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Religion and Ethics II

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Science and Religion: Can They Coexist?

From a young age I have grappled with my own perspective regarding the relationship between religion and science. I grew up in San Diego, California with a rocket scientist father who stressed the importance of technological advancement and religious mother who was brought up in a strictly Catholic household with strong religious values. Throughout my childhood I felt the need to reconcile these two seemingly contrasting viewpoints to come to my own conclusion on religious and scientific perspectives. The conclusion I eventually came to was that their two perspectives were not mutually exclusive; this epiphany let me to understand that religion and science are both necessary in understanding problems in the world, most notably environmental issues.

While science is typically referenced to explain why problems arise, it cannot fully explain the greater significance of these problems. By "greater significance", I mean that religion provides us a moral framework from which we derive actions and assign meaning to those actions. Without values to ground us, we fall victim to a compartmentalized view that allows us to detach from the larger context of our actions (Walker, 152). Religion provides context and reason for existence itself beyond materialistic values. Scientific and religious lenses are compatible and are both necessary to examine environmental issues to understand why problems exist and how they can be solved. I argue that scientific and religious approaches

must be balanced in order to give solve current environmental issues while still giving meaning to our actions.

The modernization of the world has led to an increased secular mindset and a disenchanted view towards nature that leads to indifference towards the environment. As the world has become modernized, religion has become more open to scientific research. The view of a higher power in many religions has shifted to evolve with the increased presence of technology and science. Although religious and scientific overlap has increased, the shift is not entirely positive. The current relationship between science and religion does not put enough emphasis on environmental ethics. In order to change this issue, there needs to be a closer connection between science, religion and an environmental national identity. Japan was previously thought to be a role model in this relationship but has lost environmental consciousness as values move away from traditional roots. Rots claims that Japanese identity is closely intertwined with environmental ethics that are evident in Shinto and Buddhism, but recently there has been less regard for the intrinsic value of animals. According to Brett Walker, "In September 2000, despite intense international objections, whalers returned to Japanese ports with 88 whales, including 53 Bryde's and 5 sperm whales"(140). These statistics show that Japan has lost its strong connection to environmental values that previously framed them as an ecological model. I attribute these negative moral issues in environmental science to a loss of influence of Japanese indigenous religions.

I see the decline in religiosity and a lack of sufficient scientific based regulations as the leading causes that contributed to disasters like the spread of Minamata. When looking at the Minamata disaster it is evident that human influence is a leading factor in environmental damage. Ogata Masato argues that the environmental damage we bring upon the earth is the

fault of human attitude as a whole, not just of those who physically contribute to the damage. He states, “When human beings no longer look upon one another as fellow humans, then we each become responsible for incidents such as Minamata disease. When we are a part of a movement we forget to look into ourselves” (146). His words speak to the idea of acting in a compartmentalized manner as a result of capitalism. Our constant need as a society to consume and make profit will not change easily, but we can take steps to change how capitalism changes the environment. In a world where efficiency and profit are the priorities, it is often easy to lose sight of how individual actions contribute to larger issues.

Timothy George explores a similar idea, arguing that there is no such thing as a natural disaster, only actions or lack of actions that lead to a disaster. He says, “human presence, and human choices and actions and responses” (6). He goes on to to argue that the 3 disasters, “the earthquake, the tsunami, and the nuclear crisis—faced the consequences it did because of what human beings did before and after the great earthquake”(6). In the case of the mentioned crises, the decisions that led to a state of extreme disaster are largely attributed to the Japanese government’s failure to plan and protect against disaster and disease. So the question then becomes, how can the government use science to effectively regulate levels of pollutants and monitor safety? Brett Walker addresses this scientific aspect in the context of Minamata by referencing a number of effects that led to the spread of the disease that could have been prevented by environmental regulations. He explores the importance of using science to address the issues that lead up to Minamata. His insight illuminates the impacts humans have on the environment and his research shows how scientific tests have been used to establish environmental laws. Walker writes about the nitrogen issue Japan faced and how the use of nitrogen was necessary to increase food productions, but proper environmental regulations were

not in place to regulate waste. He went on to explain that "global population would have needed about 30 percent more farmland in cultivation were it not for fertilizers" but there were not sufficient limits on the amount of nitrogen added to the environment (154). This example demonstrates that there is a need for science in society, but there must be restriction on how it is used. Although it is always easier in hindsight to see what measures should have been taken, it is essential to establish stricter regulations before a disaster.

This argument emphasizing the importance of scientific innovation to identify crisis counters Lynn White Junior's argument that science cannot solve ecological issues. He says, "our ecological crisis is the product of an emerging, entirely novel, democratic culture. The issue is whether a democratized world can survive its own implications" (1). He goes on to say that the current regard for nature is rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions. Western culture's deep roots in these traditions is why he claims that nature's deterioration cannot be solved by science and technology. He claims that modern technology and science emerged out of a Christian framework and therefore cannot solve the issues since they are based in their own values. However, White fails to acknowledge that our morality is rooted in biology and are not entirely derived from a theological framework. His argument implies that humans are inherently selfish and cannot collectively create a culture where nature is valued by all.

Although science itself is a product of disenchantment, its existence does not make religious presence void. Rational science has contributed to secularization, as it provides concrete proof for issues that were previously explained by religion. Science cannot provide an ethical framework from which taken should be taken. Max Weber's examines the process of responsible decision making in a modern context. He recognized that the disenchantment of the world led to a lack of empathy that leads humans to harm the environment. What makes this

argument most effective is to imagine the environment without the presence of wither religion or science. Without religion, Many people would struggle to cope with losing loved ones and the devastation that hits during an environmental disaster when they have no higher power to believe in. There would be less charitable organizations to help with disease, hunger, and disaster. Without science, we would not be able to test for levels of mercury in the water that harmed so many people in Japan. It is often argued that we are doing more damage by using science for things like oil rigs, however if science is neglected then we will soon no longer be able to support the human population with the resources that are present. Even for those who are not religious, the overall combination of science and religious values can be helpful in viewing nature as a gift to be treasured. This conversion back to a more enchanted view of nature will increase the amount of empathy felt by humans.

The idea of inherent value is essential in creating an appreciation for nature in society. In order to fix the current state of environmental crisis, there needs to be a push for balance of scientific based regulations and religious values intertwined in national identity. It is not easy to change a country's values but it is possible to put more of an emphasis on issues by incorporating them into everyday life. Japan has been able to do this by featuring religious values in anime and other forms of media. In the film *Spirited Away,* animism is used to showcase Shinto values in a digestible manner. The film reflects an world discussed by Munakata in his analysis of Japanese Religions. He says, "In an immanentist religious world, nature possesses a symbolic meaning that reinforces the folk religion. In other words, the believer projects his religious faith onto the natural environment (106). These symbolic meanings are present in *Spirited Away* in many areas like the bathhouse that represents cleansing of one's evils. Children can learn about kami, enlightenment, identity, and the value

of nature from a young age without realizing they are internalizing values. Media provides an opportunity to influence mass audiences and convey the idea that something needs to be done to prevent the earth from deteriorating. In addition to using media to spread ideas like the inherent value of nature, scientific research must be used to establish more strict environmental regulations. Incorporating inherent value into our everyday life is a way to create a national identity that is more closely intertwined with religious values. It will also help to re-enchant the world to an extent to where there is an appreciation of the mystery of nature its role in our lives.

The Industrial revolution and the increased presence of materialism in the world has caused environmental ethics to be sacrificed in order to meet the production demands of the modern population. While science has a role in cleaning up the mess created by human innovation, religion plays an important role in preventing these negative human actions through values. Diseases like Minamata highlight the importance of using scientific methods to look at the causes and take action to prevent a similar event from happening in the future, as well as the importance of religion in comforting victims. We cannot wait for disaster to strike to reevaluate how we can be better and take safety precautions. The environment will continue to suffer if we do not learn to reconcile science and religion to solve ecological issues.