

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

Paper Proposal for COV&R 2004 by Allen Johnson

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. 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 common harlot” as Francis Bacon termed nature has itself been an obstacle and rival, as myths amply illustrate. Furthermore, human competition to wrest a living has set creation as a stage for societal conflict and resolution. Paleolithic hunting bands required group cooperation 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 blood of hunting, and 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 birthed empathy for nature as victim. This dualism of nature as commodity and nature as sacred creation underpins the currents of the ecological crisis.

The population explosion that hard presses the Earth’s carrying capacity is related to the advances and availability of improved nutrition and health care that humanitarian empathy is advancing on a global scale. Meanwhile, 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.

Modern societies struggle without a cathartic method to resolve mimetic tensions. Many 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 of animal rights groups and nature as victim indicate that sport hunting cannot muster the potency of primeval subsistence hunting societies. Other sportsmen pit nature in competition as a rival in sports such as mountaineering. The solitude of wilderness offers respite from the mimetic frenzy of the modern world. 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 rather, in creation as a work of God? How we see ourselves is how we see the natural world. If we understand ourselves as having an imputed holiness because of the Incarnation, then we 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 of Scripture and complementarily through lessons in creation. 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.