

## **The Modern Ecological Crisis: Nature as Theater and Fuel for the Mimetic Frenzy**

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### **As Goes Humanity So Goes Nature**

The fate of the Earth hinges on the ability of humankind to correctly identify the roots of the ecological crisis and to successfully address the attitudes that underlie this crisis. Several currents underlie the ecological dilemma, all derived from human culture: Massive denuding of forested lands, enormous erosion and despoliation of topsoil, dramatic dwindling of ground water reservoirs, emissions poisoning that induces acid rain and ozone holes, and extensive species extinction through habitat destruction, poaching, and human-introduced invasive species. The Earth's climate is rapidly changing, precipitated by a fossil-fueled increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> that threatens the near future with unprecedented societal upheaval as predicted rising ocean levels displace millions, traditional agriculture fails, and basic necessities such as fresh water become scarce. Imminent threats also cast their ominous shadows. Even within the next hour, the Earth could be blasted back to the pre-Cambrian with a nuclear weapon fusillade.<sup>1</sup>

The Girardian mimesis hypothesis holds up as a potent explanatory model to explain human interactions with creation from the dawn of history to the present. The competition, violence, and cooperation that are part and parcel of any social order take place as theater on the stage of nature. Conflagrations of interindividual mimetic jousting burn through the resource fuels of nature.<sup>2</sup> While it is axiomatic that humans need to use Earth's resources to biologically survive, humans learn their survival skills mimetically,

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<sup>1</sup> "An Open Appeal to the Religious Community" *Directory of Environmental Activities and Resources in the North American Religious Community* (Kutztown, Pa.: Kutztown Publishing, 1992). pp. 158,159. This appeal to the religious communities was signed by 32 internationally eminent scientists. I add that the juried scientific evidence for an Earth-threatening ecological collapse is preponderant against the protests of those who say the threat is exaggerated.

<sup>2</sup> Interindividual is a term coined by Rene Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* to describe the psychological personality of an individual as comprised of the influences of others.

and in this mimetic interplay nature becomes a pawn. Since human personality and culture are founded and thoroughly conditioned through mimetism, the key to solving the ecological dilemma is this: What are the pathologies in human interindividual mimetism that drag the Earth down? Or to state this positively, how can interindividual mimetism be reoriented so that as people are restored to one another the planet is correspondingly restored? As Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, “The whole creation eagerly awaits the unveiling [*apokalupsis*] of the children of God” (Romans 8:19).

Meeting the ecological challenge depends on whether a critical mass of humanity attains a worldview, or God view, that is conducive to sustainable life on this planet. The late Philip Sherrard states,

How we see the world depends above all upon how we see ourselves. Our model of the universe—our world picture or world image—is based upon the model we have of ourselves, upon our own self-image. When we look at the world, what we see is a reflection of our own mind, of our own mode of consciousness...this means that before we can effectively deal with the ecological problem we have to change our world image, and this in its turn means that we have to change our self-image.<sup>3</sup>

According to the mimetic model, a person’s self-image is the calculus of the sum total of human interaction. Psychological personalities are formed in interaction with other people and their combined cultural weight.<sup>4</sup> Like plunging into a powerful gravitational field, the pull of today’s unsustainable consumer culture is strong and gathering.

Humanity has commandeered Earth’s Ship, is savoring the delicious song of the Sirens, and is sailing toward shipwreck and death. Is there a more powerful countervailing pull, a sweeter song?

Thirty-two internationally eminent scientists issued an appeal in January 1990 to the religious community urging them to address the ecological crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Sherrard. *Human Image: World Image* (Ipswich, UK: Gogonooza, 1992). p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Michel Oughourslian. *The Puppet of Desire* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press). “It is mimesis, and that alone, that makes one human, that constitutes the self, and that makes possible one’s entry into the sphere of language. This means that from the very start psychological actuality is to be found between individuals.” p. 15. “It can be seen that every social holon (individual, family, clan, tribe, nation,) is at once a coherent whole in relation to its constituent parts and part of a larger social entity.” p. 17.

Problems of such magnitude, and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension... efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. At the same time, a much wider and deeper understanding of science and technology is needed. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will be able to fix it. Thus, there is a vital role for both religion and science.<sup>5</sup>

### **Nature and Human History**

“The common harlot” as Francis Bacon termed nature<sup>6</sup> has itself been an obstacle and rival, as ancient myths amply illustrate. Furthermore, human competition to wrest a living has set creation as a stage for societal conflict and cooperation. Paleolithic hunting bands required group teamwork to bring down dangerous food prey such as bison and mammoth, a successful kill of which would bring about social camaraderie and integrate nature into primitive religion. The agrarian societies of the Neolithic era had less contact with the galvanizing danger and bloodletting of hunting, and therefore turned more into one another in mimetic conflict and resolution. Urbanization continued putting in more layers to separate humankind from nature “red in tooth and claw.” Thus civilized societies tilted toward human victimization to assuage mimetic conflict. Christianity inaugurated an era of empathy for the victim and the consequent demythologization of sacrificial religion. Correspondingly, creation became demystified and eventually separated from its soul during the Enlightenment. Nature without the aura of religious awe and taboo became a soulless commodity to fuel the increasingly ravenous mimetic passions of societies bereft of efficacious scapegoating resolutions. This assault on nature has rebounded with empathy toward nature as victim. This dualism of nature as commodity and nature as sacred creation underpins the ecological crisis and the Acceleration of Overconsumption

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<sup>5</sup> “An Open Appeal to the Religious Community,” p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Francis Bacon. “De Augmentis” *Works*, vol. 4, 325. Quoted in Jeremy Rifkin. *Biosphere Politics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991). p. 29. Rifkin says that Bacon introduced “the idea of perpetual warfare against nature. The goal of the new science was to ‘establish and extend the power of dominion of the human race itself over the universe.’”

Whether in its communist or capitalist permutations, materialism has arisen as the dominant societal engine, with wealth the measure of human worth. “Keeping up with the Joneses” is the raging contagion fire that has ignited the globe, a fire that is rapidly consuming and polluting the Earth’s resources.

The correlation of material wealth with comfort, security, political and sexual power, and prestige is rooted deep in human history. Paleolithic societies were hunters, scavengers, and gatherers. Although large-sized game was abundant in many parts of the world, the technology to kill such beasts was rudimentary. Hunters in their small bands required close cooperation with one another to bring down dangerous beasts for their food and fiber. Furthermore, the presence of deadly predators such as the big cats, bears, and hyenas necessitated courage and skill to defend their groups. As with any human group, some hunters would have more athleticism and skills than others of a band. Being that such men would have more ability to consistently provide food and security would presumably give them advantage in competing for the sexual favors of women, clout in tribal decision-making, and confidence in interpersonal showdowns. Other less competent members of the band, especially youth, would acquisitively desire after the prowess of the better hunters and defenders. The imputation of prestige would be the logical next step as the acquisitive mimetic desire would overshoot the object (skill in hunting and defending) to the models themselves.<sup>7</sup> According to the Girardian mimetic model, conflict would be inevitable. Without a transference mechanism to dissipate antagonisms, a band would lose its effectiveness to coordinate its vital social functions. The very existence of that band would be internally threatened.<sup>8</sup> One important factor however would seem to militate against violent meltdowns. The bloodletting from hunting challenging and dangerous game along with the constant threat from predators and competing bands would provide sufficient outward transference of intra-band

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<sup>7</sup> Rene Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundations of the World* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1987). p. 90. Here Girard defines prestige “to the fact that the object cannot suffice to explain the intensity of the conflict. One can remove the object and the rivalry will continue.”

<sup>8</sup> Evidence for hominid sacrificial rites may date 500,000 years. Whether the victims were weak, young, disabled, captives from other bands, or simply food for hungry times, is largely open conjecture. It seems unlikely that a small band could survive with but one surviving alpha male. The evolution of increased cranial capacity increased mimetic rivalry and the need for cultural mechanisms to transfer rivalistic violence without destroying the band (see *Things Hidden*, p. 84).

conflictual mimesis. Since humans were day-to-day both prey and predator, people could project their very real human rivalries and resentment onto animals. Killing an animal, especially a dangerous one or a fascinating one, would produce a catharsis that would unify the band.

The ecological impact of hunting bands from the Upper Paleolithic even to recent times should not be underestimated. Many scholars hypothesize that human inhabitants precipitated rapid megafauna extinctions in the Northern Hemisphere, Africa, Australia and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> The more advanced technology of the atlatl, bow and arrow, and razor sharp stone tips of the Mesolithic increased the distance needed to kill game. This reduced the danger of the hunt, lessened the need for communal hunting, and increased kill efficiency. Human overkill of large game populations for prestige and cathartic release is a reasonable hypothesis. At the advent of the great North American exterminations, the aboriginal population was less than one million while large mammals numbered up to 100 million, far more meat than needed to satisfy hunger.<sup>10</sup> The decline of megafauna keystone species such as Mammoths and Mastodons due to hunting would have had a negative ripple effect on other species leading to their concurrent demise.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gifford Miller, “Early Human Activity In Australia May Have Led to Animal Extinctions” (Boulder, Co. University of Colorado Press Release, Jan. 7, 1999). Professor Miller, a geochronologist, shows evidence that as the earliest Australian human inhabitants 50,000 years ago used fire to clear land and secure food, many large species were exterminated, including 19 species of marsupials over 220 pounds such as a hippopotamus-sized relative of the wombat, a 25-foot-long, three-foot-in diameter snake, a 25-foot-long lizard, a Volkswagen-sized giant horned tortoise, and a flightless 200 pound bird. A competing theory by Tim Flannery suggests that direct hunting extirpated the animals first, and that the resulting change in vegetation without the grazing animals led the humans to burn acreage. Tim F. Flannery. *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australian Lands and People*. (New York: Grove Press, 2002). Some scholars (ie. Gould) postulate that the relatively mild megafauna extinction in Africa may be due to the long period of coexistent evolution of humans with animals and the consequent adaption by animals to human hunting.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich. *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Metropolitan, 1997), p. 119. The thesis of Ehrenreich’s book is that culture evolved as a reaction to the predation of wild beasts on humans. The impact of predacious animals upon humans should not be underestimated as evidenced by abundant mythology. However culture also formed through violent human sacrificial modalities even in geographies without predacious land carnivores such as in New Guinea and (likely) Australia.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Haynes. “The Catastrophic Extinction of North American Mammoths and Mastodonts” (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Anthropology Department). Professor Haynes argues for the efficiency of the widespread fluted Clovis point to bring down 5-ton Proboscideans. These keystone species would browse scrub that would improve grass; enlarge water holes; provide improved trails; and improve soil

The advent of agriculture during the Neolithic opened the way to expand and stabilize food production, establish settled communities, and develop extensive societal specializations. Populations burgeoned, civilizations birthed. Permanent dwellings were conducive to the larger scale acquisition of material goods. An economy of scale and a division of labor enabled societies to change the geography of landscapes through tillage, timber harvesting, and trenching. In the 1930's U.S. Assistant Secretary of Agriculture W.C. Lowdermilk concluded that 13 of 15 great civilizations had their collapse precipitated by land misuse, including Babylon, Egypt, Syria, Greece, and Rome. Typically deforestation, overgrazing, and improper cultivation precipitated soil erosion with consequent decline in food production capability.<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that over half of original arable acreage has been lost since historic times.<sup>13</sup> As land abuse led to declines in agricultural productivity, land ethics began to appear. The Torah states, "For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a Sabbath of rest, a Sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards" (Leviticus 25:1-4).

The acquisition of enormous wealth in early civilizations began to concentrate on the ruling class, evidenced by a vast consensus of archeological data as typified by the Egyptian pyramids and Solomon's Temple and other arrays throughout civilizations in South America, China, India, Mesopotamia, and Northern Africa, and only to lesser copiousness in almost all settled tribes everywhere. The symbiotic association and melding together of the religious class and the ruling class both fueled and received the largesse of the economies. Nomadic peoples, unable to garner large-scale wealth directly from the land, resorted to raiding and looting settlements. Expanding trade bolstered the development of specialized trades such as artisans, merchants, sailors, and bureaucrats, and furthered the differentiation of societies into classes. The ruling class developed militaries to secure their positions and whenever possible advance their realms.

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fertility through their copious dung. The demise of large herbivores would precipitate a correspondent demise of large carnivores and scavengers.

<sup>12</sup> C. Dean Freudenberger. *Food For Tomorrow?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). pp. 25, 26.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*; p. 21.

Conspicuous consumption burgeoned as a mark of prestige among the upper classes, who competed among themselves with lavish displays even to the point of bankruptcy. Rarity of items, whether precious gems, gold, fine cloth, feathers, or exotic foods, gave prestige. A rare item is difficult to match and thus differentiates the possessor of an item from his or her competitor.

The Hebrew prophet Ezekiel lists extensive luxury goods and other merchandise garnered from throughout the known world traded through the Mediterranean port of Tyre, noting that these goods “satisfy so many peoples” yet “enrich the kings of the earth with an excess of wealth and goods” (Ezekiel 27:33). The prophet rails that the extraordinary wealth and economic success of the ruler of Tyre has deluded him into the pride of self-deification (Ez. 28:1) with consequent degeneration into violence and dishonesty (Ez. 28:16-18). A parallel denunciation in the Apocalypse of John (Revelation 18, 19) celebrates the fall of Babylon with a Hallelujah chorus in heaven.

There will be weeping and distress over her [Babylon] among all the traders of the earth when no one is left to buy their cargoes of goods; their stocks of gold and silver, jewels and pearls, linen and purple and silks and scarlet; all the sandalwood, every piece in ivory or fine wood, in bronze or iron or marble; the cinnamon and spices, the myrrh and ointment and incense; wine, oil, flour and corn; their stocks of cattle, sheep, horse and chariots, their slaves and their human cargo. All the fruits you had set your hearts on have failed you; gone forever, never to return again, is your life of magnificence and ease (Rev. 18:11-14).

Disparities of wealth that have characterized most past civilizations have correlated with highly evolved class structures. People remained within the economic and political orbit of their birth class. A privileged few had wealth and power. The vast majority had meager subsistence, grueling work, short lives, and no political power. Technologies were simple, at best utilizing wheels and levers harnessed to wind, animal, and human energy. The footprint on the earth’s ecology in any given year was soft, although through several millennia many accumulated footprints had pounded hard paths upon the blooded earth.

The modern age was ushered in by the shifted winds of the Enlightenment as humankind began to break through the hard crusts of prevailing religious, political, and economic

hegemonies. The scientific revolution spawned undreamed technologies that exponentially increased the potential to alter the earth. Political revolutions demythologized the fatalism of closed social classes, releasing the masses to mimetically aspire to a security, affluence, and political power previously denied them by birth.

Today, with vast populations desiring the milk of the earth's bounty and equipped with the technology to strip its stores, can our planet meet human demand? Perhaps more telling, can the Earth hold up to demands compounded by an insatiable mimetic frenzy of consumerism? People have basic biological and correlative psychological necessities such as food, shelter, security, nurture, procreation, comradeship, comfort, and pleasure. Ideally all humans would cooperate together to see that everyone has creature needs met. Not so, as the seeking of these "objects" invariably spawns mimetic rivalries where parties seek to outdo one another.<sup>14</sup> The Christian impulse toward egalitarianism has liberated people from dominant and subservient roles to be brothers and sisters of one another (Acts 2:42-47). For many, however, that liberation is simply the shedding of shackles of religious and cultural restraint for new irons of insatiable thirst to admire and be admired.

Traditional roles of men and women are in upheaval. Men no longer need physical prowess to defend and provide for their social groupings. Women no longer need to bear numerous children to be useful for a social order. Prestige, that capacity to procure and establish the admiration and respect of others, is tied to many mimetic factors including physical attractiveness, sparkling personality, glowing health, and a reputable name. But money, and what money can buy, is today's trump card. Ostentatious consumption has always been a powerful mimetic stimulant, historically available only to an elite. In today's modern world with class breakdown coupled with the extraordinary leverage of technology, the masses aspire as contestants for the deadly serious game of conspicuous consumption, a grim race in which there is no finish line.

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<sup>14</sup> "Double" is the term Rene Girard uses to indicate the rivalry between two persons mimetically possessed by each other, simultaneously both secretly desiring after the other and resenting the other. Doubles are most likely to occur when people are in close proximity to one another by class, nearness, position, skill, or other undifferentiated matter.

In the past, Earth with its seemingly endless borders could buffer a few thousand riches-craving despots with their limited technologies to extract the planet's resources. Today millions of people realistically aspire to conspicuous wealth.<sup>15</sup> The Earth will cannot fuel the accelerating mimetic competition.

### **Earth as Victim**

The modern drive to upgrade the standard of human conditions casts a heavy weight on the Earth's shoulders.<sup>16</sup> Modern nations by far use the most resources. Their affluence, comfort, security and power is coveted by the poorer "developing" nations who aspire to approximate the standards of the USA, Western Europe, Japan, and other pockets throughout the rest of the world.<sup>17</sup> Corporations court willing masses in the developing world as potential customers. Mass media, especially television, brings images of high-level consumption to the eyes of billions, sparking fascination, admiration, and desire in their hearts. The contagion of a more affluent society is driven by both avarice and empathy.

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<sup>15</sup> Over seven million people are millionaires in the USA. *Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine* (Jan. 2001) But even relatively low-income people can impact ecology by their consumption drives coupled with high technology, as evidenced by the near extinction of Tigers and Rhinoceros for their alleged aphrodisiacal properties.

<sup>16</sup> Carl T. Hall, "Humanity is Taking More than Earth Can Give: Researchers Calculate the Planet is Ecologically Overburdened by 20 Percent" *San Francisco Chronicle* June 25, 2002. A-3. Under the direction of Harvard Biologist E.O. Wilson, and appearing in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, utilizing 1999 data, the report concludes that "it would require 1.2 Earths, or one Earth for 1.2 years, to regenerate what humanity used in 1999." Worldwide, the average amount of productive land needed to satisfy the needs and wants of each man, woman and child is about 2.3 "global hectares" -- the standardized measure of productive acreage used by the study authors. By comparison, the productive capacity of the Earth is estimated at 1.9 hectares per capita. The imbalance is much more pronounced in the richest countries: The United States, for instance, consumed about 9.7 global hectares per person for 1999, while the United Kingdom commanded 5.4, and Germany took 4.7. "We are overspending," Mathis Wackernagel [one of the authors] said, calling the trend a prescription for "ecological bankruptcy" that is starting to show up already in collapsing commercial fisheries, loss of productive cropland and demise of natural forests.

<sup>17</sup> The Energy Information Agency (EIA), a U.S. government agency within the Department of Energy, estimates a 60 percent average rise in overall world energy consumption from 1997 to 2020, yet forecasts that consumption in developing nations will grow by 121 percent. *Energy Outlook 2000* (EIA, March 2000).

The population explosion that hard presses the Earth's carrying capacity is due to the advances and availability of improved nutrition and health care that humanitarian empathy is advancing on a global scale.<sup>18</sup> He or she who loves humanity would not condemn someone to a shack and a bowl of thin gruel. Thus the thrust for an improved standard of living involves increased consumption on many fronts. An improved diet includes more protein, which can translate into depletion of fish stocks, draw down of aquifers, and desertification of marginal grazing areas. Improved housing translates into increased consumption of construction products, water, electricity, heating and cooking fuels, and land sprawl. The modern standard of transportation is oil dependent, the combustion of which deteriorates air quality.

The anthropocentric view of nature, that human needs and desires have priority over those of nature, is the dominant worldview of most rich and poor alike. Yet as ecosystems falter and collapse, a reactionary biocentric worldview is growing in which all creatures and their habitats have equal rights to those of humans. Some biocentrists see unenlightened humankind as the enemy, a blight victimizing the Earth. As with all triumphalist moralities, some biocentrists become mimetically captivated by their enemies. Girard says, "The principle is hatred of the triumphant wicked. Good is loved in order that Evil is hated more. The oppressed are defended for the sake of overwhelming the oppressors."<sup>19</sup> Anti-human biocentrists cannot resolve the ecological crisis, being themselves mimetically chained to the same fetters as their anthropocentric opponent doubles.

Animal rights activists such as PETA are growing rapidly in members and influence, for example, depressing the fur industry. Many vegetarians claim as their motivation ethical concerns such as a distain to kill animals or to bear the heavy ecological burden of meat production. Save the Whales, Green Peace, and a host of other organizations proliferate,

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<sup>18</sup> It is misplaced to blame a high birthrate for the population explosion. In reality, the death rate is plummeting as infant mortality drops, the elderly live longer, and horrendous plagues are stopped. In many of the more affluent countries the birth rate is below replacement.

<sup>19</sup> Rene Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 189.

their mantra that the Earth is being destroyed by human avarice, ignorance, and the normal consumption needs of a burgeoning population.

Many people in Western cultures claim to be environmentalists. These people truly delight in the wonder of creation with its myriad forms of life, the mystery of its secrets, the breath of its winds. For these people, the sully of the air, water, and soil, the despoliation of habitats and its creatures, the alteration of climate, the blighting of creation's beauty and the cavalier disdain for its wonder, bring mourning and righteous rage.<sup>20</sup> But these lovers of nature, most of them, us too, are caught in the double bind of active complicity within a mimetically fueled overconsumptive society.

Theologian Vince Rossi suggests "addiction" is a word with more potency than the word "sin" to evoke a response.

That is to say, "I am addicted ecologically to the things that are destroying the earth, and I can't seem to do much about it!" Addiction means you have a destructive habit; you have something that has afflicted you body, soul and spirit, and despite the fact that you might want to change, you are unable to do so without help. Why am I an addict? Because paraphrasing St. Paul, "The things that I do not want to do environmentally, those things I do. And the things that I want to do environmentally, those things I never do." That is what being an ecological addict means."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Resanctification of Nature and the Hunger for the Holy**

Modern societies stripped of formerly efficacious sacrificial catharses struggle to resolve mimetic tensions. Numerous persons seek nature as a ground to reconstitute the sacred. Sport hunting offers the awe of a kill, camaraderie, and the opportunity to apprentice to a model as a rite of passage. However, decreasing popularity of hunting along with the rise

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<sup>20</sup> The twenty-four elders prostrate before the presence of God in the Apocalypse of John pronounce a judgment for environmental destruction. "The time has come to destroy those who are destroying the Earth" (Revelation 11:18).

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Rossi. "Addiction, Apocalypse, Asceticism: Choices for Christian Ecology." *Firmament* (Summer, 1990). p. 3. Rossi goes on to show the analogy between consumption addiction and drug addiction, such as denial of the addiction, the inability to live without ecologically-destructive consumption (i.e. automobiles), the willingness to kill for the addiction (oil wars), and the overwhelming difficulty to "kick the habit."

of animal rights groups and nature as victim are cultural signs that sport hunting cannot muster the cathartic potency found in primeval subsistence hunting societies.

Other sportsmen pit nature in competition as a rival in action sports such as mountaineering, kayaking, and hang gliding. When men (less often women) test themselves against a challenge in nature, they are contesting themselves in a mimetic challenge to their human models. The challenge is desired because the model desires it. Meeting the challenge is satisfying because it elicits adulation.

The solitude of wilderness offers respite from the mimetic frenzy of the modern world. A stroll in the city park, a Sunday afternoon drive in the country, a sailboat on a windy bay, or a campfire deep in the North woods, bring a sense of healing and refreshment from the pressures of life, pressures in large part induced by the constant fury of interindividual mimetism back home.

Some moderns seek to reconstitute nature into a religion with ritual and taboo. However, the demystification and desanctification of nature due to the scientific revolution is too powerful for nature worship to achieve true religious efficacy.

The discomfort with a society where all is objectified and commodified, and the uneasiness of seeing oneself in this light, has resulted in a new hunger for the holy. Is the holy to be found in nature, or theologically speaking, in creation as a work of God? How we see ourselves is how we see the natural world.<sup>22</sup> For Christians, by understanding themselves as having an imputed holiness because of the Incarnation, they can relate with creation in complementary nurture, reconciliation, and restoration.

Opening the Book of Nature is an example of a program approach that seeks to recover the ancient Christian understanding that God's revelation is in Christ through the witness

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<sup>22</sup> To reiterate in Girardian terms, how we see ourselves is a calculus of our mimetic interchange with other humans, and with God.

of Scripture and complementarily through lessons in creation.<sup>23</sup> Through a process of prayerful openness to experience creation as a revelation of God, one awakens to awareness, healing, and reconciliation with God, nature, and human society. In my personal experience conducting weekend outdoor retreats in several states with people from an array of theological and religious perspectives, I have found Book of Nature retreats to be consistently potent in strengthening Christian spirituality to encompass greater love for God, humanity, and creation. These retreats use one or more facilitators to set an atmosphere conducive to prayerful receptivity to be taught lessons from creation. With eyes focused on seeking lessons from the works of God's creation, inter-human mimetism is reduced below a threshold of acquisitiveness and conflict.

A modern day resurgence in Celtic Christianity is in part a reaction against the Platonic dualism permeating Augustinian Christianity that has relegated the material realm to inferiority and carnality. Celtic Christian belief and practice emphasize the interconnectedness and goodness of all creation. Most other denominations and religious bodies have in recent years put forth position statements that value the goodness of God's creation and decry its despoliation.<sup>24</sup>

The hope for the restoration of creation, which at a deeper level is the hope of the restoration of humanity, lies in a critical mass of humanity embracing a theocentric worldview and practice. In contrast to an anthropocentric worldview with humanity at the center of significance, in contrast to the reactionary biocentric worldview with humanity devalued as a parasite, a theocentric worldview is centered upon God. In loving God with all heart, soul, mind, one is freed from the chains of interpersonal and rivalistic mimetism to truly love the neighbor as oneself.<sup>25</sup> Neighbors are those who intersect our lives. Neighbors are those we inevitably are mimetically drawn to desire

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<sup>23</sup> *Opening the Book of Nature*, 409 Mendocino Avenue, Santa Rosa, California 95401.  
www.creationethics.org

<sup>24</sup> Christian leaders speaking out for creation care include Pope John Paul II ("The ecological crisis is really a moral crisis"), Patriarch Bartholomew I, ("To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin"), and Billy Graham ("We Christians have a responsibility to take the lead in caring for the earth").

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 22: 34-40.

and rival.<sup>26</sup> Neighbors are those we cannot love aright without first loving God, having our eye singly upon God, keeping our first love and worship to God.

Yet God is in heaven whilst we mere mortals toil here on earth. A few haloed saints tread on water, but the rest of us continue our piranha feeding upon the planet. How can humanity “brass tacks” move away from the competitive materialism that is strangling and sucking dry our earth mother? And how does humanity remain humane in the face of the reality that saving more lives through improved medicine, sanitation, and nutrition means more bodies pressing into the world’s very finite storehouse?

In his first letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul writes, “Be imitators [*mimētēs*] of me, even as I also [imitate] Christ.”<sup>27</sup> In words leading up to this exhortation, Paul has given the church an important point to reduce interdividual mimetic conflict. Answering the controversy on whether as a guest to partake meat that had been butchered under pagan sacrificial rites, Paul recognizes that in some cases to refuse would offend his host while in other cases to partake would scandalize a fellow follower of Christ. Paul’s response is to “give no offense [*aproskopos*], neither to the Jews, nor to the Greek, nor to the church of God. I try to accommodate everybody in everything, not looking for my own advantage, but for the advantage of everybody else, so that they may be saved.”<sup>28</sup> Paul as an effective church planter undoubtedly had personal charismatic attributes that drew people to pay attention to his preaching. In Girardian terms, Paul was a mediator or model for the newly emerging church at Corinth. Paul had influence. Rather than using this power over people to aggrandize his importance, which likely would have caused division, he sought to avoid offence and competition.<sup>29</sup>

The world needs charismatic, magnetic models whose own lives of responsibility to the earth and to its humanity inspire others to emulation. Today it is materialistic self-

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<sup>26</sup> Rene Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, p. 9. Internal mediation is when two persons lives significantly intersect with each other, creating the grist for rivalry and competition. In today’s societies this competition is often a race of consumer largesse.

<sup>27</sup> I Corinthians 11:1

<sup>28</sup> I Corinthians 10:32,33.

<sup>29</sup> Paul avoids a leadership competition with Apollos and Cephas by pointing to the crucified Christ as the one model to emulate. I Corinthians 1:10-17.

indulgent ball players, actors, pop musicians, and wealthy business folk who fuel mimetic contagion toward unsustainable consumerism. Celebrity endorsements and lifestyles are an essential component in advertising “the good life” of conspicuous material consumption. The critical importance of social formation institutions such as schools and universities, religious groups, and political parties to raise up charismatic individuals who embody non-competitive, earth sustaining, responsible human behavior would have positive impact. “It is cool to live in a modest-sized, energy efficient dwelling, to use public transportation, to eat low on the food chain, to indulge in simple life pleasures.” Charismatic prophets need to rise up to challenge and envision institutions such as schools, businesses, the press, and churches to assume eco-friendly leadership. University admissions policies should place more priority on admitting students with generous character rather than good grades;<sup>30</sup> religious seminaries must raise leadership that is truly servant-hearted not only to people but also to the earth; eco-friendly businesses must have competitive market parity through tax structuring and regulatory controls. The preponderant yearning of most people for wild spaces to refresh themselves in nature must find fulfillment in the political process. Importantly, courageous statesmen must rise up and be supported who can envision local, regional, national, even global societies to tackle the vital, time-pressed issues that threaten the very existence of our planet—global climate change; massive pollution; depletion of soil, water, fisheries, living space; nuclear or biological warfare holocaust.

### **Personal Reflections**

Do I end this treatise in an optimistic key or on a pessimistic note? It should be clear that the twin engines of run-away mimetic contagion coupled with humane impulses to save human life fuels human pressures upon the carrying capacity of the earth. To put it in the vernacular, “the earth has more people who want more stuff.” As a Christian, I profess to place my hope in the Gospel, that the way of Jesus is the way of life. Yet where is there

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<sup>30</sup> Do we really want to subsidize at public expense university educations for students whose goals in life are to acquire great wealth and privilege? Better to render such students undereducated and therefore less harmful.

preached the biblical exhortation to be content with basic food, shelter, and clothing with fulfillment being in God and the Kingdom?<sup>31</sup>

Religion sociologist Robert Wuthnow ran a study in the early 90's to examine the attitudes and lifestyles of Christians in the United States concerning money, work, the poor, economic justice, and volunteerism, in contrast with the larger society? By analyzing a sophisticated survey of 2013 persons in the labor force along with 175 in depth interviews, Wuthnow concludes that religious involvement has some tempering effect upon materialistic obsession, primarily to therapeutically assure consciences of their unselfishness. For most American religionists, money and faith are basically separate domains. This dualism permits them to blithely serve both God and Mammon, thus locking out even the question of possible radical systemic change for society. Wuthnow speaks of most church leadership ordained to faithful proclamation of the Word of God, specifically in matters of money.

The implications of faith for work or for the handling of money have often been neglected entirely by religious leaders. In other cases, the clergy have discussed these issues in such generalities that believers were left to make their own decisions based on what felt most comfortable at the moment. These tactics have perhaps been in the short-term interest of religious leaders—seldom rocking the boat, seldom offending their middle-class congregants, and seldom disrupting the steady flow of charitable giving on which their salaries depended. In the process, religious leaders have nevertheless given away their birthright.<sup>32</sup>

Wuthnow speaks of the cognitive dissonance between professed faith and practice, a dualism that segregates spirituality from finances.

For many of us, compartmentalism is probably the most comfortable way of dealing with the relationship between our faith and our finances. Keeping the two apart is expedient. We can fall back on familiar habits—which may be ethically sound—rather than having to think about every decision anew.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, both Mammon and God can be served, each in its own respective domain. And (supposedly) from each god benefits can flow! Thus if the church in the United States is

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<sup>31</sup> I Timothy 6:3-12; Matthew 6:19-34. The mammon idolatry that holds the vast majority of Western Christianity in its sway is nowhere more pronounced than in the almost absolute refusal to seriously discuss and apply scriptures dealing with possessions.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Wuthnow. *God and Mammon* (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1994), p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*; p. 151.

paralyzed from addressing the ecological crisis due to its captivity to mammon, where does one look for hope to avert ecological catastrophe?

The various eco-movements, perhaps epitomized in the Green party movements in Europe and North America, do reflect a stirring of consciousness and creative activity that in many aspects can be applauded. A probable weakness in such movements is the dearth of a spiritual Transcendence, a god or God, religion if you will, for religion historically and anthropologically has provided the structure, meaning, and motivation to overwhelm and underpin a society. The merging of environmental activist and human rights advocates throughout the world in the growing global fair trade movement seems a significant step pressing for an equitable standard of living for all people along with a softer ecological footprint. Such envisioning includes cooperative sharing rather than mimetic competition and its resultant individualism. A living standard of “enough” is coupled to everyone’s opportunity and responsibility to earn through work a fair share of the earth’s bounty while restrained from excessive hogging. Usurious profiteering from the labor of other people along with the rapacious abuse of fragile resources is taken as crime. Stripped of the prestige that siring numerous children has historically held, and confident that modern health care and nutrition can guarantee high survivability in children, parents are satisfied with fewer offspring and the world’s human population boom tops out.

Humanity is hard-wired to imitate, to emulate, to desire. But that desire does not need to be turned in toward one another in a cascading avalanche of unrequited desire. Humanity can find its rest and fulfillment in its Creator. Is there hope? Gil Bailie writes,

The question is not: will things get better and better? Some may, most won’t. The question is: do we have a prayer? We do if there is both a reason to pray and One to whom a prayer might be addressed...

Historical tribulations are as inherently a part of human existence as are matter and death. It isn’t, finally, a question of whether we humans have what we need to solve our problems or survive our crises. Finally, it’s a question of whether or not we have what we need to transform the materiality, mortality, and occasional madness of existence into a love that neither madness nor mortality can destroy.

As strange as it may seem, therefore, there is scriptural warrant....It is Jesus' reply to a Pharisee who asked what was the greatest commandment. Jesus told him:

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39).<sup>34</sup>

In final sum, all anyone can do to avert looming ecological catastrophe is to seek the truth and to act upon that truth as one knows it. And if any of us in our weakness and brokenness would draw into the invitation to the Triune God's presence, these words will surely be spoken.

“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And I said, “Here I am. Send me.”<sup>35</sup> “For how then are they to call on him [Jesus] if they have not come to believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard of him? And how will they hear of him unless there is a preacher for them? And how will there be preachers if they are not sent?”<sup>36</sup>

If one pulls back the veils of denial and triumphalist hubris, the earth is headed toward ecological death. 50 years, 500 years, 5000 years, the planet cannot stay its present course. It is not that technological solutions cannot be found to avert disaster, but rather technology cannot change the human heart. Unrestrained interindividual mimetism is a destroying fire. Only a transcendent power can save. “I believe, help my unbelief. Save me, send me.”

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<sup>34</sup> Gil Bailie. *Violence Unveiled*. (N.Y. Crossroad, 1995), pp. 271, 272.

<sup>35</sup> Isaiah 6:8,9.

<sup>36</sup> Romans 10:14, 15.