

Marxist view on the religious ecological culture: A review of the western studies in religion and environment and their discourses

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The ecological crisis is related to religion that shapes the values, but its decisive factor is the inherent contradiction between the selfish logic of capital proliferation and the social public nature of the environment. The fundamental way to solve the ecological crisis is the domestic social reform, the coordination of international relations and the continuous development of science and technology. Guided by the social public agencies and scientific methods, religion can play a secondary constructive role in building the pro-ecological humanistic environment.

Contribution: It is as I have known perhaps the initial attempt to deal with the question between religion and conservation from the perspective of Marxism, as a response to the colleagues from the West.

Keywords: ecological crisis; ecological civilisation; human and nature; the limits to growth; the Dao follows the law of nature.

Introduction

Environment provides the necessary resources and conditions for our survival and development. For thousands of years, the two have coexisted harmoniously. But with the rise of industrial revolution that has greatly increased productivity, human activities are threatening the environment. Environmental crisis has become a problem for all human beings, regardless of nationality, race and social system. In order to strengthen the right to speak within the increasingly secularised society, kinds of religions, as well as all walks of life, have participated in the discussion on environment issues. As an interdisciplinary dialogue, religious ecology has attracted great academic interest and become a hot spot. The research of Chinese academics on this topic has laid down some foundation stones, yet without an overall view from the Marxist standpoint, it lacks in-depth insight of the ecological crisis. This article will firstly introduce the occurrence of environment crisis and the shift in religious ecology, secondly, analyse and comment on the results of foreign counterparts with the Marxist position, views and methods, and finally interpret the efforts of Chinese religion to advocate environment protection.

Environmental crisis and the shift in religious ecology

On 05 June 1972, the 'United Nations Conference on the Human Environment' was held in Stockholm, Sweden. This conference adopted the *Declaration on the Human Environment* summing up the theoretical and practical issues concerning the protection of environment, and put forward the slogan 'Only One Earth'. This event marked the awakening of environmental consciousness by all humankind and was the first milestone in the history of environmental protection in the world.

However, in identifying the root causes of ecological crises, answers from different disciplines vary. Economists emphasise the wrong price system as the cause; sociologists believe that poverty, despair, hierarchy, a lack of justice and excessive consumption in developed countries are the culprits; political scientists accuse the capitalist greed ideology of environmental unsustainability. Meanwhile, because of the strong religious and cultural atmosphere in American society, the academic community and the public have an increasingly strong interest in studying the relationship between religion and nature. In this case, religious ecology quickly became popular, and its research interest also mutated.

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Religious ecology is an interdisciplinary study on the ecological thoughts in religious traditions from the perspective of ecology. The original meaning of the word is to study how religion is influenced by environment. In 1967, the Swedish anthropologist and religious historian Ake Hultkrantz applied such research orientation to the studies of religion and proposed the concept of 'religious ecology'. While studying the life of the native American Shoshone tribe and certain northern peoples, he concluded that the surrounding environment has a great influence on many aspects of culture, including religious beliefs and rituals. Such research method, as a supplementary way to historical and phenomenological religion study, has created a new approach to understanding religion.

In 1967, Clarence Glacken published *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, which is the most important historical overview of the complex and vague relationship between Western religion and nature. It analyses European classical culture (including paganism and its long-term cultural echo) and Christianity in a detailed way. Donald Worster published *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (2nd edn., 1994) in 1977, promoting Glacken's studies into the era of ecology. Both these works aimed to portray an epic struggle between the organic and mechanistic worldviews in Western culture (sometimes too simplistic), and also an epic struggle between two types of people: those who believe that nature is somewhat sacred and has intrinsic value, and those who regard the life on earth as things only useful to humans from a utilitarian perspective. A common logic can be seen from these works that religious conceptions are decisive variables in human culture, and thus they are either the culprit or the saviour of environmental and social welfare.

In 1967, American historian Lynn White published his thesis *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* in the most well-known journal *Science*, in which he regarded the Christianity as the primary cause of environmental deterioration. The universal belief in Bible Genesis raises people's status and encourages people to engage in scientific research and technological inventions. However, the extreme human-centred views in Christianity conduce to the misuse of technology and undue exploitation of natural resources. Conversely, natural religions where the gods exist in all creation, tend to limit the freedom of human activities and may fail to produce scientific exploration and technological promotion in the modern sense. Therefore, White concluded that environmental crisis has its root in religion and any attempts to getting rid of ecological crisis will fail, unless we build new beliefs or re-examine our existing beliefs (Chen 2004). White highly praises Eastern religions and native American religion.

With the rise of religious ecology, many researchers began to reflect on their traditional views of nature, and reinterpreting doctrines with ecological concepts has become a new

tendency under which green theology and ecological theology emerged. Christianity once believed that the salvation of human soul is the key, while nature and the world have no value and cannot attract the interest of Christians. Today's ecological theology has turned its attention to nature and sharply criticised the religious doctrine of anthropocentrism.

Catholic theologian Thomas Berry argues in his book *The Dream of the Earth* and *The Universe Story* that people have fallen into egocentricity, which makes us fail to give value to life and beauty. The contemporary German theologian Jurgen Moltmann argued in 'God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation' that human greed causes deprivation of nature, because Christianity emphasises the distinction between human beings and other creatures, which to some extent, leads to an ecological crisis. The American theologian John B. Cobb, an advocate for White's ecological philosophy and process theology, claimed in the book *Is it too late? An ecological theology and ecology, science and religion: Towards a Postmodern Worldview*, that the idea of ecological theology is to recognise the complex interrelationships and dependencies between humans and nature. Christianity also turned 'fairness' and 'justice' into 'ecological justice', reminding people to pay attention to the deep connection between environmental care and social inequality and racial discrimination.

Religious ecology provides a platform for dialogue between religions. The world's religious leaders have issued joint statements at several important environmental conferences to express their consensus on environmental issues. Religious ecology's interest in Asian religions expands the horizons of Western civilisation and provides an opportunity for the internationalisation of Eastern culture. Eastern religious and philosophical views on the harmonious relationship between humans and nature have been the focus of Western academic circles.

From 1986 to 1995, many international conferences on the subject of religious ecology were held, showing religion circle's effort to cultivating the habit of coexistence with the nature. During the period of 1996–1998, more than a dozen seminars on religion and ecology were held at the Harvard University Center for World Religious Studies. The purpose of these forums is to explore ecological ideas, values and practices in various religious traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, Islam, and Shintoism, describe and analyse the attitudes and common characteristics of each religion towards the environment, and to make religious resources that have a special contribution to ecology, such as classics, rituals, symbols, cosmology stand out, and express the ideal model of humans and nature in a clear and inspiring language. In 1999, Harvard University also held a special conference on 'World Religions and Animals'. Driven by these conferences and forums, a series of religious and ecological books and websites were published. Religious

ecology has become an interdisciplinary hot spot (Krasnikov 1999). At the same time, it has naturally promoted the involvement of religion in the ecological field, and refreshed the discourse power and the sense of presence in the era of secularisation. These series of conferences and academic achievements have promoted the formation of the *Earth Charter* while seeking a variety of religious expressions. *The Earth Charter* was read at the UN General Assembly in 2002 and is considered a preface to *Agenda of the 21st Century*.

How to view the efforts and viewpoints of Western religious ecology?

Reasons for the shift

Since the rise of religious ecology, the focus of academia has shifted from how environment moulds religion to how religion affects people's attitude towards the environment. The first reason for this change is that religious leaders have recognised that environmental issues are a global problem that human beings must face together; in this case, they are willing to mobilise believers to participate. On the other hand, the active involvement of religious ecology in environmental issues has injected vitality into the search for self-positioning in the society with great prosperity of science. Religion has been keenly seizing opportunities to recover its social influence weakened by secularisation. Showing extensive concern for environmental issues is an important way to make it a reality. Lastly, the transformation from Marx's paradigm to Weber's paradigm and the search for the positive value of religion in solving environmental crises are greatly caused by the ideology confrontation between Eastern camp and Western camp in Cold War. There is even a tendency to exaggerate the social role of religion to a decisive influence.

The root cause of ecological crisis

The ecological crisis manifests itself as a product of human ideas. However, the fundamental concept is not religion, but the greed of capital. The logic of capital is proliferation, and the rule of capital means that developing and utilising the natural world without any scruples is allowed as long as it can promote the proliferation of capital.

Marx wrote in *On the Jewish Question* in 1843 that:

The view of nature attained under the domination of private property and money is a real contempt for, and practical debasement of, nature; in the Jewish religion, nature exists, it is true, but it exists only in imagination. It is in this sense that Thomas Müntzer declares it intolerable 'that all creatures have been turned into property, the fishes in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the earth; the creatures, too, must become free'. (Wikipedia n.d.:1)

For Marx (Wikipedia n.d.:1), the natural alienation described by Müntzer is manifested through the worship of money, which makes money 'the essence of alienation': 'Money is the universal self-established value of all things. It has, therefore,

robbed the whole world-both the world of men and nature-of its specific value' (Wikipedia n.d.:1).

Under the logic of capital, nature completely loses its independent value and becomes instrumental value. A passage in Marx's *Economics manuscript from 1857 to 1858* reveals the impact of this attribute of capital on the natural world and the ecological environment:

Thus capital creates the bourgeois society, and the universal appropriation of nature as well as of the social bond itself by the members of society. For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind, purely a matter of utility; ceases to be recognized as a power for itself; and the theoretical discovery of its autonomous laws appears merely as a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production. In accord with this tendency, capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the all-sided development of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces. (Marx 1973:409-410)

In brief, under the conditions of capital dominating, nature is alienated by the alienation of labour, which results in the ecological crisis. Nature has been alienated into the object of exploitation, rather than the object of gratitude and worship.

The dilemma faced by capitalist society to deal with environmental crisis can be considered as a contradiction between infinity of capital proliferation and the finiteness of the ecological environment. The proliferation logic of capital leads to the disorderly expansion of consumption, and a popular culture of consumerism has been formed under the guidance of capital. Capital promotes the commercialisation of the media, renders the consumer culture and admires the social conventions of luxuriousness and hedonism, so that people's purpose of consumption changes from consuming the use value of commodity to compensating for their tedious, non-creative real life. In the society dominated by capital, the only way for people to access their own value and realise the essence of human beings is capital-oriented consumption rather than labour creation. The prevalence of consumerism culture will inevitably result in the waste of resources and damage to the ecology.

Capital logic creates an ecological deficit in developing countries. In order to improve their own ecological environment and obtain excess profits, developed capitalist countries have transferred high-energy consumption and high-pollution industries to developing countries through comparative advantages, and forced developing countries to sell their natural resources cheaply. Globalisation has led to the continuous expansion of the overall scale of capital logic, the total consumption of material resources, and the amount of waste discharged into the environment has continuously increased, which further increased the contradiction between the infinity

of capital proliferation and the finiteness of the ecological environment, making the global ecological crisis more serious.

Solutions to environment crisis

Religious ecology provides a platform for dialogues between natural sciences and humanities and social sciences. However, in the name of religious ecology, some people even put forward the slogan of 'non-scientific' to solve the ecological crisis. It is obviously incorrect and misguided. Only by the advancement of science and technology, the reform of the social system, the improvement of the legal system, and the construction of an ecological economy can we fundamentally solve the ecological crisis.

Engels pointed out in the 1840s when he criticised Malthusian population theory that the fatal flaw of this theory is that it ignores the important role of humans in the development of science and technology in solving ecological crisis. Malthus had insisted that population tended to grow at a geometrical rate when not checked, while food supply only grew arithmetically. However, Engels pointed out that the whole doctrine fell apart when it came to the key arithmetical proposition, for which there was little basis. As Owen had said, Malthus's mistake was to attribute problems of subsistence 'to a deficiency in Nature's stores, and not to man's laws, in opposition to Nature's laws!' (Liu & Xiao 2006:120). The rapid development of modern science and technology, along with the continued downturn in the birth rate of developed countries, have fully proved that Engels's argument is correct. The development of science and technology is not the profound cause of, but the solution to, the ecological crisis. In the *Communist Manifesto* in 1847, Marx and Engels (Marxists Internet Archive n.d.:1) expressed their confidence in the progress of human productivity while praising the enormous productivity released by capitalist society: 'The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce 100 years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together'.

Marxism puts a high value on the decisive role of science and technology, while at the same time pays special attention to the balance of the material energy transformation process between humans and nature through scientific technology and labour production, which is named 'metabolism'. The fundamental meaning of the German word 'Stoffwechsel' is 'material exchange', showing the process of biological growth and decay captured in the term 'metabolism'. As John Bellamy Foster, a representative of Western Marxism, commented in the book *Marx's Ecology – Materialism and Nature*, in his definition of the labour process, Marx made the concept of metabolism central to his entire system of analysis by rooting his understanding of the labour process upon it (Liu & Xiao 2006:174). Thus, Marx argued that:

Labor is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. (Ecology Center n.d.:1)

Engels warned us in the *'Dialectics of Nature'*:

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. Each victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. (Marxists.org, n.d.:1)

The reality has sounded the alarm for us. We must develop green economy in order to resolve the contradiction between ecological and economic development. In this case, ecological economics has become a worldwide science since the late 1960s, which consists of three parts. The first one refers to the transformation of traditional industries by upgrading the level of traditional industrial technology; the second part refers to the development of environment-friendly industries, such as hydro, wind and solar industries; the third part refers to the economic formation that can directly provide ecological products, such as the restoration and reconstruction of the ecological environment. There is no doubt that these all depend on scientific and technological progress, policy guidance, sound legal system and society cooperation. In this process, religion can play a positive leading role with its own cultural advantages and the influence on the majority of religious population, by searching for analysis, understanding the complex ecological problems, and developing ecological awareness and ecological lifestyle.

The ecological thought of Marxism on the metabolic balance in the process of human and natural material transformation is a summary of the results of modern scientific research from the standpoint of materialist dialectics. On one hand, it advocates that human beings should actively develop and utilise nature to meet the demands of human development, which is consistent with Marxist humanism; on the other hand, it also advocates that when developing and utilising nature, it is necessary to take into consideration both the needs and the possibilities, the present and the future, and pay attention to the balance of metabolism in the process of material transformation between humans and nature. From the perspective of the world's religious ecological culture, it combines the advantages of Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism.

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is the moksha of the soul, which essentially is contemptuous of the material world and escapes from the secular world. Buddhism is more inclined to environmentalism in theory and alienated from the progressive philosophy of transforming the world. Taoism upholds the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of harmony between humans and nature. The worship of nature, ancestors and spiritualism put humans and nature in a two-way exchange of reciprocal networks, which contains the dialectical spirit of believing in life instead of giving in. In the natural economy of small-scale agricultural production, people survive on the crops grown on the land and return themselves back to nature completely by burying in the land after death. When the population greatly exceeds the land capacity, famine and war occur to keep the balance. This is a model of sustainable material transformation, but it is undoubtedly disadvantageous to the rise of modern technology and industrialisation.

The constructive role played by religion

From the aforementioned analysis, it can be concluded that religion is neither the root cause of the human ecological crisis nor can it play a decisive role in solving the crisis. However, religion is able to play a constructive role in education and the formation of life habits through its own organisation networks.

Recently, more and more detailed scientific researches have shown that religion may have an impact on how people think about nature. Emma Shephard-Walwyn (Rust n.d.) examined Kenyans' feelings about their native religious shrines, which were established and maintained by groups adhering to traditional beliefs. Walwyn found that some of the Christians interviewed felt that the forest should be destroyed because it is associated with native traditional beliefs, which in their view are evil. A study conducted by Hazzah (2007:6–9), a member of the Lion Guardians, demonstrated that Kenyan Maasai who converted to Evangelical Christianity from their native faith were more willing to kill lions than those who remained native.

Even among Eastern religions, the environmental friendliness of believers is related to the degree to which they commit themselves to the religion. For example, Buddhists who regularly attend religious services are more likely to be positive about wolves and snow leopards. In other words, the link between Buddhism and attitudes in favour of environmental preservation is evident only among Buddhists of higher faith.

Besides, the attitude towards environment of different people must be adapted to their religious beliefs. The case of the Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC)'s successful implementation of environmental projects based on core religious beliefs in an island off the coast of Tanzania is a typical example. When the Muslim fishermen ignored the local government's ban on dynamite fishing and continued their destructive fishing practice that uses explosives to catch fish, the advocates of ARC showed the imams passages from the Koran that support environmental protection and told them that the practice of dynamite fishing is a violation of the doctrines of Islam. Thereafter, the imams began to caution the community about it, and the devout Muslim fishermen obeyed their instructions. In 2013, a study conducted in Indonesia by McKay et al. (2014:23–29) in the University of Kent showed that incorporating environmental information into Islamic sermons could raise public awareness and concern. Environmentalists can learn from religions how to deal with people and gain support, because religions are known for their ability to gather followers and dedicate themselves to common ideals.

Chinese solution to ecological crisis

China's religious circles can serve ecological civilisation from two aspects: ideological construction and social services. In terms of ideological construction, the idea that heaven and humans are united as one in Buddhism and Taoism in China, believes that all beings are closely related and equal, and the

respect for nature is the respect for human themselves. The early Taoist classic *Taiping Jing* emphasises the value of taking species diversity as wealth, believing that land, mountains, rivers and even trees and grass are all alive and spiritual.

As a result of such viewpoints on ecology, it is common to see Buddhist and Taoist temples with healthy ecological environment becoming both natural and cultural heritages. In the areas where Buddhism is prevalent such as in Theravada of Yunnan, the Buddhist world depicted in the stories of Buddhist scriptures, which is surrounded by green trees, flowers such as brocade, usually has clean and fresh air and harmonious figures. The ecological wisdom of the Dai ethnic group cultivated in the long-term survival gives birth to the pecking order of 'forest, water, field, grain and people', which is integrated with Buddhist culture. If someone fails to follow this order or does not build his home amid green trees, it will be a denial of his own morality and ability and he will be rejected by the whole village.

In terms of social service, both Taoism and Buddhism in China actively participate in environment protection, such as afforestation, beautifying gardens, releasing wild animals, cherishing blessings and so on according to religious ideals. Buddhist and Taoist temples and monks encourage women, who make up the majority of believers, to use more reusable daily tools and less disposable plastic bags, bowls and chopsticks; some Buddhist and Taoist monasteries usually motivate believers to collect garbage in mountains and rivers in environmental protection days.

Since the 1960s, experts and scholars of Taoism in Chinese Taoist Association and universities have conducted research on the cultural thoughts of Taoism, elaborating on the ecological thoughts and ecological ethics of Taoism, so that people can get enlightenment from the thoughts and cultures of Taoism. Chinese Taoist Association and Taoist organisations at all levels have listed the protection of sacred mountains and amusement palaces as a major task.¹

In conclusion, this article provides an overview of the predominant perspectives of Western religious and ecological discourse since the 1960s. Diverging from Western colleagues, the author posits that while religious culture does indeed play a significant role in environmental crises, it remains secondary and auxiliary in nature. Moreover, the underlying causes of the environmental crisis should not be attributed solely to scientific and technological development, but rather to the insatiable greed inherent in capitalist systems. Conversely, solutions to the ecological crisis must rely on advancements in scientific and technological progress. Additionally, while religious traditions may vary in terms of environmental awareness and behaviour, effective participation in environmental protection can be achieved under the guidance of domestic public policies.

1. Chinese Taoist Association: Developing the Spirit of Taoism, Protecting the Ecological Environment and Benefiting the Mankind – a Claim from Taoism on the Protection of the World Environment, Chinese Taoism, No.3,1995. This is a declaration made by a Chinese Taoist delegation at Religious and Environmental Summit held in London by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) at the same year. The main authors of the declaration are Zhang Jiyu and Zeng Chuanhui.

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C.Z. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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