

SCIENCE RELIGION ECOLOGY

CINI-DRAFT TESTIMONY-BL (09-2011)
DRAFT FOR A SAN GIORGIO DECLARATION

Written by Bruno Latour,

But not validated by the other participants

See for details Pasquale Gagliardi, Anne Marie Reijnen, and Philipp Valentini. *Protecting Nature, Saving Creation. Ecological Conflicts, Religious Passions and Political Quandaries*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Assembled in Venice, the most beautiful, most technology dependent, most threatened creation of human audacity and ingenuity, we wish to bear testimony that there exist other ways to handle ecological conflicts. Gathered for three days in the island of San Giorgio at the initiative of foundation Cini, our self-assembled group of ecologists, theologians, anthropologists and social scientists, offer the following testimony encouraging other participants around the world to dismiss, discuss or amend their propositions.

It is our conviction that the diversity and magnitude of conflicts over natural resource offers a unique opportunity to rejuvenate the links between science and technology, the various traditions of political ecology but also religion. Instead of claiming that it is possible and desirable to separate ecology and religion as much as possible, or to condemn ecological movements because it would risk becoming a “new religion”, we wish to tackle head on the question of ecology and religion and offer an alternative description of their entanglement. Even though bringing religious passions to bear on ecological conflicts might be risky, we think the risk is worth taking because religious traditions might have the intellectual, ritual and emotional resources at the scale of the challenge faced by the human-transformed cosmos

We wish to start from the following conjectures:

-religions have always been, for the best and for the worst, deeply concerned with the right ways to bless, transform, manage and upkeep

the cosmos; thus there is no sense in separating inside religious traditions what concern their rituals and theologies from their attitudes toward the cosmos and the consequences of their mundane organizations; in practice religions have always engaged in some form of ecotheology;

- sciences in their Western traditions and from the 17th century onward have always been concerned with the right ways to understand the connections between natural, political and spiritual agencies so that in practice they can be defined as an enterprise in “natural theology”, which has never been interrupted especially when they claim to have broken away from their irrational past;

- ecological movements, although connected in many ways with religious traditions and scientific results, because of their relative novelty, have not yet found the right ways to harness the transformative power of religions nor to respect the innovative capacities of science and technology;

- the result of those three conjectures is that the notion of “nature” might not offer a common ground for settling the numerous conflicts we have collectively to tackle, nor to understand the way other civilizations have lived in the world; it is thus our conviction that we should not engage in saving or protecting “nature” but in finding an alternative to the very notion of nature.

In sum, we think that it is just when we enter what is described as an “era of limits” that we should not limit ourselves to the boundaries between science and religion, nature and culture, protection and salvation that we have inherited from the first modernizations. It is because we have only one planet to live on that we should break through the narrow confines of modernity.

It is our belief that a new set of transformations is offered to religious souls, to concerned scientists and to ecologically minded activists once those three elements are brought together: religions that accept their cosmic impact; sciences that accept their theological concerns; ecological movements that accept to be religious and scientific in new ways. It is in this crucible that all our former values might be thrown and resuscitated. It is at this historical juncture that religion, science and ecology may finally come down to earth.

That ecological conflicts offer unique opportunities to religions, especially Christian traditions, is clear. They allow them

- to abandon “nature” and “naturalism” as what they have to be opposed to in order to define their own beliefs;
- to put into question their obsession with moral problems and their anthropocentrism disconnected from cosmic concerns,
- to renew their own notions of incarnation and providence,
- to reconnect with their own history of creation and recreation and harness again the transformative energy that has led them to transform the world so dramatically,
- to extract themselves out of this long hate/love relation with science that has forced them to migrate either into the supernatural or to the deep recess of the inner souls,
- at the occasion of their meetings with so many newly minted divinities like Gaia, they may test their own prejudices against “paganism”, “immanence”, “nature”, “pantheism” and deeply renew what they mean by transcendence and spirituality.

In brief, it is possible that Christian religions may start all over again to provide rituals and energy to give a new meaning to what is meant by Incarnation and the long sacred history of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.

But ecological conflicts are an immense chance for scientists and engineers as well because they will allow them:

- to abandon their pretence to have broken from religion, metaphysics, and politics in the name of a “nature” now too multiple and too composite to be unified once and for all;
- to complicate their quest for certainty, mastery and indisputability that put them in the impossible position of settling conflicts that cannot be closed by them only;
- to reconnect with religions and thus reinterpret their long and beautiful history as a long quest for the right type of “natural theology”;
- to allow themselves to wonder and worship at a cosmic adventures without having to pretend that they share “a view from nowhere” that they have to claim is valueless; the value of truth and objectivity deserve better;

-to unleash the new creative power of their trades without having to ignore unintended consequences through the invention of a new set of values that would tie the contradictory demands of audacity and care;

-at the occasion of their meeting with the new divinities of ecological movements (such as Gaia) they too can begin to test again what they meant by a nonhuman view which is no longer a view from 'nowhere';

In brief, science and technology may begin all over again in the confidence that by shifting their values from the search from "matters of fact" to the handling of "matters of concern" they remain faithful to their original vocation and their final destiny.

But it is of course for ecological movements that the opportunities are just as great so that they may answer differently to their vocations. When encountering renewed religious, scientific and technological practices, they might seize this occasion:

-to abandon "nature" as what should be protected or saved, as if it could provide a final judge to shortcut political conflicts;

-to escape from their insistence on limiting human footprints and withdrawing from the effects of human innovations just at the time when those effects have to be tackled with expanded ingenuity and innovation;

-to break out of the limits of cosmocentrism since the overwhelming transformations of the planet shift the burden back to human shoulders;

-to reconcile themselves with the importance of technical innovations and scientific research to recreate this "nature" that has been forever transformed;

-to participate in the renewal of engineering values in order to redefine on which ground technical innovations should be sorted and how to tend for the unintended consequences of our collective actions;

-to join forces with religious and especially Christian traditions not for the dominion over "nature", but for the common task of continuing Creation.

It is because neither God's will, nor the results of the various sciences, nor the conflicting states of a "nature" to be protected will ever be able to offer a final arbitration to define the common good, that it is necessary to explore other ways to move collectively through controversies. We are well aware that this way to shift the conversation between religions, sciences and ecological movements remains highly tentative, but we are confident that they offer a different and more hopeful entry into the politics of environment.