituality - The concepts ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ are highly contested (see for example, Hamilton, 2000; Rose, 2001). I do not attempt to resolve the debate about their meaning and the use of these terms. I generally use ‘religion’ to mean an institutionalised belief system that addresses the relationship between the self, +/- the physical universe, and the numinous (after C.G. Jung) or divine. This is broadly within the scope of the definition of religion as a “relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the Sacred, the Supernatural, the Self Existent, the absolute, or simply ‘God’” (Bouquet, 1967 cited by Thompson, 2002). I also accept the definition of religion used by Milton, 2002 p9: that which is “concerned with ultimate meanings as a basis for moral rules, rules which are often, though not always, believed to be sanctioned by a sacred authority in the form of a divine being or beings.”

I use ‘spirituality’ to mean much the same as ‘religion’ but without the institutional dimension. Thus, I hold that one can have religion that incorporates spirituality (which I believe it must do in order to be authentic as a religion) and religion that lacks spirituality (where it is primarily about beliefs, values and practices that reinforce the institution itself and where reflexivity and contemplation are absent or suppressed, being replaced by dogma). Tacey, 2003 p8, writes, “Spirituality is by no means incompatible with religion, but it is existential rather than creedal. It grows out of the individual person from an inward source, is intensely intimate and transformative, and is not imposed upon the person from an outside authority or force.”

I use the term ‘religio-spirituality’ to convey both the abovementioned concept of religion and the broader concept of spirituality.

Secular - I discuss the meaning of the term ‘secular’ in detail in Chapter 4, section 2.1

Stewardship and custodianship - ‘Stewardship’ is a term used extensively in Christian ecotheology. It is essentially a Christian (though not specifically Christian) version of the ‘wise use’ paradigm of the secular ‘natural resource management’ field. It is an ethic in which Earth is seen to have been made for and given to humans by God for their use but subject to the proviso that they do not abuse this gift by ruining it, i.e. ‘use it but don’t lose it’. Stewardship is variously anthropoexclusive to anthropocentric and operates in a theocentric context with humans seen, in effect or actually, as God’s stewards of His (sic) Creation.

Stewardship is gradually being replaced in more progressive ecotheology by the concept of custodianship. This latter notion attempts to address the problematic anthropocentrism and blatant utilitarianism of the stewardship model by adopting a bio- or ecocentric basis on which humans are permitted to make use of Creation but not beyond their reasonable needs and not at an unreasonable cost to the rest of Creation.

The custodianship model sometimes purports to draw on the perspectives of indigenous people. It tends to view all of Creation as good and worthy of moral considerability. Some versions still place human needs above those of other beings, whilst others resemble forms of Deep Ecology by placing the needs of all beings on an equal footing. The latter is a much less common view and pushes the boundaries of even relatively progressive Christian belief.

Goosen, 2000, discusses three forms of ‘stewardship’: deep ecology (panentheistic); deep stewardship (“human being as the stewards of the non-human cosmos and fulfilling that stewardship in conformity to God's own will for the earth. Benedict of Nursia is a good example of this view”); and shallow stewardship (“stewardship of the non-human but from a fairly pragmatic point of view, that is, if the stewardship is not exercised we all will perish”). He claims that “In ecotheology the question of how stewardship is understood is the vital point” (Goosen, 2000 p209). The approach of John Paul II is to “affirm the interdependence of humans and the rest of creation without using the word ‘solidarity’ which might suggest monism” (which Goosen holds to be beyond Christianity) (Goosen, 2000 p209-10).

Sustainability - the long-term viability of society in terms of the ‘triple bottom line’ of ecological, social, and economic parameters. I generally use the term ‘sustainable’ with an adjective such as ‘more’ or ‘less’ because I consider sustainability to be a relative variable that is best viewed as a trajectory rather than as an endpoint, see for example, Land & Water Australia, 2001.