5-8-2014

# The Separation of Humans and Nature as it Relates to Environmental Degradation

Vinay Srinivasan
*Pomona College*

**2014**
**Claremont Colleges Library**
**Undergraduate Research Award**

Sophomore Honorable Mention

**Vinay Srinivasan**
**Pomona College**

Reflective Essay

**Reflective Essay: Reflecting on the Research Process**

Stumbling upon the unforseen—the ultimate goal of any thorough research project. Perhaps this means pursuing a line of thought hardly ever before pursued, finding a old document that had never been connected properly to the rest of the puzzle, or ending up investigating an issue completely different from what it was at the start. Whatever the surprise, it comes to define the scope and value of the entire project. My tangle with the unexpected throughout the process of researching this paper for Religion and the Environment was certainly one which amounted in tremendous personal growth as a scholar, as I produced (and surprisingly enjoyed) an essay on a topic I once thought I would never touch.

In reaching my entirely unexpected result, I overcame two enormous, metaphoric ball and chains that had been weighing me down/holding me back for a while. For one, I had never written a proper research paper before—sustaining an meaningful effort through the entire process. Sure, I had done literature reviews for reports in my science classes, and I had written a large term paper for the freshman writing seminar last year, but those always managed to be about topics I found incredibly dry. Subsequently, I typically put off research until the last minute, burned through sources for the sake of finding somewhat relevant facts, and got nothing out of the research process except just enough marginally relevant material to Frankenstein together into a coherent jumble of words that I called an essay. And then a few weeks later, when I would see presented the beautifully thorough projects presented by better-versed, more experienced, and meticulous upperclassmen, I would regret not putting effort into my investigation to even spark a lasting interest in what I studied. For this paper, the vagueness of the topic (which asked us to examine the influence of various worldviews on environmental degradation) gave me much welcome leeway to allow the sheer progress of inquiry to refine my paper into something that accorded very well with my natural line of thought and fed back into my desire to dig as far as I could within the window I had. I finally felt that because I made myself the adequate time and gave myself the opportunity to nurture and evolve my ideas from the inception of the process,

Second—and somewhat related—as someone who has typically confined himself to the sciences out of a general discomfort studying and interpreting esoteric arguments in the humanities, I really thought my paper would adopt a slant in the direction of the environmental science aspects of the issues at hand. Funnily enough—as Professor Kassam has been reiterating all semester that issues of religion are so intertwined to our interactions with the natural world that they just seem to "crop up" when we least expect them—by the time I was wrapping up the conclusion my paper had morphed into one tracking the historical progression of Christian dualism in regards to our current attitudes towards the environment. The novelty of the thought required to examine the historical and religious frameworks that became necessary for my paper inspired me to take additional risks in my inquiry—opening doors into issues of economics, politics, and development that had previously been unexplored by me—to the point that for the first time the research process became enjoyable for me, almost addictive. Never before had I regarded my sources with such interconnectivity, been so meticulous about how I flowed from one search to the next, felt such a drive to answer the questions that each subsequent article raised. Rather than clamoring for the end of the research process like I usually came to do, I kept expanding the frontier of my inquiry to the point where I had to cut myself off to have a paper to turn in on time. So overall, the most valuable thing I gathered from this research process, and certainly the most valuable thing I have gathered from any library research I have done was unexpected-but-welcome drive and curiosity to find out more. Even though my paper itself has been turned in, for the first time, I definitely felt compelled to look more into how capitalism specifically interacted with Christian dualism in the American recovery narrative before it was globally disseminated (something which I had to speed through for the sake of economy while I was writing).

I would like to reiterate that this was the first time I feel like I have taken holistic approaches to my research, so in comparison to someone who has a better idea of how to use library resources, my methods may have been a bit limited. I made extensive use of the library Research Guides for both the Religious Studies and Environmental Analysis departments in finding the databases to use for my literature searches as well as drew a bit from the History guides. I only just realized the value of using the articles I found to link myself to other articles

that the authors referenced and found a number of my most valuable pieces by scouring the references of the more pertinent articles that I was able to find via my broad searches. This allowed me to really get a niched selection of literature that really facilitated drawing connections between my sources in a way that I had never before been able to do. I used the ILL system to request two of the more obscure articles electronically, which really came in handy given how specialized my topic was. I also drew a fair amount from sections of books we discussed in class. My research into environmental statistics was done using conventional search engines to find the most current reports on issues ranging from coral bleaching to eucalyptus monoculture. In short, for the more academic issues of Christian theology, I used the library journal databases, and for more explicitly environmental science-type issues, I sought more current data via published reports and news websites. These approaches complemented each other nicely and really contributed to fashioning a paper that was balanced in both the academically and immediately relevant.

It is a strange feeling to have generated such an interest in a topic that once seemed so foreign, intimidating, and untouchable to me; nonetheless, I definitely can see now that the research process (when undertaken with an open mind and a bit of curiosity) can really have a powerful influence in shaping my knowledge even outside the classroom. This is how passions are sparked, questions start flowing, and perhaps the next revelation is reached. I am excited to see how the process pans out of for me in the future.

**2014**
**Claremont Colleges Library**
**Undergraduate Research Award**

Sophomore Honorable Mention

**Vinay Srinivasan**
**Pomona College**

Research Project

# "The Separation of Humans and Nature as it Relates to Environmental Degradation"

Vinay Srinivasan

Religion and the Environment

Professor Zayn Kassam

23 February 2014

# The Separation of Humans and Nature as it Relates to Environmental Degradation

Across the world the human footprint on the environment is stark and alarming: seventy-five percent of the world's coral reefs are threatened by a combination of direct human-related activity and thermal stress due to rising ocean temperatures (Burke 2012). Widespread eucalyptus monoculture in former tracts of Asian, African, and Latin American rainforest has dried up aquifers, significantly altered biodiversity, and displaced close to 50,000 families who subsisted on farming the fertile land (Acosta 2011). Parts of China, Australia, and the Middle East are running out of potable water (leading to political tensions regarding distribution) while closer to home California is currently experiencing the worst drought it has seen in one hundred years (Wilkey 2014, Barlow 2007). By no means is this a non-exhaustive list, but with the clear implications that even these observations have to global health, politics, economics (and to an extent, survival) moving forward, a holistic attempt to understand the attitudes and practices that perpetuate human-induced environmental degradation is key to addressing the gamut of problems facing the 21st century.

Rich or poor, developed or undeveloped, an attitude of exploitation and belief in the human capacity to improve utility through opportunistic alteration of the environment pervades. What compels us to think this way?[1] It becomes a question of how humanity perceives itself in relation to the environment

[1] Note that the use of "us" it is not meant to generalize or imply that every collection of humans in the world holds an attitude of dominance and superiority towards nature. There are certainly ample societies that live in "partnership" with the environment, as "stewards" of nature (as Merchant puts it). However, the attitude most significantly contributing to current environmental degradation and the attitude integrated into Western

and by extension how that shapes both our role on this planet (as partners or as improvers) and our ideas of progress and development. As Bill McKibben puts it, "We're running genesis backward, decreating," hinting at an implicit association between ourselves and the divine, an anthropocentric view that separates us from the other occupants of this planet and gives us agency to use and treat it in whatever way we choose (McKibben 2010). As self-identified globally-conscious people of the 21st century we do not necessarily see ourselves in such black and white terms, but perhaps this superiority is more subtly integrated into the way we have come to think and act as a whole. What is the nature of the separation that seems to justify our detrimental interactions with the environment? And how did this exploitative attitude become such a global phenomenon? This paper seeks to argue that the historical separation of humans and nature in the Western frame of thought has contributed to the development, persistence, and globalization of an anthropocentric worldview largely responsible for the current state of environmental degradation.

**Foundation**[2]

In understanding the place and role of the dualism in present day human interaction with the environment it is critical to acquire a sense of the historical context of its development. This can be better interpreted from the perspective of three integrated but distinct lenses—the religious, the economic, and the civilizational. Interestingly, the role of the religious frame (in its traditional sense) was greatest in the *establishment* of the divide between humans and the environment and waned with the rise of capitalism, the market, as the new world religion (Loy 2003). The interplay of the religious and economic perspectives as they related to the dualisms contributed significantly to the makeup of the overarching

---

ideology/disseminated through the forces of globalization is this one that places humans at a level above in the hierarchy.

[2] This section is prefaced by acknowledging that over the course of history other societies at other times (like the former inhabitants of Easter Island) have degraded their environment to the point of being unusuable. In attempting to explain current practices and behaviors we track the development of "Western" thought because of its timely interactions with the American narrative, capitalism, imperialism, and globalization that allowed it to better persist and spread. Additionally, a linear, causal relationship between the development of the dualisms, the current behaviors towards the environment and everything that happened in between is not to be implied. There were certainly a number of other factors involved in the maturation of the attitude beyond the scope of this paper, so the linearity of the argument is only in the sake of practical economy.

civilizational attitude towards nature that was able to spread worldwide. However, the religious foundation is especially significant because the world views developed by its establishment were integrated into the western consciousness over centuries to the point of inextricability by the time those ideas were spread through the world. We turn to Christianity as the primary religious foundation because of its association with the rise of the west and western thought and because its reputation as the "most anthropocentric religion" (White 1967).

**Christianity's Establishment of the Western Separation of Human and Nature**

The first Christian idea of a hierarchical separation between humans and nature came far before its establishment into the American narrative. In reference to a debate that stretched back to the second century, Martha Henderson writes that "the question of life after death" is central to this human-nature duality (Henderson 2012). Monism regards the mind (spiritual) and the body (physical) as one and part of the larger natural context. However, if we believe that our existence is not confined to the physical earth—that this life is merely a stopping point on a larger journey made by the spirit—then there is an implied notion of transcendence over everything left behind, nature included (Henderson 2012). This assertion is echoed by White Jr., who claims that "human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about nature and destiny" (White 1967). In other terms, the less humans believe that their spirit and nature are intertwined, that the state of this world is not something on which the fate of that spirit is dependent, the less their interactions with nature will reflect an awareness or caution of the state of the world post-death. The resolution of this debate heavily influenced collective attitudes about the human-nature relation for the centuries to come.

In that early period where competing claims of monism and dualism were largely unreconciled, people's attitude about their position in relation to nature was highly variable. Not until the church took a clearer stance on the monist-dualist debate did the origins of the current "western" worldview begin to come together. Henderson references the rejection by the early Catholic Church of the female leaders of

the Montanists[3] as "the denouncement of the role of nature as an equal member of society" that "reinforced the human-nature dualism that continues into the present" (Henderson 2012). In a symbolic sense, the "logical masculine presence" of the catholic church was to overshadow the "chaotic and emotional" feminine powers, a gendered dichotomy that is recognized and examined by Gaard and Merchant as central to the human attitude of dominance over nature. (Henderson 2012, Gaard 2004, and Merchant 2004). After this point, the church took up a position that credited an "external power base" with "giving humans dominion over the creation and adjudicating human morality" (Taylor in Henderson 2012). As one of the Church's first resolved positions as to what to believe, this ancient worldview that had established a gendered human dominance over nature and acknowledged a spiritual separation became an integral part of belief and moral direction in future western thought.

Long-reaching influences from this early separation of human and nature via the dualist creed in the early centuries can be seen on later academics and philosophers. And by this time, the separation implied by dualism had become closely associated with a full dominion of humans over nature and the rest of the material world. Thomas Aquinas, an incredibly influential medieval scholar (1200s), offered an Aristotelian conclusion—that "the life of animals and plants is not preserved for themselves but for man." His view was very hierarchical, that man was superior to animal and God superior to man, but nonetheless an idea of man above everything else on the planet was apparent (Aquinas in Binde 2001). A few centuries later Francis Bacon, the father of the modern scientific method, claimed that "the most wholesome and noble [human ambition] was 'to endeavor to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe' " (Bacon in Merchant 2003). The most alarming observation here is that this notion of unmatched human superiority was laid into the very fabric of science, the field of study used to explain, understand, and determine our role in the present day. The questions we ask, the methodologies we use, what we seek to do with the knowledge we gain—they are

[3] According to Henderson, the Montanists practiced an offshoot of Christianity, believing in direct contrast to the Catholic Church that Christ would return to rural Anatolia and not Rome. In accordance with the high esteem held by women in the Mediterranean societies where it Montanism was followed (ie, women as goddesses), women had power within the group. This caused them to butt heads with the main church.

prefaced by this implicit quality in science of the using our methods of inquiry to tame and conquer the mysteries of the world. If we do not yet own and control the natural world through our understanding, it is the most "noble" human ambition figure out enough to do so. In his philosophical explorations of dualism, Rene Descartes claimed that if "it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life…we may… render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes in Olivier 2005). The deliberations and conclusions made by these scholars bookended the Renaissance, an entire period of intellectual development in Western Europe characterized in large measure by humanism, a philosophy emphasizing innate human capability and agency as well as rational thought. Relating this to the human-nature relationship, David Ehrenfeld asserts that humanism was "based on the irrational faith in the limitless power of humans to dominate the world, the belief that the environment and other species can and should be manipulated and controlled to meet human needs" (Ehrenfeld in Kuhn 2001).

Interestingly, this implies the rationalism[4] central to humanist ideology paradoxically seems to arrive at the same conclusion of human dominance over nature as the Church's dualist argument based on a spirit leaving the body. If acknowledging the spirit's transcendence over the mundane was necessary for this attitude, how could the two arguments have coexisted? The sheer scale of the renaissance as a movement produced a line of humanistic thought that for the first time both diverged from the Church and amassed enough of a following to establish itself as an alternate yet parallel way of thinking for the future. In essence, the two arguments were able to coexist because over the centuries the idea of man's dominance over nature was had become part of a fundamental human consciousness, that it was universally "understood" that man exerted dominion over nature simply by virtue of what it meant to be human rather than one's position regarding the spirit. Binde writes about this commonality between the religious and secular perspectives both establishing human dominance over nature: "The soul with its free will should dominate matter, and the secular discourse holds that urban civilization…is opposed to and

[4] Rationalism tended to move away from a religious explanation for the processes governing the world and tended to emphasize direct observation over faith in the divine.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/atheism/types/rationalism.shtml

superior to nature" (Binde 2001). Coming out of the renaissance, the two seemingly contrasting lines of Western thought now agreed on human agency and superiority over nature. This belief had become an essential part of the people of the developing west, and now that the foundation was set in how humans fundamentally viewed themselves in relation to the world, it became much more easily ingrained in the values of the countries and institutions they built.

**"Otherizing" Dichotomies**

We have established that towards the end of the Renaissance, "Western" thought, both inside and outside the religious frame, had seemingly validated the dominance/superiority of humans over the rest of the material world as part of the natural order. The fact that this worldview was adopted by two groups with highly different ideologies (the rationalist and the religious) hints at its accessibility and universality contributing to its persistence both at the time and moving forward.

Other than the universality of the idea of a fundamental disassociation between humans and nature, a key factor in the persistence through the Renaissance and later into the New World was the vigor with which the argument was made, the starkness of the separation that was proposed to exist between the two. The larger the contrast between the two opposing spheres, the harder it is to ever bring them close together again. Earlier the gendered dichotomy between man's logic over woman's emotion and chaos was mentioned in relation to the church's initial views that legitimized human dominance over and separation from nature; however, Greta Gaard takes the contrasts to another level by examining a number of variations of this dichotomy that contributed to "Western culture's alienation from and domination of nature" (Gaard 2004). Gaard proposes a whole host of intersecting dyads, in which one term exhibits "higher value or superiority" in relation to the other. For example, culture, reason, male, white, and civilized, oppose and trump nature, emotion, female, non-white, and primitive. A sense of identity for what it is to be human is further developed in the opposition and the stark binary lumps everything that does not match into a single group further ostracized and characterized solely by its "otherness." As a

collection these binaries produce a synergistic effect, the combination of the feminization, racialization, queering, and animalizing of everything that is "not" part of the established ideal further relegates them to a position of inferiority. Humans bolstered by the numerous associations of what is "good" and nature exponentially hindered by the numerous associations of what is the "other," the sheer magnitude of the separation provided a strong justification for its longevity in the western world view. The definitions were so clear and undebatable.

**Defining the Human Role**

The universality and starkness of the separation between humans and nature have already been elucidated as early potential contributors to its early integration into Western thought as an implicit quality of humanity. Before looking at how these interacted with the American narrative over the course of capitalism's rise, we must examine how these two qualities affected the perception of the extent of our role on this planet. Are we here to live as "stewards" of the earth in somewhat of a partnership in nature, or do we have the "right" to exercise our dominion by altering and "improving" what has been given to us? Navigation of this role both on an individual and community level is central to the nature and scale of current environmental change and degradation.

As was briefly mentioned before, the development of science as a way of "understanding God's mind by discovering how his creation operates" asserted humankind's dominance and control over the natural world (White 1967). By gaining a better knowledge of the laws that governed our universe, we could provide ourselves more agency in how to cheat them, manipulate them, use them to maximize human potential. Relating this to the dichotomies presented in the previous section, science's exploits and pursuits as outlined by Francis Bacon became a symbolic rape of a subjugated, feminized nature by masculine reason, "penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object" (Bacon in Merchant 2003). The human "duty" to dissect and violate nature's secrets through scientific inquiry was fueled by a genuine desire and belief that they could alter nature into something

"greater" and "sweeter," but acknowledgement of this manipulation and control in part laid the stepping stones for future commercial exploitation (Merchant 2003).

Carolyn Merchant also looked that the question of human roles in the environment by exploring pre-capitalist exploitation of nature in her examination of the American recovery narrative. While the settlers certainly justified their attitudes about themselves in regards to nature with the Christian scriptures, it is important to remember that the Western worldview of human dominance had also started to become a part of regular understanding. She wrote about the new world's initial conception as a "virgin" land to be whose bounty could be utilized by the hordes of settlers granted by God dominion over the land (Merchant 2004). However, this image began to change as the dichotomies began to take hold: civil and white versus savage/wild and non-white, male clarity versus female darkness and mystery. Otherized, the native worldview of an affinity, delicate balance, and partnership between humans and other living beings was rejected in favor of belief in an Adamic hero who could transform and restore the bounty to an Eden lost to the dark and savage through male ingenuity (Kuppe 1999 and Merchant 2004). Common with the view held by science, the role of humans in their position of superiority to nature was one of continual "improvement" and "progress" through a transformation and manipulation of that over which they had dominion. The crystallization of this role in the American consciousness at this time would come to define the environmentally-unfriendly "Western" attitude both maintained throughout the country's growth and the global spread of ideas.

**A Brief Word About Capitalism and Globalization**

While a thorough foray into the roles of capitalism and globalization in the propagation of the "Western" ideas of dominion, stark contrast, and the role of humans in relation to the environment is too broad for the scope of this paper, several things must be noted. As Merchant writes, Lockean property rights combined with the increased importance of the booming market in beginning to shape a "good state" and a "good economy" that encouraged a transformation and exploitation of nature (Merchant

2004). Capitalist forces, promoting efficiency, innovation, expansion, and the creation of new markets meshed very well with these ideas of development, improvement, and progress established under the Adamic recovery narrative (Olivier 2005 and Merchant 2004). With the rapid transformation of the U.S. under capitalist industry—the advents of steam engines, barges, saw mills, and large urban centers —and as capitalism came to overshadow religion as the larger defining American ideal, the justification for the human domination of the environment slowly began to embed itself into the economic framework (Merchant 2004). The intertwining of the anthropocentric view towards nature into the fabric of American capitalism and Western economics made it significantly more easily transmissible to the rest of the world than under the original religious framework.

Fast forward into the present day and "Western" capitalism dominates the global economic model—perhaps not in its purest form but all seven of the countries designated "major advanced economies" tend towards capitalist practices (IMF Data 2013). Even more importantly, the countries who have reaped the most from this exploitative, capitalist model have the most stake/voting power (up to 22% in one case for the US) in organizations central to global economic development like the World Bank (Voting Powers 2013). Naturally, the skewed influence by the major players has colored these organizations' notions of the new "good" economy in the modern day to be used as the standard for development. As a result, the nature-otherizing, anthropocentric, capitalist worldview subtly trickled down to developing countries in the form of conditions placed on international loans that reflect that the worldviews of those handing out the money—the "West." Not only the global preeminence of capitalism perpetuate the now-deeply ingrained Western idea of the human relationship with nature on an almost civilizational scale, but it spawned a sort of "fundamental separation" that foments selfishness on the level of the individual actors (the countries themselves) in the market (Loy 2003). From an environmental perspective, this selfishness has translated into an exploitative, get-ahead-at-all-costs mentality regarding the relationship of a country to its natural environment (parallel to the individual superiority over nature) that, when layered on top of the Western otherization of nature, accounts for a large share of our current

environmental crises. This way a collective attitude, the good of the "commons" is cast into the shadows. Thus the western economic model has not only established the notion of a separation between human and nature but also has spread the idea of a selfish and irresponsible use that has significantly influenced environmental degradation worldwide.

**Conclusion: What do we do now?**

From the time of the second century Christian dualists to the present day, the perpetuated Western separation of humans and nature justifying dominion over the environment has gradually become a permanent fixture of the current global economic system. The influence of this western worldview is both powerful and far-reaching. Each country that has come to operate under this capitalist model to some extent adopts the implicit, exploitative, anthropocentric worldview at its historical root, and the synergy of activity in the name of individual progress and development only further contributes to global environmental degradation. What can we begin to do to remedy this? Capitalism as an ideology is not bound to fail anytime soon, so a paradigm shift in the economic system is out of the picture, at least for now.

In Ecuador there exists an indigenous community who navigate their relationship with nature in such a way that they "assure survival for seven generations onwards" (Kuppe 1999). The worldview is selfless and timeless, acknowledging the significance of all that is left behind even after death. A collective sense of responsibility promotes an attitude of environmental consciousness that precludes widespread change and degradation. In contrast, one of the pitfalls of capitalism (by environmental terms) in the 21st century we addressed earlier was its production of a very selfish, exploitative attitude towards nature on the level of individual countries. James Kuhn suggests that with a little empathy and by establishing a sense of "expanded ecological self" we can develop a similar sense of respect for that which is not human and better rationalize our protection of nature (Kuhn 2001). With a belief in the commons, with a shared understanding of our responsibility to maintain this earth for more than personal

gain in this lifetime, we can curb the scale of environmental degradation we face currently. Yes, perhaps this is easier said than done, but a fundamental alteration of the Western notion of the human-nature separation is necessary before any sorts of improvement can happen.

## References

*GDP data G7 countries*. 2013. International Monetary Fund, .

Voting powers in the World Bank. 2013 [cited 26 February 2014]. Available from http://go.worldbank.org/AXK8ZEAD10.

Acosta, Inés. 2011. "Green desert" monoculture forests spreading in africa and south america. *The Guardian*2011.

Barlow, Maude. 2007. Chapters 1 and 2. In *Blue covenant.* New York: The New Press.

Binde, Per. 2001. Nature in roman catholic tradition. *Anthropological Quarterly* 74 (1) (01): 15-27.

Burke, Laura, Katie Reytar, Mark Spalding, and Allison Perry. 2012. *Reefs at risk revisited in the coral triangle.* World Resources Institute, .

Gaard, Greta. 2004. Toward a queer ecofeminism. In *New perspectives on environmental justice.*, ed. Rachel Stein. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.

Henderson, Martha L. 2012. Revealing the origin of human-nature dualities in christian political structures. *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 74 (01): 15-27.

Kuhn, James L. 2001. Toward an ecological humanistic psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 41 (2) (Spring2001): 9.

Kuppe, René. 1999. Indígenas y medio ambiente: Conservacionismo a espaldas de los guardianes de la tierra. *Boletín De Antropología Americana*(35) (diciembre): 95-104.

Loy, David. 2003. The religion of the market. In *Worldviews, religion, and the environment.*, ed. David Foltz. Canada: Wadsworth.

McKibben, Bill. 2010. Chapter 1. In *Eaarth.* 1st ed. New York: Times Books.

Merchant, Carolyn. 2004. Chapters 5 and 6. In *Reinventing eden.* New York: Routledge.

———. 2003. Dominion over nature. In *Worldviews, religion, and the environment.*, ed. David Foltz. Canada: Wadsworth.

Olivier, Bert. 2005. Nature, capitalism, and the future of humankind. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 24 (2) (05): 121-35.

White Jr, Lynn. 1967. The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*.

Wilkey, Robin. 2014. California drought emergency declared by governor jerry brown. *Huffington Post*2014.