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Early Christianity and Antimilitarism—Mass Violence and Trends

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ECOPSYCHOLOGY. The human psyche has become a mighty force of nature. Our attitudes, everyday behaviors, passions, and ambivalences shape life on our planet. Inexorable pressures of technology and globalization are causing more and more people to live in urban settings, where water comes from pipes, food magically appears in bins, and cash materializes with the push of a few buttons. Modern consumers in the developed world live viscerally and mentally separated

from sources of life that sustain physical existence. Due to our lifestyles and ignorance, ecosystems are in radical decline.

Ecopsychology arises in response to this precarious situation by expanding the scope and focus of psychology to include the encompassing world of plants, animals, oceans, and land. An open and mutual relationship with the natural world, like our relationships with family, friends, and society, is vital to our physical and emotional well-being, as well as the lives of countless living things. We all matter to each other.

Ecopsychology is by no means a “new” psychology, for ancient healing arts have always included the more-than-human world. In earlier times, nature was by far the more powerful player to whom we submitted. The rapidly decreasing vitality of ancient ecosystems indicates that humans are now the dominant players and nature is often the victim. Modern ecopsychology seeks to reestablish human-nature connections. It posits that a personal relationship with nature is not only essential to psychological health, but also counters a dangerous anthropocentric trend in which a sense of human superiority fosters an emotional disconnection with non-human beings. As ever, people are still dependent on nature for survival.

Because there are countless, culturally unique ways to balance the needs of civilization and the environment, ecopsychology can hardly claim exclusive rights to healing modern dissociations between humans and nature. Thus, it is a persistent challenge for ecopsychologists to clearly define and limit the scope of their work, which often spills out of psychology and into domains of cultural and political transformation. In the early 1960s, the founders of this new, ancient field called their work “psycho-ecology,” which has “ecology” as its etymological base, rather than psychology. Although ecopsychology has settled into psychology as its foundation, its focus is more cultural than clinical.

Ecopsychology and the modern peace movement share synchronistic and synergistic connections. Neither is new, and both aim unerringly at bending the course of human history by changing human nature. Peace efforts arise in response to a danger parallel to ecological collapse, where all-out human conflict would result in mutually assured, planetary destruction. Extinction of all life is at stake. Exceedingly profitable traditional survival strategies like war and environmental exploitation are now, due to technological prowess, death warrants. While the modern peace movement

focuses on relationships between humans, ecopsychology concentrates on relationships between humans and other species, which includes our capacity to work creatively with ecological limits.

Emotional Responses to Ecological Destruction

Unlike other environmental scientists, ecopsychologists do not exclude human emotions from their work. The capacity to feel and be affected is the foundation for all conscious and mutual relationships. Possibly the greatest danger to life on earth is apathy. People do not take action or change their behavior unless they care. Caring arises from the capacity to be affected by what is happening in the world, to feel awe, joy, and love as well as sorrow, fear, anger, or shame. Ecopsychologists believe sluggish responses to glaring environmental crises are less an expression of not caring than an inability to weather challenging emotions. Denial and avoidance are symptoms of emotional limitations, not heartlessness.

In reality, many people do care about the environment and the fate of future generations. When people learn that comfortable lifestyles irreparably damage biological life and discover how everyday actions are incongruent with the care and concern they genuinely feel, an inborn response is to experience shame and guilt. This is often closely followed by fear, anger, and despair. People quite naturally steer clear of extremely uncomfortable emotions like these and attempt to maintain equilibrium, ease, and peace of mind.

Avoiding feelings is not real peace, but numbness. Shutting down emotional reactions is actually a disaster for living systems, because feelings of pain indicate a need for attention and action, signaling it is time to pull one’s hand out of the fire. Beside inhibiting responsiveness, avoiding feelings leads to a diminished quality of being and dampened vitality. Life loses depth and inspiration. Being with what is true in an emotional way, even if challenging and painful, is energizing and enlivening.

Often zealous environmental sentiments promote violent reactions, but ecopsychology councils against thoughtless emotional reactivity. For example, spiking logs, a practice used to protect old-growth trees that injures or kills loggers if their chainsaws hit the hidden metal spikes, is not an ecopsychologically grounded practice. The loggers, economic markets, and trees are all part of modern ecology, and caring about the needs and concerns of all parties is foundational to

ecopsychology. To counter emotional reactivity, ecopsychology works to develop an overarching consciousness that is inclusive of all parties and their needs, one that renders violence unnecessary. Feelings of frustration and anger are perfectly appropriate when people witness ecological destruction, but violent reactions are different than taking firm and thoughtful—even outrageous—actions.

Fostering Ecological Identity

Human beings need to develop a new identity that integrates the effects of globalization and technology and combines them with love and respect for ancient ecological systems and other creatures. An expanded and inclusive emotional identity with the natural world, each other, and our “stuff” (cars, computers, garbage) is what ecopsychologists call the “ecological-self.”

Historically, people had a vital connection with all aspects of their world, including one’s community of people, critters, creeks, forests, and future generations. In many cultures, this connection is lost, forgotten, and damaged. Taking time to simply be outdoors in wild beautiful places is a first step in restoring this eroded connection. “Re-creation” in nature rejuvenates body, mind, and soul. However, simply loving the outdoors does not unerringly develop vital, emotional connectivity with one’s world. Deeper psychological intention, inquiry, and presence are necessary to recover an emotional bond with nature. Ecopsychologists favor methods that combine intimate contact with the natural world with self-inquiry. Nature is a great healer and teacher, providing metaphors for one’s personal journey, a space for self-reflection, and fresh perspectives. Nature-based healing modalities that develop the ecological-self and promote personal healing include wilderness work with youth, vision quests, cooperative gardens, community-based environmental restoration projects, conscious activism, intentional ecological travel adventures, and therapeutic work in outdoor settings.

Efforts to bridge humans and nature are happening in many settings, often by people who do not even know the term “ecopsychology.” The popularity of marine worlds, wildlife sanctuaries, and zoos illustrates the myriad ways people seek out and enjoy connection with animals and the wild, nonhuman world. Even in highly “unnatural” settings, people learn about the profound impacts human behaviors have on distant habitats and animals. People are increasingly seeking to become ecologically educated and emotionally connected to nature. This

may signify a shift from belief in biblical claims that humans have “dominion” over nature and toward becoming conscious participants in evolution and stewards of life.

Another perhaps surprising benefit of developing an ecological identity is self-esteem. Although individual lives are relatively short, life itself—in the form of fish, forests, and future children—is long and abiding. Future lives and destinies are intertwined with present life. Because of this, individuals and their actions really matter. Each person, in his or her own way, is relevant to all with whom he or she is connected, now and in the future. Thus, an expanded identity can foster a sense of self-esteem more abiding and less personal than how one looks in a pair of jeans, the size of a bank account, or the car one drives.

Finally, and perhaps most relevant to peace, linking our actions with the fate of others is an expression of empathy. At a recent amphibian exhibit in Vancouver, crowds of viewers were exhorted to buy organic, fair-trade chocolate for the sake of tropical frogs. Making meaningful connections between seemingly disparate facts (e.g., chocolate and frogs) involves forging paths of intelligence and imagination needed to maintain compassionate relationships with all beings. The capacity for empathy is like a muscle. Flexing it ecologically builds a capacity to care for others, however different and distant they may be. Fostering empathic “I-Thou” relationships also erodes people’s tendency to objectify others. Objectification, like dehumanization, is a root cause of violence in all its forms.

Inspiring Creative Action

Plumes of smoke in the forest or the cries of a child trigger instinctive responses in human beings to take immediate action, but more gradual ecological disasters do no such thing. The most egregious environmental crises are often abstract and incomprehensible (e.g., global warming). Responding effectively requires that expanded identity and imagination be matched by grounded, nonabstract sovereignty. Collective change is necessary, but collective change still involves thousands of personal, quirky, passionate responses. Powerful corporate and governmental forces usually defend the status quo and short-term gains take precedence over long-term interests. This is why ecopsychology believes that serious collective change begins at the personal level.

Regaining the right to love and take care of the world requires personal effort. Corporations or governments may stand in the way. Very few have been to a slaughterhouse, a forest clear-cut, or active recycling plant because ugly, smelly, cruel places are blocked from view not only by distance but also by squeamishness. Efforts to regain the right to love and take care of the world involve transgressing taboos that hide ugly truths and block authentic expression in whatever ways each person devises. Everyone can rise to the challenge in a unique way, or not. Either way, all people affect the course of evolution. The prospect is staggering and intoxicating, terrifying and invigorating, humbling and empowering. Ecopsychology reminds people that the mysterious and creative powers of life course through everyone, each being expressions of nature as beautiful, unpredictably creative, and determined as any natural phenomena.

A Healthy Environment Is the Foundation for Peace

“Peace on Earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment.” So spoke the Norwegian Nobel Committee in 2004 when explaining to a surprised world why, for the first time, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to an environmentalist, Wangari Maathia. There was no need to explain the connection between peace and ecology when, three years later, the prize was awarded to Al Gore and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for their work with climate change.

Harmony with nature and harmony with each other are not mutual guarantees, but a degraded environment clearly instigates social disharmony and even total disintegration. This is witnessed in food riots around the world, the tragic failed state of Haiti, and the collapse of the Mayan, Anasazi, and Easter Island civilizations. A healthy relationship with the environment will always remain the foundation for lasting peace and the flowering of culture. Ecopsychological theory and practices dovetail naturally with efforts to sustain peace. Ecopsychologists help people do the inner and outer work of making peace with the living environment so everyone can continue to do the perhaps more difficult work of getting along with each other.

[See also *Climate Change and Its Implications for Conflict*; *Deep Ecology*; *Ecology and Environment*; *Environmental Peace and Holistic Theories*; *Experiential Peacebuilding*; *Globalization and Peace Issues*; *Green*

Parties; *Peace through Health*; *Psychology*; and *Sustainable Environmental Behavior*.]

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