

## RELIGION, ECOLOGY, RACE, AND CULTURAL EVOLUTION

By Matthew David Segall

*Editor's Note: This article was posted on June 23, 2015 on the blog [Footnotes 2 Plato](#). Matthew David Segall is a doctoral candidate in philosophy and religion at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, California. He recently chaired the session on "Late Modernity and Its Re-Imaging" at the conference on "Seizing an Alternative: Toward an Ecological Civilization" held in Claremont, California on June 4-7, 2015. The summary of the session read: "The discoveries of geological deep time and biological evolution that emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries dealt a death blow to substance dualism, forcing humanity to make a fateful ontological decision: either, (1) re-imagine nature as ensouled or (2) re-imagine the human as a machine. This track will examine Western civilization's choice of the latter option, contrasting it with the former one."*

*"Today we cannot ignore that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach and should integrate justice in discussions on the environment to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor." -Pope Francis (Par. 49)*

Pope Francis released [his encyclical](#) on June 18, 2015. I have only skimmed it thus far myself, but I am encouraged by the reviews I have read. Especially [that by the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff](#), whose work connecting ecology and social justice is among the major spiritual inspirations behind the encyclical. The impact of this document on public policy remains to be seen, but the pope explicitly intends it to speak to all Earth's people, not just Catholics.

Conservative politicians are predictably beside themselves. Their common refrain seems to be to tell the Pope to stick to religion and stay out of politics. As I said in [a post two weeks ago](#), perhaps these climate change denying politicians should stay out of science. But of course, part of what the ecological crisis is revealing to us is the way everything—from politics, to religion, to science—is connected. The Earth does not respect our artificial boundaries and all too human constructs. We've entered [the Anthropocene](#), which means the old dichotomy between free human subjects and inert natural objects is entirely obsolete: If anything, it is humans who have become inert, unable to act to avoid the worst of the coming ecological catastrophe, while nature—or better, **Gaia**—is the new dominant actor on the scene, no longer content to remain the static background of human history. The Pope is rightly linking economics, morality, and ecology. There are other issues that need to be addressed, of course (i.e., sex—more on that in a second), but under Francis's leadership the Church is way ahead of state governments on this. Politicians need to catch up.



Other theistically-minded critics are upset by the fact that [one of the pope's main advisers, Hans Schellnhuber, is a Gaia theorist](#). About Gaia theory, *The Stream's* William Briggs sarcastically writes:

*"This is what we might call 'scientific pantheism,' a kind that appeals to atheistic scientists. It is an updated version of the pagan belief that the universe itself is God, that the Earth is at least semi-divine—a real Brother Sun and Sister Water! Mother Earth is immanent in creation and not transcendent, like the Christian God."*

Ah yes, the dreaded paganism. It is strange to me that so many Christians seem to neglect the little detail of Christ's **incarnation**. Trinitarian theology is not as clear on the issue of transcendence as Briggs makes it seem. And let's be honest. If Christians continue to insist on the other-worldliness of their God, then their religion will wither away even faster than the ecosystems of this planet. A totally transcendent God is utterly irrelevant to human life on Earth. Who cares about a God unmoved and unaffected by human and earthly concerns? Only death-denying patriarchal authoritarians. This is not to say that some forms of transcendence do not carry liberatory potentials, but [I would argue transcendence needs to be held in polar tension with immanence to remain relevant](#) (e.g., [panentheism](#)). The geologist Thomas Berry coined the term "incendence," which beautifully captures the necessary polarity.

Briggs is also worried about what he views as Schellnhuber's misanthropic statement that the carrying capacity of Earth is around one billion people. There is something important in this criticism, since many "environmentalists" who take a more or less "protectionist" approach seem to imply that humans are some kind of eco-disease who would do best to just withdraw from nature as much as possible, to let it do its wild thing without our unnatural interference. This sort of dualism only re-enforces the problem, in my opinion. Anthropologists have thoroughly deconstructed the idea of "wilderness" by pointing out that indigenous

populations have always been intimately involved in caring for their local ecologies. Restoration ecologists have also made it clear that humans can constructively participate in the flourishing of life on this planet, if only we shift our anthropocentric values so they are inclusive of the intrinsic values of all organisms and habitats.

Finally, Briggs dismisses Schellnhuber's claim that educating women would help reduce population. [The evidence on this question is so unambiguously on Schellnhuber's side](#) that I'm at a loss as to who Briggs thinks he is kidding. [Then I realized he is associated with the Heartland Institute](#). So much for fidelity to the facts. Or perhaps he is himself Catholic, which would also explain his ideological resistance to sex education.

As I mentioned parenthetically above, [the Church's stance on sexuality](#) remains highly problematic. By continuing to enforce patriarchal norms, the Church is perpetuating an injustice to women and LGBTQ (etc.) communities. I can only hope that the pope's Earth-positive message will carry over in time to sex-positivity and gender equality, as well. The pope is willing to listen to Gaian scientists about climate change and mass extinction but still looks to the Old Testament for his understanding of healthy human sexual relationships. [Society's views on sex continue to change faster than the LGBTQ \(...\) acronym can keep up](#). Pope Francis rightly critiques the "rampant individualism" and "self-centered culture of instant gratification" that dominates our postmodern world (Par. 162), and it is true that in such a context, the sacredness of sexuality is often ignored or debased. But for an institution still so mired in its own sex abuse scandals to pretend to speak with such moral authority about the singular legitimacy of heterosexual marriage as the only container for human sexuality is embarrassing, to say the least. Contemporary human societies are undoubtedly struggling to find new ways to raise and care for children, but instead of condemning so many people to hell, the Church could do a better job supporting anyone, gay or straight, for whom love is the guiding factor in the formation of families. And further, those who wish to express their love without increasing the human population should also be able to avoid the Church's condemnation, since it is ecologically obvious that we've reached and probably surpassed the carrying capacity of this planet. If the pope is serious about rejecting humanity's absolute dominion over the planet, he must come to understand this.

For an alternative perspective on the role of sex in society, check out [primatologist Isabel Behncke's short presentation about bonobo sexuality](#). The connections she draws between play and ritual resonate strongly with what I tried to articulate in [the paper I delivered at the recent International Whitehead Conference on religion in human and cosmic evolution](#).

Again, moving toward an ecological civilization is going to take more than just a sustainable and green economy. It is going to take a massive transformation of every aspect of our modern human lives, including how we relate sexually. Conservatives are clearly terrified of such changes, but the power of their ideology pales in comparison to the power of evolutionary creativity. We are primates and our behavior is evolving on every level, or at least needs to if we hope to adapt to a shifting environment.



One final word about [the terrible shooting in Charleston](#) that stole the headline from the pope's encyclical last week. Responding to racism must be part of any integral ecological movement. [The Civil War started as much for economic as for political and moral reasons](#). The North was industrializing, while the South remained tied to slave labor and dependent upon the agricultural exports, especially cotton, that their slaves produced. Black slaves helped get this country on its feet economically, mediating between Whites and the natural world. As machines began to take over this mediating role, the moral absurdity of slavery became more and more apparent to those in the North. The ecological and moral consequences of industrialization are only now becoming obvious. This is far more complex than I can articulate fully here, but there is clearly a connection between the White fear of the natural world, the need for mediation (whether by slaves, machines, or something else) to protect us from it, and the ecological crisis. The Union won the war and ended black slavery only to enforce the enslavement of the regenerative processes of Earth to the new machine overlords of techno-capitalism. Healing from the residual racism still blighting our country's collective psyche seems to me to be a far deeper issue than just being nicer to one another. There are deeper wounds at play here . . . .

Thoughts? The connections I'm drawing are obviously still in their larval phase. I am hoping to start a dialogue to shed light on it all.

*Editor's Note: You may respond to Matthew's blog at [Footnotes 2 Plato](#).*