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THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Vast, hideous, and desolate
—William Bradford
on glimpsing the New World.¹

William Bradford's description of the New World contrasts sharply with that of Thomas Berry. To Bradford the natural wilderness, although well inhabited by North American native peoples, was desperately lacking in the signs of modernity—that is, of human progress; it needed taming, subjugation, and human artifact. To Berry it was the Eden we have since wrecked; in his words: “When we came to this continent, it was a glorious land of woodlands and prairie grasses . . . a land of abundance.”² This contrast sets in bold terms the question: How did we get to this place in history we now describe as an ecological crisis? The answer, put simply, is Western modernity.³

This chapter will first complicate this response but not deny it. It will address the elements in the development to the present Western way of life that have led us to such a poignant moment, in which the future of the planet is at stake. These are elements that will be quite familiar to most of our readers and are certainly present in many of the ecotheological texts we will examine in the chapters ahead. Second, this chapter will propose a framework for a deeper understanding of the nonintentional, even oblivious, way in which the construction of a Western modernity as described by Charles Taylor produced the “wrecks of Eden.” Western modernity, however, is not a rigid, static construction. It has been and continues to be malleable. The social imaginary carries its own potential for change, even radical change, and it is here that the hope for a better future, within a Western perspective, at least, can be envisioned and accomplished. Third, this chapter will address the particularity of vision brought by Christian ecotheology texts to the hope

for a more ecologically sound social imaginary. Our argument is that as engaged texts they may play a significant role in the shifting of our imagination and practice. For that to happen, however, there must be an understanding of the location of religion within Western modernity.

How did Western modernity as we have constructed it result in such a “wreck of Eden”? Two elements that are reflected in the earlier comment of Bradford are the dominance of a scientific worldview and the shift from a cosmic-centered to a human-centered perspective on the universe. A scientific worldview is not merely a physical science-based view; it refers to the merging of the notion of history as humanly controlled progress with the development of powerful technologies. The virtual eradication of the idea that humans were subject to a divine will or to Fate in some form translated into the further idea that there was virtually no limit to the progress that could be accomplished with the right knowledge and tools. For all of this the natural world was merely the resource. The conviction was that it would only be a matter of time before disease, poverty, and illness would be under control.

The shift from a cosmic-centered to a human-centered perspective is really another thematization of the same reality. The perception that human society ought to fit in some way into a cosmic order as reflected in the seeming predictability and graceful movement of the planets, the seasons, and life and death in the organic world, gave way over time to notions of society that were unrelated to the physical world. The pre-Copernican worldview had the earth at its center. Humans gained their importance from their geographical location on earth as the center of the cosmos. In the post-Copernican view the centrality of planet earth no longer held. Human importance now had to be constructed apart from the earth; most notably humans were seen as the only beings made in the image of God. Human society sat on top of the creation; creation was a mere backdrop for the important work of building a better future, whether this was to end in this world or in some supernatural world. These broad strokes were not obvious overnight, but can be seen only in retrospect. Various scholars, including those whose texts we consider in later chapters, have focused on the components of these historical shifts. Taylor considers them within his description of the construction of a social imaginary that is our present Western modernity.

THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF THE WEST

Taylor uses the notion of the social imaginary, which originated in the social sciences, to provide a framework for understanding how we got to be where we are, and also for understanding how societies can change.

Thus, there is not only one social imaginary, but rather there are multiple social imaginaries, in fact, as many as there are recognizable actual and potential societies.⁴ Taylor's concept of social imaginaries emerges from an historical discussion about the construction of human communities, which has deep roots in Western scholarship.⁵ In particular, Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities helps to locate Taylor's notion of social imaginaries within that discussion. Anderson's explanation of how a nation is imagined is most relevant to our use of Taylor's concept in that it elucidates the nuanced meanings of "imaginary."⁶ According to Anderson, nations are *imagined* because they consist of members we will never meet or know. Yet we imagine ourselves in some sort of communion with them all. Thus, nations are invented not awakened. As a departure from previous scholars' understanding of "invention," Anderson associates invention (as does Taylor) not with fabrication and falsity, but with imagining and creating.⁷ The nation is imagined as limited; it has set boundaries, even if elastic, outside of which lie other nations. It is imagined as sovereign; the idea of nation was conceived at a time when the notion of a divinely ordained authority was losing legitimacy. The nation, finally, is also imagined as a community; a fraternity or comradeship to which one is committed enough to lay down one's life.

These notions of the nation as imagined community as well as Anderson's work on its cultural roots are brought forward into Taylor's conception of a social imaginary. What Taylor adds is the focus on the interweave of theory and practices that constitute the dynamics of the imaginative process by which one creates a society. Furthermore in using Western modernity as an instance of social imaginary at work, he focuses on the very theories and practices critiqued by ecotheologians of late twentieth century as coalescing in an ecologically unsustainable society. On the other hand, by articulating the apparatus by which one constantly constructs and reconstructs a social imaginary, Taylor offers (intentionally or not) a potential means by which even this ecologically indifferent or even hostile social imaginary of the West can be redirected. According to Taylor, the social imaginary is "not a set of ideas, rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society."⁸ The term carries the notion that societies develop as a result of the application of imagined futures.⁹ Evidence that sustained effort from different starting points over time can effect change in the social imaginary forms the basis for hope. The community of scholarship on religion and ecology of the last several decades has already helped shape a more ecologically sensitive social imaginary. It is different from but also identifiable within the present Western social imaginary, which has virtually excluded ecological concerns. It represents a redirection of the manner of human life based on a new imagination. Yet, it rests on the

basic principle that ideas and practice in the service of powerful convictions and imagination regarding a future are effective over time.

“Central to Western modernity,” Taylor argues, “is a new conception of the moral order of society.”¹⁰ Taylor is speaking of the emergence of a set of ideas and practices in social forms that characterize modernity in the West. These include, preeminently but not exclusively, the market economy, the public sphere, and the self-governing people.¹¹ The social imaginary, then, refers to the way in which people imagine their manner of living together. The source of the particular imagined existence may begin with the articulation of certain ideas, but it is the images, stories, and legends that grow out of or mutate from these ideas that form the social imaginary. While a theoretical understanding is often clearly grasped only by a few, many share the social imaginary. The social imaginary is “that common understanding that makes possible the common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”¹²

Furthermore, the social imaginary is both factual and normative. It is at the same time recognition of how things usually work and how they ought to work. The social imaginary of a particular modernity or a given society governs all social behaviors, such as how to conduct oneself at a social gathering or how to negotiate the fair treatment of competing interests. While the concept of the social imaginary may seem abstract, it is immediate, practical, and essential for society. For example, it legitimizes a particular school curriculum, adequate school behaviors, tests and standards, and anticipated outcomes (including acceptable retention and graduation rates).

The social imaginary cannot be understood only in terms of an *articulated* history. Besides the existence of ideas and events that led to the present imaginary there is a large and *inarticulate* understanding, a “wider grasp” of such questions as “how we stand to each other, how we got to be where we are, how we relate to other groups and so on.”¹³ As Taylor explains,

This wider grasp has no clear limits. . . . It is in fact that largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature. That is another reason for speaking here of an imaginary and not a theory.¹⁴

In creating and sustaining the social imaginary, practices and their meanings work together. Understanding often gives rise to practice, but

practice itself carries an understanding. Usually a common understanding precedes any kind of theory about why those involved might act in this way. Thus, for instance, we all know how to operate toward each other within different social spaces, how to respect boundaries of a political demonstration, how to organize and carry out an election.¹⁵ A striking example of this is the enduring anger of many Americans towards the Supreme Court for its decision favoring Bush over Gore in the American presidential election of 2002.

While largely recognizable as continuous over time, practices and their meanings change, sometimes slowly and organically, but sometimes quickly and abruptly. When practices begin to change and boundaries are consistently transgressed, we are probably in transition. Idealizations, theories, and ideas grow into a complex imaginary as they are incarnated in new practices or associated with old ones that are transformed by that process.¹⁶ Examples include the ways in which ideas of Karl Marx or Adam Smith inform present practices in Western societies. The original ideas may be barely recognizable in important segments of societies, because of creativity and practical applications (as well as human self-interest and greed). Likewise, the visions and ideas of the Christian reformers of the sixteenth century are still recognizable today in mainline Christian churches. These reformers, however, would likely be shocked at particular practices and views to which their visions have given rise.

It is clear, then, that the social imaginary of a group is not merely the fruit of a well-reasoned theory, a vision of the imagination, or useful practices. It is rather the combination of these as they enter the process of human living and the struggle to fulfill both the basic and higher needs and desires that govern life together.

In the West, this combination has come to produce what is commonly called Western modernity. It is not the only possible modernity. Different sets of ideas, visions, and practices or other ways of relating the theories and practices could have produced a quite different society. What we have is the contingent way in which history shaped our present modernity in the West. It is in this modernity that the ecological crisis emerged and must be confronted. The key forms, as Taylor describes them, all hold critical difficulties from an ecological perspective. But the dynamics of the social imaginary itself also hold a promise that a different, more ecological, way of life is possible.

Key Forms in the Social Imaginary of the West

Taylor argues that the moral order that shapes the social imaginary of Western modernity is based on the concepts of individual rights and

mutual benefit. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the notions that society was constituted by rational beings and that governing powers could be challenged began to take hold. Gradually these ideas infiltrated various segments of the society—classes, races, genders, and ethnic groups. They shaped and were shaped by three main cultural forms: the economy, democratic self-rule, and the public sphere.¹⁷ Each of these forms has significant implications for the subsequent ecological crisis. The specificity of the forms and the dynamic manner in which they arose, however, demonstrate both the malleability of the social imaginary and the possibility of alternatives as practices are transformed or as new ones emerge.

Taylor explains the sources of these three main cultural forms in a much more complex way than we can here.¹⁸ It is not our purpose to give a full account of the emergence of the modern social imaginary as he does. Rather we give a somewhat schematic account to illustrate the manner in which ideas and practice interweave; that is, how they are imagined and incorporated in the formation of an ever-changing social imaginary.

The Economy

The specific capitalist form of the economy in the West originates with ideas of Adam Smith (at least they are considered to be best articulated by him). Briefly, what is significant for our purposes is the way in which the relationships among creatures came to be redefined. Prior to the theories Adam Smith articulated, the hierarchical distribution of power in the human world was believed to originate in the order of the cosmos itself. What emerged was the understanding that the source of power lay within the human world.

It is within this context that Smith articulated his economic theory. He assumed a world governed by humans for their own purposes, rather than a world in which the distribution of power was received from divine or cosmic sources. As they gradually interacted with and changed practice, Smith's theories led to the belief that by concentrating on building one's own wealth, one benefited the whole society through the working of "the invisible hand." Self-interest becomes benevolence. According to Taylor, this kind of profitable exchange for the sake of security and mutual benefit becomes the metaphor for the whole political society.¹⁹ We come to see society itself as an economy, "an interlocking set of activities of production, exchange and consumption, which form a system with its own set of laws and its own dynamic."²⁰ This is now a system that is separate from the polity. It functions by its own

laws, laws that humans need to know in order to live within society. Further, these laws, which in their origins gave specific answers to specific economic questions, now have taken on the character of abstract principles that are immutable and unarguable.²¹

It is worth noting and an illustration of how particular elements of imagined futures change over time that Smith presumed a certain kind of community interest and civic responsibility as part of one's self-interest. So his theories and the manner of their practice in his own day become quite different historically as that sense of community gives way to a much more individualistic society.²²

The Public Sphere

Although the economy may have been the first to disengage itself, it paved the way for other forms to take on independent existence. However, while the economy depends largely on individual activities, the public sphere and democratic self-governance stem from a new notion of the collectivity and its power and function.

The public sphere relies for its existence on the notion of secularity and its sense of profane time, which is discussed more fully below where we examine the role of religion in the social imaginary of the modern West. The public sphere is not identical to any given or officially constituted government, but rather has power over it. Taylor describes it as that public space in which discussion, via various media, produces a public opinion. Thus it is a metatopical agency. It is metatopical in that it is nonlocal and transcends any one assembly or topic of discussion. It is an agency because it has power, a perception of itself as an entity that stands outside the political order and exerts a certain kind of power over it. For example, public officials answer to the public sphere.²³ Like the social imaginary itself, the public sphere did not result merely from a set of ideas. It came into existence in concrete occasions of assembly and through the growing influence of the print media and print capitalism.²⁴

Self-Governance

Taylor explains two examples of the emergence of the self-governing democratic form in the modern social imaginary—the American Revolution and the French Revolution. They exemplify two different ways, one a more recognizable continuity and the other a more radical discontinuity, in which the social imaginary can be substantially changed.

In the case of the American Revolution, the colonists understood themselves as Englishmen (male gender intended, as women were not yet recognized as legal persons). As Englishmen they belonged to England and thereby possessed certain rights that had been institutionalized in governing assemblies in their own land, where parliament had been instituted. The power of the people was represented beside the power of the King. These institutions had already inculcated the idea that peoples could be founded (and refounded) not in some mythical past, but by the people themselves. What became an essentially extended and new idea of the equality of all peoples (not just Englishmen) in the U.S. Constitution relied for its legitimacy on older forms. Legitimacy was transferred not from the historical form represented by the King but by natural law. "Truths held self-evident" refers to the foundation of order and legitimacy within natural law. However, the idea of foundation is transformed into a foundation totally in the will of the people, that is, in elections. In Taylor's words:

Older forms of legitimacy are colonized, as it were, with new understandings of order, and then transformed, in certain cases, without a clear break. . . . But what has to take place for this change to come off is a transformed social imaginary, in which the idea of foundation is taken out of the mythical early time and seen as something that people can do today.²⁵

At the beginning of the Revolution, Americans saw themselves fighting for their rights as Englishmen; at the end, they had broken with the King and stood for *universal* human rights. It is also clear that the transformation was not a matter of interpretation only. The institutions for the incorporation of this new interpretation, especially that of an elected assembly, were already in existence.²⁶

The French Revolution, however, was different. The French had to move away from the idea and practice of legitimate dynastic rule to that of self-governance without any "agreed meaning in a broadly based social imaginary."²⁷ This was in large part the reason, Taylor claims, for the period of instability that followed the French Revolution. In the end, however, it did succeed in changing the social imaginary of French society and of the West.

While the notion of "a people" can be seen to have roots in earlier history (in a sense, the whole of Taylor's account shows the gradual emergence of both the institutions and the developing idea of "a people"), both American and French revolutions are threshold events in which the modern social imaginary embodies the notion of "a people"

as the self-founding and self-governing agency of nations and communities in an integral form. This form continues to extend its influence as more and more groups assume agency and claim for themselves the status of “we, the people.”²⁸

Thus Western modernity is a social imaginary that embodies three major concepts. The economy is understood to be the form of human relations whereby acting for one’s own purposes enmeshes with and generally furthers the purposes of others. There exists a public sphere governing the polity of the people. The people are self-constituted and self-governed. This reference to self, independent from any sacred or predetermined order of time and space, is characterized as secular. A shift occurred, which, Taylor observes, gradually relocated religion from its previous position as the central ground of society to a new more tentative location. Furthermore, from an ecological perspective (not Taylor’s) the severing of the psychic connection to cosmos as a mediation of meaning and value paved the way for the virtual disregard of the natural world and the nature of humans as creatures of the earth and the physical universe. It could be argued, alternatively, that the emergence of natural law as a philosophical and scientific foundation replacing divine revelation with the rise of secularity could strengthen the ties of humans to the natural world. Whereas such a potential existed and does exist, the scholarship suggests that natural law did not have this effect, at least in any substantial way. In Western modernity no significant structure or set of practices required legitimation from principles considered inherent to the nature of the physical universe. Natural law itself carried various meanings and has diverse traditions. For Christians (who accepted it) it was understood as the law of God implanted in human consciousness and became a standard for moral decisions.²⁹ In the scientific world natural law referred to a deterministic ordering principle, which in the early stages, was associated with the Creator, but later came to be seen as the result of evolution based purely on chance. Another variance says that natural law is imposed on nature by the Creator; nature itself otherwise being disordered and chaotic.³⁰ In any case, natural law and with it the idea of nature itself was highly abstract and had little to do with the concrete natural world that was more and more to become the instrument of human progress.

Religion in the Social Imaginary of the West

As the key forms of the social imaginary changed in the West, so did the role of religion. Understanding the role that religion has come to play in

the modern social imaginary is critical, if we are to claim that religious writing about ecology matters. Secularity is popularly understood as the condition whereby God is removed from public life. All categories of life can proceed without reference to a higher or supernatural power. Hence, religious faith and practice are often seen as a throwback to the premodern. Taylor's compelling argument about the relationship of religion to secularity allows for a more nuanced and, at the same time, more sure-footed approach to religion's power within modern societies. It shows with considerable specificity how religion can affect the social imaginary. This is important for ecotheologians who, although keenly aware of what was lost in the relation of humans and the earth in the transition to the modern world, know that no return is possible. A new scenario—a modification, perhaps even a radical one, to the Western social imaginary—is required.

Taylor concludes that the long cultural march to secularity that occurred in the modern West “removed one mode in which God was formerly present” but did not totally remove God's presence from the public space.³¹ The present social imaginary is characterized by horizontal time, which means that all that is significant within the society is referenced in ordinary rather than higher or transcendent time. Actions for mutual benefit have always ordered human society, and in premodern times the origins were seen as created by God and the destiny was also with God (in Christian terms).³² Such is no longer the case; God or some higher power is no longer an ontic necessity for any legitimate form or activity. Secular societies understand themselves as both founded and fulfilled in horizontal or profane time. This indicates for Taylor not the absence or end of religion and the relevance of God, but a new mode of God-presence in both personal and public life.³³ He deals with Christianity specifically because of its substantial presence in the history of the West.

As Taylor traces the rise of national (and other group) identities, he points to the complexity of forces, including religion, which enters into their formation. God can be present through devotion and a strong sense of God's will operating in one's personal life. Likewise, in public life, “God can figure strongly” in the formation of identities. “God's will can be very present to us in the design of things, in cosmos, state and personal life. God can seem the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially.”³⁴ While it may be wise, Taylor advises, to distinguish our political identity from any particular confessional stance, it will always be necessary to be attentive to changes in the interaction of religion and the state as long

as the importance of religion persists as it does “virtually everywhere.”³⁵ The compelling truth of Taylor’s assertion has been demonstrated recently in both North America and Europe as immigrant religious groups vie for social and legal rights and recognition.

In light of Taylor’s analysis, religious adherents must be aware of the larger social imaginary and the implications of its secularity if they are to negotiate religion’s role within our present society. If they are to make a difference to the ecological crisis, they must be critically astute and confident with regard to their new role. This is not primarily to adapt to the social imaginary as some static reality, but to capitalize on the contingency of its present forms and its overall malleability in a process that will include at times negotiation and at times resistance.

ECOLOGY IN THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY OF THE WEST

The role of perceptions of nature within the Western social imaginary is particularly pertinent to the argument we are making. There are traditions within the West that can and have been revived in the ecotheology texts we discuss in the chapters ahead. However, these are, as most will admit, not the traditions that gained hegemony. Furthermore, many of the key developments in the West contributed substantially to many aspects of the ecological crises we experience today.

Nature in the Social Imaginary

In the social imaginary that Taylor describes, ecological consciousness has no substantial part in the long development of modern Western societies. As the notions of human freedom, individual rights, and the human control of history were strengthened, and the notions that confined human society to the destiny of God and cosmos were weakened, the concrete natural world—the soil, the water, the air—became simply instruments of Western progress. In his account of the social imaginary, Taylor does not deal with the ecological crisis or the role of nature, but he observes that nature as natural law is a normative ground for charters and constitutions based on inalienable human rights.³⁶ This is a nuance worth exploring as natural law understood in this fashion represents an abstraction. While maintaining some remnant of attachment to nature as a form of legitimacy for moral action, it is detached from actual natural phenomena. Furthermore, it comes more and more under

attack as a basis for moral decision and practice in the Western social imaginary.

Bruno Latour extensively develops the latter point.³⁷ Latour differentiates Facts (capital F) from opinions, Nature (capital N) from nature in its concrete collectivity, and Science (capital S) from science as it is practiced in a constructed and tentative manner. For Latour the current impasse on the ecological front is not due to the absence of Nature in the Western imaginary, but to the mode of its presence—that is to say, Nature as an abstracted form rather than nature in its concreteness.³⁸ Latour's thematization is quite different from that of Taylor as well as from the many writers on ecology and religion who see nature as absent from modern society, but it does not contradict the main lines of that critique. Furthermore, his work offers insight into the way in which scientists as representative of Nature (even in its abstract form) can use their position to advocate on behalf of nature (in its concrete form).

CRITIQUES OF THE WEST FROM ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Ecotheologians concerned with culture and society more than professional science find fault with the key forms within which the social imaginary, as Taylor describes it, took shape. The focus on the power of the human in history, whether through the economy, the public sphere, or the rights of individuals to participate in self-governance, is seen as detrimental to the nonhuman beings including planet earth itself. The excessive focus on the human is seen to have emerged from deep biblical notions about the human in relationship to the rest of creation. This focus is then exacerbated by the scientific and economic developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A few of the accounts most influential for ecotheologians since the 1970s are those of Lynn White Jr., Thomas Berry, and Carolyn Merchant, although none of these authors was a professional theologian. These critiques will be presented and discussed in the chapters ahead.

Such accounts are consistent with Taylor's description of the social imaginary of Western modernity. They observe not so much the teachings and motivations of biblical religion or (in the case of Merchant) new scientific methods but the way in which these ideas and motivations came to be picked up and developed in actual practice. As Roderick Nash observes of White's critique, his "approach was pragmatic." The relevant question for White was not "what does Christianity mean?" but "what did it mean to a particular society at a given time

and place?”³⁹ In other words, how did meaning and practice interact, a concern that is clearly also Taylor’s. Furthermore, Taylor pays attention to the role that Christianity played in replacing some of the core beliefs about how humans saw themselves in relation to the rest of creation.

While Taylor gives credence to the complexity of the process of disembedding humans from the cosmos and the variety of factors that may have contributed, he pays particular attention to the role of Christianity in this process. Relying on the concept of the axial period proposed by Karl Jaspers, Taylor sees the roots of this disembedding in the last millennium BCE, when the biblical religion of the Hebrews, Confucianism, Buddhism, and the philosophy of Socrates appeared seemingly independently on different continents.⁴⁰ Taylor observes that these religions made possible the separation of religion from cosmic and social control that tied human activity to what were seen as established natural cycles; in Taylor’s words:

Perhaps most fundamental of all is the revisionary stance toward the human good in axial religions. More or less radically, they all call into question the received, seemingly unquestionable understandings of human flourishing, and hence inevitably also the structures of society and the features of the cosmos through which this flourishing was supposedly achieved.⁴¹

Whereas the process of disembedding continued with traces of a previous worldview, ties to the natural world that existed in pagan religions were in the process of being severed.

For Taylor, Christianity disenchantments in two interrelated ways. It undermines the conviction that the reality of the given world established in Original time could not be changed. Christians aim to re-create the world as the Kingdom of God, “purging it of its connection to an enchanted cosmos. . . .” This building of the Kingdom of God relies on the belief that one is covenanted (called by God and invited to respond) to life in the Kingdom of God on earth not by virtue of birth but by choice. Originally hemmed in by the strong social controls of the established cosmopolitical order of King and Empire, Christianity did not reach full expression of these ideas until the seventeenth century. At that time the Protestant reformation gave force to the idea of a society “founded on covenant and, hence, as ultimately constituted by the decisions of free individuals,” as discussed above.⁴²

Taylor is not unique in this account of the effect of Christianity on the moral order of the West. What Taylor adds is a clarification of the

process by which the social imaginary is shaped in the interplay of ideas and practices. The sense of the individual as an agent of society was first embraced only by elites (and mostly as an idea) in European society. Yet the idea influenced the social imaginary in mutual interaction with social and economic practice, and indeed may well have emerged from social and economic practice. Thus he argues, “Certain moral self-understandings are embedded in certain practices, which can mean both that they are promoted by the spread of these practices and that they shape the practices and help them get established. It is equally absurd to believe that the practices always come first, or to adopt the opposite view, that ideas somehow drive history.”⁴³

Taylor’s account of the role of Christianity in the social imaginary of the modern West provides two important insights with regard to the ecological crisis. First, there is support for the persistent contention that Christianity played a critical role in Western attitudes and practices toward nature. Hence Christianity is complicit in the ecological crisis, because the disembedding of humans from the cosmic-based social and political order, to which Christian belief and practice contributed, served to disenchant and instrumentalize the natural world. Second, the social imaginary is a fluid and changing reality; new ideas and practices in mutual interaction in the sociopolitical world can have profound effects over time. All this means that while the current social imaginary of the modern West does not effectively include the ecological imagination, present efforts for ecological change are working. And it is precisely through a greening of the social imaginary that positive ecological change will happen. Greening in this context means much more than a decorative or trivial appearance of green, or a few adjustments to the existing systemic order. The depth to which the present social imaginary is not green only serves to indicate the extent of the challenge that lies ahead and the degree of intentionality that must be brought to bear to penetrate our taken-for-granted and convenient ways of thinking and acting.

ROOTS OF GRIEF AND HOPE— A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

The dynamics of change that Taylor describes are influenced by the normative values held and expressed by members of society at any particular time. With regard to the modern West, it would be inconceivable to speak of change without recognizing the major influence of Christian concepts and values (as Taylor does). Because of the fluid way in which

ideas and practices interact and either reassert or change the social imaginary, however, it is easy to see how nonintentional change or outcomes of change can emerge. The assumptions of the social imaginary are generally not clearly observed or articulated, most likely not even understood at any particular time. As a result there is the phenomenon that social scientists call “drift,”⁴⁴ which refers to the very gradual accumulation of activities or ways of thinking that build up incrementally. Drift can be seen to be a concomitant part of all change. One might conceive of the present ecological state of the world as a result of such drift. No one would argue that our ancestors set out to destroy the foundation of human existence. Yet an accumulation of activities has created just such a dangerous state of destruction.

Christianity interprets such drifts or malaise as indicative of the need for the human mediation of the divine presence in history. A core concern of the ecological texts considered here is the need for human but divinely inspired agency to heal the present ecological malaise.

Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan describes certain kinds of persistent and particularly pernicious evil according to what he calls the longer cycle of decline.⁴⁵ The cycle is “longer” by comparison to short-term dysfunctionality caused by individual egotism or group biases that temporarily inhibit true progress. What Lonergan means by progress is not the ideology of unlimited progress that has colonized the social imaginary of the West and driven the socioeconomic system, but rather the ways in which the human good is increasingly incarnated in judgments and actions. The longer cycle of decline occurs when common sense refuses to acknowledge the long-term views and critical theoretic analyses within a community or society. Typically, insights deemed to be impractical or contrary to immediate interests are refused. Over time, valuable insights for the guidance of society are lost from one generation to another.

Furthermore, the longer cycle of decline is often characterized by the isolation of cultural forms from the social reality. The arts and academy are instrumentalized for the support of the status quo. Religion is relegated to a purely personal role. In all, the separation of theory and practice, of culture and society, result in a situation in which all that is intelligible is the balance of economic pressures and national powers.⁴⁶ For Lonergan, as for Christian theologians in general, this account of long-term dysfunctionality in society is value laden. Dysfunctionality is assumed to mean neglect of the practice of such values as charity and social justice, as well as a cumulative loss of human creativity and freedom. It is, in more traditional language, a sinful condition. The longer cycle of decline calls for intentional and authentic human

intervention. Ultimately, in Christian terms, authenticity requires a difficult and challenging response to freely given divine love.

For our purposes, Lonergan's sense of the longer cycle of decline alerts us to a distinctly religious interpretation in the texts of Christian ecotheologians. This is not a negation of the largely secular account presented above. Indeed, we are claiming that such secular accounts are critical in helping establish the concreteness of hope. There is no actual separation of Christianity and secularity. Religious believers inhabit and act in both religious and secular contexts. The stakes for change are intensified, however, in a Christian account. They are the stuff of salvation. This is the case that the ecotheological texts make. Thomas Berry, one of the primary thinkers influencing ecotheology, claims: "It is increasingly clear that none of the children, nor any living being on this continent or throughout the entire planet has any integral future except in alliance with every other being that finds its home here."⁴⁷ This will require a difficult negotiation, complicated by the peculiar location of religion in the social imaginary of the West.

Christianity claims to make a concrete difference in the world. The salvation story of the Christian tradition rests on change in human history, in the attitudes and practices by which its adherents live. While religion occupies quite a different place vis-à-vis the social imaginary today than it did in the premodern era, it continues to be a source of meaning and values to many. It continues to function, even if in less defined ways, in the dynamic formation of the social imaginary. Thus the ideas and practices that Christians and Christian institutions promulgate are a significant set of tools for bringing about concrete change. The religious motivations for engaged activity in the world, especially in resisting the pernicious tendencies to decline, can provide an important impetus for positive change.

In the chapters ahead, we explore the conditions by which Christian texts can create positive change toward a viable and worthy future. In the words of Bill McKibben, already noted in the introduction, "Real hope implies real willingness to change."⁴⁸ The challenge is to bring this sense of willingness into the concreteness of life, where change happens in the social imaginary, at a day-to-day pace often too incremental to observe.

HOPE AND VISION INCARNATE

The present social imaginary in the West has little in its repertory that is ecologically sane. The community of texts we examine in this book

participate in the process by which this repertory can be extended and changed to include ecological values and practices. For the creation of such a value-laden repertory, Taylor calls for “a complex, many-leveled struggle, intellectual, spiritual, and political in which the debates in the public arena interlink with those in a host of institutional settings.”⁴⁹ These debates must reflect the theoretic reflections, the lived practices, and the demands for human authenticity that are relevant to the debate. They must be set in the wider context no less than “the shape of human life and its relation to the cosmos.” “But,” Taylor adds, “to engage effectively in this many-faceted debate, one has to see what is great in the culture of modernity, as well as what is shallow or dangerous. As Pascal said about human beings, modernity is characterized by *grandeur* as well as by *misère*. Only a view that embraces both can give us the undistorted insight into our era that we need to rise to its greatest challenge.”⁵⁰

It is clear from Taylor’s reflection on the social imaginary that visionary ideas are never perfectly incarnated in practice. Utopias, for example, have been imagined and described; they have never actually existed. What is equally clear, however, is that our only hope lies in the incarnation of the best visions for a better future. That future will be imperfect. We can confidently predict that we will never be perfect ecological citizens of the earth. Nor can we return to a premodern existence. The starting conditions for the incarnation of a new vision, at least as far as the West is concerned, are set by the contemporary social imaginary with both its strengths and weaknesses. Our future will be negotiated between what presently exists and what we are committed to creating. As in all negotiations, success is not measured by the full or immediate achievement of the ideal situation, but by the process of engagement.