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Nature is Already Sacred

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ABSTRACT: Environmentalists often argue that, in order to address fundamentally the harmful impact of their activities on the environment, western industrial societies need to change their attitude to nature. Specifically, they need to see nature as sacred, and to acknowledge that humanity is a part of nature rather than separate from it. In this paper, I seek to show that these two ideas are incompatible in the context of western culture. Drawing particularly on ideas expressed by western conservationists, I argue that nature is already seen as sacred, and that its sacredness depends on it being seen as separate from humanity, an idea which effectively contradicts the scientific knowledge on which many conservationists base their actions. Goodin's green theory of value is used as a source of ideas about why non-human nature is experienced as sacred, and can be extended to suggest that other values, such as 'development' and 'progress', are also seen as sacred.

KEYWORDS: Nature, sacredness, conservation, non-human nature, western culture

In my judgement, only when we perceive that the value of the living natural world is grounded in something greater than ourselves, in something other than our human ability to value it, will our rational capacities be satisfied fully that life on earth matters. (Taylor 1997: 104)

We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us. (McKibben 1990: 54, emphasis given)

FOOTPRINTS IN A BOG

I begin with a story I was told about a botanist who worked at Queen's University in Belfast. An expert on peatlands, he used to take his students on field trips to

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study raised bogs in County Fermanagh. It was normal practice to walk out into the bog, to get in amongst the community of plants and study them at close hand. Then one year, returning to a favoured site, he found in the vegetation traces of the footprints made by himself and his students twelve months before. From then on, he confined his field trips to the edges of bogs.

This anecdote illustrates an attitude to nature that is widespread amongst environmentalists in western¹ industrial society, and particularly among those who style themselves 'conservationists'. Nature should be conserved in a pristine state, unaffected, as far as possible, by human activity. In this paper I shall suggest, as many others have done, that this attitude attributes a kind of sacredness to nature. Footprints in a bog are a violation; so is the pollution of rivers, the burning and felling of forests, the grubbing out of hedgerows.

My purpose in making this rather unoriginal observation, that for many westerners, and for conservationists in particular, nature is sacred, is to clarify one particular area of environmental discourse by correcting two common misunderstandings. First, it is often suggested that we² need to bring an element of sacredness into our dealings with nature. This is expressed, for instance, in calls for religious world views to be enlisted in the search for an environmental ethic (Tucker 1997) and is exemplified in the World Wide Fund for Nature's Network on Conservation and Religion (WWF 1986). It might be reasonable to suggest that the sacredness of nature needs to be taken more seriously, but the impression that sacredness is missing from our understanding of nature is false; it is a fundamental and well established part of it.

It is also often suggested and that we need to eliminate the conceptual barrier between ourselves and nature. Our separation from nature is assumed to have fostered our destruction of it, constituting it as something over which we have dominion, which can be manipulated for our own purposes. Both suggestions, that we need to make sacredness a part of our dealings with nature and that we need to remove the conceptual barrier that separates us from nature, are often couched in terms of a contrast with non-western traditions. For instance, Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel (1993) point out that the Buddhist world view, in contrast with western culture, places humanity within nature, and see this as an important factor in Buddhism's potential contribution to an environmental ethic. Posey (1998: 103) argues that 'we must discover how the balance sheet of economic and utilitarian policies', which characterize western society's dealings with nature, can be countered by the 'sacred balance' expressed in the cultures of some indigenous peoples. In perhaps the most public expression of this idea, Maurice Strong, in his opening address to the Rio Earth Summit, said, 'We must reinstate in our lives the ethic of love and respect for the Earth which traditional peoples have retained as central to their value systems' (United Nations 1993b: 50).

The impression given by this strain of environmentalist thought is that seeing nature as sacred and seeing the human and non-human worlds as continuous go hand in hand. Whether or not these ideas are combined in non-western cultures

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(which is a matter of debate among anthropologists — see Ellen and Fukui 1996), the implication that they constitute an appropriate formula for western society is misleading. This is the second common misunderstanding I wish to address. I shall argue that, in western culture, in some contexts at least, the sacredness of nature depends on it being seen as separate from humanity.

This point needs to be qualified. ‘Nature’ is an ambiguous term, used sometimes to include and sometimes to exclude humanity (Ellen 1996a). In one of its uses, it refers to the general scheme of things to which human beings and everything else belong. In this form, no doubt, many people regard it as sacred, particularly those for whom it is a divine creation. However, in another of its senses, nature refers to what Ellen called ‘space which is not human’ (1996a: 110). Some analysts have assumed that this is *the* western concept of nature (for instance, Ingold 1996, Dwyer 1996), Soper suggested that this is the ‘most common and fundamental sense’ of the term ‘nature’ (1995: 15), and Ellen stated that, ‘In Western notions, nature is most obviously recognizable as what is “out there”, what is not ourselves...’ (Ellen 1996b: 7). Certainly, for conservationists, people who actively protect nature, this appears to be the most important meaning of the term, and I suggest that it is in this essentially non-human sense that nature is seen as sacred. My comments in this paper relate primarily to a conservation perspective, though I think that a similar attitude is found in many sectors of western industrial society, albeit as one of several different ways in which nature is understood.

There are three main steps in the argument presented here: to establish that nature is sacred in western thought, to establish that, for conservationists in particular, it is *non-human* nature that is sacred, and to suggest reasons why this should be so. Before setting out down this path, it is important to indicate what I understand by the term ‘sacred’.

THE NATURE OF SACREDNESS

Like most phenomena for which anthropologists assume a cross-cultural or even pan-cultural existence, sacredness is a rather slippery concept to define. Any attempt to tie it down to a simple formula, such as Durkheim’s ‘things set apart and forbidden’ (1971: 47), runs the risk of excluding much of what we want to include. For instance, Durkheim’s formula, taken, perhaps, rather more literally than he intended, seems to describe quite accurately one particular aspect of the way conservationists deal with nature. Rare species and habitats are set apart in reserves designated for their protection, in which many human activities are prohibited or restricted. But in other contexts conservationists, particularly groups such as Conservation Volunteers³ and others concerned with environmental education, advocate a hands-on approach to nature, encouraging people literally to get in touch with their environment.

Sacredness clearly has something to do with religion, in that religious objects, beliefs and actions are often described as sacred. Religion, in turn, usually has something to do with spirituality. I shall assume here that the religious implies the sacred, and that when people are referred to as having a religious or spiritual attitude to nature, this means that they see it as sacred. But the concept of sacredness also has currency outside religion, in the sense that many people who would willingly claim that they hold certain things sacred, would not feel at ease with the idea that their beliefs or attitudes are religious.⁴

As a broad working definition, I suggest that the term 'sacred' can be applied to anything whose value is not based on reason, but is experienced directly, through the senses and, when necessary, asserted dogmatically. Sacredness is thus linked to aesthetics, to affective experience. Religious objects and events are often understood in this way, but so too are some phenomena that fall outside what is normally thought of as the religious sphere, such as things we regard as beautiful, or what we see as basic human rights: the right to life, to freedom, to parenthood. In suggesting that the values of these things are not based on reason, I am not implying that they cannot be rationalized or reasoned about. Clearly, in some circumstances, sacred values conflict with one another, and reason is often used as a basis for choosing between them. A particular individual's sacred right to life or to freedom, it might be argued, should be sacrificed for the greater good. But the rights themselves are not arrived at through reasoned argument. In observing that nature is experienced as sacred, I am suggesting that people value nature in the same way as they value their religious objects and their rights. Indeed, in environmental discourse, nature is often explicitly asserted as a right: the right of future generations to live in a healthy and diverse natural environment.

THE SACREDNESS OF NATURE

What evidence is there that nature is experienced, in western culture, as sacred? There is far more than can be summarized in one paper. The literature on environmental discourse contains many personal statements and analytical observations which explicitly link nature with religious values, spirituality and affective experience.⁵ Here I select just three instances as illustration.

First, an example of what people say about their experience of nature. In an analysis of environmental education in Britain, Palmer set out to test the hypothesis that 'spiritual ideas, attitudes and experiences held or encountered by individuals may strongly influence their development of awareness of and concern for the environment ...' (Palmer 1998: 148). She asked a sample of 232 environmental educators to provide autobiographical statements indicating what had influenced their commitment to environmental concerns. Although only 13 respondents (6 per cent) made explicit references to God or religion, 211

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(91 per cent) cited experiences of being “‘outdoors” — in the natural world’ as formative influences. Many of these were described in spiritual or affective terms, using expressions such as ‘awe and wonder’, ‘mystery’, ‘transcendence’ and referring to experiences of solitude and freedom (Palmer 1998: 150-1). Although, as Palmer observed, personal statements do not lend themselves to statistical analysis, she and her colleagues estimated that, overall, ‘over 90 per cent of the respondents referred at some point in their life stories to spiritual ideas and experiences as key influences on their thinking’ (1998: 151).

Second, an analysis of how people act towards nature. Szerszynski identified several ways in which the sacredness of nature (he used the term ‘sacrality’) is addressed in the patterns of activity in which people engage. He argued that ‘environmentalism has been shaped by religious modes of action and corporateness’ (Szerszynski 1997: 50), and, through comparisons with the history of Christianity, suggested that environmental activism is characterized by four kinds of ‘ecological piety’. Monastic piety is displayed by environmentalists who withdraw from contemporary society to lead a life which minimizes their harmful impact on nature, practising self-sufficiency, growing and making what they need to survive, recycling and reusing whenever possible. Sectarian piety requires a similar degree of personal commitment but directed at social change rather than renunciation. This category includes the activities of networks such as Earth First!, the Earth Liberation Front and protesters against the British road-building programme, all of whom engage in various forms of direct action. Szerszynski compared such activities with those of the early Quakers, whose ‘public mission to bring the world to righteousness’ was implemented through symbolic action (1997: 42).

The two remaining forms of ecological piety are experienced by those who conform, broadly, with the conventions of mainstream industrial society, but whose behaviour in that context expresses a degree of environmental concern. Churchly piety (Szerszynski 1997: 44-7) is experienced by those who support environmental organizations in more passive ways, by making donations or paying subscriptions. Szerszynski compared Greenpeace to a church, whose supporters acknowledge the existence of their own imagined community, and who gain individual satisfaction from the knowledge that others are acting on their behalf. I suggest that the same could be said of any environmental organization with paying members or supporters. Folk piety, Szerszynski suggested, is experienced through green consumerism, which he described as ‘a kind of ritualisation of the everyday’ (1997: 49). Through green consumerism, and associated activities such as recycling, people habitually build ecological awareness into their everyday choices, easing their consciences about humanity’s impact on nature and, at the same time, demonstrating their concern.

The significance of Szerszynski’s analysis, as he pointed out (1997: 50), lies partly in what it says about contemporary religion, that piety is inspired by things other than beliefs in divine beings, but also in what it says about environmental

values. They constitute a category of phenomena that inspires piety, that evokes a religious response. It is because people's responses to environmental values are religious, that Szerszynski is able to claim that they address the *sacrality* (or sacredness) of nature.

Finally, a personal statement by Bron Taylor (1997), who opposed Callicott's view that science should form the basis of environmental ethics with religion playing a supporting role (Callicott 1994). Taylor argued that scientific fact cannot provide people with sound reasons why they should care about the earth. The only alternative is to seek a religious basis for such motivation. His understanding of religion is broad, encompassing far more than beliefs in divine beings, indeed encompassing the whole debate about the nature of the divine. He admitted that, 'most days', he is agnostic. And yet,

I am compelled by my own affective life, my aesthetic experiences, by a few moments in nature that are beyond words, to affirm that it all matters. I am not sure of much, but I am sure of this ... In my own quasi-agnostic way, I must *resolve* to believe in the sacred, because it makes good sense, because it coheres with my experience of the value that surrounds me, because when I am at my most perceptive, it rings true. (Taylor 1997: 105, emphasis given)

Taylor provides quite a clear description of something that is very difficult to articulate: the way in which sacred values flow directly from experience of nature, without being passed through the filter of rational thought. Adams expressed it as follows: 'Nature is something that can be experienced, very directly, and this experience is the spark from which wider concerns about nature can grow — it is a vital root of conservation' (Adams 1996: 104). Although these are just two statements, by two environmentalist commentators, I would expect many conservationists to recognize in them descriptions of their own emotional responses to nature, of why nature matters to them. This expectation is more than wishful thinking; it is based on years of research on environmentalism in Britain and Ireland, including many interviews in which conservationists have described very similar thoughts and feelings to those articulated by Taylor.

THE SACREDNESS OF NON-HUMAN NATURE

There is nothing in the above observations on the sacredness of nature to imply its separation from humanity. What grounds are there for claiming that, for conservationists in particular, it is non-human nature that is sacred, as distinct from nature conceived as an all-inclusive scheme of things? In an earlier paper (Milton 1997) I examined the role of the dichotomy between non-human and human phenomena, what we often call 'nature' and 'culture', in the world view of conservationists engaged in protecting biodiversity. Conservationists often use this dichotomy as a basis for deciding what to conserve. Generally speaking,

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nature untouched by human hand is worth conserving, whereas nature that has been influenced by human activity is less valuable. So species that are indigenous to an area are more worthy of protection than ones that have been introduced, primary forest is more precious than secondary forest, and so on. Paradoxically, conservationists themselves have to intervene to ensure that the so-called 'pristine' nature survives.

As well as generating this paradox, the nature–culture dichotomy is also at odds with scientific knowledge, which many conservationists treat as the arbiter of truth. *Homo sapiens* is a biological species, and it is illogical to claim that what other species do is natural whereas what human beings do is not. Given that conservationists, especially in their dealings with policy makers, stress not only the importance of science but also the need for sound, reasoned argument, the conceptual muddle generated by their use of the nature–culture dichotomy might be expected to worry them. I suggested that they might like to abandon the dichotomy and acknowledge that all human activities are as natural as the activities of any other species. This would remove the criterion of 'naturalness' from their decisions, leaving them free to promote the conservation of biodiversity wherever and however it occurred.

This earlier paper was intended as devil's advocacy, for I had predicted and, indeed, shared, some of the misgivings expressed, at the conference at which it was originally delivered, by a mixed audience of anthropologists, philosophers, political theorists and biologists. What would happen to the concept of 'species' if transgenic organisms were treated as natural? Once human phenomena are seen as no less valuable than non-human phenomena, a large part of the rationale for conserving the world as we know it is lost. We could, for instance, preserve the Amazon rainforest in a gene bank, to be recreated whenever and wherever convenient, and still regard it as authentic 'nature'. I find such a prospect abhorrent, as I'm sure all conservationists do.

The reason why it is abhorrent was signalled by one respondent who suggested that conservationists cannot abandon the nature–culture dichotomy because it is too important to them; it is a part of what they are striving to conserve. This is an important insight. In that paper I had assumed that the nature–culture dichotomy was of *instrumental* value to conservationists, enabling them both to conceptualize and to identify empirically the objects of their concern. This response suggests that it has ultimate value and is itself an object of concern, that nature conservation is aimed at maintaining the boundary between humanity and the natural world. If this is so, then the inconsistencies introduced into conservationist thought by the nature–culture dichotomy are irrelevant. The distinction is both fundamental and a dogma, in that it is neither based on reason, nor susceptible to reasoned objection. Conservationists conserve non-human nature because it *is* non-human, because, if they don't, there might come a time when nothing exists that is not produced or influenced by humanity.⁶ This is what they find abhorrent.

Bill Adams' book *Future Nature* (1996) vividly endorses the view that non-human nature is sacred. The book arose out of a project by the British Association of Nature Conservationists (BANC) to write a new agenda for conservation in Britain. The project was supported by WWF (UK) and some of the statutory conservation agencies, and a group of conservationists from these and other organizations was established to advise the author, both at the beginning of the project and on the draft manuscript. So although the book represents Adams' personal vision for conservation, it is one that has been shaped, in part, by a sector of the British conservation lobby.

Adams cited several reasons why nature matters: 'Nature *is* of enormous value, because of its role as a cultural archive, a record of human endeavour and husbandry, and because nature has a wild non-human otherness that stands apart from human values' (1996: 106, emphasis given). He claimed that people need the 'otherness' of nature, its wildness, its ability to act independently of humanity, and suggested that conservation must 'meet and address' the otherness of nature (1996: 103). If conservationists tame the wildness out of nature through management, they destroy this essential quality. For Adams, nature's otherness is seen most vividly in the ability of natural processes to continue — of birds to migrate, of dunes to shift and change shape, of rivers to mould the landscape — regardless of anything we might do.

Other visionaries in the history of environmentalism have conveyed the same message. For McKibben (1990), 'the end of nature' meant the end of nature's independence, marked by the presence of human influence in all natural processes. I would guess that the very title of Carson's book, *Silent Spring* (1962), has had more emotional impact than its content, and has inspired many conservationists who have not read it. Its power lies in the suggested imagery, not only of the deaths of millions of songbirds, but also of the death of what they are part of, a natural rhythm that operates beyond human control.

WHY IS NON-HUMAN NATURE SACRED?

The third step in my argument is to consider why wild, independent, non-human nature is seen as sacred. Here it is important to clarify what could be seen as a contradiction. I have suggested that sacred values are not based on reason but are derived directly from experience. This amounts to saying that people do not have reasons for experiencing nature as sacred. How, then, can I suggest reasons without contradicting this understanding of the sacred? Another objection might be that to suggest reasons for things which, for the people who hold them, are not based on reason, is to invent bits of a culture in order to satisfy our own need for an explanation. The answer to both these objections is the same. As long as we seek only to describe a cultural perspective, then it is important to avoid importing ideas from outside, but when we seek to understand why a cultural

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perspective is as it is, we move onto a different level of generalization, one which makes cross-cultural comparison possible and which needs a theory drawn from outside the perspective that has been described. So far I have merely described the conservationist attitude to nature. Now I shall consider why such an attitude is held, but not by claiming to put reasons in the minds of individuals. I am concerned with why people *in general* might be inclined to experience nature as sacred, with why nature has this kind of impact on people's emotions and thoughts.

To explore the reasons why non-human nature is experienced as sacred, I turn, as others have done (Adams 1996: 101; Soper 1995: 16-17), to Goodin's green theory of value (Goodin 1992: 19 ff.). His argument is that people want to see some sense and pattern to their lives and that this requires their lives to be set in some larger context. Nature provides that context (1992: 37). In this sense nature fulfils the same psychological function as society and history do. Society provides a context for individual lives, giving them sense and pattern, making them meaningful. History provides a context for contemporary society by showing where it came from. The efforts to conserve cultural products — buildings, landscapes, traditions — are aimed at protecting the human context from which the lives of individuals, groups, societies and nations derive their meaning. In providing such meaning, these things also have sacred value which is asserted dogmatically; heritage is important *per se*. It may be significant that nature conservationists often present nature as (natural) heritage, indicating that its sacredness has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension.

An important feature of Goodin's theory, particularly for its application to western culture, is that it can accommodate the scientific understanding that humanity is a biological species and that human activities are therefore natural. In other words, Goodin's theory does not require humanity and nature to be seen as totally separate spheres, but can accommodate humanity as a part of the natural world. But when something is seen as part of a larger whole, there is always another part of that whole which is external to it. Strictly speaking, if we regard humanity as natural, we should refer to this other part as 'non-human nature', as I have tried to do consistently in this paper. More often than not, it is referred to simply as 'nature', even by those who, in many circumstances, treat science as the arbiter of truth.

Goodin's theory helps to explain why that part of nature which lies outside human influence has more value, is more sacred, than the part of nature that is produced or shaped by humanity. Anthropogenic nature, in the form of introduced species, agricultural landscapes, genetically modified crops, is part of culture, part of human history; these things form part of the context in which individuals and groups live their lives. But non-human nature is on an altogether different scale. It lies outside human history, outside human culture, and therefore provides a context, not just for the lives of individuals and groups, but for the whole of humanity. The wider the context, the greater is the sense of 'wild

otherness' that impacts upon us, and the more sacred, consequently, is its value.

The question of why conservationists and other members of western industrial society experience non-human nature as sacred cannot be fully addressed without considering why other cultural perspectives are different. I do not have sufficient ethnographic knowledge to answer this with authority, but I would guess that most other cultures are *not* significantly different in this respect. It is extremely common for non-human nature to be experienced as sacred, though it is usually referred to by terms which we translate as 'God' or 'spirits'. If Goodin's theory is applicable to humanity in general, we can expect non-human nature, wherever it is perceived as such, always to be experienced as sacred, because it will always provide the widest possible context for the setting of human lives. The only instances in which this will not occur are those cultures in which the human and non-human worlds are so fully integrated that there is no space which is not human. According to the work of analysts who have sought to identify the conditions under which a concept of non-human nature develops (see Coursey 1978; Dwyer 1996; Ingold 1994),⁷ we can expect such instances to be extremely rare.

It is now possible to clarify what the environmentalist message needs to say in order to appeal to western culture and avoid any inconsistencies with scientific thought. Humanity is unambiguously a part of nature. We are a biological species like any other, we are subject to nature's laws and everything we do is as natural as anything that termites, dolphins or bumble bees do. But we are only a *part* of nature. There is a great deal of nature that goes on regardless of our actions. This non-human nature (it is inconsistent to call it 'nature'), this 'space which is not human', is important because it provides a context for the setting of human lives, a context which makes human lives meaningful. Our experience of it as such makes it sacred to us. If we want to conserve that sacred context, we must protect non-human nature from human influence, we must protect the independence of non-human processes.⁸

POSTSCRIPT: DEVELOPMENT IS ALSO SACRED

In the preceding discussion I have hinted at a possible application of Goodin's theory which may go beyond what he envisaged. I think his ideas can usefully be treated as a general theory of religion. People want to see some sense and pattern to their lives, and this requires their lives to be set in some larger context (Goodin 1992: 37). I would suggest that most of what we think of as religious beliefs, ideas about the ultimate powers in the universe and humanity's relation to those powers, fulfil this function; they provide a larger context for the setting of human lives.

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Thinking of religion in these broad functional terms can produce some interesting insights. We have already seen how attitudes to nature fall within its parameters. Even though concepts such as religion and sacredness appear to have no currency in the commercial, utilitarian world in which environmental policies are negotiated, they may still express the most important function that non-human nature fulfils in people's lives. Durkheim's (1971) understanding of society as *the* object of religious observance could be seen as expressing the same idea; society is experienced as sacred because it provides individuals with the context that makes their lives meaningful.

I suggest that this line of thought can also throw light on the major obstacles faced by environmentalism. Human beings are always engaged in processes external to themselves, and all such processes provide contexts in which their lives acquire meaning. Human social life could be described as the continual creation and recreation of such processes. Some of the most powerful processes, in terms of personal commitment, are directed at the creation of material wealth and the pursuit of scientific knowledge. If I am right in suggesting that these processes are important to people because they provide contexts in which human lives acquire meaning, then it makes sense to assume that they are experienced as sacred. In other words, 'development' and 'progress', which have produced some of the most damaging impacts on nature, are, like nature itself, sacred values.

I suspect that this observation merely expresses what many environmentalists already know, that commitment to progress and development is dogmatic,⁹ and therefore not amenable to reason. Arguments that their own dogmatic commitment to the conservation of non-human nature expresses a broader vision, and is therefore a superior dogma, are unlikely to be effective.

NOTES

I am grateful to participants in a conference on 'Contesting Nature', held at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, in September 1998, for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ Like most other writers, I use the label 'western' as 'a kind of shorthand' (Ingold 1996: 117) for the broad category of societies whose histories, in recent centuries, have been characterized primarily by industrial capitalism and institutionalized liberal democracy.

² In this paper I sometimes use 'we' to refer to western society in general. I do not, of course, assume that all readers will share a background in western society.

³ The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) develops people's interest in the environment by involving them in practical conservation work. There are similar organizations in America and other western countries.

⁴ Clearly, the definition of 'religion' is as much at issue here as the definition of 'sacredness'. In suggesting that people would not feel at ease with the idea of religion, I

am assuming a commonsense understanding of religion as having something to do with a belief in the divine. Anthropologists using a broad functional definition might call many things religious which would not fall within this commonsense understanding. This point is taken up in the final section of the paper.

⁵ For recent examples see Hamilton 1993, Gottlieb 1996, Cooper and Palmer 1998 and several papers in the journal *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* (1 and 2, 1997 and 1998).

⁶ According to McKibben (1990), this time has already arrived.

⁷ See Milton 1998 for a summary of this literature. It is ironic that what some environmentalists seem to admire most in some non-western cultures, the apparent full integration of the human and the non-human, is also what they appear to fear most in the development of western science. The control of nature through science would achieve a full integration of the human and non-human worlds, and would establish a culture not far removed, in principle, from the traditional cultures of Australian Aborigines, for whom the perpetuation of a healthy environment was dependent on human action (see Strehlow 1970).

⁸ This is the essence of Adams' (1996) vision for conservation.

⁹ Documents produced by international organizations often express a dogmatic commitment to development. The most obvious example is the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, in which development is asserted as a right (United Nations 1993a; see Milton 1996: 181-2 for further discussion).

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