

Eco-theology and losing the sacred

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ABSTRACT

Within an eco-theological context Christianity, more specifically Protestantism, has been blamed for our current ecological crisis due to the fact that it has lost its sense of the sacred. The purpose of this article is to explore how this de-sacralisation or disenchantment of nature may be linked to a specific cosmology or worldview and the theological implications such a loss of the sacred may have on the eco-theological debate. It is concluded that it is not possible to regain a sense of the sacred, except if one is willing to revert back to a pre-Renaissance magico-mythical worldview and that eco-theologians should rather search for more appropriate metaphors when arguing for the conservation of the environment.

A PURPOSE¹

The view of the historian Lynn White, that the Judaeo-Christian concept of dominion over nature (Gen 1:28) is partly to blame for our ecological crisis, is well-known amongst eco-theologians.² Lesser known is White's view that the loss of the concept of sacredness within Christianity was equally to blame for the destruction of the environment. He formulated it as follows:

To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West.³

Peter Berger later qualified this view by saying that it was not so much Christianity as a whole, but Protestantism and Calvinism specifically that "reduced" religion and estranged itself from nature:

¹ This article closely links with some comments made in a previous article: Peet J. van Dyk, "Challenges in the search for an ecotheology," *Old Testament Essays* 22/1 (2009): 186-204.

² Cf. Lynn White, "The historical roots of our ecological crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207; James A. Loader, "Image and order: Old Testament perspectives on the ecological crisis," in *Are we killing God's earth?* (ed. Willem Vorster. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1987), 6-28; Van Dyk, "Challenges," 189; and Gunther Wittenberg, "In search of the right metaphor: A response to Peet van Dyk's 'Challenges in the search for an ecotheology': Part One: Metaphor and dominion," *Old Testament Essays* 23/2 (2010): 429.

³ White, "Historical roots," 1203.

If compared with the “fullness” of the Catholic universe, Protestantism appears as a radical truncation, a reduction to “essentials” at the expense of a vast wealth of religious contents. This is especially true of the Calvinist version. It can be said that Protestantism divested itself as much as possible from the three most ancient and most powerful concomitants of the sacred – mystery, miracle and magic. This process has been aptly caught in the phrase “*disenchantment of the world*.” The protestant believer no longer lives in a world ongoingly penetrated by sacred beings and forces (emphasis added - PJvD).⁴

Within the eco-theological context Creegan has more recently taken up these criticisms and suggested that it was the influence of the Renaissance on Protestantism that facilitated this so-called “disenchantment” or de-sacralisation of nature.⁵

The *purpose* of this article is to explore the reasons which led to the de-sacralisation or disenchantment of nature within Protestantism. It further wishes to explore the possible theological implications such a loss of the sacred may have on eco-theology, or if one has to agree with neo-paganists such as Daniel Quinn⁶ that one should try and regain a sense of the sacred.

To answer the above questions it is necessary first to clarify the concept of sacredness and explore its possible relatedness to the concept of enchantment. This investigation will be done primarily from an Old Testament perspective, but will include a more general discussion of the history of religion and how the change in cosmology or worldview during the Renaissance has led to the loss of the sacred.

B SACREDNESS AND ENCHANTMENT

At first glance many scholars would deny any link between the two concepts of sacredness and enchantment: reserving them either for religion or alternatively for a so-called “primitive” belief in magic respectively. However, it has been argued extensively and convincingly by various scholars of religion, that this absolute distinction between religion and magic is untenable, and their argu-

⁴ Peter Berger, *The Sacred canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

⁵ The Judaeo-Christian tradition and Protestantism are not the only culprits blamed for the disenchantment of nature. Other scholars have also blamed the Renaissance, the Constantine church, the Thomistic emphasis on secondary causation, and/or on Descartes’ dualism cf. Nicola H. Creegan, “Theological foundations of the ecological crisis,” *Stimulus* 12/4 (2004): 30-34.

⁶ Daniel Quinn, *The Story of B* (New York: Bantam 1996); and Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael: An Adventure of Mind and Spirit* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998).

ments therefore need not to be repeated here.⁷ If the sacred and the enchanted do not belong to two mutually exclusive categories of religion versus magic, then it begs the question how the sacred and the enchanted may relate to one another.

1 Defining enchantment

The term “enchants” (or enchanted) may be defined in a twofold way: Firstly, as “*delight; charm*”; and secondly, as “*put under a magical spell, or something which is under a magical spell*”.⁸ The first meaning agrees with the more common usage of the term today – referring to anything delightful or charming, without any underlying assumptions regarding magical forces that may be operating in the universe. One can call this popular usage the *secular* meaning of enchantment.

The second definition of the term reflects the more *technical* usage, which assumes a kind of magical spell. For example, enchantment may be used to describe an enchanted forest, associated with magical spells.⁹ This technical definition of enchantment specifically assumes supernatural magical forces, which may enchant (or place a spell on) a forest or an object. As such an enchanted place or object is perceived as being linked to supernatural magical forces, which forms an alternative system of cause and effect, going beyond the natural set of causes and effects.¹⁰

It should further be appreciated that traditional folklore (e.g. traditional fairy tales, myths, legends and folksaga), are inseparably linked to a belief in magic and thereby with what could be called a *magico-mythical cosmology* or worldview. In this article I will restrict my usage of the term “enchantment” to

⁷ E.g. Hans-Günter Heimbrock, “Magie, Alltagsreligion und die Heilkraft des Glaubens. Etappen und Probleme theologischer und kulturwissenschaftlicher Magiediskussion,” in *Magie. Katastrophenreligion und Kritik des Glaubens* (eds. Hans-Günther Heimbrock and Heinz Streib, Kampen: Kok, Pharos, 1994), 15-19; Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 8; and Peet J. van Dyk, “Magic, myth and monotheism when reading Genesis 30:37-39,” *Old Testament Essays* 23/2, (2010): 381.

⁸ Free dictionary, “Enchantment,” n.p. Free Dictionary [Cited 25 September 2010]. Online: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/enchantment>.

⁹ Cf. Helen Pilinovski, “Spells of Enchantment: The Fairy Tale Cycle,” n.p. [cited 13 September 2010]. Online: <http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rrSpells.html>.

¹⁰ Cf. Peet J. van Dyk, “Mythical linkage and mythical frameworks,” *Old Testament Essays* 18/1 (2005): 863-878; and Peet J. Van Dyk, “Creation, temple and magic. A magico-mythical reading of Genesis 1,” *Old Testament Essays* 22/2 (2009): 422-436.

the technical meaning, where both narrator and listener believed in the *real* existence and power of enchantment and magic.¹¹

2 The sacred

One of the most common mistakes of modern (Post-Enlightenment) readers is not to recognise, what Gadamer calls the “otherness” of traditional (Pre-Enlightenment) texts:¹² that is, to assume a modern scientific cosmology for an ancient text, instead of a magico-mythical one.¹³ When mistakenly adhering to this “*fallacy of a supposed modern cosmology*” it is equally simple to miss the links which exist between the concept of sacredness and that of enchantment and between the sacred and a magico-mythical cosmology. For this reason it is necessary to go into a detailed exploration of how sacred objects, places, times and rituals were understood within a magico-mythical framework (e.g. within the Old Testament) and hence the possible magical assumptions regarding the sacred.

C IDENTIFYING MAGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

By using the criteria proposed by Van Dyk to identify magical assumptions one can expose possible magical undertones with regard to the sacred.¹⁴ The following discussion deals with each criterion separately, although one should appreciate that they are all closely linked to each other.

1 A linkage process

In his study on the sacred, Eliade described the sacred as the “*ganz andere*” – as something totally different and distinct from the profane or from natural realities.¹⁵ The sacred is thereby revealed as a reality not from this world, in the sense that a sacred object (e.g. a stone or a tree) is not about the stone or the

¹¹ Modern genres which include a belief in magic, e.g. Lord of the Rings and the Harry Potter series, are totally different phenomena than traditional folklore, because they do not necessarily assume a real belief in magic, but merely expect from the reader to *temporarily suspend* their disbelief in magic. Cf. Phrase finder, “Suspension of disbelief,” n.p. [cited 25 September 2010]. Online: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/suspension-of-disbelief.html>. It describes this process as follows: “The temporary acceptance as believable of events or characters that would ordinarily be seen as incredible. This is usually to allow an audience to appreciate works of literature or drama that are exploring unusual ideas.”

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*. 2nd Edition. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 305-306.

¹³ Peet J. van Dyk, “Magic, myth and monotheism,” 378-405.

¹⁴ Van Dyk, “Magic, myth and monotheism,” 389-390.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane* (Hamburg: Rowohlt 1957), 7. The meaning of the Hebrew word “*qadosh*” also includes aspects of distinctiveness or separateness.

tree, but about that which they signify.¹⁶ Although a sacred object is not visibly changed by its holiness, it is nonetheless perceived as being totally different and apart from any other similar object. By a process of consecration (i.e. by making it sacred) the object becomes (in a mysterious way) part of the larger cosmos and is thereby endowed with religious significance.¹⁷

According to the logic of sympathetic magic¹⁸ the supernatural can become linked to an object, place or ritual, because of contagion or similarity. For example, an object or place may become more or less permanently linked to the supernatural, once God revealed himself through it. Such a linked object or place is then (within a religious context) described as sacred. For example, in Genesis 28 God reveals his presence in Bethel to Jacob in a dream. Bethel thereby becomes a sacred place, because it becomes *linked* (according to the logic of sympathetic magic) to the heavens through a process which can be seen as *contagion*. Within a magical framework theophany can therefore be seen as a form of contagion by the supernatural.

Other examples in the Old Testament, describing such a mythological linkage process of contagion with regard to the sacred, are Exodus 3:1-15 (Moses and the burning bush) and Exodus 19:1-25 (where God revealed himself on mount Sinai). In all these examples, places become sacred, or are revealed as sacred because they become linked to God, which makes sense within a framework of magical assumptions.

2 Magical instruments

The sacred is clearly demarcated from the profane and protected from evil demons or powers. This is effected by sacred rituals or by placing guardians at the entrance to a sacred place.¹⁹ These guardians may be human guards, but more often are magical or supernatural guardians (e.g. in Ancient Near Eastern myths, scorpion men or cherubim).²⁰

Access to the sacred is restricted not only to prevent it from being “polluted” and thereby losing its sacred character, but also because the sacred is dangerous and an inappropriate approach may not only cause misfortune to a per-

¹⁶ Eliade, *Das Heilige*, 8.

¹⁷ This is what Van Dyk calls mythical linkage: Van Dyk, “Mythical linkage,” 863-878.

¹⁸ James G. Frazer, *The golden bough. A study in magic and religion* (London: MacMillan, 1957), 14-49; and Van Dyk, “Magic, myth and monotheism,” 387.

¹⁹ Eliade, *Das Heilige*, 15

²⁰ Gargoyles on Medieval cathedrals fulfilled the same function to protect the sacred, cf. Gary R. Varner, *Gargoyle, grotesque and green men. Ancient symbolism in European and American architecture* (New York: Lulu Books, 2008), 21.

son, but in some cases may even result in death.²¹ Access to the most holy of places are therefore often restricted to a few initiated religious officials, who know the necessary purification rituals required before the sacred can be approached with safety (see officials below).

Implicit in the separateness of sacred places and objects is the idea that these places or objects act as concrete instruments through which the powers of the supernatural can act. In this regard sacred places and objects are similar to magical instruments. For example, in Genesis 28 the stone head rest on which Jacob slept can be interpreted as a magical instrument through which the supernatural acted and revealed itself to Jacob.

3 Precision

Sacred rituals (e.g. sacrifices) and sacred objects or places (e.g. the Israelite tabernacle and temple) required absolute precision in terms of its details. This is clear from the astounding amount of detail provided with regard to when and how sacrifices should be offered (e.g. Leviticus 1-16), how the ritual of Yom Kippur should be conducted (Leviticus 16:8-34; 23:27-32) and the minute detail regarding the structure and measurements for the tabernacle and temple (Exodus 25 and 1 Kings 6).

To the modern reader this emphasis on precision, regarding cultic detail, is often difficult to comprehend, but it did make sense within a magico-mythical framework where magical effects depended on exact detail: The logic behind precision in the execution of sacred rituals and in the construction of sacred objects or places can be explained in terms of the “law of similarity” in sympathetic magic: that is, the magical effect depended upon the similarity between the instrument of magic (e.g. ritual or tabernacle) and that which it signifies.²²

4 Cultic functionaries

The sacred is regarded as holy (i.e. it has religious significance) and should always be approached with the ambivalent attitudes of fear and reverence, that is, it is a dangerous and mysterious attraction.²³ The magico-religious person is attracted by the power of the sacred and strives towards sharing in this power

²¹ Cf. Exodus 19 (where God warns Moses that any person touching the border of Mt. Sinai will be killed); 2 Sam 6:6-7, 1 Chr 13:9 (where Uzzah is killed when he touches the sacred ark) and Lev 10:1-5 (where Nadab and Abihu are killed when they offered strange fire before Yahweh).

²² Cf. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 14-49; and Van Dyk, “Magic, myth and monotheism,” 387.

²³ Eliade, *Das Heilige*, 7.

by living within this holy universe.²⁴ Fear and attraction also describes the way in which magical forces are regarded.

The fact that fear is associated with the sacred is often noted by scholars of religion, but seldom explained. However, when it is appreciated that within a magical framework, sacred objects and rituals are regarded as potentially dangerous, exactly because of their association with dangerous magic, this fear becomes understandable. These supernatural impersonal forces of magic (associated with the sacred) are perceived as real and automatic forces which are potentially dangerous when handled incorrectly (see the two following criteria below). That is, the sacred is fearful, because it is endowed with magical power, which acts without any mercy or exception.

When something powerful is regarded as dangerous, but is nonetheless desired, a logical way out of this dilemma would be to appoint certain representatives, who are trained and purified so that they can safely handle magical/sacred rituals or objects. Often such official functions are inherited (linked to a specific sacred blood line) as is the case with traditional healers in many African communities and with some forms of priesthood in formal religions. For example, in the Old Testament only special people (e.g. the patriarchs) were allowed to perform sacrifices and once the cult was formally organised, only ordained priests from the Aaronite house could officiate in such sacred rituals (Exodus 28). The analogy between “religious officials” (priests) and magicians are further illustrated by the contest in Exodus 7-9 between the Egyptian magicians and Aaron (the priest) to see who could perform the strongest magic.²⁵

In conclusion one could say that the need for “religious” officials and the fact that even in a largely monotheistic religion like Yahwism, priests like Aaron were perceived as powerful magicians, may further argue for magical assumptions in the understanding of sacred rituals and objects.

5 Real effects

Magical effects are always regarded as real. This implies that sacred rituals, like magical spells, are not perceived as merely symbolic, but as real causes which result in real effects. Sacred rituals are therefore not regarded as optional symbolic ceremonies, but they are obligatory to ensure the desired results: that is, without blood and sacrifice there is no possibility for real forgiveness.

The difference between sacred rituals (perceived as real causes) and symbolic ceremonies can best be illustrated by the debate during the Reformation

²⁴ Eliade, *Das Heilige*, 9

²⁵ Thomas C. Römer, “Competing magicians in Exodus 7-9: Interpreting magic in the Priestly theology,” in *Magic in the Biblical world* (ed. Todd. E. Klutz. London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 12-22.

regarding the magical (miraculous) effects of the Christian sacraments. For example, in the Medieval Roman Catholic Church the sacred sacrament of the Eucharist was perceived as a magical/miraculous event: during the consecration of the wine and bread, these elements changed into the real body and blood of Christ.²⁶

If one avoids the pedantry and much of the hair splitting which went on with regard to specific terms it becomes clear that as children of the Renaissance, Reformers wanted to get rid of any magical connotations regarding the Eucharist and therefore opted for a more symbolic interpretation of these sacraments. In effect one could say that the Reformers changed the original sacred ritual of the Eucharist into a symbolic ceremony.²⁷

Peter Berger was therefore right (see introduction) when saying that Protestantism lost its sense of the sacred by scrapping any belief in magic.²⁸

6 Automatic effects

When the sacred is activated or violated it causes immediate and automatic (or semi-automatic) effects – as would happen with any natural cause and effect. As argued above, the sacred was (like magic) perceived as being dangerous. Although modern theologians have often argued that the reason for this “holy fear” can be explained in terms of the exalted godliness of Yahweh, this explanation, logically makes no sense if God is regarded as a loving father and not as a capricious god (as in Greek and Ancient Near Eastern mythology).²⁹

The fact that the violation of the sacred causes automatic and deadly effects is evident from the following Old Testament passages:

²⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Transubstantiation,” n.p. [cited 24 September 2010]. Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/603196/transubstantiation>. It is defined as follows: “Transubstantiation in Christianity, the change by which the substance (though not the appearance) of the bread and wine in the Eucharist becomes Christ’s Real Presence—that is, his body and blood. In Roman Catholicism and some other Christian churches the doctrine, which was first called transubstantiation in the 12th century, aims at safeguarding the literal truth of Christ’s Presence while emphasizing the fact that there is no change in the empirical appearances of the bread and wine.”

²⁷ This was especially true with regard to the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, while Luther tried to maintain some sense of the “reality”. Cf. Wikipedia, “Transubstantiation.”

²⁸ Peter Berger, *The Sacred canopy*.

²⁹ Whenever theologians are confronted with such logical inconsistencies they habitually defend their position by declaring the matter a mystery. Although this defence may sound very pious, one has to wonder to what extent it is merely a way of avoiding of facing the “unpalatable” reality of magical assumptions imbedded within the Old Testament.

- **Exodus 19:12:** The Israelites were warned that if they touch the sacredness of Mount Sinai (or its borders) they would be killed.
- **Leviticus 10:1-5:** Nadab and Abihu were killed when they offered strange or unauthorised fire before Yahweh. From the context it is clear that they violated the exact ritual prescriptions and were thus immediately killed.
- **2 Samuel 6:6-7 and 1 Chronicles 13:9:** Uzzah was killed when he merely touched the sacred ark.

Although these incidents are often explained in terms of some kind of idolatry (in the case of Leviticus 10), or in the case of Uzzah as insufficient trust in Yahweh, underlying magical assumptions and the concomitant belief in the dangerous nature of the sacred, may be a simpler and more straight forward explanation.

Although automatic magical effects are reinterpreted as semi-automatic effects within monotheism (involving God to some extent),³⁰ the magical effects, caused by violating the sacred, were nonetheless regarded as immediate and unavoidable, as illustrated by the three examples quoted above. This automatic effect of magical forces is analogous to the ordinary and natural set of causes and effects.³¹

Even though magical forces are often defined as impersonal in nature, it has been argued that this absolute distinction between impersonal and personal supernatural forces is difficult to maintain and that the belief in impersonal magical forces is difficult to eliminate even within a monotheistic religion such as Yahwism.³²

7 Preliminary conclusions

From the above discussion it can be concluded with relative certainty that the concept of sacredness had definite magical undertones – linked to a persisting belief in magical forces within the Old Testament. This conclusion is supported by the fact that all the criteria for identifying magical assumptions were met

³⁰ Cf. Peet J. van Dyk, “Magic, myth and monotheism,” 398-399.

³¹ For example, if one jumps down a high cliff you will be smashed and killed at the bottom of the cliff as a matter of cause. The same will happen as a matter of cause when you violate the sacred, except that magical, instead of natural forces, will kill you.

³² Cf. Peet J. van Dyk, “Magic, myth and monotheism,” 378-405. It is fairly common in popular religion to theoretically subjugate impersonal magical forces to the power of God, while in everyday practice one may regard them as more automatic in nature. In more secular Western societies natural effects are similarly sometimes ultimately attributed to God, while in practice these are perceived (only) in terms of immediate (and automatic) natural causes and effects.

when applying them to the sacred and that most of the features of sacred phenomena (rituals and objects) make better sense when assuming a magico-mythical cosmology and thereby a belief in magic.

This conclusion further implies that the terms “enchanted” and “sacred” are closely related terms, because both assume phenomena which are linked to potentially dangerous magical forces. The only difference between the two terms is that enchantment is usually not associated with specifically religious contexts (e.g. in fairy tales), while sacredness is always associated with specifically religious contexts.³³

D THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ECO-THEOLOGY

One of the primary aims of the Renaissance and Enlightenment was to reject any alternative system of cause and effect (i.e. a belief in magic). In this sense the philosophers of the Renaissance were the children of the classical Greek philosophers, who started a process of stressing immediate natural causes, rather than ultimate supernatural causes, when explaining the workings of the cosmos.³⁴ Scholars of the Renaissance therefore rejected any belief in magic or in an alternative supernatural system of cause and effect as unacceptable forms of “superstition.”³⁵

During the Renaissance/Enlightenment the magico-mythical worldview of the Bible was replaced by the modern scientific worldview, which is incompatible with the magico-mythical one, because it rejects its basic assumptions regarding the mechanisms of the universe. If this fact is appreciated it becomes extremely problematic to try rationally to reconcile the pre-scientific magico-mythical worldview with the current scientific one.³⁶

As indicated earlier, the concept of sacredness was lost (or was “demythologised”) by Protestant traditions when it was rid from all its magical as-

³³ One could also rightly ask to what extent such a distinction between fairy tales and other traditional genres still assumes mistakenly an absolute distinction between a belief in magic and religion. We therefore prefer the term “specifically religious” to indicate that the religious is never paramount in fairy tales.

³⁴ Cf. Bryan Magee, *The story of philosophy* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1998), 37.

³⁵ Cf. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An interpretation. The rise of modern paganism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 34.

³⁶ This does not necessarily imply that a religious person cannot assume God’s active hand as the ultimate cause in nature and history, but this cannot be done on rational grounds, but on faith alone. It should also not be implied that no mysteries remain in this universe or that “hard science” could necessarily access all knowledge through rational means. A sharp distinction between irrational and above-rational should, however, be drawn.

sumptions. In its stead was placed the concept of respect that interpreted the sacred in symbolic terms.³⁷ Therefore, to try and revive the concept of sacredness within eco-theology would be an extremely doubtful venture, because it would imply a rejection of the basic tenets of the scientific method and would revert back to a magico-mythical cosmology.³⁸

In this context one should also ask if we really want to revive the concept of sacredness and use the associated fair for the sacred to scare religious people from destroying “sacred” nature. Would a more ethically sound approach not be to emphasise an internal conviction and a sense of responsibility towards nature, rather than using scaring tactics?

If regarded in this light, an attempt to regain the lost sense of the sacred within eco-theology would not only be scientifically naïve, but would really be trying to flog a dead horse. Rather than bemoaning this loss, eco-theologians should recognise that the concept of sacredness belongs to an outdated world-view and that it may be more profitable to search for more promising metaphors to communicate our urgent responsibility towards nature.³⁹

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³⁷ Because the term “symbolic” is used rather loosely by scholars of religion, an urgent redefinition of symbolisation versus signification and other related concepts is needed.

³⁸ Although it has become fashionable within the humanities and theology to ridicule science, such views should be evaluated in the light of its many inconsistencies. For example, to what extent do people, who ridicule the basic tenets of science, still pretend to be scientists and academics? It could equally be asked if science should be rejected solely because of some of its less attractive attributes, for example, forms of power play, naïve absolutism and various other “unattractive” features.

³⁹ Cf. Gunther Wittenberg, “In search of the right metaphor: A response to Peet van Dyk’s ‘Challenges in the search for an ecotheology’: Part One: Metaphor and dominion,” *Old Testament Essays* 23/2 (2010): 427-453.

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