

# Out of the Greenhouse

John Milbank

In the false Spring of our times, everything is painted green: it is the appointed liturgical colour for our post-historical sabbath. It's to everyone's taste, the guarantee of minimum respectability. There's a Green party, but that doesn't get very far, because it appears to appropriate for a particular cause the symbol that belongs to all. The colour has a utopian hint, or rather that of a puritan arcadia, but at the same time it soothes the passages of capitalist economic exchange. More than that: the guarantee of a 'good', 'healthy' relation to nature, as to one's own body, increases surplus value. Capitalism has already incorporated, in the interests of profit, the new religiosity of our times, which takes the form of transcending one's humanity in order to celebrate nature or animality as the 'other' with which one nonetheless seeks to become united.

I don't want to be misunderstood. The planetary structures which support life have been dangerously interfered with; much natural beauty, along with the delicate and long-developed harmonies of people's everyday environments has been ruined or destroyed. Technology is employed indiscriminately and for the mere sake of size and complexity. However, 'Green consciousness' is not the complete answer to all this: in too many ways it may collude with precisely what it purports to oppose.

I am thinking in particular of its assumption that at the root of our ills lies a distortion or mis-perception of the relation between human beings and nature: our destruction of the natural environment is derived from our supposed hubris in relation to the natural order. In response, we are exhorted to affirm nature, downgrade humanity. If nature has been abused by humanity, runs the (faulty) logic, then nature herself will offer us the corrective: 'obedience to nature' will prove the salve for our planetary ills. Thus ecology offers itself as a new natural law, and even the Vatican shows signs of concurring. Obedience to nature can, of course, despite her supposed percipiency, take radically opposed forms: either, assuming she speaks in scientific tones, we are adjured to submit to a utilitarian calculus of maximum well-being for the planet and its sentient life, or else, assuming her utterances to be more oracular, to rediscover the lost aesthetic and spiritual values, which these deliveries impart.

But there's nothing at all new here. These high tech and new age

remedies for our modern predicament, the over-reachings of science, themselves repeat precisely modernity, and the gnoseological framework within which 'Science' has been able to establish cultural hegemony. After the collapse of the mediaeval consensus, faced with the difficulties of containing the conflicts amongst communities of diverse belief, the early modern age already fled to the arms of nature as support for a new objectivity. Human relations had proved recently problematic; they were now to be mediated by the certain laws governing the inter-relation of physical bodies, and the supposed transparency of 'experiment'.<sup>1</sup> Displacement towards nature was therefore in place from the outset of modernity, although 'nature' was also from the outset a cultural construct: initially a disguised projection of a new mode of human power, operating less according to a consensus (imposed or spontaneous) about goals and values, and more according to the formal manipulation of quanta of power and information. This both encouraged and depended upon, their concentration at the sovereign centre, which was increasingly defined through this concentration, rather than its position at the apex of a complex hierarchy expressing a value-laden set of mutually positioned priorities.

In the face of the emergency of divided Christendom, knowledge and power were reconfigured together. During the mediaeval era, all social action and understanding was subordinated to salvation, the eventual gaining of the beatific vision; but now the pursuit of power as the mere guarantee of order—*any* order—is allied to the new legitimation of inquiry as mere *curiositas*, finding out for the sake of finding out.<sup>2</sup> Any secreted knowledge can be deployed on behalf of power, and knowledge defined as prying is none other than the power of vision to survey its objects with impunity (however much, through the dialectics of the gaze, such impunity may prove to be an illusion).

The usual villain, then, as 'Green consciousness' would have it? Dualism, body and spirit, the latter representing and mastering the former? Body or nature drained of value and meaning, spirit reduced to the emptiness of subjective autonomy? Yes, but that's only part of the picture. The new configuration of the relation of mind to body, humanity to nature, was an aspect of a new configuration of inter-human, inter-bodily relations. When these had been complex and hierarchical, then environmental space had expressed and constituted such complexity and hierarchy. It was emplotted with auratic signs that constrained trespass on one sanctum by another, and prevented a lone sovereign rule through the reduction of space to a single abstract medium, where all can be made equivalent as different permutations of geometric extension. Whereas that same, 'simple' space, is what permits

the project of a comprehensive scientific knowledge of nature, based on a disinterring of its 'fundamental' workings, whose infinitely complex combinations nonetheless do not outpace the projective reach of combinatorial calculus.<sup>3</sup>

The change in inter-human relations was prior and more basic; but the exigencies of social order which required the rule of spatial equivalence, and the possibility of an objective, totalizing comprehension of space in terms of quanta of extension and energy, involved also an instrumentalization of nature, and a more emphatic version of humanity as its spiritual master. Yet, the dialectics of the gaze ensured that the scientific *voyeur* must forever succumb to the fascinations of 'passive' nature, which alone guarantees his authority. The new knowledge which infuses the new power relies for its prestige on its absolute faithfulness to nature, its waiting upon her for the deliverances of truth. This is so much the case that inter-human relations, the relation of subject to subject, are now only legitimated and guaranteed by the humanity-nature relationship, the relation of subject to object. Hence while it remains transcendentally the case that the nature-human (body-spirit) relation is only an aspect of the inter-human relation, an apparent inversion of this priority is nonetheless a logical consequence of the modern configuration of social relationships. This is not *merely* because humanity now basks in the democratic identity of 'conqueror of nature', but more crucially because nature herself now yields up scientific and social 'laws' to the theoretic gaze or practical attempt at manipulation. For this reason, to identify the ecological villain as humanism, and to argue that the prime corrective for our ills must be 'submission to nature', may be to overlook the fact that this is to remain firmly within an existing paradigm. (I am not, however, trying to present a straightforwardly 'humanist' case, nor arguing that modernity has deserted a 'spiritual', inter-personal realm: on the contrary, the point is more that modernity has tended to refuse subjectivity to nature and concomitantly embodiment to 'value', thereby *constructing* nature as 'objective', the personal as unstructured interiority.).

If, for the reasons just intimated, it may be not so clear that 'humanism' is the villain, it is equally unclear that the villain is secularization. For from the outset, the shifts I have just detailed were usually accorded a religious tinge. After the collapse of the English Republic, natural philosophers posed as the new priests of the universal temple of nature, and favoured experiments which were supposed to verify the presence of 'spirit' working in the interstices of matter—thereby steering a mid-course between materialist atheism on the one

hand, and sectarian enthusiasm (whose access to 'spirits' is private and uncheckable) on the other.<sup>4</sup> From the outset, also, a religious immanentism was in vogue: God as embodied in nature, as gravity, mysterious ether, active principle, world-soul, general law; newly limited by the intractabilities of matter, and newly verifiable through the evidence of his operations.

*Almost imperceptibly* this immanentism can later take on a romantic tinge: nature should be thought of less mechanistically, God less as spiritual regulator of a machine; instead we need metaphors of dynamic organism, spontaneous creative self-shaping. The way to get in touch with spirit comes increasingly to be through aesthetic intuition, rather than purely objective verification: yet through this shift nature remains the remedy, its harmonies the salve for sundered human community. During the Romantic era, existing construals of the nature-humanity relation came to be more critically regarded, and yet the modern idea that this relation holds the key to our social ills, still retained its grip. Then and since, nature has sometimes been regarded as an alien objectified sphere which must be fully humanized, or else it has been seen as the repository of modes of Being suppressed by the conscious reasonings of humankind. But in either case the solution is always: heal the nature/spirit divide, mend the damaged relation between mind and body.

And what is more curious here is that this is not simply a modern fixation, but has a specifically pre-mediaeval, pre-Christian antecedent in the thought of Plato. If, as Heidegger alleged, the Platonic conception of *theoria* imposing its rule on unruly matter is one source of western technological fixation, one must nonetheless wonder whether anti-humanist ecologisms really escape this parentage, or do not rather invert its legacy, which thereby persists. The individual soul and his/her body; the soul and its relation to the cosmos: the locus abides in our new/old age. With a consequent evasion of the issue of human community, of symbolic orderings, of always coded material practices.

Some old-fashioned, still perhaps valid Marxism needs repeating here. The nature/spirit divide is not objectively real, even as a phase in a dialectical process: rather it is ephemerally re-produced in capitalist/bureaucratic divisions of law from morality, public from private, male from female, factual from evaluative, inert and manipulable from subjective and decisive.<sup>5</sup> 'Nature', like private life, is turned into the repository of what capitalism denies or relegates: community, mutuality, objective aesthetic value. It becomes the site of our longings, and this location is confirmed by the evidence that loss of community, and of public beauty, is accompanied by exponential

destruction of wild and cultivated nature. The remedy for destroying nature, thought many romantics, must surely be—turn to nature. But no: as I have tried to argue, modernity is *already* in part the turn to nature, this is itself part of the problem. ‘Green consciousness’ inherits the blindness of romanticism at this point.

For by ‘turning to nature’, we cannot really find the key to ‘value’. Its beauties we always ‘complete’, and so produce as much as discover. And alongside beauty, we encounter also the ambiguous terror of sublimity. Overwhelming, unpredictable power, continuous destruction. Ceaseless violence, suffering, indifference to parts, manic sustaining of the whole over long eras. . . then all as if nothing had been. If such a description is pathetically fallacious (although the fallacy is limited by the spread of sentient life), then the fallacy is only the upshot of seeking ‘value’ outside human cultivation.

However, the turn to nature is usually underwritten by ‘ecothology’, the Christian manifestation of Green consciousness, ecological new-ageism.<sup>6</sup> Characteristically, it seeks to re-endow nature with sacral value. There may be nothing wrong with such an agenda so far as it goes, but to offer this as a cure-all ignores the fact that, while primordial sanctifications of nature often accidentally imposed limits on the instrumental use of nature, they had no necessary moral, nor ecological intent. On the contrary, such a consciousness often consorted with, celebrated, sought to appease, the terrors of nature through the counter-terror of sacrifice. Mythical consciousness, for example that of the ancient Greeks, often recognised that *any* culture involved the upsetting of a pre-given natural balance, but regarded this as something to be practically coped with through caution and appeasement, rather than as a rank error, or occasion for moralizing.<sup>7</sup> Within the confines of superstitious inhibition, one can even recognize a kind of instrumentalism already here in place.

Sacralizing nature still carries with it the danger of acquiescence in terror. As surplus to a merely moral response, it can too easily be in tension with it. Moral response alone can regret the ravages of time, safeguard the individual animal from death, protect species and preserve sites of natural beauty. None of this seems to require any valuation of nature as such, nature as a whole. Indeed it could easily be given a manichean rationale, and there do appear to be such overtones in, for example, Schweitzer’s respect-for-life philosophy.<sup>8</sup> The attitude which doesn’t want to muzzle the ox too hard, that seeks to embrace a particular symbiosis of humans, animals and plants within its notions of ‘order’, does not appear to be in love with immanence and process, but rather with eternity and transcendence. For it values ‘the individual’;

attributes to her 'out-standing' a permanence of value. This is not the bloody Dionysian riot of seasonally renewed fruition and decay.

The dangers of pure immanentism seem obvious: resignation to death and redundancy, to the 'natural law' of competition. Exactly what, for such an outlook, inhibits an ecological fatalism of the kind which assumes that humanity's gloriously natural self-vaunting is doomed to an equally natural demise, but the planet will continue, at least for aeons? Anti-anthropocentrism retains its logic at this extreme, but collapses into paradox as a basis for more ethical responses to the environment. For *only* within human community are individuals, including animals and plants fully valued, only within human community occurs aesthetic appreciation of nature, which must always include a productive discrimination. Humanity is the event of this sort of valuation, such that to deny anthropocentrism is to inconsistently deny the transcendental condition of possibility for a certain sort of ecological concern; that a 'desirable environment' cannot be dumbly, objectively realised, I shall argue below. A consistent refusal of anthropocentrism would have to argue away human uniqueness, our being made in the image of a God 'who saw that it was good'; but thereby we would be reduced to the status of most powerful creatures in the universe, no longer fit subjects for moral/aesthetic environmentalist appeals. The only remaining imperative would be that of ecological sacrifice. The law of fatality would invite us, as the strong, to gloriously submit ourselves to the yet stronger, the planet as such, the self-maintaining totality.

While we should, of course, respect ecological mechanisms, to expect from these mechanisms the key to all modes of evaluation (so exceeding 'anthropocentric' ethics), is to acquiesce in the notion that there is such a 'readable' fatality, such a manifest possibility of knowing what 'the whole' requires. The danger is that claims to have identified 'optimum' environments, the most 'natural' and 'sustainable' balances, will often mask the ruses of human power and ambition.

Eco-theology may not entirely escape the danger of under-girding this crypto-fascism, because, instead of finding in Biblical tradition ample support for recognition of animal subjectivity, the careful tending of nature, and divine glory and sublimity as disclosed therein, it insists (after little historical reflection), on jettisoning orthodoxy, and constructing a more purely immanent, embodied, developing, limited Godhead. It assumes that re-sacralizing nature, and de-throning a supernatural God, must obviously be the key to our sick condition. But this repeats the facile mis-deduction I've already noted: we've been nasty to nature, so let's have more nature, more science, even (after all its *about* nature, and quantum physics is really taoism etc., etc.). Also

more Creation, more animality, more body. . . and less Fall and redemption, less doctrine of sin, less history, less humanity, less spirit. Never mind that 'spirit', as the realm of culture, is the only possible *source* of all our eco-problems, such that their solution demands that this realm be set to rights, *not* asked to efface itself before an affronted nature. Such a request can only serve as a device of the powerful, because there *is* no isolatable nature other than that fantasized by culture. Remembering that the worst we can do to the planet is only likely to temporarily discommode it, and perhaps to destroy ourselves, we should realize that environmental problems are entirely *our* problems, problems of our making, our perception, and our attempts to relate as human beings.

Instead of recognizing this, eco-theology prefers to repeat the specifically modern turn to nature, and to perpetuate specifically modern natural theology. Thus we get—and I won't delay the reader unnecessarily—the world is God's body; he's not omnipotent, but does his best (as a liberal headmaster), to persuade recalcitrant nature (pure More and Cudworth); Creation is not *ex nihilo*, but an evolution from small time beginnings somewhere on the cosmic prairie, to 'ever greater complexity', evidently a very good thing. Despite ecological-nuclear catastrophe, things are automatically getting better and this is called 'redemption'. The Fall is dispensed with, and the myth, not the event, is held to be our 'first disobedience' and 'source of all our woe'.<sup>9</sup>

The common thread here would seem to be the replacement of the 'drama' of fall and redemption with an account of the evolution of spirit from matter and its continual struggles with and against it. The implications of the traditional Christian account of the drama are just not attended to. Far from properly instilling a world-hating pessimism, the Fall underwrites a non-fatalistic optimism: in its gloomier aspect, the doctrine only acknowledges what all can already half-see: that evil is always already begun, and unable to reverse itself, because inscribed in death, suffering, and the chain of human error which has no traceable origin and appears doomed to limitless perpetuation because of our scarred psychic inheritance. By contrast, the true novelty of the doctrine is to announce that this 'always already' is nonetheless itself an intrusion, a distortion of the Creation as first made and intended. Without the fall, we would be left, not with the benignity of 'original blessing', but instead the terror of evil and suffering regarded as necessary outcomes of evolutionary experimentation.

It's the same with redemption: the orthodox view provides hope for overcoming all violence and death, lends meaning to the suffering of the individual who can regard it as expiatory and reclamatory of the fullness

of Being. Because redemption has its source in an excessive 'elsewhere', which conserves, inviolate, the original imagining of perfection, no default need be retrospectively justified, no *impasse* need be regarded as an occasion for despair, or giving up the struggle against domination. Eco-theology instead places its faith in a process, the chance workings of a 'divine lure', and writes off sufferings as unfortunate necessities. Instead of the divine promise of liberation from sin and suffering, we are offered a suffering God who sympathizes and suffers with us. 'We're all in it together' says this mythical headmaster: a Nobodaddy if ever there was one.

Sallie Anne McFague has given us the most consummate summation of this morass: an American Green leisure theology, enabling the self to communicate with the cosmos in time off from work. According to McFague, God doesn't in fact sympathize with *us*, so much as with *his own body*—'God cares about the world as one cares about one's own body, that is with a high degree of sympathetic concern'.<sup>10</sup>

'Sympathy with one's body'; this in an (of course) anti-Cartesian essay which traces a lot of trouble back to spirit/body dualism. An essay which also informs us that the old monarchic God offered 'control through violence and repression', while insisting that within God's body (which evidently won't allow him much sleep), evil and violence have a creative role to play. Recalling what I said at the outset about the displacement of the intersubjective (and inter-bodily) in modernity, by a new version of Platonic spirit/body fixation, it is evident that McFague walks slap-bang into this trap. Supposedly, she makes God less spiritual—and less phallic, *naturellement*—so he's a real guy you can relate to, talk to, negotiate with and, indeed, fondle. However, he's still got this head bit (where he 'reflects' etc) that sticks up above his body, and looks down upon it with *sympathy*. Beheading is not on the cards, since, if God just feels and suffers as/in his own body, his charity is no more. Given that the world is God's body, something approximating to a 'distanced' love can only be conserved by re-instating the dualistic distance of body from spirit. A distance which cannot really substitute for the inter-personal one, because here God does not freely permit creation, which in turn can freely offer him praise, but instead is merely one, 'spiritual' factor within the world, which in turn imposes limiting constraints upon him. (Note that while a divine 'body' has inappropriate connotations of limit, it may be possible to think transcendence yet more radically than the tradition, by denying that 'mind' or 'spirit' is any more 'unlimited' than matter, with the consequence, perhaps anticipated by Tertullian, that a Creator God quite 'independent' of his/her



Creation, can nonetheless be thought of as being as much 'material' as 'spiritual';<sup>11</sup> such an option would be far more radical than the proposal to interpret the world as God's body, which turns out to be yet more immured in Platonic dualism than the traditional construal.)

McFague fortunately manages to avoid the line taken by some other process-theology influenced exponents of eco-theology: namely that God as 'lure and process' is somehow required by the factual evidence, which cannot be accounted for in terms of the mere operation of chance in evolution.<sup>12</sup> Of course we can never be in a position to know just what is and is not compatible with the ultimately aleatory, and McFague rather sees acknowledgment of God as a matter of belief related to the support of good human practice. The test for a theological model is, does it support good practice now? But the assumptions that are made here about the linkage of myth/belief and actual behaviour, are too easy. There are no *obvious* correlations. McFague says: 'The monarchic model encourages attitudes of militarism and dualism, and conduces control through violence and oppression; it has nothing to say about the non-human world. The model of the world as God's body encourages holistic attitudes of respect for and care of the victimized and oppressed. It is non-hierarchical and only acts through persuasion and attraction; it has a great deal to say about the body and nature'.<sup>13</sup> Note once again the great weight accorded to sheer *prominence*: a lot more said about body, nature, creation, science etc. will do the trick.

But two further points arise. Firstly, only an absence of specific historical detail allows these correlations their plausibility: exactly *which* important Christian theologian envisaged God as a Monarch who acted on, and had knowledge of things, outside himself? Answer: none. By contrast, and to compound the error, human kings were often thought of as having extended bodies in the realms they ruled.<sup>14</sup> A God conceived in this sort of image (and we have seen how McFague fails after all to behead the Monarch), a God whose body in the world is a something we stumble up against, is a God who exercises a compulsive constraint *over-against* our freedom, like the King's official eyes and limbs, which are everywhere. Not the God whose power is the creative ground of our freedom.

The second point is this: *all* models, images, symbols etc. are indeterminate and ambiguous. They don't self-evidently dictate a practice; rather the practice further defines the model. *How* it conceives God's Kingship and so forth is partially known from a society's social practice. Inversely, practice always involves some theoretical assumptions, whose implications nonetheless leave much scope for argumentative development. McFague makes it sound as if we're quite

*clear* about practice and appears priggishly certain about what we ought to do, attitudes we need to adopt. Theological models are just invoked as functional supports for this. They don't therefore *reconfigure* our practice, although this seems odd if so much practical ill is blamed upon the old dualistic and hierarchical doctrines. Did theory determine practice in the past, though not today? But for now, at least we're left in no doubt which way round it is. We all, of course, *know* what to do, and all that is expected of theologians is that they should back this imperative up with a suitably honed model, and get rid of the nasty old one (and its mysterious, lingering, phallic theoretical potency which seemingly allows it to subvert the natural order of 'priority of *praxis*').

But we *don't* know what to do. *That's* the problem, and that's what's being evaded by green consciousness and eco-theology. Since we can't take decisions that are genuinely in common, we can't produce physical environments of convenience and beauty, because these reflect and embody a common civic life; constitute, materially, a mode of human reciprocity collectively affirmed. It's here that the real 'religious' problem arises. The question of 'what binds us together', a something that nature cannot supply—the 'Spirit' which speaks to us after all, subjectively, enthusiastically (but not before/without our public discourse). If we knew what rule was for, if we could somehow reconcile democracy (and so renew it) with *paideia*; if we knew whom to encourage and whom to restrain; what to produce and why; the just measures in exchange between diverse products . . . *then* we could inhibit our economism and technologism and protect our environment. However much more urgent such protection may daily become, this still does not alter the necessarily indirect path to the healing of our environmental woe, which is most fundamentally *perception* (but not *mere* perception) of such woe, as the evidence of subjectivity in what we find 'intolerable'—and when—seems to indicate.<sup>15</sup> Scientific 'fixes' may well be found for those problems that most starkly endanger our current notions of wealth and essential well-being, but this will not necessarily prevent their constantly mutated re-emergence, nor, emphatically, will it deal with our subjective, aesthetic sense of despoliation. That requires a civil knowledge not currently available, but not, by contrast, appeals to a fantasized, and sacralized wilderness.

And I have heard that magical musical bears are good to eat.

*This article is based on a paper given to the environmental philosophy seminar at Lancaster University. I am very grateful to Robin Grove-White, Bronislaw Szerszynski and Paul Morris, without whose stimulus the article's argument could not have been developed.*

- 1 See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 1989); Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 1986).
- 2 See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* trans. Robert M. Wallace (MIT, Cambridge Mass. 1986) 229–457.
- 3 On the contrast of mediaeval 'complex space' and modern 'simple space' see my essay, 'Against the Resignations of the Age' given at the conference for the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, St. Edmund's House, Cambridge, July 1991, and to be published in a volume of the conference proceedings.
- 4 Shapin and Schaffer, 283–332. See also, Michael Buckley *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Yale UP, New Haven, 1987).
- 5 see Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992).
- 6 See *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology* ed. Charles Birch et al (Orbis, Maryknoll NY, 1990).
- 7 J-P Vernani, 'Rémarques sur les formes et limites de la pensée technique chez les Grecs', in *Mythe et Pensée chez les Grecs* Vol II (Maspero, Paris, 1978). And Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'Religion, Nature and Ethics' an unpublished essay which is the most comprehensive demolition of the Lynn White thesis (that Christianity is responsible for eco-catastrophe) ever written, and to which the present essay is much indebted.
- 8 See Lois K. Daly, 'Eco-Feminism, Reverence for Life, and Feminist Ecological Ethics in *Liberating Life*, 88–108 (on Schweitzer, 96–108).
- 9 See *Liberating Life*, and especially the essays by McFague, Birch, Berry, Daly.
- 10 Sallie Anne McFague, 'Imaging a Theology of Nature: the World as God's Body' in *Liberating Life*, 201–227; this quotation, 215.
- 11 See Funkenstein, 23–117.
- 12 Charles Birch, 'Chance, Purpose, and the Order of Nature' in *Liberating Life*, 182–200.
- 13 McFague, 218.
- 14 See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton UP, Princeton NJ, 1957) 32; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*.
- 15 The researches of Robin Grove-White, in particular, based on his long involvement in ecological campaigns, have demonstrated this point.

## Utility, Understanding and Creativity in the Study of Religions

Chris Arthur

### Thinking and Treachery

At one point in *Speculum Mentis*, R G Collingwood remarks that

If thought were the mere discovery of interesting facts, its indulgence, in a world full of desperate evils and among men crushed beneath the burden of daily tasks too hard for their solitary strength, would be the act of a traitor<sup>1</sup>.