

# God or Nature: Desire and the Quest for Unity<sup>1</sup>

By BILL VITEK

It is high summer here in way-upstate New York—twenty miles from the Canadian border—where I work and live. It is that brief time of year when the sun seems to lounge its way across the sky, and when its work in June and July now brings warmth to even our most shaded nooks. With the first frost just over the autumn horizon we dare to complain of the heat, of the mountain of produce needing canning, and of those club-sized zucchinis hiding under green leaves that seem too big for our northern latitude. It is a good time to consider the source of this harvest; those myriad, uncountable, interconnected, and creative forces with many names—some religious, others scientific—that share a common, universal source. How this interconnectivity was severed, and why we need to recover it, are the topics of this essay.

The “why” is all around us, too. We live in a divisive and divided world. Religions clash with each other and against those who choose a secular path. Secularists deride religion and call for its elimination in favor of a fully rational and mechanistic world. A voracious global consumerism treats our sun-powered, living ecosphere like a supermarket and dumpster. The gap between rich and poor grows ever wider, and human slavery is on the rise worldwide. What we used to call a “heat wave” is now the new thermostat setting of a feverish planet.

If we need a visual to see these divisions at work, the Gulf of Mexico is one among too many examples of

a world gone wrong. One of the world’s great ecosystems, the Gulf is also the sink for all the nitrogen and herbicidal runoff from America’s breadbasket, creating a deadly hypoxic zone that is estimated to be six thousand square miles in size. Industrial agriculture argues that fertilizers and pesticides are necessary to feed a burgeoning human population. What the gargantuan machines cannot harvest is gathered by poorly paid and sometimes poorly treated migrant farm workers. Nearly 85% of all corn and soybeans grown in the farm belt go to feeding livestock who live short and miserable lives, and whose deaths demean both them and the men and women who “process” them. And I haven’t even mentioned last summer’s oil spill. The problems in the Gulf are many, as are their interconnected and too often invisible causes. Each of us can be found somewhere along this complicated chain—and along many others as well—whether through our use of cars, our food, our retirement funds, or our institutional endowments. Our hands are in the oil and the blood and the pesticides, even if our hearts recoil.

Social movements have sought for centuries to call our attention to the maltreatment of our fellow humans and the natural world. Religious and secular leaders speak eloquently of the harms and wrongs and of the need for reconciliation and redemption. Technologists offer the latest, greatest fix. And still the problems persist, worsening in a world with weapons of mass destruction and misery, made up of frayed ecosystems and filled with the frustrations and despair of a human population growing weekly by the millions. Against this onslaught our fixes seem like so much duct tape. The divisions we are trying to repair on the fly go to

the deepest levels of the human capacity for thought; beyond politics, science, and technology; beyond even ethics and morality. These divisions reside in our most basic assumptions about what we think exists in the world: the real, the true, and the meaningful.

Philosophers call this kind of thinking *metaphysics*, a term given by later thinkers to Aristotle's attempts at what he himself called "first philosophy," "first science," "wisdom," and "theology," but never "metaphysics." While philosophers of nearly every generation since Aristotle have disagreed on what this term actually means and even about whether metaphysics is possible, metaphysical thinking in general describes our commitments to and judgments about the most basic units of reality and their interrelationships. Trees? Real. Tooth Fairies? Not real; well, probably not. Santa Claus? I'm not saying. Miracles? God? Souls? The external world? An infinite universe? Anti-matter? And what about the connections? What *is* a tree *really*, and can we talk about a tree separate from the soil, microbes, water, nutrients, oxygen, temperature, and gravity that make it, and our observation of it, possible? Metaphysics is a "theory of reality in general,"<sup>2</sup> a system that attempts to account for everything in the universe. As audacious as that sounds, metaphysical systems come in all shapes and sizes and from across a large span of human thought: from the creation stories and ancient texts of every culture to attempts to explain the recent discoveries in quantum physics and ecosystem science.

Personal and cultural ontological commitments to this or that reality—or to the existence of a loving God, the reincarnation of the dead, or the belief that animals are soulless machines, for example—really do matter in how the world is seen and treated. Largely invisible in everyday life, these metaphysical commit-

ments hold up all the other systems in our complex cultures. Astrology and alchemy were once taught in the world's greatest universities because they were thought to express real causal events and objects. Not anymore. Animal vivisection, thankfully, is no longer practiced in medical schools because of our altered metaphysical assumptions about animals. If you believe that a God exists who decides when to end the world, you will be less likely to worry about climate change or a Manhattan-sized meteor hurtling toward Earth.

Historically, interest in metaphysical thinking tends to pick up in cultures when all the other systems are in serious forms of disarray. In other words, when your metaphysics needs fixing, you know that things are bad. The Axial Age, a period of history identified by German philosopher Karl Jaspers as spanning 800–200 BCE, was just such a time. India, China, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean basin all saw transformational transitions away from tribal, animistic, and polytheistic cultures with gods, goddesses, and rituals connecting humans to nature. The invention of agriculture and the torrential release of energy-rich carbon stored in the soils and forests fueled advances in cultural complexity, increases in population, the invention of writing, the mining of iron and bronze, social stratification, and ever more destructive implements of war. The Axial Age was born out of these dramatic changes and conflicts, and it gave birth to two new and often competing metaphysical systems: monotheism and humanism.

The Axial Age, in other words, reordered the metaphysical landscape and gave us the three primary and distinct metaphysical units we live with today: God, humans, and nature. God is up there, all powerful and loving; nature is down here, mostly passive and resourceful. Humans are in between. God becomes separate; nature becomes secondary; and humans share in both divinity (our reason, mind, or soul) and nature (our bodily desires and appetites). We live in a world divided by a Jewish-Christian-Islamic God and a Greek and later Enlightenment rationality—a world made separate and very much unequal.

The story of how Yahweh, a minor warrior god and one among many gods worshipped by the tribe of Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean in 1200 BCE, became the one and only God—a monotheistic force existing outside of space and time, all powerful and merciful, now worshipped and followed by one in three people living on the planet—is as fascinating as it is improb-

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ble. So, too, is the development of the great philosophical and mathematical systems of the Greeks, premised on a similarly radical notion that humans are the measure of all things. Buddhism and Confucianism, too, utilize human reason as a tool to understand the mind and to create social customs. Both are humanistic at their roots, eschewing God and gods for *this* world and confident of the power of humans to transform themselves *by* themselves.

Modern history is filled with the conflicts between these two great world systems. But monotheism and humanism also share a common intolerance of views of reality that contradict their own views. Alternative views are labeled unreal, false, dangerous, heretical, or meaningless. In addition, both of these metaphysical systems see nature as inferior—as either a stage to work out one’s salvation or a resource base to capture and utilize. We live day to day with these grand systems of reality and meaning and with the conflicts and divisions they create. They are revealed when we reject all ideas of God as “unscientific,” or, in Christopher Hitchen’s words, as the “first, worst” explanations of how the world works, which are now completely unnecessary. Or when monotheists reject scientific claims simply because they conflict with or are not revealed in their sacred texts. But even dyed-in-the-wool humanists, materialists, Big-Bang theorists, and Darwinists have lingering questions about the world before the Big Bang or the seeming gap between human development and that of all other primates. Yes, we are all primates, but some primates seem, well, more advanced than others. Why else would we still accept the “sapiens” description of ourselves or dare to explode nuclear devices in the New Mexico desert or drill holes miles down on the ocean floor or treat other living creatures as mere meat machines?

This metaphysical segregation of the divine, the natural, and the human has had lasting effects. It puts the sacred and the divine somewhere out there, available only by membership. It turns nature into a collection of parts and processes. And we humans are stuck in the middle, both mind and machine, secular and spiritual. The natural world has suffered the most, but we are suffering, too, from separation, anxiety, and the occasional existential dread. How might we move from separate and unequal primary metaphysical units to a primary metaphysical unity? How might we begin to see divinity in overgrown zucchini, desire in our divinities, or a singular dance of creation, organization, and destruction?

There’s plenty of inspiration from which to choose. The worldview systems of first peoples across the continents share a legacy of metaphysical unity, a spirit that moves through all things. Pre-axial worldviews frequently have few lines of demarcation between the gods, humans, and nature. There are plenty of intermarriages between humans and divinities, divinities taking animal forms, and some of the oddest-looking characters one can imagine, including Ganesh, the Hindu elephant deity riding a mouse. But it is simultaneously a sacred and secular space where these two modes of being are open to all and available at every moment; where each moment in time, as Emerson observed, contains *every* moment in time.

Creation Hymn 129 from the *Rig Veda*,<sup>3</sup> a collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns from ancient India, speculates that the universe begins with a seed, heat, and desire. The creator One is not some force outside nature, nor does it create nature out of nothing. Indeed, the author of this hymn suggests that the One itself came into being with its first desire to create. The desire arose first and linked the creator with the creation, so that both came into being together, in unison. *A co-creation, sparked by desire*. Desire is a force shared by all living beings, even if it is not always a conscious

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desire. It may exist even in those objects we call inanimate. The language here is perhaps metaphorical, but scientists talk about strong and weak “forces” and “attractions,” and about energy as heat. What is the thermodynamic equivalent of the end of the world? Absolute zero. It is called “heat death.” Nothing moves. No heat, no desire, no creator or creation. The author of that *Rig Veda* creation hymn was on to something.

The first modern expression of metaphysical unity was written in a nearly incomprehensible format resembling a mathematical proof. It was considered so dangerous to express in seventeenth-century Europe that its author,

Benedict Spinoza, knew that it could be published only after his death. Spinoza claimed in a little book called *The Ethics* that there is only one substance in the universe. He dared to call it “Deus sive Natura,” “God or Nature.” Like the Vedic hymn discussed above, this singular substance has two aspects: the creator and the created. There is no creator distinct from its creation. They are identical. “God is no longer the transcendent creator of the universe who rules it via providence, but Nature itself, understood as an infinite, necessary, and fully deterministic system of which humans are a part.”<sup>4</sup> Too radical for his time—and perhaps still too radical for ours—this metaphysical unification is what we are after.

The American environmental movement from the early Transcendentalists to the current ecosystem theorists sees a basic unity in the world. Emerson’s work is suffused with language that puts God into our world and our world into the divine. In proclaiming, “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” Thoreau—much like the West’s first philosopher, Thales—put the world on a new philosophical and metaphysical path.<sup>5</sup> Wildness is a real property—indeed, the essential property of a living, creative, spiritually and physically powerful world. It exists in and animates the objects of nature, humans, and even human creations, from farmer’s fields to whole civilizations. The pine “family” on Spaulding Farm doesn’t just turn on an ideal image of nature and wildness that is in us, as Emerson might say; rather it has this wildness in itself. “Nature is a personality so vast and universal that we have never seen one of her features. . . . They [the pines on Spaulding Farm] seemed to recline on the sunbeams.” Not only do individuals and whole human societies depend on this wildness for their vitality, but those of us who understand its powers need to “go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hand of the Infidels.”

John Muir liberated the bully God of his childhood by seeing divinity everywhere in the creation. Aldo

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Leopold spoke simply of “the Land” as a complex, interconnected community, with humans as mere citizens. Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead proclaimed nature alive and created a rich, if complex, metaphysical system that merged mind and creativity into the whole fabric of the universe, from the micro “actual occasions” and the human “middle ground” to the macro swirl of actuality-potentiality, in a remorseless dance of change. It reminds me of the Hindu god Shiva’s dance, representing both the destruction and the creation of the universe and revealing the cycles of death, birth, and rebirth. Whitehead conceives of God as a limiting factor, a boundary-maker, on this endless universal creativity.<sup>6</sup>

James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’s Gaia theory, named after the Greek earth goddess, describes the Earth as a complex, self-maintaining, living system that essentially keeps the planet life-friendly. Life itself manages to create the conditions conducive to life. It’s co-creation right in our backyards.

Canadian ecologist Stan Rowe was more insistent. He exclaimed “Earth Alive!” and taught that the explanation of life is to be sought “outwardly and ecologically.” The blue planet—the ecosphere—“integrates the organic and inorganic, and expresses life as well as harmonizing it with death in perennial cycles.” Rowe uses words like “revivify” and “re-enchant,” and like Leopold before him, believes that a cultural shift in language, beliefs, and commitments could “harmonize humans with their ecosystem homes, repairing the damage done to Earth and living things in general due to past ignorance.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Wes Jackson’s work on the Kansas prairie to perennialize the major grain crops is deeply informed by many of the thinkers discussed above, and by others, too, who seek to heal the divisions between humans and nature. Alexander Pope’s phrase, “Consulting the genius of the place,” is Jackson’s guiding principle behind efforts to grow food in the way a prairie grows grasses. Nature is not to be subdued or ignored, but rather respected as a teacher with tenure and seniority. To see Kernza, the world’s first perennial wheat grass, growing on the Land Institute’s test plots is to see the union of human cleverness and nature’s wisdom, wildness, and thirty-five years of plant breeding. Salina, Kansas is a long way from the Gulf of Mexico, but perennial agriculture is a first step toward healing this saltwater ecosystem and all of the connections along the way.<sup>8</sup>

This talking and thinking about a post-axial uni-

fication of our primary metaphysical units among philosophers and ecologists, even if sometimes metaphorical, can feel very strange to someone like me who, raised Catholic and serious about pursuing a religious vocation as a teenager, then rejected all things theistic and lived without God for thirty years. I was called instead to the philosophical and environmental work of repairing the frayed relationships between humans and nature. That's hard enough without bringing divinities into it. But that all changed three years ago on a dock along the Raquette River in New York's St. Lawrence river valley, while reading the *Bhagavad Gita*. That book and its description of Krishna, the god disguised as a chariot driver, rocked my philosophical foundations. I've since gained a new awareness of Indian philosophical thinking on the unity of the divine, the human, and the natural. It led me to the American Transcendentalists and Taoism, to Spinoza and Alfred North Whitehead, and to contemporary work in naturalistic or ecosystem metaphysics. Stuart Kauffman's latest book, *Reinventing the Sacred*, offers a view of God that is nothing more or less than "the very creativity of the universe."<sup>9</sup> The creativity in the universe is the sacred work.

If this is what a mid-life crisis feels like for a philosopher, then I'm happy to be having one! (Although I miss more than ever Strachan Donnelley, the founder of the Center for Humans and Nature, who was committed to seeing the world and all of its processes as a unified, organic whole. In this, his and our teachers are Heraclitus, Spinoza, Alfred North Whitehead, Hans Jonas, and Ernst Mayr, among others.) Why bring divinity and the sacred into an already complex mix of politics and environmentalism at a time when global climate change points to a clock nearly out of time? Because there is little else that forces us out of thinking that we are ourselves gods. And it speaks to a long history of metaphysical thinking about and experience with finding human worth and dignity alongside our non-human neighbors, who have similar worth and dignity, without humans having to demand the top spot.

It is preposterous and naive of me to suggest that we can heal the world and ourselves if we just build a conceptual collider big enough to fuse our metaphysical divisions into one living, creative, divine whole. Harder still would be to imagine a concept of the di-

vine that was simply the creative energy of the universe. I hear Voltaire's voice at the end of *Candide* encouraging the characters to cease the speculative talk and tend the garden. And Buddha's warning that too much speculation can drive one mad. But it seems that less radical solutions are failing to do the trick and are sometimes making matters worse. History shows us that similar radical transitions have occurred before. Imagine how a singular, transcendent deity sounded to people who only knew their gods as local and fallible. The rise of monotheism across the Middle East and beyond was a cultural shift of very large proportions, and it took millennia to reach its current state. If we take a perspective that is wide and long enough, we can imagine, I think, Kauffman's images of God and the sacred operating right here and now, in us and in our midst.

We are at a critical time in human history. A new Axial Age is upon us, requiring some revolutionary thinking. Imagine a unified world and use desire and the creative quest for unity in your own lives and hearts to begin this healing process. The divine is real. Nature is real. The human experience is real. There is only one reality, and desire is its source. "See a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower; hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour," writes William Blake. And Meister Eckhart: "The eye that sees God is the same eye that God uses to see us." It is a unity that connects Australian aboriginals with astrophysicists; poets and musicians with theologians and mathematicians; children with sages; chickadees and zucchinis with the divine.

Together they, we, it, speak of a world beyond our senses and our imagination: a divine, creative, living whole; an ordered universe of which we have only the slightest glimpse. But experience it we do, and it is awesome. It calls us to reverence, joy, and humility. And that's a start.

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## NOTES

- 1 Adapted from a talk given at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Canton, New York, August 2010.
- 2 F. Ferré, *Being and Value: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Metaphysics* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1996), 1.
- 3 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10129.htm>.
- 4 <http://www.iep.utm.edu/spinoza/>.
- 5 <http://www.bartleby.com/28/15.html>.
- 6 See “Nature Alive,” [http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Whitehead/Whitehead\\_1938/1938\\_08.html](http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Whitehead/Whitehead_1938/1938_08.html), and “God and the World,” <http://www.anthonyflood.com/whiteheadgodandtheworld.htm>.
- 7 Excerpts from S. Rowe, *Earth Alive: Essays on Ecology* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: NeWest Press, 2006). The publisher rejected the use of an exclamation point in the title for reasons having to do with electronic bibliographic search engines.
- 8 Wes Jackson’s latest book is *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010).
- 9 S. Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason, and Religion*. (New York: Basic Books, 2008).