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Introduction

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Any discussion of environmental ethics must begin with a statement of the scientific evidence as a baseline from which to begin the analysis. In chapter 2, Kenneth Hare suggests that the consensus of environmental scientists is that the chemical balance of the atmosphere is being upset by the introduction of alien chemical species — CFCs and the increased flow of greenhouse gases. Although the atmosphere is self-cleaning, its self-cleaning is too slow to cope with the excess gases pumped into the atmosphere, and so we will not be able to avoid their consequence — the greenhouse effect, which threatens human welfare.¹ This is a problem we have created for ourselves and that population increase will make worse. Indeed, some suggest that the rise of the world's population is rapidly outstripping the earth's carrying capacity and simultaneously fouling the atmosphere, so that the very survival of humans and other species, and the quality of our environment is in question.² To make things worse, demographic projections show a population increase of unprecedented magnitude continuing well into the next century.³

In chapter 3, Anne Whyte, in laying out the human context of the problem, warns that the earth's population rise is occurring at such a rate that it threatens to rapidly outstrip the earth's carrying capacity. In a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article, Charles Mann asks the question "How Many is too Many?" for the earth to sustain.⁴ Mann shows that the answers to this question have varied since the 1700s between those who believe that continued population growth will eventually lead to an environmental catastrophe (e.g., the 1798 economist

Robert Malthus and the biologist Paul Ehrlich, in his 1968 book *The Population Bomb*) and those who argue that increasing technological efficiency and changing social/economic patterns will solve the problem (e.g., the Marquis de Condorcet in 1794 or A.L. Lovins in his recent article "Least-cost stabilization"⁵). At the Rio Earth Summit, the developing countries responded to the developed countries on this issue by saying that the problem is not one of overpopulation in the South but of excessive consumption of the Earth's resources by the well-off few in the North.

The debate has ranged across the disciplines of biology, economics, ecology, anthropology, philosophy, and demography. The brilliant summary of this long, complex and crucial debate in *The Atlantic Monthly* is particularly significant in that *the role of religion is never mentioned*. Yet it is clear that religions can and do strongly shape people's attitudes and behavior toward the environment, toward the practice of fertility planning, and toward the sharing of resources. Religion can obstruct or foster responsible behavior. The cooperation of the world's religions in helping civilization respond to our current global crisis is essential. Also, the religions may discover new vitality as they take a fresh look at their sources of revelation for the wisdom their tradition may possess to guide our response to the problems that challenge us all. To respond to this gap in knowledge, the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria brought together some forty scholars from North America, Europe, Africa, India, Thailand, China, and Japan for an intensive ten-day seminar to examine what the world's religions and secular philosophy, economics, law, and demography say about this debate.

In some ways, this seminar, held at Whistler B.C. in August 1993, was a Canadian follow-up to Rio and the 1991 and 1992 meetings organized by Carl Sagan, the Very Rev. James Parks Morton, and (as he was then) U.S. Senator Al Gore. What made the Whistler seminar unique was the breadth of representation present from Aboriginal and Eastern as well as Western religions — and the fact that most religions were represented by women ethics scholars. The papers presented on the religions, revised later to take advantage of the working discussions at Whistler, form Part II of this book. Part III is composed of the secular analyses from philosophy, demography, law, women and family planning, and post-Rio considerations — all referencing back to the religious issues raised in Part II, and the baseline analysis of Part I.

What follows in this Introduction is an analysis of points of convergence and divergence in the responses of the various religions to the double-sided question: "How can we respond to population pressure and excess consumption and their degradation of the environment?"

POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

At the outset, it should be noted that most religions are just now beginning to systematically examine what their traditions have to say about threats to the environment from overpopulation and overconsumption. Various world events are prompting the religions to examine these issues. For example, the fact that the UN draft document for the Cairo 1994 summit on population has very little mention of religion is causing religious reflection on the problems being discussed, so that the voices of the religions will be heard. Often, it is women scholars who are taking the lead, and their work is proving to be a creative cutting edge of contemporary religious thought. At Whistler, for example, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the three patriarchal Western religions, were represented by female theologians. Buddhism, Chinese religion, and the Aboriginal traditions were also represented by women. Feminist scholars have paid particular attention to the issues. Let us now examine points of divergence under the three headings of Nature, Consumption, and Population Pressure.

Nature

While all the religions see nature as having varying degrees of intrinsic value, the Eastern and Aboriginal religions take a stronger stance on this issue. They emphasize that the cosmos is made up of interdependent parts, of which humans are simply one species among many. The Western religions are more anthropocentric, yet none of them give humans unchecked dominion over nature in satisfying their desires. Their various visions of a transcendent creator God place upon humans the responsibility of being co-stewards of the environment that God, the creator, has provided for their use. Yet today humans are destroying much of that which, in the view of the Western religions, has been created for their use. At the opening of our Whistler meeting, a group of Haida children and elders sang and danced a prayer-song of invocation in which we were reminded of the Aboriginal Golden Rule: each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects for the next seven generations.

The Jewish tradition sees nature as having been created by God to give pleasure to humans, who have the responsibility to be careful stewards. As Sharon Levy points out in chapter 5, God's will was to build a world based on and functioning through *chesed*, or loving kindness. Our role in God's world is to be his partners in actualizing his will for the world as spelled out in the *Torah*. The observance of the sabbath is seen to play an important role in keeping humans balanced in their relationship with nature. By observing the sabbath, which God created as an integral part of creation, we step back from our potentially dominating role, and in peaceful ease, again become part of creation.

Then, with right relationships re-established, we resume our co-creator work in the new week. In a way the sabbath might be seen as an element that God built into creation to keep humans responsible and accountable. In the modern economy of seven-day shopping and consuming with no pause for rest or reflection, Judaism offers a compelling argument for the practice of *Shabbat* as a powerful means for changing our approach to nature and our overconsumption of its resources.

Jewish scripture and commentaries seem to agree with the practical position that humans should respect those aspects of the environment necessary to sustain life.⁶ Less clear is the degree to which humans have duties to animals, plants, the environment, and its ecosystem, although feminist scholars are rereading the Talmud and Torah for texts that emphasize the earth and our connectedness with it. In this sense, they approach an extreme view held by some (e.g., Kabbalists and Hasidic thinkers like Martin Buber) whose mystical perspective endows all of creation with a divine spark that it is our duty as humans to liberate through engagement in I-Thou relationships.

Like Judaism, Islam sees nature as created by God for the benefit of humans, but not for their selfish use. The human role is to work to shape the world into the pattern God reveals in the *Qur'an*. Islam is more nature-affirming than Judaism or Christianity. It does not see nature as corrupted or discontinuous with God's purpose. As Al Faruqi puts it, the world "is innocent and good created precisely to the end of being used and enjoyed by man. The evil is not in it, but in its abuse by man."⁷ Islam is unique among Western religions in two ways. First, there is no separation between humans and nature: they are both parts of God's creation, and join together in worshiping the one God, their creator. Indeed, there is the concept of a natural, cosmic *islām*, in which stars and molecules, plants, animals, and humans all "worship" God by conforming to the laws of their own being.⁸ Nature not only joins humans in worshiping God, but, by its very existence, displays God's potentialities and attributes.⁹ This leads to the second unique aspect, the idea that Nature is a revelation of God that in a sense parallels the revelation of the *Qur'an*. Islamic spirituality is based "not only upon the reading of the written *Qur'an* [*al Qur'ān al-tadwīnī*] but also upon deciphering the text of the cosmic *Qur'an* [*al-Qur'ān, al takwīnī*] which is its complement."¹⁰ Some Sufis go so far as to describe the events of nature as "the book of nature" set before us to read.¹¹ Nature and the *Qur'an* are placed before humans as twin acts of God's self-revelation. But the relationship between the two books is not equal. It is only through the revelation of the *Qur'an* that humans can learn to "read" the book of nature; the cosmos is seen in its innocence to manifest God's compassionate breath through its regularity and beauty. Nature is thus a vehicle by which humans can be brought to see God's truth, beauty, and compassion. But the mystic and the scientist, through their re-

spective disciplines, are understood by Islam as capable of seeing the divine truth inherent in nature.

Christianity views humans and nature as created by God, with nature's purpose being, at least partly, to provide for human needs (Ps.105). In this, Christianity is like Judaism and Islam. Again, as in Islam and Judaism, nature by its very existence praises God and manifests his awesome powers (e.g., Ps.148). However, unlike the Islamic view of nature as innocent in itself, Christian thought sees nature as having participated along with humans in the Fall.¹² A peculiarity of the Christian view is that the human fall from innocence recounted in Genesis 3 also drags down all of nature into a corrupt state. As Calvin puts it, "Through man's fault a curse has extended above and below, over all the regions of the world."¹³ Paul speaks of humans and nature — the whole of creation — "groaning in travail together" toward the ultimate purpose for which God created it, namely the revealing of the sons of God, in which the whole creation will share (Rom.8:19–25). Thus, there is as well a strong teleological thrust in the Christian understanding of nature. For Christians, a special contribution of Jesus Christ was his exposure of nature as having value, not in itself, but only in relation to God's purpose. While the human misuse of our God-given freedom brought on the Fall (for both humans and nature), God's grace in Jesus Christ restores to us the opportunity to live a righteous life in relation to nature and God (Rom.8:1–14). Unlike Judaism, in which the revelation of the *Torah* provides all the help that is required, or Islam, in which the *Qur'an* gives the needed revelation, Christianity sees God's incarnation in Christ as essential to the re-establishment of right relationships after the Fall. It is the grace of Christ that enables one to see nature not from the selfish perspective of fallen humanity, but from the perspective of God. Only when this perspective is attained do humans function in the correct relationships among humanity–nature–God that bring forth the abundance of nature described in Genesis (1:26–31). It is in this context that the "human dominion over nature" mentioned in Genesis 1:28 is correctly understood from a Christian perspective.

When we shift to the Eastern religions and the Aboriginal traditions, we find a distinct difference in the degree of holistic interconnectedness assumed between humans and nature. Also, the divine is usually seen as present in, rather than separate from, nature. These traditions challenge the dominant Western view of a strong qualitative difference between humans on the one hand, and animals and plants (the Jainas push the position to its logical conclusion and include atoms of matter, e.g., air, water, and rocks) on the other. The basic Eastern position, to which all Hindus, Buddhists, and Jainas ascribe, is that just as humans are beings composed of a combination of spiritual and non-spiritual elements, so also are animals, and in the Jainas case, even plants, rocks, air, and water. To take the most extreme position (that of the Jainas) every animal, plant, or element

of matter is a being in a different combination of the components that make up each of us. Thus, there is no radical break between humans and the non-human realms of nature. Consequently, as humans we should treat animals, plants, etc. with the same dignity and respect we accord other humans. Clearly, this approach has significant ethical implications. Exploitation of one part of nature (plants, animals, trees, etc.) by another part of nature (humans) is unacceptable — if it is unacceptable to exploit your child, wife, or neighbor because of their stature as “beings” then it is also unacceptable to exploit another being, who happens to be at that moment an animal (thus the Eastern practice of vegetarianism — to kill and eat an animal is to engage in cannibalism).

While this way of thinking seems strange and foreign to our Western minds, it is supported by a well worked out theory that follows with clear logic once its basic assumptions are granted. These assumptions involve the notions of rebirth and the law of karma. The law of karma maintains that every time you do an action or think a thought, a memory trace is laid down in the unconscious. A good action or thought leaves behind its trace as does an evil action or thought.¹⁴ When you find yourself in a similar situation in the future, the previous memory trace rises up in consciousness as an impulse to do a similar action or think a similar thought once again. Note that this is merely an *impulse* (a disposition or desire), and in itself does not force us to repeat the good or evil action or thought. We still have free choice. We may decide to go with the impulse and repeat the action (in which case a new reinforced memory trace will be laid down in the unconscious), or to negate the impulse (in which case, using the analogy of the seed, the sprouting impulse will receive neither warmth nor nourishment and will wither away, leaving no further trace in the unconscious). Thus, by the exercise of free choice at each moment in life, we either reinforce or delete the memory traces in our unconscious. In theory, then, every impulse I experience in this life should be able to be traced back to actions or thoughts done since birth. But karma theory does not assume a *tabula rasa* or blank mind at birth. Not only does our unconscious contain memory traces of all actions and thoughts since birth, but also those from the life before this, and the life before that, and so on backward infinitely (since karma theory rejects any absolute beginning and assumes that life has always been going on). Consequently, each of us is thought to have a huge store of memory traces in our unconscious that is constantly bursting with ideas, impulses, desires to this or that good or bad action or thought. These impulses, however, can be controlled by the exercise of our own free choice. If a particular action or thought is repeated often enough, it becomes a habit. The result of this theory is a ladder of existence as follows:

Assume that you are a human being. If you use your free choice to act on the good karmic impulses that come up within consciousness, and negate the evil

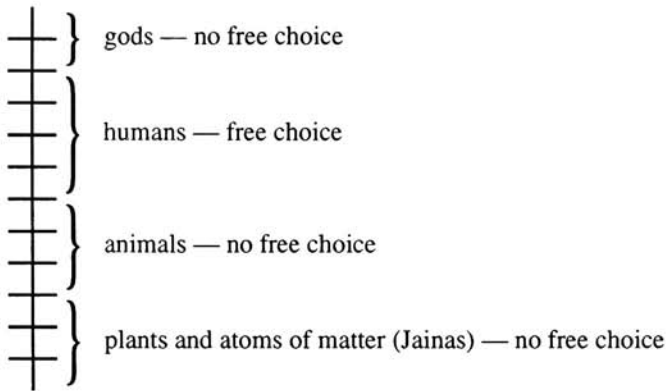


Fig 1-1. The Karmic Ladder of Existence

impulses, then, at the end of this life you will have increased the number of good karma (memory traces) in your unconscious and reduced the number of evil karmas. Using the image of a banker's balance, this will automatically cause you to be reborn higher up the scale. If, in your next and future lives, you continue to act on the good and negate the evil, you will spiral up the ladder of existence until you are eventually reborn as a god. Gods are beings just like us who, according to mythology, have the honor of superintending one of the cosmic functions, e.g., the sun god. But this is merely an honor and carries no free choice. Once the merit from all the good free choices made as a human is used up, you are reborn as a human being once again, with free choice.

But now let us follow through the other possibility, namely, that in this life you use your free choice to reinforce the evil impulses and negate the good. At death you will have increased the number of evil impulses and reduced the number of good impulses. This will automatically cause you to be born a step lower on the ladder of existence. If the same pattern is repeated again in the next life and the next, etc., you will spiral downward until eventually you are reborn as an animal. Animals are beings like you and me, but with a heavier composition of evil karmas (memory traces). Animals have no free choice, but simply endure the sufferings to which their animal instincts expose them. Through these sufferings, the evil karmas built up from years of evil choices (made freely as human beings) are expiated. Then one is reborn as a human again, with free choice and the ability to move up or down the ladder through karma and rebirth. In the Jaina view, plants and atoms of matter are treated as parallel to animals.

This is indeed a “long view” on life. After countless lifetimes it might well lead one to voice the sentiment, “Stop the world, I want to get off!” — or,

in Eastern terms, “Is there not some way out of this beginningless and seemingly endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth?” The Hindu religion gives one answer (one path out), the Buddhist religion another, and the Jainas a third — all quite different.¹⁵ Before looking at the Hindu and Buddhist “answers” (paths of release) for their views of our human responsibility towards nature, let us first make some observations regarding environmental ethics from the karma-rebirth theory alone. First, there is no radical separation between humans and other forms of beings (animals, plants, atoms of matter). Instead, there is a radical equality presupposed. Second, according to karma theory, I have created the karmic impulses (good or evil) that I am now experiencing, as well as my current position on the ladder of existence, by my own freely chosen acts in previous lives. And the free choices I am making in this life will determine where I will end up in my next life. I alone, therefore, am responsible for the condition in which I now find myself, and for the condition I will create for the future. In this regard, karmic responsibility is seen to be both individual and cosmic. The way I make my choices conditions not only my future lives but also the future of all other beings — which, in the karma-rebirth perspective, includes all of nature. According to karma theory, our current environmental crisis is a direct result of the free choices made by humans to date — and it is up to humans to change the situation by the exercise of their free choice now, for the sake of both the present and the future.

In line with the theory of karma and rebirth, Hinduism sees all of nature as interconnected and capable of progressive transformation from matter to life to consciousness and finally to divine spirit. As Cromwell Crawford puts it, “. . . each stage is cyclically interlocked with the other stages. The dead stone is linked to life in the vegetable kingdom, plants are linked to consciousness in the animal kingdom, animals are linked to the intelligence of *homo sapiens*, and man is connected to the Life Force within the cosmos.”¹⁶ As to the character of this “Life Force,” Hindu scripture is quite explicit:

The essential self or the vital essence in man is the same as that in the elephant, the same as that in these three worlds, indeed the same as that in the whole universe (Brihadaranyaka Upanisad 1.3.22 as cited by Crawford¹⁷).

Crawford interprets the above Upanisadic verse as follows:

The general idea behind this text is that the individual [self] *ātman* is one with the universal *Brahman*. *Brahman* literally means “the growing or increasing force” (*brih*). This *Brahman* force is manifest in the divinities of heaven, and in human, animal and plant life on

earth. All of these entities live an apparently independent existence, but they all emanate from *Brahman* and are finally reabsorbed into it.¹⁸

This emanation of the cosmos from the Divine is given detailed description in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where God's body is revealed as the whole Universe. Many Hindus (especially those of the Vaisnavite sect) see trees, cows, etc. as manifestations of God in nature, and therefore as fit symbols upon which to focus in worship. Nature, as God's body, is also seen by some to be a *guru* or guide to God, and therefore a fit subject for prayerful or scientific study.¹⁹

Like Hinduism, Buddhism adopts the karma-rebirth theory of nature and thus sees a continuity between human and animal life. Unlike the Jainas, Buddhists do not see plants and the inorganic elements of nature as composed of beings. There are some Buddhist schools, (e.g., Hua-yen) however, that see all of the cosmos as one interrelated web of existence within which there is no hierarchy. In the Hua-yen universe, says Francis Cook, "There is no center, or, perhaps, if there is one, it is everywhere. Man certainly is not the center, nor is some god."²⁰ This quotation identifies another distinctive feature of the Buddhist view of nature — it has no God. From the Buddhist perspective, the Universe has been going on beginninglessly according to its own inner laws, without the need for a creating, sustaining or supervising God. The Buddhist universe is one of identity and interconnectedness: what affects one part of the cosmos affects all parts. Therefore, the acts of humans, as part of the whole, are seen as intimately affecting the environment around them, of which they are a small but crucially interconnected part. Unlike the modern Western perspective, where people, and for some, God, stand separate from and above nature, from the Buddhist perspective there is only one level: nature, the cosmos, of which humanity, along with everything else, is simply a part.

Rather than thinking of the cosmos in terms of separate *entities*, Buddhism conceives of reality in terms of the relationships between entities. Rather than being conceived as distinct parcels of matter, reality is seen by the Buddhists to be the dynamic interrelationships that structure the whole. In this regard, Buddhist thought is often said to be close to that of modern physics and notions such as Einstein's theory, in which relationship is more fundamental.²¹ The Buddha "taught that to exist in any sense at all means to exist in dependence on the other, which is infinite in number. Nothing exists truly in and of itself, but requires everything to be what it is."²² The ethical implication of this viewpoint is that every single thing in the universe is important and thus deserving of respect. In the Buddhist view, interdependence is fundamental and all human interaction with nature occurs within that context. For the Buddhist, things do not exist in their own right, but only in interdependence. Things in nature, including humans, are said to be empty (*śūnya*) of any essence or self-existence

(*svabhāva*). Their existence arises from their relations of interdependence with the rest of the cosmos, and it is within this context that all ethical reflection takes place.

Indian thought provided the cradle for Hinduism and Buddhism. As evidenced above, Indian thought (although quite different in its basic presuppositions, such as karma and rebirth) shares with the West an approach to nature that often emphasizes laws or principles by which nature is to be ordered and understood. When we shift from the West and India to China, we encounter a radically different approach to nature. The Chinese give primacy to the concrete particular in its aesthetic context, rather than to an a priori metaphysical theory. For example, whereas in Plato one proceeds by moving from the concrete particular to the abstract universal (e.g., the “real” forms or ideas), in Chinese Daoism there is no preassigned pattern. Rather, as Roger Ames puts it, “The organization and order of existence emerges out of the spontaneous rearrangement of the participants.”²³ The Chinese adopted a “this-worldly” focus on the details of daily life as a basis for understanding nature and the cosmos. They emphasized the uniqueness of a particular person or event, and at the same time stressed the interrelatedness of that particular to its cosmic context. The Chinese sensibility, suggests Ames, leads to an approach to nature characterized by “polarity” rather than the “dualism” of the West, in which humanity and nature, or nature and God are seen as radically separate concepts. Polarity, by contrast, views such concepts as being interrelated in a way that each requires the other for understanding. For example in the Daoist concepts *yin* and *yang*, “*yin* does not transcend *yang*, nor vice versa, rather *yin* entails *yang* and *yang* entails *yin*.”²⁴ Darkness does not transcend light, nor vice versa; rather, darkness entails light and light entails darkness. In conceptual polarity each pole can only be understood in relation to the other — as in the above example dark requires light and vice versa. In dualist thinking, by contrast, the two concepts involved are often seen in opposition (e.g., male versus female), thus leading to discrete essentialistic interpretations of the world. From the dualist perspective it is relatively easy for humans to approach nature as a separate category of existence — composed of things to be used as required. The polar character of Chinese thinking and experience resists such a reification of nature by humans and conditions one into an intimate relational perception. All of this is well represented in Daoism. Nothing can be understood in independence of its context. In fact, nothing exists by itself. All things such as humans and nature exist only in interdependence and interpenetration.

De denotes the particular in its environment. It is both an individuating and an integrating concept. Ames offers the illustration of the stew pot, “Just as any one ingredient [*de*] in the stew pot must be blended with all of the others in order to express most fully its own flavor, so harmonization with other

enviroming particulars is a necessary precondition for the fullest self-discourse of any given particular."²⁵ For one to fully express or individuate oneself, it is necessary to harmonize and integrate oneself with other humans, nature and the whole cosmos. With such integration, one's particular humanness (*de*) will be realized. Contrary to what we might expect, Daoism does not see the necessity of integrating with the whole as militating against individual freedom and creativity. *De* as one's particular nature is understood by Daoism to have an inherent potency to self-expression and self-individuation. But such dynamic manifestation of the *de*, when integrated into the complexity of the larger whole, is called the *dao*. The distinction between *de* and *dao* therefore, is one of degree rather than kind. The *de*, when fully individuated and integrated, is but a particular aspect of the *dao*. For example, the *de* of a particular person, when fully expressed and integrated with his or her surrounding natural environment, is but an aspect of the *dao*. Ames says it better: "When *de* is cultivated and accumulated such that the particular is fully expressive of the whole, the distinction between *dao* and *de* collapses. . . ." ²⁶ The result is harmony, regularity, and rhythm, and the action involved is described by Daoists as *wu-wei* (translated as "non-action" meaning no self-willed action independent of the *dao*). It is also called *tzu-jan* (spontaneity or uncontrived action).

The Aboriginal perspective is in many ways very close to the Daoist viewpoint. However, rather than the theoretical *yin-yang* formulation, the Aboriginal tradition views the cosmos as a community of "peoples." Humans, animals, plants, rocks, trees, wind, and water are all seen as different species of "peoples," all of whom are suffused, unified, and transcended by the unseen presence of the Great Spirit. As Joseph Epes Brown puts it,

Our animate inanimate dichotomy, or our categories of animal, vegetable and mineral, for example, have no meaning for the Indian who sees that all that exists is animate, each form in its own special way, so that even rocks have a life of their own and are believed even to be able to talk under certain conditions.²⁷

As Daisy Sewid-Smith puts it in chapter 4, the hemlock tree, the bear, or the salmon all were seen as sacrificing themselves for the life of the people, and thus to be acknowledged and thanked. Such ritual practices helped to maintain human sensitivity to the social and natural limits within which life has to be lived.

Put another way, for the Aboriginal, all of the entities that make up nature share in the same consciousness that humans enjoy and thus are seen as different species of peoples. The consciousness that is possessed by all aspects of nature is described by Aboriginals in terms of manifesting divine spirit; all things are suffused, unified, and transcended by the unseen presence of the

Great Spirit. The Sioux Indian John Fire Lane Deer gives this notion metaphysical expression:

You can't explain it except by going back to the "circles within circles" idea, the spirit splitting itself up into stones, trees, tiny insects even, making them all *waken* by his ever-presence. And in turn all these myriad of things which make up the universe flowing back to their source, united in one Grandfather spirit.²⁸

There is of course *no one* Aboriginal religion or culture, but the many North American Aboriginal traditions share a common belief in the environment as composed of different peoples manifesting the one divine spirit (as expressed by Lane Deer). This idea leads to a genuine respect for the welfare of all forms of nature within the environment. Central to the notion of "person," for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, is the idea that persons must be treated with respect and not be intentionally harmed. By seeing all aspects of the environment as different species of persons, the Aboriginal traditions manifest a strong and inclusive environmental ethic. Humans, together with all the component parts of nature (including the atmosphere), are seen as members of an intimately related family. As Callicot puts it, "Not only does everything have spirit, in the last analysis all things are related together as members of one universal family, born of one father, the sky, the Great Spirit, and one mother, the Earth herself."²⁹ Although the words are those of the Lakota sage Black Elk, the concept of the Great Spirit, as symbolized by the atmosphere (the sky), and the Earth Mother producing the family of creatures composing nature is so common as to be very nearly universal in North American Indian thinking. The ethic it generates is the necessity of treating all of nature as one would treat the members of one's own family, and the recognition that there is a spiritual aspect to all natural things. Human beings are part of a larger social and physical environment, belonging to both the human community and the community of all nature.³⁰ The ethical responsibilities and mutual obligations due to the members of one's own family or tribe are extended to include one's "natural relatives" that make up the environment. The cosmic kinship group enables the aboriginal, even when alone in nature, to feel as comfortable and secure as one would feel in the midst of a large family. Luther Standing Bear reports that the Lakota child never felt alone in nature. "Even without human companionship one was never alone. The world teemed with life and wisdom; there was no complete solitude for the Lakota."³¹

In their approaches to nature, all of the religions reviewed above would agree that the aggressive, self-centered attitude that has typified human interaction with the environment is unacceptable. Our misbehavior has brought upon us the en-

vironmental problems of fouled air and water, and the greenhouse effect, which threatens continued human welfare. The teachings of all of the religions require us to confess to the violation of nature and require from us nothing less than a changed attitude in which we value nature for its own sake — as a part of the cosmos of which we humans are but another part. The first place such a change must show itself is in our patterns of consumption — especially those of us who are well off. Such a change is important not only for the environment but also so that a fairer distribution of the earth's resources may occur.

Consumption

All the religions agree in warning against overconsumption and the dangers it would bring by damaging the environment and causing injustice between peoples. However, one religion, Christianity in its modern Western forms, is singled out as having the overwhelming responsibility for the imposition throughout the planet of unsustainable patterns of development. As Catherine Keller notes in chapter 6, it is not that Christianity has the worst ideas for the environment and the consumption of its resources, but that the modern Western Christian cultures have developed the ideological framework for unprecedented domination in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. It is this aggressive domination of peoples and nature by the ideological framework of the modern West that seems to be a root cause of much overconsumption.

In a widely quoted article, the historian Lynn White has pointed to the Christian understanding of the Biblical notion of humans as having “dominion over the earth” as a major factor in making possible the Industrial Revolution, its attendant overconsumption of natural resources, and the devastation of the environment that has followed.³² Christian theologians (e.g., R. L. Shinn³³) have responded by pointing out that White's thesis oversimplifies an extremely complex historical development. Nonetheless, no one denies that there is some truth to White's analysis. Quoting Genesis 1:28, in which humans are told to “fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing,” White suggests that such Christian ideas led directly to a human-centered and domineering attitude towards nature. Christianity established a dualism between humankind and nature and also insisted, says White, that God wills humans to exploit nature for their proper ends. Consequently, concludes White, Christianity, besides making possible the Industrial Revolution, also bears a burden of guilt for human alienation from nature and the overconsumption and environmental degradation that has resulted.

The Jewish conception of Yom Kippur, “The Great Shabbat,” as described by Sharon Levy in chapter 5, seems helpful here. One day a year we are called

to give an accounting. Our deeds are scrutinized. If there is error in our ways — if we have overconsumed — then we can only be forgiven by God if first forgiven by those we have slighted. Social justice and the Shabbat are tied together — we are required to put ourselves back into a right relationship with all of nature and with our neighbors.

Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, and the Aboriginal religions all have important wisdom on overconsumption. Indeed, for the Buddha, ego-selfish desiring (always wanting more) is the root cause of the constant frustration and lack of peace that typifies ordinary life. Overconsumption is its chief symptom.

Population Pressure

It is with regard to population pressure and its impact upon the environment that we find the greatest divergences among religions. Most of the religions in their traditional formulations have been solidly pro-natal. However, two religions, Buddhism and the Aboriginal traditions, appear to have taken different approaches. Rita Gross points out in chapter 9 that early Buddhist and Mahayana texts lay out three rules for response to the problems of population pressure (and overconsumption):

1. Buddhism assumes that humans must live within the limits of nature because they are a part of that web of life.
2. Morally there must be an equitable distribution of resources among the earth's peoples.
3. Population control is necessary to ensure (1) and (2) which are non-negotiable.

Buddhism requires moderation in reproduction to ensure that the carrying capacity of the earth is not strained. Therefore, the practice of birth control, but not abortion, is encouraged. Reproduction is not an accident or a duty, but is seen by Buddhism as a mature deliberate choice, which is to maintain the balance and harmony of the interdependent cosmic web of life. In this approach the emphasis on interdependence seriously challenges any notion of individual rights as overriding the greater value of the whole. Individuals, in other words, must not, as an individual right, choose to reproduce without concern for the overall impact on the biosphere.

Although Aboriginal traditions place a high value on the sacredness of life, contraception and abortion have historically been practiced but have become increasingly unacceptable as a result of the impact of European Christianity. As Aboriginal people adopted Christianity, the size of their families grew from

an average of two children (widely spaced) to six (closely spaced). Methods employed included birth control by sexual abstinence during periods of war, hunting, or spiritual quest, and the knowledge of medicine people who specialized in contraceptive medicines and techniques. “The decision to abort or use contraceptives is initially an individual one; however, it was not carried out without the specialist [the medicine person] who acted as both counselor and doctor.”³⁴ Overall guidance in such matters is provided by the aboriginal sense of needing to live in interdependence with nature — to maintain a state of equilibrium between humans and their natural environment. However, as Daisy Sewid-Smith points out in chapter 4, the impact of European society and its contagious diseases such as measles, along with infertility resulting from imported sexually transmitted diseases, radically reduced Aboriginal populations, so that today, like the Jews, the Aboriginals are concerned with maintaining their own decreasing population.

Chinese Religions should perhaps also be seen as divergent from the traditional pro-natal approaches of most religions. As chapter 10 by Jordan and Li Chuang Paper shows, throughout China’s early history the concern was with underpopulation, therefore these sources offer little guidance with respect to overpopulation. However, during the past three centuries, overpopulation and its negative impact upon the environment have become a matter of serious concern. With the possibility of a doubling of the population every generation, China in 1980 adopted a one child per family policy. This policy is widely practiced and appears to have the support of the people, who see overpopulation as a threat to the future of the globe and to family well-being. The success of this policy is especially remarkable as it clashes directly with the fundamental imperative of Chinese Religion, namely the continuation of the patrilineal family. If the one child is not a son to conduct the family rituals then, according to traditional religion, the parents, grandparents, etc. will cease to exist upon the last son’s death, and the family will come to an end. And in Chinese culture, familicide is the greatest moral crime.³⁵ However, changes are occurring which suggest that a gender neutral family is developing, in which a daughter *or* a son could perform the rituals required for the continuation of the family and the support of those in the afterlife.

Sharon Levy, in chapter 5, observes that from the Jewish perspective contraceptive methods are permissible if the carrying capacity of the earth has been reached. Following the directive of Isaiah that the world not become a “wasteland,” population restriction practices may be necessary — although for a world Jewish population of thirteen million which is not currently replacing itself, and which was reduced from close to seventeen million by the Holocaust of World War II, the concern is in the opposite direction.

CONVERGENCES

While the points of difference noted above are significant, the Whistler Summer Institute also identified important points of convergence.

Nature

All the religions reviewed see nature as having varying degrees of intrinsic value, and all religions offer correctives to the exploitation and destruction of the environment that threaten the globe today. Each of the Western religions emphasizes that humans are to use their intelligence and the technology they create in being stewards of nature, according to God's plan rather than their own selfish interests. While Eastern and Aboriginal religions may not always conceive of God as separate from nature, their stress on the interdependence of all of nature, of which humans are simply one part, has a similar result — humans are morally responsible to live in harmony with nature, and this rules out selfish exploitation. The spiritual disciplines of meditation upon nature in the Eastern religions (e.g., Zen) are designed to keep this awareness front and center in human consciousness, so that it will guide all thought and behavior. These Eastern practices are resensitizing modern Westerners to a recovery of similar aspects of their own traditions. Thus, a common basis of respect for nature and humans, as being in a relationship of interdependence, is occurring. This is especially true when the Western religions are re-visioned through feminist eyes — e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, and Katherine Keller in Christianity.

Consumption and Population Pressure

The ethic of interdependence, now endorsed by all religions, requires a radical change in consumption patterns — especially from the well-off people in the developed and developing countries. This change, which would give up excessive consumption, is required for two reasons: (1) due to our respect for nature, of which we are an interdependent part; and (2) due to our commitment to social justice, which the ethic of interdependence entails. It is of interest to note that the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago just one week after the Whistler Seminar, also grounded its statement of "A Global Ethic" on the premise of "interdependence." Like the Whistler Seminar, the Parliament of World Religions found that a global ethic of interdependence requires respect for the Earth and its community of living beings (including people, plants, animals, air, water, and soil), and respect for others in the world-wide human family.³⁶ Effectively this ethic demands a "transformation of con-

sciousness” that would give up excessive consumption with its attitudes of domination and exploitation. Instead, preservation of nature and concern for others (present and future generations) must be the new consciousness that directs our thinking and behavior. Such a transformed consciousness, both gatherings agreed, would produce a just economic order, for women and children particularly. For this to happen requires that in the developed countries especially, “a distinction be made between necessary and limitless consumption, between socially beneficial and non-beneficial uses of property, between justified and unjustified uses of natural resources, and between a profit-only and a socially beneficial and ecologically oriented market economy.”³⁷ Such a transformation begins with the individual, for it is through changes in individual thinking and behavior that changes in government policy and business practice arise. And it is the stated goal of religions to bring about just such transformation of consciousness within individuals. Although techniques differ, the various religions all show a commitment to this common goal of limiting human consumption by transforming thought and behavior.

In Judaism, as chapter 5 makes clear, we are enjoined not to waste — the principle of *ba'al taschit*. This principle applies to resources of nature, such as energy, as well as to human-made things. The rich are those content with what they have. But every person has a right to shelter, food, water, and education (for both men and women). The world should not rely on reducing birth rates, but rather focus on reducing the overconsumption of the few and enabling all to live in dignity.

Judaism also employs the approach of requiring obedience to God’s commands to offer the first fruits of harvest in thanksgiving, to let the land lie fallow every seventh year (Exodus 23:10–12), and to return everything to God for a fresh start every fiftieth year (Leviticus 25). These practices serve to remind humans that the land and its produce are not for their selfish use but are owned by God and given to humans as a trust to benefit all. Leviticus suggests a fifty-year cycle where all hierarchy is abolished and everything renews itself on the basis of harmony between God, humans, and all of nature. With regard to population pressure, many Jewish thinkers call upon the mystical thought of the Kabbalists, which suggests that humans must learn to limit themselves — their rate of reproduction, their use of natural resources, and their production of fouling wastes. The example to emulate is the Kabbalist vision of how God created the world. If God is omnipresent then, reasoned the Kabbalists, the only way God could create would be by an act of *tsimtsum* — of voluntary withdrawal or limitation to make room for creation. Similarly, we as humans must withdraw or limit both our reproduction and our wants, so as to make room for coexistence with our environment in this and future generations. As Schorsch put it:

The miracle of co-habitation with other living species, the beauty of collective I–Thou relationship with beings wholly different from ourselves, requires our self-limitation. If we were everywhere, our presence would herald the end of the teeming diversity of nature. Our fragile and unique habitat needs a reprieve from human assault.³⁸

Nature's fragility and susceptibility to human greed is also emphasized by Islam. Nature's balance can easily be upset by human wickedness. Natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes are interpreted by some Muslims as warnings from God that people are embarked upon a fundamentally wrong course of action, and the disasters that the greenhouse effect threatens might be similarly understood. When seen as a kind of "wake-up call" from God, the greenhouse effect resulting from excessive consumption by humans poses a serious dilemma to Muslims around the world, but particularly to those Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, whose economy has come to depend upon the heavy use of oil. For such countries, and for the world at large, Islam's view of humanity as the "custodian of nature" (*Khalifa*) poses critical questions. Nawal Ammar, in chapter 7, describes how humans, as custodians of nature, are free to satisfy their needs only with an eye to the welfare of all creation. The harmony and beauty God gave nature must be respected by humans in their stewardship of nature, resulting in the following rules:

1. The use of nature resources must be balanced and not excessive.
2. Humans must treat nature and its resources with kindness.
3. Humans must not damage or abuse nature in any way.

4. Humans must share natural resources, for no one owns nature. All persons are benefactors and stewards. Therefore, population pressure will dictate limits to consumption so that there can be equal access to resources by all.

5. Conservation is enjoined by the *Qur'an*. Therefore, in Islamic law there are rules for the conservation of forests, water, and animals.

While the above rules served previous ages well, they are just now being enlarged by Muslims to address the modern issues of pollution, chemical warfare, and technological hazards, which are for the *Qur'an* clearly abuses of God's creation. While fertility control is generally forbidden by the *Qur'an*, and the production of children is encouraged, some Muslims now suggest that fertility control may be acceptable if seen as part of self-discipline on the part of humans to avoid upsetting the balance of nature.

Although there is great diversity within Christianity today (from conservatives to the radically progressive), many Christian thinkers are holding Christianity responsible for fostering much of the world's excessive consumption and overpopulation. Within Christianity, there are strong forces at work transforming Christianity's mainstream into a self-critical force for justice, peace, and the maintenance of the integrity of nature. As Catherine Keller puts it in chapter 6, planetary ecology cannot be separated from social justice, especially as seen through feminist theology. However, even in this perspective the traditional Christian opposition to fertility control has not yet been critically examined in relation to the looming crisis of overpopulation. Christian thinkers are recognizing, however, that it is overconsumption by the developed Christian countries of the North that is both polluting the environment and depriving the developing countries of the South of the resources they need. Keller suggests it is not the babies of the underdeveloped Asians, Africans, or Latin Americans who threaten the ecology, but rather the babies of well-off first-world parents. The first-world child will, due to excessive consumption, have thirty times the environmental impact of a third-world child. Therefore, it is the child who has most, the first-world child, that the world can least afford. This leads Keller to the radical conclusion that well-off Christians should choose to reduce their own populations and resource consumption, so as to make room for the migrating poor. Such an ascetic choice is not seen by Keller as a denial of pleasure, but as a responsible practice of fertility control in relation to others and to nature. It also challenges the traditional patriarchal family patterns basic to many Christian cultures, just as it has for the contemporary Chinese.

All of this is grounded in the teachings of the Hebrew prophets, who politicized the relationship of humans with nature, maintaining that "nature and man are bound together in a fateful history where the responsibility of man for his life and his world meets the demands of a new order in which basic justice is required."³⁹ In line with the prophets, the New Testament teaches that one must love one's neighbor in need (e.g., act as did the Good Samaritan). Christians today are realizing that their neighbor's welfare is strongly affected by the way they treat the environment and by the number of children they produce. The prophets addressed the issue of resource consumption from the vantage point of the poor. The lesson for Christians today, says Keller, is do not multiply the *quantity* of life, but enhance the *quality* of life through the sharing of nature's abundance. The result is an ethic of interdependence with the rest of creation, which may also mean an ethic of "non-creation" for Christians in developed nations — for the good of the whole. Although the prophets were quick to criticize human greed and sinfulness in its many forms, they also held out a hope for the future, a harmony that would include all of humankind and all nature. In the New Testament the idea of "the Kingdom of God" is seen as referring both to another

world and to this world in its hoped-for state of harmony among persons and between humans and nature. For the early New Testament Christians, the notion of an immanent end-time (the second coming of Christ) led them to counsel “few possessions and no children.” Christians today are hearing a similar counsel, not because the end (Apocalypse) is coming but in order to avoid another kind of end — an environmental catastrophe.

Like Christianity, Hinduism has traditionally opposed fertility control. The purpose of marriage is the production of children, and a childless marriage is grounds for divorce. A large number of children, especially sons, has been seen as both a social and an economic asset. Abortion or other means of fertility control have been condemned except when the mother’s health is in danger.⁴⁰ In chapter 8, Klaus Klostermaier suggests that there have been times in India’s history when the population pressure exceeded the earth’s carrying capacity. At such times, many young people have chosen, or been urged by society, to enter *sanyassi* or celibate monastic life, perhaps to help ease the population pressure on the environment. Although Hindu leaders today would not advocate fertility control, most educated Hindus likely practice it. Indeed, with the social and economic emphasis on sons, there is evidence that the technologies which offer possibilities of sex selection and abortion to ensure the birth of sons are being used by some parents.

Traditional Hindu lifestyles, says Klostermaier, have used resources carefully and tried to conserve for the future. Possessions were kept to a minimum and fasting was popular. All of this was based on respect for nature as the body of God. For a Hindu, to overexploit nature through excessive consumption was to do damage to oneself, because oneself and nature were simply different aspects of the same whole — God. With the British came the modern Western idea of the exploitation of nature for profit, and the technological means to do so in abusive ways. With them also came modern medicine, which cut deaths dramatically, allowing the population to escalate, resulting in a vicious circle. According to Klostermaier, Hinduism has largely shut its eyes to these problems, with the exception of some women’s movements and the aboriginal communities. Hindu-owned industry in India has not proven to be more environmentally responsible than were the British. And well-off Hindus have shown themselves just as open to engaging in unnecessary and conspicuous consumption as those in the modern West. One contemporary Hindu reformer, Mahatma Gandhi, attempted to bridge between India’s traditional ideals of restraint and conservation. Gandhi attempted to guide India between the extremes of no growth at all and growth for material values only. In his view, Hindu ethics do not reject technology or material possessions, but see them as having a restrained but proper place in the cosmic order of God’s body. His Hindu Vaiṣṇava background — with strong Jaina influence — led him to advocate social models