Augustinian Ecological Democracy: Postmodern Nature and the City of God

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Abstract
In this article I critically explore the work of the social theorists Klaus Eder and Ulrich Beck, who in different ways use an account of the ‘postmodern’, plural character of contemporary ideas of nature to argue for the necessity and possibility of an ecological democracy. I argue that within such social theoretical understandings of the contemporary politics of nature is a tension between pagan and Christian understandings of difference—between an understanding of difference as fundamentally irreducible and irreconcilable, and one that sees difference as contained within an overarching harmony. I cast suspicion on an account of postmodern difference which would see it as the resurgence of a pagan polytheism which had merely suppressed by two millennia of monotheism, in favour of an alternative account in which it appears as a historical product of the contingent path taken by the development of the Western sacred. I then explore ways in which Christian thought can provide the basis for an ontology of original peace in contrast to the original violence of pagan thought, on the basis of which might be built a different, ‘gothic’ understanding of ecological democracy, in which consensus is not grounded in the suppression of polysemy but in the harmonization of generative difference.

Introduction
It has become commonplace to describe nature as having been postmodernized in the late twentieth century. From the 1970s at least, the unity and monopoly of scientific representations of nature has been increasingly challenged, and nature has become plural—became ‘natures’. At the beginning of the 1970s, Thomas Kuhn demonstrated how scientific investigations at any moment in history depended on a
paradigm, an unexamined, inter-dependent set of concepts, assumptions and techniques, and thus how even scientific concepts of nature are socially and historically embedded (Kuhn 1970). Later in the same decade, Jean-François Lyotard described contemporary culture as exhibiting a collapse of faith in metanarratives, and the rise in importance of small, local narratives — a ‘postmodern condition’ in which the idea of singular universal truth had lost credibility (Lyotard 1986). Work in feminist science studies also uncovered the gendered character of scientific understandings of nature (Haraway 1991; Harding 1986). And outside academic thought, the rise of the environmental movement from the early 1970s also contributed to the postmodernization of nature by politicizing it; scientific truth claims about nature became contentious to a greater degree than ever before — nature became ‘contested’ (Macnaghten and Urry 1998).

Of course, there have also been countervailing tendencies. For example, from the 1980s in particular the more institutionalized parts of the environmental movement have often deployed a unified understanding of nature, one framed in realist, scientistic terms — albeit often for strategic reasons (Yearley 1991). And outside the world of the environmental pressure groups, there have been many attempts to articulate a unified ‘green’ cosmology as a basis for environmentalism, a system of thought that would short-circuit the need for public contestation of claims about nature. Such projects rarely draw solely on empirical ecology and biology for their metaphysical basis (Taylor 2001: 235). Instead, less experiential, more abstract ideas from quantum physics, cosmology and evolutionary biology figure prominently, for example in the work of Fritjof Capra (1975, 1983), Thomas Berry (1990) and Brian Swimme (Swimme and Berry 1992), writers who seek to identify a unifying, scientifically validated vision on the basis of which an ecologically sustainable society can be developed. This style of sacralized science writing was an important influence on the Earth Charter, a global attempt to agree ‘a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21st century’.¹ Bron Taylor describes the Charter as ‘the consecration of scientific narratives in an ambitious effort to inculcate nations in reverence for life on earth’ (Taylor 2001: 237).

Nevertheless, the monolithic character of such ideas was always in tension with the increasingly pluralized nature of scientific and ethical ideas about nature. As some environmentalists sought to raise scientific metanarratives to sacred status, most were levelling science, attempting

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¹ See www.earthcharter.org.
to strip it of any pretensions to divine authority it may have had, instead presenting it as human, interested and fallible. In a related development, advocates of various forms of environmental pragmatism responded to the *de facto* plurality of normative descriptions of nature by finding ways in which co-ordinated action need not depend on agreement about foundational, ontological matters (Light and Katz 1996). These initiatives could be seen as attempting to go with the grain of the contemporary, broadly postmodern, situation. We no longer live in the Middle Ages, when the inherent instability of an interpretative approach to nature was constrained by an overarching hermeneutic framework. But at the same time society has all but lost faith in the idea of a modern, singular nature, in the idea of knowledge production ever coming to a halt as science finally stabilizes its object. Such a timeless finite object was always only the mirror of a timeless infinite deity. Now that that deity has all-but disappeared from the horizon of modern society, nature appears as irredeemably multiple.

Some European social theorists, such as Ulrich Beck and Klaus Eder, take from this that the existence of substantive ideas and ethics of nature are less a positive resource in the struggle to overcome the ecological contradictions of modern, industrialist society than a handicap to be overcome (Beck 1992; Eder 1996). To be more accurate, what they feel needs to be overcome is the idea that achieving an environmentally sustainable future depends on identifying the one correct descriptive and normative account of how nature might be being damaged by human intervention, and which ethical imperatives might flow from this. In this, in different ways they embrace the idea of a postmodern nature; they are starting from the premise that in contemporary society there are multiple, socially situated views of nature, with no agreed, neutral way of deciding which can claim to be the privileged truth. The social authority of the institutions of religion, science and government can no longer command automatic assent; the power to define what is true is thus increasingly dispersed across society.

Given such a background, they argue in different ways that traditional environmental ethics and ecotheology are mistaken in their characterization of the environmental problematic. Such traditional approaches assume that what is needed is the identification of the one, true, philosophically, theologically or scientifically grounded account of what is happening to nature and how we should respond, an account which is so persuasive that it ought to command the assent of all. In contrast,

2. Here, I am of course underplaying the substantial differences between these theorists; later in the article some of these differences will however become crucial.
theorists such as Beck and Eder argue that environmental learning is maximized when no one perspective on nature has automatic authority; instead, we should embrace as both inevitable and desirable the coexistence of a plurality of perspectives about nature, in a form of ecological democracy. Rather than seeking to determine in advance which perspective is true, we should focus on identifying the kind of features society should have if we are to maximize the chances of this pluralism resulting in both beneficial mutual critique and pragmatic compromise. This would involve moving to a different model of agreement over nature: assuming not that the pre-social singularity of nature guarantees agreement, but that out of social disagreement a more adequate engagement with nature may emerge (see also Latour 2004).

In the rest of the article, I first argue that within such social theoretical understandings of the contemporary politics of nature is a tension between pagan and Christian understandings of difference — difference of perspective, of identity, of values — that is, between an understanding of difference as fundamentally irreducible and irreconcilable, and one that sees difference as contained within an overarching harmony. However, I also distinguish between an orthodox Christian understanding of eschatology as endlessly deferred, and a heretical, realized eschatology in which difference would be abolished. Secondly, I contest an account of postmodern difference which would see it as the resurgence of a pagan polytheism which had merely suppressed by two millennia of monotheism, in favour of an alternative account in which it appears as a historical product of the contingent path taken by the development of the Western sacred. Thirdly, using the work of John Milbank I explore ways in which orthodox Christian thought offers an ontology of original peace in contrast to the original violence of pagan ontology. I argue that such an ontology could form the basis for a different understanding of ecological democracy, one in which consensus is not grounded in the suppression of polysemy, the arbitrary foreclosure of meaning, but in the harmonization of generative difference. I suggest that such an ecological democracy would involve the cultivation of an associational society, one built of overlapping communities of ecological virtue.

_Ulrich Beck and Klaus Eder_

Ulrich Beck established himself as one of the key social theorists of the contemporary environmental problematic with the publication in 1986 of _Risikogesellschaft_, which appeared in English as _Risk Society_ in 1992. Beck’s thesis, developed in a host of other publications since, and much debated in wider society, is that contemporary technological risks have
become the key organizing factor in contemporary society. Where earlier, industrial society was organized around the problem of the distribution of goods, in contemporary society the key question is that posed by the distribution and avoidance of risks or ‘bads’. For Beck the effects of such risks stretch far beyond physical realm; they impact on society (in terms of the capacity of the major institutions of society to proceed with business as usual), but also on the everyday lifeworld and human consciousness itself. Indeed, so pervasive are the effects of risk that Beck suggests we should see ourselves as living in a distinct kind of society, one that he calls ‘risk society’.

For Beck, a reflexive form of modernity is generated by a growing awareness of the ecological contradictions of modernity, its unanticipated, self-endangering consequences. But reflexive modernity is also engendered by more pervasive structural changes in modern societies. Beck insists that industrial or ‘simple’ modernity was never completely modern. Industrial society was always a transitional but ultimately unstable hybrid between traditional and modern social forms—part feudal, part industrial. The liberating effects of the labour market of industrial modernity always operated in tension with the solidity of traditional gender roles and class cultures, and the development of cognitive reflexivity was held in check by the concentration of epistemic authority in the new priesthood of expert institutions. However, the working through of these contradictions are progressively eroding the last vestiges of traditionality in modern society (1992: 89). For Beck this emergence of reflexive modernity constitutes nothing less than a ‘second Reformation’, as processes of individualisation free up individuals from their embedding in institutions. ‘People are set free from the certainties and modes of living of the industrial epoch—just as they were “freed” from the arms of the Church into society during the age of the Reformation’ (1992: 14).

Under such conditions, all ideas of nature are contested; for Beck the core of environmentalist thought is not to be found in particular dogmatic claims about nature but the freeing up from dogmatic claims. Beck suggests the lineaments of a kind of society which would allow the free circulation of claims about risk, which might generate the necessary reflexivity to minimize the self-endangerment of society. An ecological democracy needs international treaties, in order to co-ordinate national responses to transnational problems; it also needs a ‘subpolitics’ outside representative institutions, a cultural politics which would incorporate everyday life, the global symbols of the mass media, and new linkages and coalitions within civil society. But for such a subpolitics to function effectively, other preconditions are necessary: an independent judiciary
and mass media, active, critical citizens and consumers, the institutionally protected self-criticism of professions and institutions, and new semi-public fora (Beck 1997).

Klaus Eder (1996) offers what is on the surface a broadly consistent theoretical analysis of contemporary environmentalism; however, he recognizes that any plausible account of ecological morality has to acknowledge an irreducibly symbolic, cultural element to ideas and ethics of nature. Eder too makes links between what he calls contemporary ‘ecological reason’ and the Protestant tradition. For Eder, ecological reason is still ultimately rooted in a utilitarian approach to nature, but one now ‘enlightened’ by an ecological awareness of the prudential reasons to protect nature for human benefit. It is thus a further rationalization of the instrumental relation to nature promoted by Protestantism. However, he also acknowledges a disjunction between ecological reason and ecological morality: between an ecologically enlightened instrumental rationality, and the traditions and customs which actually shape people’s dealings with nature. The reason for this is the hidden cultural codes that shape our practical relations with nature. So Eder acknowledges that there is always an unthematisable symbolic basis to society—in practice we operate in accordance not with an abstract ecological rationality but with a concrete ecological morality informed by unexamined symbols and metaphors.

Yet at the same time Eder does not want to lapse into a Burkean conservatism by wholly abandoning the modernist hope of finding moral principles transcending de facto social mores (Burke 1968). Instead he wants to suggest that the very awareness of the ineradicable plurality of truth claims in modern society can itself bring a kind of reflexivity. If Eder’s ‘ecological enlightenment’ is emerging as he claims it is, there will not be any agreed substantive ethic which will tell us how to act in relation to nature, but there will be an agreed procedural ethic which will tell us how competing visions can most productively engage with each other (Eder 1996: 183-84). Eder describes this as ‘post-environmentalism’, a form of environmentalism that has become ‘political’ in the specific sense of being aware of the contingency of its own claims. He identifies two main preconditions for its institutionalization in modern societies. First, a new environmentalist ‘master frame’, a set of background assumptions and symbolic meanings, has to displace the industrialist one that has organized public discourse for the last two centuries (Eder argues that this is indeed occurring (1996: 162-91)). Secondly, a growing awareness of the postmodernization of nature means that society has to develop a distributed, procedural approach to regulating the human–nature relationship. Given the contested character of descriptive and
normative claims about nature, the state can no longer act as an objective arbiter, setting the limits to societal behaviour regarding the environment. Instead, what is needed is a complex interorganizational field, crossing the domains of the economy, the state and civil society, within which agreed procedures will serve to co-ordinate the agonistic identities and incommensurable rationalities of different societal actors (Eder 1996: 205-12).

There is much in the accounts of Beck and Eder which I would endorse. Both have contributed greatly to our theoretical understanding of the character of human–nature relations in contemporary society. However, I want to suggest that the work of both theorists is compromised by unexamined theological assumptions. Beck’s idea of reflexive modernity itself draws on a fundamentally religious image, yet one drawn from Christian heresy. In the twelfth century Joachim of Fiore propounded a view of salvation history which divided time into the ages of the Father (the law), of the Son (the gospel), and of the Spirit, an age of freedom in which humanity would have a direct, inner access to knowledge of God (Burrell 1983: 257). In the final epoch individuals will be released into Spirit, and know divine truth without the need of any intermediaries, even Christ. This spiritualized eschatology—one also recognizable in Hegel’s idea of Absolute Spirit (Hegel 1977), and in Habermas’ account of the ideal speech situation (Habermas 1987)—seems also to inform the more chiliastic moments in Beck’s reading of environmentalism, as individuals are delivered from the revealed religion of industrial, scientific modernity into the immediacy of reflexive modernity. It is Christian, in its insistence of the possibility of a peace grounded in unmediated knowledge, of seeing ‘face-to-face’ (1 Cor. 13.12); but it is heretical in its rejection of the eschatological, messianic nature of our time, of the insistence that we are suspended between the incarnation and the deferred eschaton.3

For his part, Eder has an approach to orderings of the sacred which locate them as cultural phenomena within society, rather than seeing the social itself as constituted through an ordering of the sacred. But, ironically, this move does in fact reinstate and privilege a particular ordering of the sacred—that of pagan polytheism, with its ontology of original violence. Here Eder seems to be relying on an implicit historical narrative about the emergence of postmodern plurality whereby the retreat of hegemonic, organized religion in Western society releases an

3. Ulrich Beck is a writer who is not always concerned to offer a single coherent position. Here for the sake of simplicity I am emphasizing a particular side of Beck’s writing, one which is closer to Habermas than to Eder.
inherent polytheism in beliefs and values concerning nature. And in the context of the resultant postmodern social ontology of competing world-views, the only plausible form of environmental politics seems to be a highly agonistic version of environmental pragmatism, where a basically market model of co-ordination is relied upon to generate societal ecological virtue from the self-interest of individuals and corporations.

So, for Beck the postmodern ecological condition is rendered in Christian but heretical, Joachimite terms, as realized eschatology. For Eder, by contrast, postmodern difference is nothing but the uncovering of an original pagan difference. I want to suggest an alternative account, one that is theologically closer to Beck than to Eder but retains a yet more orthodox theological position. In the next two sections, I first argue that the contemporary plurality of understandings of nature can be seen not as an originary paganism filling the gap left by the withdrawal of the Western, monotheistic sacred, but as the result of a contingent move within the latter’s history. Secondly, I reject both Beck and Eder’s shared understanding of ecological democracy as the secular mediation of plural sacralizations of nature, arguing instead for a post-secular, liturgical model of ecological democracy.

Postmodernity and the History of the Western Sacred

In a 1918 speech later published as ‘Science as a vocation’, Max Weber suggested that modern cultural conditions can seem to effect a return to polytheism, but one now rooted less in forces outside ourselves and more in the irreconcilable nature of different societal subsystems and different subjective points of view. ‘The many gods of old’, he suggested, ‘without their magic and therefore in the form of impersonal forces, rise up from their graves, strive for power over our lives and begin once more their eternal struggle amongst themselves’ (Weber 1989: 22-23). Weber here articulates a theme common to many writers on the plurality of modern nature(s). It is as if the monotheistic roots of modern science had bequeathed to it the idea of a singular truth, holding in check the proliferation of alternative understandings of nature. But then, as Beck argued, in the ‘second Reformation’ of the late twentieth century the single vision of modern science was increasingly displaced by the polytheistic plurality characteristic of the Greek polis; nature was taken out of the hidden semi-private realm of scientific institutions, brought into public view, and restored to its original multiplicity.

And it is certainly true that historic religions such as Christianity introduced a new concept of singular truth to humanity’s experience of the sacred. In a radical shift in the understanding of the sacred which
occurred across Europe and Asia in the centuries following 800 BCE, in what Karl Jaspers calls the axial age (Jaspers 1953), the cosmological monism of earlier religion was progressively reordered around a dualistic distinction between ‘this’ world and a transcendent reality understood to exist ‘above’ it. The historic religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism, were all in some way religions of dualism and world-rejection, involving a turning away from the empirical world, whether through conforming to religious law, through a sacramental system or through mystical exercise (Bellah 1970: 32-36). And this breaching of a previously unified immanent sacral order and the idea of a transcendent foundation or source for all reality brought for the first time the possibility of philosophical thought about Being—of what Marcel Gauchet calls ‘thinking the “One”’ (Gauchet 1997: 48).

However, the very same moment that the notion of the ‘One’ emerged, laying the ground for the later development of philosophical and scientific thought, also marked the point at which the empirical human individual was born, a development of which the contemporary postmodern condition is a contingent product. The axial religions in effect all in their different ways posited a transcendent non-empirical reference point to which all humans have a shared relationship: all humans are created; are capable of salvation or enlightenment; or are bound by the same moral law. But the Christian revelation in particular involved a transformation of the sacred which was a precondition for the later emergence of the distinctively modern individual, by creating a distance of individuals from the social bond. Unlike the warrior Messiahs predicted by many Jewish cults, Jesus was an ‘inverted Messiah’, in whom divine power was identified not with the highest, the sovereign, but the lowest, the weak and excluded. In contrast to the ideas of divine kingship characteristic of archaic forms of the sacred, this implied not a continuity but a radical gulf between natural and supernatural realms. Similarly, while a traditional Messiah would have preached war, and thus reaffirmed the primacy of the empirical collective, Christ preached love and peace, constituting a radically new interiority to human experience. Similarly, the infinite distance of the Christian God and the refusal of the demonstrations of magical power characteristic of earlier, ‘archaic’ forms of the sacred demands of the individual acts of faith and

4. There are clearly other, equally complex stories to be told about the transformations of the sacred that occurred in other, non-Western societies. However, my focus here is on that particular branching path in the development of the sacred which led to modern and postmodern society — and that is one in which the Christian epoch has played a crucial role.
conversion based on the denial and surpassing of the senses. And this radical separation of the Christian from communal sociality was counterbalanced by the apocalyptic expectation that worldly and divine power would be merged in the Second Coming, an expectation that was eventually converted into a continuously deferred, eschatological fusion of the two kingdoms of the human and the divine (Gauchet 1997: 118-24).

Gauchet describes how this new ordering of the sacred brought forth correspondingly new forms of collective being, where distanced individuals were gathered together into a salvation community distinct from political power—the Church. The Incarnation had taken a form which opened up a yawning gap between divine and earthly truth; the Church at once symbolized and promised to fill that gap by organizing dogma and policing souls. As Gauchet puts it, ‘what legitimated the Church’s existence—the human understanding’s uncertainty about revealed truth—simultaneously justifies challenging its authority’ (Gauchet 1997: 137). At the same time, the separation of sacred and earthly authority did not just put the Christian in tension between what Augustine (1960–72) called the two cities of man and God; the very existence of the Church and its continual tension with worldly administration showed how the absolute otherness of God meant that there could not be one legitimate worldly order (Gauchet 1997: 120-22, 130-44). The division of imperatives between outward belonging and inward distancing from worldly power, the emphasis on the impossibility of certain knowledge of spiritual truth, and the demands of salvation thus started to shape what would become the modern individual. The Gospels were not just a collective, canonical ritual but an address by God to each individual (Gadamer 1975: 427); individuals were thus thrown back on themselves to make sense of the sacral truths in terms of their own inner understanding. Similarly, the breaking of the connection between divine and earthly rule gave the individual the right to withdraw assent from worldly power, helping constitute the individual as a centre of experience, consciousness and judgement in their own right.

However, the Reformation represents a further decisive stage in the development of modern subjectivity. Following Weber (1930), Bellah (1970) describes the way that the Reformation flattened out the hierarchies in both the material and supernal worlds, so that the relation between the two worlds was no longer mediated through heavenly or earthly intermediaries. The service of God came to be thought of not in terms of specialized sacramental, ascetic and devotional acts but as an inner orientation, the sense of a divine command that had to be acted out in all areas of this profane life. This formulation allowed the centred self of the axial, monotheistic sacred to operate outside of world-denying
practices, amidst the complexities of empirical social reality. And as the sense of spiritual power and semiotic meaning in the natural world grew yet feebler in the eighteenth century, the recognizably modern individual emerged, understood as controlled by impulses coming from within. Tracing changes in the English language over the next two centuries, Owen Barfield describes this as a process of ‘internalisation’, ‘the shifting of the centre of gravity of consciousness from the cosmos around him into the personal human being himself’. ‘All this time’, Barfield writes, ‘the European “ego” appears to be engaged, unawares, in disentangling itself from its environment—becoming less and less of the actor, more and more of both the author and the spectator’ (Barfield 1954: 166-67).

Against the background of this historical trajectory, the contemporary postmodern sacred appears radically different to pre-monotheistic forms of the sacred. Primal and archaic forms of the sacred were experienced as an agreed, unified, monistic cosmos, albeit one populated by plural supernatural powers; the postmodern sacred, by contrast, consists of a ‘multiplex’ reality, one filled with and constituted by different cosmologies and worldviews grounded in subjective experience (Bellah 1970). Rather than religion and cosmology—including ideas of nature—determining who people thought they were and how they experienced the world, in the contemporary, postmodern sacred people feel obliged to fashion or choose religious and cosmological ideas on the basis of their own subjective experience—what ‘feels right’ to them (cf. Heelas 1996; Roof 1999). With the abandonment of the doctrinal certainties and Puritan character ideals of early modern religion, culture and personality are seen as endlessly revisable, and answers to religious questions are sought not just in Scripture but in art, thought and social practices (Gauchet 1997: 200-207; Lee and Ackerman 2002). Religious action thus becomes even more demanding than it was for the Puritans, with a growing imperative for each individual to work out their own religious and spiritual meanings, whether inside or outside the structures of organized religion (Bellah 1970: 39-44). And under these conditions it is the ‘aesthetic community’ that is the paradigm form of sociality—a community that ‘has no other foundation to rest on but widely shared agreement, explicit or tacit’, that is ‘woven entirely from the friable threads of subjective judgements’ (Bauman 2001: 65).

What is striking here is the way that in the postmodern condition the multiple orderings of the sacred are grounded in the very empirical, individual subjectivities that were made possible by the distinctive Western sacral history sketched above.5 Postmodern plurality can thus

5. For a more detailed treatment of this sacral history, see Szerszynski (2004).
be seen not as a resurgence of a paganism merely suppressed by Christian monotheism, but as a contingent product of Christian history itself. However, what this still does not elucidate is how we got from the mediaeval to the postmodern condition; how what was once the Christian’s mere interior distancing from the social bond became radicalized to the point that it became the grounding for a subjectivized, relativized understanding of reality; how what was once simply the space in which the believer had to come to their own understanding of the truths of the gospel, became the imperative to choose and invent one’s own cosmology.

This is a complex issue which can only be touched upon here. Part of the story must involve the emergence during the twentieth century of consumer capitalism, a form of life which authorizes the subject as the sovereign of their own desires and projects. However, a more fundamental shift that laid the ground for the later emergence of postmodern subjectivity is a radical alteration in the understanding of sovereign rule, both in God and humanity, which occurred at about the time of the Reformation. The Protestant reformers rejected mediaeval organicism and the idea of any intermediary at all between the individual and God, except for the Bible and Christ himself. And they did so through a refashioning of the understanding of how God rules his cosmos. As Michael Walzer puts it, ‘the Calvinist God…establishes his own omnipotence by levelling the cosmos, by destroying the intermediate power of the angels, of the Blessed Virgin and the saints, of the pope, the bishops, and finally even the king’. Like the absolute monarch who simply sits at the centre and commands, thereby diminishing rather than increasing the being of his subjects, the voluntarist God reigns as a despot over ‘a single, unified domain’, and all beings and institutions only have powers in as far as he continuously bestows them (Walzer 1968: 152). Divine rule over creation, like the political rule of an absolute monarch over his subjects, was no longer seen in the donative terms in which it was conceived in mediaeval thought; no longer was rulership the partial giving away of power in the very moment of its exercise (Milbank 2004). The rise of this highly voluntarist model of divine and earthly rulership went hand in hand with the emergence of the ‘sovereign subject’, in

6. Hannah Arendt traces the historical emergence of such ideas of political rule. She argues that ancient languages had two words for action, one meaning ‘to initiate’, the other ‘to achieve’. Such language, she argues, emphasized the intersubjective nature of political action, and the essential dependency of the ruler on others. However, over time such concepts became radically split; in the political sphere, this shift was manifest in a sharp distinction between commander and commanded (Arendt 1958: 188-90).
which subjectivity is not gift but given. And the postmodern social condition to which Eder gives a pagan reading can be seen as a further development of this heretical offshoot of Western monotheism. Like the voluntarist God, the postmodern subject has absolute, incorrigible power over their own reality; whatever they feel is the case, is, to them, the case. Secured neither by the sensus communis of premodern thought, nor by modernist reference to an extra-linguistic reality, agreement can only be the contingent, accidental harmony of isolated, sovereign subjectivities.

*Code of Violence, Code of Peace*

In the first main section of this article I argued that underpinning Eder’s analysis of postmodern nature is a narrative which understands it as the resurgence of an originary pagan difference, in contrast to the positions taken by Beck and Habermas, who in different ways see contemporary conflicts over nature as a benign result of the progressive development of reason in Western societies. Eder’s fundamentally pagan social ontology avoids the angelic excesses of such realized eschatologies, with their assumptions about the possibility of uncoerced consensus on facts and norms. Nevertheless, I argued, Eder’s analysis constrains the possibilities for ecological democracy, casting it in the terms of agonistic relations between fundamentally irreconcilable positions, which can only be coordinated through procedural mechanisms such as markets and negotiations. Then, in the next section, I sketched an alternative narrative for the genesis of postmodern difference, one that understands it as the product of a heretical trajectory within a basically Christian horizon. In the current section I want to start to explore the implications of this re-reading of postmodern difference, suggesting that it suggests different possibilities for the understanding of ecological democracy.

Eder (1996: 107-39) himself recognizes something like the Christian/pagan contrast I am making here, by identifying two cultural codes that he suggests have organized European culture during the last two millennia. The dominant one, he suggests, has been the carnivorous one characteristic of archaic cultures, where solidarity between human and human, and between humans and the gods, was secured through the sacrificial feast. This ‘bloody’ cultural code uses sacrifice and eating to affirm the social order; participation in the meal signifies membership of the community, and the eating of clean or unclean meat defines one’s position in the social hierarchy. Underlying the elitist, exclusionary forms of republicanism characteristic of the Greek polis (Brunkhorst 2000; Detienne and Vernant 1989), this code also runs through much of European history (Elias 1978). However, he also identifies an alternative,
‘bloodless’ cultural code that weaves through Western culture, usually surviving in religious minorities such as the Jews and the Pythagoreans and certain Christian groups. From the Pythagoreans onwards, the practice of vegetarianism has been used to negate the carnivorous code underlying the social order; eating neither unclean nor clean meat, religious groups—and many social movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—have used vegetarianism to ground sociality outside the dominant social order, in relation to a transcendent reality or to an Edenic state of nature.

Eder identifies Hebrew thought as having played an important role in this counter-tradition, particularly in the case of the slowly emerging prohibition against killing in Hebrew, and later in Christian society, as prefigured in the non-sacrifice of Abraham’s son Isaac. Eder sees this as the emergence of a form of consensus based on discourse and agreement rather than power. Eder’s claim that the discursive co-ordination of society, and hence democracy, have roots that are more Hebrew than Greek, is a complex one that cannot be fully explored here. Yet the shift towards the word rather than blood and de facto might as the mediator of divine and social power is a development that can be traced in both Jewish and Christian religious history. This development leads away from the tribal deity and towards a more universal, transcendent divine—and towards a recognition of the power of language to secure social harmony without the prior existence of customary, tribal solidarities.

It is certainly striking that when environmentalism reaches to Greek thought, or indeed to other forms of paganism, these are usually ‘unbloodied’ by being hybridized with elements from the biblical tradition (Szerszynski 2004). Political ecology is dominated by the Edenic, vegetarian image as a determining ideal, whether in anthropocentric notions of stewardship or more biocentric ideas of peaceful coexistence. And this idea of a peaceful, egalitarian relationship with nature depends to a great extent on changes in the conception of the social bond—and the idea of and relationship with nature that symbolically underwrote that bond—that occurred in the Christian era. The elitism of the Greek republican tradition, where freedom is the possession of equal, male, property-owning members of a political community, was symbolized by the violent appropriation and exploitation of nature (whether animal or slave). This was softened by the Augustinian notion of the abstract and universal human being, inherently possessing freedom in its God-like capacity to create new beginnings ex nihilo (Brunkhorst 2000), and by a model of the social bond between humans and that with God as being mediated primarily by the word rather than violence, predation and power.
John Milbank argues that it was Augustine in *The City of God* who first and best identified what here we are referring to as Eder’s two codes— one the universal sway of antagonism, heroism and violence that is common to all cultures, and the other the radically unique City of God, with its rule of peace (Augustine 1960–72). Whereas Eder sees the two codes as empirical cultural currents struggling against each other within the social order, evolutionary theorists such as Habermas and Beck, like their predecessors Hegel and Marx, see the code of peace emerging dialectically *out of* the code of antagonism. However, Augustine offers yet another interpretation, one that sees the rule of peace as breaking into the empirical world from outside, with no internal connection to the archaic rule of antagonism. Milbank points out that in the classic pagan *mythos* of order, such as that of the founding of Rome, the provider of order is always the usurper of the prior order (the slayer, for example, of the earlier ruler of the gods), and simply stays the hand of a primordial violence through their singular violence, and through founding the walls of the city. By contrast, the monotheistic deity ‘originates all finite reality in an act of peaceful donation, willing a new fellowship with himself and amongst the beings he has created’ (Milbank 1990: 391). Peace in the City of God is not just a contingent achievement within the city walls; it is coterminous with Being itself.

Yet the City of God is a nomad city, one whose walls are never—*pace* Beck and Habermas— to be constructed in finite time. To follow Paul and Augustine in understanding our time as in suspension between the Incarnation and the Eschaton would be to encourage a different model of community and politics. A model of ecological democracy that embraces such an Augustinian understanding of postmodern difference would involve a refusal of the pagan ontology of an originary antagonism between irreconcilable ideas of nature that can be merely ‘stayed’ through secular procedures of reconciliation. But it would also involve a refusal of any realized eschatology that imagined it to be possible to achieve an unforced consensus, an agreement on facts and norms that emerges non-violently from the operation of public reason and which can then coordinate the action of all. Instead, an Augustinian ecological democracy would involve a ‘musical’ understanding of difference, one that harmonizes without seeking to erase difference (Milbank 1991:227-29).

Thus, rather than procedures to stay the violence of postmodern difference, we need to build a society whose structures are consistent with the Christian vision of ontological peace. This requires a return not to Christian dogma but to the kind of ontology offered by the Christian *mythos*. Milbank suggests that an adequate political response to the horrors of the twentieth century requires a revival of the complex,
‘gothic’ space that was imperfectly realized in the monasteries and guilds of the late middle ages (Milbank 1997: 268-92). Whereas liberal social space is simple, organized around the contrast between simple, atomised individuals and the absolute sovereign at the centre, gothic social space is complex in its myriad of organic wholes, in which freedom is properly a properties of groups as well as individuals, but in which membership has an irreducible ‘aesthetic’ component that cannot be reduced to rational conviction. In gothic space, ‘not only does the whole exceed the sum of the parts, also the parts escape the totalizing grasp of the whole’ (1997: 276). An ecological democracy based on such a complex space would be an associational polity in which the pursuit of ecological virtue was neither left to the abstract systems and procedures of market and technical mechanisms, nor consigned to the relativistic sublimes of postmodern subjectivity, but consisted in the proliferation of associational forms of life which were each understood to be a response to the gift of being, and in ‘musical’ harmony with each other. Such a model of ecological democracy would not foreclose the generative, world-disclosing power of language, either by seeking to overcome difference in substantive consensus (as would Beck in his more Habermasian moments), or by reifying it through processes of toleration or negotiation (Eder). The ‘consensus’ it would be oriented toward would not be an agreement arrived at through argumentation or compromise but something more like a movement, an awareness and conciliation of difference within a harmonious whole.

Conclusion

At the moment that the ancient Hebrews first identified their tribal god with the creator of the world, a path was opened up which potentially led from the violence of the archaic sacred to the possibility of a global polity. Until then, supernatural agency had been local, particular, and within the world; any sense of a cosmic creator was as a distant immaterial speculation, of no significance to the world and experience of human beings. Judaism brought about a profound transformation by bringing these two religious ideas together, thus investing the foreground of religious life with cosmic significance. Christianity worked the logic of this move out in a particular direction by insisting in a more thoroughgoing way that the God of the Jews must be the God of all peoples. Rome found the new, universalized religion more fitting than its local gods to its experience as an imperial power. Mediaeval Christianity took all too seriously the idea that their religion was catholicus – a universal religion, a faith that all should be made to embrace. From the sixteenth century,
Protestantism sought to further radicalize the transcendence of God; but, by pushing the divine further away from involvement in the everyday world, the Reformation did not effect a return to the remote creator god of archaic cultures, however much the absent God of Deism might resemble him. In the heart and mind of the individual, God loomed larger then ever.

But in time, the public world did indeed seem to fill up again with the lesser gods of old, as the market encouraged the proliferation of individual desires and gave them absolute authority within their domain. Thus, at the same time that science and technology imposed a new form of enchantment on nature, one which constituted it merely as ‘standing reserve’ for exploitation and transformation, a space for competing sacralisations of nature opened up, grounded in the sovereign subjectivity of the postmodern self. So the dual situation identified by Roberts in this issue of *Ecotheology*—that of the management of nature by global managerial capitalism on the one hand, and a number of competing sacralisations of nature on the other—might feel like a sterile but inevitable historical impasse; suspended between the ‘technological sublime’ of global managerialism, and the ‘ludic sublime’ of ultimately ineffective alternative spiritualities.

Yet as I have tried to argue in this article, careful attention to the character and genesis of our cultural condition suggests ways in which theological reflection can re-diagnose our situation, and different ways of conceiving ecological democracy. As Beck (1998) himself puts it, the global society is ‘a democracy without enemies’; there is now no boundary between inside and outside, between Christendom and the pagans, between capitalism and communism. Yet this does not make society unified—far from it. This is not a society made infinite, sublime, guided perfectly by reason. It is a society without an outside, but it is still finite; its members can still only know and act from within the world, not as God from outside. Their vision is still multiple, partial, divided, and problems such as poverty and environmental degradation will never wholly be overcome. Yet now, more than ever, such problems have to be embraced, since global society has no ‘outside or deferred future on to which the rejected, the unwanted, the disowned effects of progress can be displaced’ (Franklin et al. 2000: 28-32). With no division between inside and outside, the divisions are now within the social body. And now, more than ever, we need to seek forms of social ordering that neither erase nor reify difference—for which we need an ontology in which difference signifies not a state of original violence between sovereign beings, but the shared, harmonious freedom we have by virtue of the divine act of donation of Being.
Beck suggests that the crucial division in contemporary society is between those committed to the technological mastery of nature, and those committed to making our relations with nature more reflexive (Beck 1998). But this is to turn reflexivity into a competing position within the social body, rather than, as Beck himself insists elsewhere, a property of a social body organized in a way that social authority is not centralized but distributed (Beck 1996). The kind of reflexivity needed is one that cannot be claimed by any one actor within the social, as if a kind of enlightenment. It has to emerge in the interactions that take place between actors in society. But neither can this reflexivity be provided for by institutional forms. The institutional reorganization of society in terms of deliberative democracy, whether along the lines argued for by Beck (1995), Eder (1996) or even Latour (2004), can only help, by opening up the epistemological and legislative organs of society to contestatory voices. But such changes can never by themselves guarantee the free flow of speech necessary for a societal co-ordination that transcends archaic, pagan violence, something which must sometimes move outside institutional forms to flourish.

As Eder argues, societal reflexivity is a procedural rationality that rises above the substantive rationalities embedded in competing sacralizations of nature (Eder 1996: 205). Yet as I have argued above the reflexive society itself needs to be seen as an ordering of the sacred, one which subsumes but does not erase the plurality of ancient Greek polytheism and democracy within the idea of harmonious agreement promised by Christian thought. Such an ordering of the sacred is one grounded in an understanding of a generous, transcendent deity founding an original peace in the very act of donating being, and requires the construction of an associational society capable of supporting the harmonious form of community that this act of donation calls forth from the creatures. If we are to have a genuine pluralist politics of nature and technology, we need a better understanding of this form of the sacred, one which is at best struggling to establish itself in contemporary society.

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