

The Return of the Sacred in Public Debates on the Environment:

Secular and Religious Uses of "Transcendence"

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According to mainstream sociologists of the 1960s, one of the earmarks of modern society was the privatization of religion, the relegation of religion to the sphere of the private life of the individual, the family, or the ethnic community. Talk of the sacred or transcendence was banished from public debates on politics, economics, and society. Leading this programme of secularization were scientists (the new cultural embodiment of reason), democrats, and social reformers. It is ironic that now, in the face of the environmental crisis, scientists, environmentalists, and grass roots activists are calling for a re-entry of the sacred into public life. For example, the well-known English-Canadian biologist and environmental activist, David Suzuki; former development aid manager, David Korten; American vice-president Al Gore; mathematical cosmologist, Brian Swimme; and a collection of world-renowned scientists all invite religious leaders to become involved in the ecological movement. Furthermore, they argue that unless nature is regarded as "sacred", humans will continue to view the environment as a collection of resources whose only purpose is to serve our needs. This anthropocentric "disenchantment" has meant that other species can make no claim to survival in the face of our own claim (or even our consumerist whims).<sup>1</sup> [\[1\]](#)

This call for a re-entry of the transcendent into public debates is not a call for a return to a premodern (that is, pre-democratic and pre-pluralist) society nor is it a defense of the privileges

of any religious group or institution. It is not a threat to democracy.iii[2] It is instead an attempt to balance the modern worldview's obsession with scientific control over nature for the purposes of economic growth with an ethic of self-limitation in the face of the majesty and value of the web of life which surrounds and supports us. Even so, this re-entry of the transcendent into public life poses certain dangers not addressed by scientists and environmentalists. By looking at recent papal documents, I will show that how the Roman Catholic tradition's understanding of the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person can serve as a useful corrective to the sometimes vague and abstract understanding of "the sacred" displayed by many scientists, environmentalists, and social activists. The so-called "anthropocentric" approach of the Church serves to link the ecological crisis to a wider moral crisis, the domination and exploitation of human individuals and peoples. Furthermore, the Church's social teaching on justice and the common good can balance the excessively individualistic emphasis common to these environmentalists. Without a religious community, the call for the return of the sacred will remain an idealistic protest that will only reinforce further the individualism that makes collective action impossible. I believe that Catholics ought to engage these secular thinkers in a serious dialogue about transcendence and ecology since I believe both groups ultimately ground their positions in an affirmation of the absolute value of life itself. Consequently, there is much room for dialogue and cooperation on a solution to this crisis among people of good will. Secular scientists and environmentalists might learn more about rooting their conception of the sacred in more concrete terms of the common good and social justice whereas the Catholic Church might find itself developing a deeper anthropology as it ponders the interrelationship that modern science has discovered between human beings and the rest of the cosmos.

### **The Return of Transcendence**

By the end of the 1980s, a large body of work written by Christians in response to the environmental crisis existed in English.iv[3] In the early 1990s, two extraordinary developments occurred. First, the mainstream religious organizations in Canada and the United States developed concrete programs to stimulate debate at the level of congregations and parishes.v[4] Simultaneously, scientists, environmentalists, and activists -- who were

traditionally suspicious of religion -- began to see in organized religion a possible ally. While Christians have often sought to move religion back into public debates, it was remarkable that the invitation was now coming from secular humanists.

One dramatic example of this phenomenon is the open letter organized by Carl Sagan, a well-known and respected physicist, to the world's religious communities and leaders asking them to overcome old suspicions and animosities to form a partnership with scientists in developing a new environmentally sane public ethic. The letter, released in January 1990 and signed by 33 scientists from the United States, Europe, and the USSR, recognizes the potential of religion "to influence personal conduct and commitment powerfully".<sup>[5]</sup> 1 Furthermore, it argues that respectful behaviour toward the environment has to be rooted in an understanding of nature as "sacred". The scientists write:

As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred.vi[6]

While science has to provide a deeper understanding of the physical world, religious leaders and communities need to communicate the principle that the earth is sacred. Such a teaching would act as a counter-balance to the purely utilitarian mentality that has led to so much environmental destruction.

This sentiment is echoed in David Suzuki's 1997 book, *The Sacred Balance*. Suzuki, a geneticist, host of CBC's weekly programme "The Nature of Things", and perhaps the best-known environmental activist in English Canada, argues that there exists a "sacred" interdependence between human beings and the natural world. All that life itself along with all that sustains life—the air, water, soil, and energy that make up the earth's life support system—must be considered "sacred", of supreme value. Suzuki protests that we have lost this sense of sacred interdependence, so evident in the rich narratives found in the cultures of aboriginal peoples.vii[7] This loss is the negative side of our greatest achievement, Western civilization,

the creation of our rational, abstracting minds. This has led to a deep alienation both from nature and from our essential being.

Indeed, the world we have created is an extraordinary, unprecedented achievement, constructed out of the awesome power of our abstracting, pattern-making brain. But it has lacked the ingredient we discover we depend on to thrive -- the idea of wholeness and connection we call spirit. Human beings have always believed in power beyond human power, life after death, and spirit-among-us (the sacred, the holy). But *our* cultural narrative does not include these beliefs, so our experience of them is stunted, truncated, painful. The consequences are threatening indeed -- the denial of value, the negation of being.viii[8]

The modern mind creates a double alienation: first from nature and secondly from the body itself. Suzuki celebrates the Romantic protest against modernity and its trust in the body's direct experience of nature.ix[9] It is our trust in our rationality and our belief that we are separate from nature that have led to our cavalier attitude towards the environment. He writes:

Although we know who we are, where we come from, what we are for, we give that knowledge no weight; our culture tends to deny or conceal that insight, and so we are left alienated and afraid, believing the truth to be "objective" instead of embodied. A world that is raw material, resources, dead matter to be made into things, has nothing sacred in it. So we cut down the sacred grove, lay it waste and declare that it does not matter, because it is only matter. Just so the slavers of an earlier century declared their merchandise to be incapable of "proper human feeling." Just so generations of experimental animals have been sacrificed in the name of research.x[10]

Suzuki's whole book is dedicated to showing how humans are totally dependent on and entirely integrated into their environment. Chapters on water, air, earth, and fire demonstrate in scientific detail our dependence on the basic elements of the ecosystem. Another chapter on life shows our close relationship to the "web of life", upon which we depend for both short-term and long-term survival. Finally, Suzuki turns to our need for "spirit", for a sense of the sacred or transcendent that gives us a sense of wholeness and unity.xi[11]

In practical terms, a newfound spirituality would teach us our true place in the cosmos. We would feel at ease thinking of ourselves as one species among many and dependent on many. This spiritual insight would lead in turn to a new ethos of self-limitation, a respect for other species and for the earth itself, a respect that is the heart of humility and wisdom.<sup>xii</sup>[12] The return of the sacred in public culture would allow us, Suzuki argues, "to reenter the world, restore its spirits and celebrate the sacred".<sup>xiii</sup>[13] Considering life and the earth itself as being of ultimate value would lead us to rethink our current tendency to rely on "bottom line" thinking to define "value" solely in economic terms. He proposes a number of far reaching political and economic reforms that would reflect our belief in the sanctity of life.<sup>xiv</sup>[14]

### **Why this demand for the return of the sacred? Why now?**

It is clear that none of these authors is writing to promote the privileges of any religious community or to advocate a return to a pre-modern society where public religion precluded democracy and religious pluralism. A brief examination of the social context of these works reveals what the authors mean when they demand a return of the sacred in public life. Certainly, some, like Suzuki, are partially inspired by a Romantic protest against modernity.<sup>xv</sup>[15] However, this movement is more than a romantic protest against enlightenment reason. The actors are scientists and none of them is ready to reject out of hand modern science or technology.

What drives them to this unfamiliar territory, I believe, is the current context. Three factors in particular are most frequently cited: the size or magnitude of the problem, the magnitude of the shift in behaviour and consciousness required to overcome it, and, finally, the sense that we are accelerating our destructive behaviours instead of arresting them. David Korten's work identifies the runaway globalization of the free-market economy as the underlying context of these new calls for the return of the sacred into public life. The redefinition of all of human life in economic terms promotes consumerism and suppresses criticism of the market place. Individuals are persuaded -- at the deepest level of their beings -- that increasing production and profit is the goal of human life. Korten argues that only a rediscovery of

spiritual meaning can counterbalance the current obsession with economic development.

Voicing sentiments that remind one of recent Catholic social teaching, Korten writes that spirituality teaches us the primacy of people and life over economic systems. It reminds us that "people-centred development" is the real purpose of life and that the economy "is but one of the instruments of good living -- not the purpose of human existence."xvi[16] The return to the sacred is a strategy to counterbalance the globalizing and totalizing claims of the new world order, the certainty of the economic "science" that justifies it, the impersonality of the bureaucracy that implements it, and the cold rationality that guides it. The Catholic theologian Gregory Baum explains how he has come to the same insight:

In contemporary culture, largely defined by capitalism, global competition and the struggle for survival, the metaphysical claim of human beings and the rights derived from this dignity will not be effectively defended against the logic of the market unless this dignity be recognized as sacred and hence untouchable; that is to say, as grounded in the divine transcendent. Similarly, I am tempted to propose that in contemporary culture, marked by individualism and utilitarianism, the self-restraint and social sacrifices necessary for protecting the global ecology will not be made unless universal human solidarity, embracing the generations still to come, be recognized as a sacred value, derived from the divine transcendent.xvii[17]

Even if some of them do not develop the idea so fully, I would argue that these scientists, environmentalists, and social activists have come to the same conclusions.

### **The Dangers of the Return of the Sacred**

Reintroducing the sacred into public debates poses certain dangers. In an earlier day, one might have cited the danger of a return to theocracy or the inherent threat to pluralism and democracy that public religion in the past has posed. I doubt that the new emergence of the sacred in the public sphere poses these dangers. The authors distance themselves from any one religious tradition or institution. They are democrats and do not call for the rejection of scientific reason, only a conversation between technology and ethics. The dangers of this strategy are more likely to lie in its abstractness and idealism. The authors cited above distance

themselves from all particular communities, so that their call for a return to the sacred remains abstract and powerless. The scientists led by Carl Sagan only appreciate the power of "religious teaching, example and leadership to influence *personal* conduct and commitment powerfully" (my emphasis). Suzuki's book is addressed to individual readers; he makes no reference to community. Without community to debate and refine the concept of the sacred -- and what that concept means to concrete living -- the concept will inevitably inspire much personal religiosity but little communal action. Moreover, because this invitation of the sacred into public life does not seem to be informed by an historical consciousness, the authors seem unaware of the possible political dangers. The use of the sacred in public debates has often led to the absolutization of political, economic, and cultural positions, protecting them against criticism or reform and raising the stakes in conflicts with other positions. The sacralization of nature could easily degenerate into the absolutization of a green movement or the goals of the environmental movements of the countries of the North over the needs for justice and development with respects to the countries of the South. Finally, the globalizing economy tends to generate a mirror-image, globalizing ecological movement rooted in the same norms of so-called "universal" rationality. Rooting the command to respect the environment in "the sacred" begs the question: who gets to define the sacred? I would argue that, if we want to avoid a new form of cultural or ideological imperialism, each community must define for itself a conception of the sacred and root its ecological *praxis* in that particular tradition. In light of the interconnectedness of human communities, this effort must take place in a spirit of openness and dialogue. But a vaguely defined understanding of "the sacred" is too weak a foundation for a new environmental praxis.

## **Papal Teaching on the Ecological Crisis**

Pope John Paul II has begun to address the ecological crisis in light of the Roman Catholic definition of "the sacred". Although done out of a particular tradition and on behalf of a specific community, this work does not represent a return to a premodern Christianity. It is rooted in a respect for pluralism, democratic politics, and civil liberties—and in fact criticizes

the dominant forms of political and economic development for not being concerned enough about these principles. It is necessary to situate the Church's attempt to participate in this public debate in its long history of trying to introduce the concept of "transcendence" or "the sacred" into public debates. Before the Second Vatican Council, the Church's introduction of the sacred in public debates was often a protest against modernity and a defense of the privileges of the Church. As such, the Church's forays into public debates often violated the norms of pluralism, democracy, and civil liberties. Since the Council, the Church's public performance on social and political issues has been more open to pluralism, democratic politics, and the human rights tradition.<sup>xviii</sup>[18] Its social teaching has rested on two main points: the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person that is rooted in that transcendence. Its insistence on God's transcendence means that no human social order can be considered perfect. Each needs to be perfected so that it will protect and promote the welfare of every human being. This orientation has introduced a prophetic dimension into Catholic social thought, so that the papacy has been very critical of all ideologies and systems that claim total allegiance. In his most recent message on world peace (1 January 1999), John Paul II identifies the materialistic consumerism that lies at the heart of the dominant form of modern development as one such ideology. Like Marxism, Nazism, Fascism, racism, nationalism, and ethnic exclusivism, it encourages people to pursue their self-interest without regard for the damage done to others.<sup>xix</sup>[19] It is in this context that the pope addresses the ecological crisis.

While other popes have addressed the ecological crisis in passing, John Paul II has addressed it squarely and much more frequently.<sup>xx</sup>[20] Like the scientists, environmentalists, and activists discussed above, he too argues that without a correct understanding of "the sacred", no solution to the crisis is possible. However, the Catholic tradition understands the "sacred" in terms of a God who not only prohibits selfish behaviour but also calls us to a more fully human way of life based on solidarity and compassion. The ecological crisis, the pope argues, is essentially a moral crisis rooted in the negation of the humanity of the majority of persons. Consequently, he does not separate the exploitation of the natural world from the exploitation and oppression of the poor. In each context, the dominant system, legitimated by the dominant ideology, affects both. To solve one crisis is to solve the other. For this pontiff, the solution is



summed up in the word "solidarity", the key to assuring the common good and justice for the marginalized, exploited and oppressed.

### **Theocentrism, anthropocentrism and biocentrism**

While Catholics might agree that for the protection of life, the concept of "the sacred" needs to be reintroduced to public debates on the environment, they would have some difficulty identifying nature itself with the transcendent. Pantheism is explicitly rejected; nature is part of God's creation; its sacred character comes from its relationship to the creator, who alone is holy.xxii[21] Humanity's obligation to respect nature and the natural order of the cosmos is rooted in God's command. John Paul II explains in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that humans were given dominion over other creatures and "nature" because they were inherently superior, made in the image and likeness of the Creator. Consequently, humans should use the gifts of God, the stuff of the cosmos, to fulfill their unique mission of self-perfection. They have the mandate of being co-creators with God; it is their right to shape the world. This higher spiritual calling is the basis of their power over nature and their right to its proper use.xxii[22] In the modern world, this right is expressed in "development" which the pontiff identifies as part of God's plan. While development presents humans with the constant temptation of idolatry and infidelity to God's will, humans are meant to be its chief protagonists. They are defined by their work that transforms the natural world.xxiii[23]

However, dominion in this sense is not "anthropocentric" but "theocentric". John Paul II writes:

The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to "use and misuse" or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to "eat of the fruit of the tree" (cf. Gen 2:16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity.xxiv[24]

Thus when humans use the gifts of nature to higher ends they conform to God's will which is to redeem both humanity and all of creation in Christ.xxv[25] The idea that "man" can "make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will" is rooted in a widespread "anthropological error".xxvi[26] The modern attitude is idolatrous because humans have set themselves in God's place, making their desires absolute.

It is at this point that John Paul II comes closest to the thinking of deep ecologists.xxvii[27] Nature, he argues, has its own order, "its own requisites and a priori God-given purpose".xxviii[28] Consequently, human will is limited by the absolute claims of other beings and the natural world. The pope warns against using "with impunity the different category of beings, whether living or inanimate" for economic ends. "On the contrary," he writes, "one must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the cosmos"xxix[29] This order is marked by "mutual interdependence". The world is not chaotic; it is marked by a fully integrated order that has its own integrity, an integrity that must be respected. Indeed, the pontiff goes so far as to suggest that nature has its own "subjectivity". He notes that the rest of creation "is called to join man in praising God". In 1979, he named St. Francis of Assisi patron of those who promote ecology. The pope explained that he did this with the hope that the saint would "help us to keep ever alive a sense of `fraternity' with all those good and beautiful things which Almighty God has created".xxx[30] The idea that the created order "praises" God and has in some sense a "fraternity" with human beings raises the issue of the subjectivity of nature, a concept which is by no means fully developed in papal writings. It suggests that, like human beings, the myriad of beings, both animate and inanimate, has an innate dignity and right to exist according to its own nature.

### **Sin, human dignity, and solidarity**

Despite these overtones of deep ecology, papal statements on the environmental crisis are closer to social ecology than to any other school. Like social ecologists, John Paul II sees the ecological crisis as the result of wider moral crisis in social relations.xxxi[31] The "natural"

human relations of mutuality, cooperation, and solidarity mandated by the creator have been destroyed and replaced by those of domination and oppression. The modern systems of development in their various forms all absolutize their goals and marginalize, exploit, and oppress individuals and whole peoples. At the heart of this loss is sin, not only personal sin but social sin or institutionalized forms of domination, violence, and theft often perpetuated by nations, blocs, classes and other groups. At the heart of all sin are the desires for wealth and power "at any price" -- even the cost of the lives of fellow human beings. The sinners absolutize their desires and pursue their satisfaction without concern for the consequences of their actions for others.xxxii[32] Furthermore, they objectify their brothers and sisters, reducing them to mere instruments to be used and discarded in the pursuit of their goals. This brutal reality is disguised by sophisticated rationalizations, but behind the decisions of these groups are "real forms of idolatry: of money, ideology, class, technology".xxxiii[33]

In terms of the ecological crisis, the Pope suggests, this sin expresses itself as the pursuit of human projects without concern for the destruction of the web of life that sustains us all. He writes:

The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological crisis is the lack of respect for life evident in many patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of the workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.xxxiv[34]

The pontiff correctly identifies the modern economic project as the real culprit in the ecological crisis. This system is not really anthropocentric because it does not take into account the whole of humanity and the whole of the human person. Those in poverty are excluded from development. Those who enjoy the material benefits of progress are culturally oppressed by a system that defines development in narrow economic terms. When this economic programme puts the needs and wants of capital over the basic welfare of whole peoples, it is a sign of collective and individual greed and selfishness which are "contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence".xxxv[35]

The ecological question can not be extricated from the question of social justice.xxxvi[36] The pontiff recognizes that there are two sides to the ecological crisis: the underdevelopment of the so-called Third World and, much more seriously, the "superdevelopment" of the First World that promotes an unsustainable consumerist lifestylexxxvii[37] The "structural forms of poverty" such as the unjust distribution of land in poorer countries that leads poor people to exploit and destroy marginal lands and the global economy which encourages irrational development among heavily indebted nations need to be addressed. War, with its great potential to destroy the environment, must be avoided. Finally, the consumerist lifestyle of the wealthy has to be completely rethought since it is, he argues, the driving force behind the destruction of the environment.xxxviii[38] When humans wantonly use and misuse the earth's resources to increase their power and wealth, they forget that the earth is "a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefits of all".xxxix[39] The idea of the earth as a common heritage for all means that environmental damage is both a sin against the poor and against all future generations.xl[40]

Like his analysis of the crisis, John Paul II's proposed solution is centred on the human person. Because he has made the teaching on the dignity of the human person rooted in God's transcendence the foundation of his social teaching, he has become an advocate for human rights. The ecological crisis, he argues, is a human rights issue. In his first full message on the ecological crisis, he stresses the point that the environmental question is a moral question, one of right relations between human beings, relations based on solidarity, recognition of each other as brothers and sisters who belong to and rely on each other. He labels these right relations "solidarity", a commitment to the common good and social justice based on the recognition of the God-given dignity in each person.xli[41] Solidarity is the foundation of all human rights, but especially the right to life. Since humans need a healthy environment to live, the right to a safe environment is a fundamental human right. International action is needed, he argues, to enshrine it as such "in an updated Charter of Human Rights".xlii[42] In his 1999 message on world peace, he includes the right to a safe environment in a list of other fundamental rights: the right to life, religious freedom, participation in society, self-determination (for peoples), self-fulfillment, and peace. For this pontiff, a commitment to the environment involves a commitment to human development—the whole person and the whole of humanity.

Here the pontiff's emphasis is its most anthropocentric. He writes that "Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress".xliv[43] Human well-being can not be defined against the good of creation. Nor can the good of the natural world be separated from the good of humanity. He writes:

The world's present and future depend on the safeguarding of creation, because of the endless interdependence between human beings and their environment. Placing human well-being at the centre of concern for the environment is actually the surest way of safeguarding creation; this in fact stimulates the responsibility of the individual with regard to natural resources and their judicious use.xlv[44]

But at his most anthropocentric point, the pontiff reveals that the question is not so cut and dried. The future of humanity depends on the safeguarding of creation, as he explains, "because of the *endless interdependence between human beings and their environment*" (my emphasis). Here the pontiff opens himself to a new anthropology, one that might well develop in new directions in conversation with the most recent science. Given John Paul II's openness to reexamining the anthropology of the Church in light of theories of evolution and the origins of the cosmos,xlv[45] such a dialogue could enrich the Church's understanding of what it means to be human.

### **Dialogue for the sake of life**

To defend human life then is to defend the whole "web of life" (to use Suzuki's term). The two are inseparable. When anthropocentrism is pushed to its logical conclusion, it becomes synonymous with biocentrism, since "real" divisions between humans and the biosphere are social constructions. We are made up of the air, water, soil, and energy that make up the rest of creation.xlvi[46] While the pope makes great efforts to distinguish human beings (and their special status, rights and duties) from nature, he is forced to admit in ever-increasing increments our total interdependence. Meanwhile Suzuki and other environmentalists frequently assert that we *are* the water, air, soil, and energy that make up the earth's life system but also say that we

are something more. We are also spirit, they say, without defining precisely what they mean. John Paul II, the spiritual leader, is led to contemplate our interrelation with nature; Suzuki, the geneticist, is led to contemplate our spiritual nature. Scientists, environmentalists, and social activists who take this approach and Catholics interested in the ecological crisis have much to learn from one another.<sup>xlvii</sup>[47] More than this, the two groups have a solid basis to form a coalition against the forces of death and destruction at the heart of the ecological crisis. In both groups, one senses a visceral commitment to life. The Catholic tradition comes to respect the web of life via its fidelity to the divine command to respect the dignity of the human person. However, the scientific reality of humanity's integration into the environment moves the Church from theocentrism to anthropocentrism to biocentrism. Suzuki and fellow scientists and environmentalists begin with a commitment to protect the web of life so that humans can survive. The search for an absolute foundation for their values in a world dominated by market values leads them to "the sacred". Start where you want and you find yourself debating the right relationship between humanity, nature, and the sacred. It is remarkable that these two groups, so utterly different, sometimes historically defined as enemies, agree that this right relationship is at the heart of the solution to the ecological crisis. They agree that the ecological crisis is a moral crisis that is rooted in our most basic values and our understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to "succeed", and what it means to "transcend". While they define the specifics of the sacred very differently, they agree that the dominant form of development can only be opposed effectively by rooting our commitments in "the transcendent". For those committed to life, these preliminary points of agreement serve as the basis for a new and fruitful dialogue *for* life and of a coalition *against* the forces of death that the ecological crisis embodies.

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<sup>xlviii</sup>[3] See Stephen B. Scharper, *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

<sup>xlix</sup>[5] "Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: A Joint Commitment in Science and Religion: An Open Letter to the Religious Community, January 1990", <http://nrpe.org/open-letter.html> (accessed on 29 May 1999).

iii[0] This paper was first delivered in French on March 13, 1999 in Quebec City at the Symposium of the Pontifical Council on Culture, an international symposium sponsored by the Pontifical Council on Culture (an office of the Vatican), the Government of Quebec, Laval University, and the Quebec Assembly of Bishops.

iii[1] See David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* (Vancouver: Greystone, 1997); David C. Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford, C.T.: Kumarian Press, 1995); Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (New York: Plume, 1993); Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

iii[2] See José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

v[4] Mark A. Shibley and Jonathon L. Wiggins, "Greening Mainline American Religion: A Sociological Analysis of the Environmental Ethics of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment," *Social Compass* 44, no. 3 (1997): 333-48.

vi[6] "Preserving and Cherishing the Earth" <http://nrpe.org/open-letter.html>.

vii[7] David Suzuki, "A Personal Forward: The Value of Native Ecologies", in Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki, *Wisdom of the Elders*, (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), pp. xxi-xxxv.

viii[8] David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*, (Vancouver: Greystone, 1997), p. 200.

ix[9] Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, pp. 203-04.

x[10] Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, pp. 204-05.

xi[11] Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, Chapter 10.

xii[12] Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, p. 208.

xiii[13] Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, p. 195.

xiii[14] Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, pp. 174-75.

xv[15] Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance*, pp. 202-03.xv

xv[16] Korten, *When Corporations*, p. 7.

xv[17] Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology*, (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994), pp. 14-15.

xviii[18] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, pp. 69-73.

xix[19] Le secret de la paix véritable réside dans le respect des droits humains. Message de sa Sainteté le Pape Jean-Paul II pour la célébration de la Journée Mondiale de la Paix, 1er Janvier 1999, no. 2.

xx[20] Jean-Guy Vaillancourt, "Les prises de position", du Vatican sur les questions d'environnement," *Social Compass* 44, no. 3 (1997), pp. 324-28.

xx[21] A number of Catholic thinkers object to this formula. Most notable among them in the English-speaking world is the Passionist priest and "ecologist", Thomas Berry, who finds the tradition too anthropocentric. For Berry, we must turn our attention to the story of the sacred cosmos, for the universe itself is God's primary revelation. So far, this position is marginal in the Catholic tradition. See Gregory Baum, "The Grand Vision: It Needs Social Action," in *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*, ed. Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, pp. 51-56, (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), p. 55.

xxii[22] *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 29.

xxiii[23] *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 30.

xxiv[24] *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 34.

La domination accordée par le Créateur à l'homme n'est pas un pouvoir absolu, et l'on ne peut parler de liberté «d'user et d'abuser», ou de disposer des choses comme on l'entend. La limitation imposée par le Créateur lui-même dès le commencement, et exprimée symboliquement par l'interdiction de «manger le fruit de l'arbre» (cf. Gn 2, 16-17), montre avec suffisamment de



clarté que, dans le cadre de la nature visible, nous sommes soumis à des lois non seulement biologiques mais aussi morales, que l'on ne peut transgresser impunément.

xxiv[25] John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility. Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, pp. 230-37, dir. Roger S. Gottlieb (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), no. 4.

xxvi[26] Centesimus Annus, no. 37. "une erreur anthropologique, malheureusement répandue à notre époque"; "Il croit pouvoir disposer arbitrairement de la terre, en la soumettant sans mesure à sa volonté, comme si elle n'avait pas une forme et une destination antérieures que Dieu lui a données, que l'homme peut développer mais qu'il ne doit pas trahir.

xxvi[27] Jean-Guy Vaillancourt, "Les prises de position", p. 326.

xxviii[28] Centesimus Annus, no. 37.

xxix[29] Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, no. 34. La première consiste dans l'utilité de prendre davantage conscience que l'on ne peut impunément faire usage des diverses catégories d'êtres, vivants ou inanimés - animaux, plantes, éléments naturels - comme on le veut, en fonction de ses propres besoins économiques. Il faut au contraire tenir compte de la nature de chaque être et de ses liens mutuels dans un système ordonné, qui est le cosmos.

xxx[30] John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis", no. 16.

xxx[31] Jean-Guy Vaillancourt, "Les prises de position", pp. 326-27.

xxxii[32] Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, no. 37. «à tout prix».

xxxiii[33] Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, no. 37. "de véritables formes d'idolâtrie de l'argent, de l'idéologie, de la classe, de la technologie."

xxxiv[34] John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis", no. 7.

xxxv[35] John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis", no. 8.

xxxvi[36] While the pontiff identifies the ecological crisis as rooted in the same oppressive system which marginalizes and exploits the poor, he does not extend his analysis to argue that it is also the same system that marginalizes and exploits women, a point made eloquently by ecofeminists. For an excellent study of this inter-relationship from a Roman Catholic perspective, see Rosemary Radford Ruether's famous essay, "Woman, Body, and Nature: Sexism and the Theology of Creation", in her *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993 <1983> and her fuller treatment, *Gaia and God: An ecofeminist theology of earth healing*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

xxxvi[37] John Paul II, "Le secret de la paix", no. 10. The pope does not address directly the issue of "over-population" in this context and I do not examine it in this paper. As Vaillancourt explains, the papal position on the demographic question has important points of agreement (for its own particular reasons) with the emerging consensus among feminists, radical ecologists and tiers-mondistes that the ecological question has more to do with the over-consumption and pollution of the wealthy and the unequal distribution of resources than with demographic growth as such. See Vaillancourt, "Les prises de position", p. 329.

xxxvi[38] John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis", nos. 11-13.

xxxix[39] John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis", no. 8.

xl[40] Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, no. 34.

xli[41] Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, nos. 38, 39.

xlii[42] John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis", no. 9.

xliii<sup>[43]</sup> John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis", no. 7.

xliv<sup>[44]</sup> John Paul II, "Le secret de la paix", no. 10. Le présent et l'avenir du monde dépendent de la sauvegarde de la création, car il existe une interaction constante de la personne humaine et de la nature. Placer le bien de l'être humain au centre de l'attention à l'égard de l'environnement est en réalité la manière la plus sûre de sauvegarder la création; de cette façon, en effet, est stimulée la responsabilité de chacun en ce qui concerne les ressources naturelles et leur usage judicieux.

xlv<sup>[45]</sup> John Paul II, "Message to Pontical Academy of Sciences on Evolution", *Origins*, 26, no. 22 (14 November, 1996), pp. 349-52. See also Nicholas A. Kenney, "Pope gives blessing to evolution theory," *National Catholic Reporter*, 8 November 1996, p 3.

xlvi<sup>[46]</sup> Thus Suzuki feels he can make a completely "anthropocentric" defense of biodiversity. See *The Sacred Balance*, pp. 130-31.

xlvii<sup>[47]</sup> Suzuki is politically informed and criticizes the dominant Western model of development from a humanist perspective. Citing Vandana Shiva, he also ties exploitation of the land to exploitation of peoples. See *The Sacred Balance*, p. 138.