

Excerpt from Heaven is sick  
an essay by Timur Si-Qin

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# Preface

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As I write this essay during the height of the coronavirus outbreak in New York City in the spring of 2020, I feel a slight sense of relief because I think I caught the virus at the beginning of last week, had relatively mild symptoms, and have already recovered. Hopefully that means I now have anti-bodies and immunity. As this crisis triggered by an RNA molecule passively travelling from person to person, lung to lung, making trillions of copies of itself each time has swept the globe, the world is left stunned and surprised. A small piece of RNA code has laid bare the weaknesses of our civilization to reveal the brittleness of our health care and economic systems, and the dangers of ignoring science.

But the message that should ring the clearest, and that I hope will not be drowned out in the resulting confusion and pandemonium, is that our health is intimately tied to the health of the natural world, down to a molecular scale. Scientists once thought that diseases and viruses existed in wild animal populations naturally, and that only our increasing contact with animals led to outbreaks. However, they have only recently come to understand that the conditions for the creation of viruses actually arise from the degradation of environments and ecosystems. By stressing animals, we stress their bodies and immune systems, degrading their abilities to fight off viruses and diseases. Outbreaks are a subtle and complex interrelated consequence of environmental destruction that Western science has only recently come to understand. But the consequences of environmental destruction are also an old teaching that Indigenous people have tried to convey and warn the rest of the world of for centuries.

In contrast to Indigenous Peoples throughout the world, who foreground the natural world and whose concern for ecosystems is foundational to their histories, cultures, and ontologies; our Western European culture backgrounds nature and has barely begun to think about it at all. Only now that we face imminent serious environmental consequences, climate change, biodiversity loss and global pandemics is European culture beginning to wake up to its own environmentalism. White European culture is historically unique in its deep ambivalence toward and dismissal of nature. This essay examines how this condition came to be and how we might chart a way out.

# Growing up in Native America

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as a  
Central  
Asian

The story of this essay is intertwined with my own life story. I was born in 1984 in West Berlin to a German mother and ethnic Mongolian, Chinese father. My mother met my father in Beijing in the early 80's while studying abroad for Sinology. She was a part of the second ever foreign student cohort permitted to study in China following China's opening up to the west. After university she became a Chinese/German interpreter for businesses and the German government, so my early childhood was a combination of German and (Mongolian inflected) Chinese cultural experiences, growing up mainly in Germany with frequent travels to China.

Eventually my parents divorced. My father moved to Hamburg, then New York City, before ultimately settling back in Beijing. My mother and I would move to the United States. My mother has had a lifelong passion for minority peoples and cultures, and in the late 1980s she became involved in Native American rights issues and plugged in to the community of Germans sympathetic to Native American and Indigenous causes. The German fascination with Native Americans has existed since the popular 19th century novelist Karl May wrote about the adventures of Winnetou, a Native American protagonist, despite never having traveled to the Americas himself. My mother grew up with these tales, and they filled her imagination with distant lands and foreign peoples. My mother is the ultimate opposite of a racist, someone who really understands the beauty and value of other cultures. She became involved with Native Americans after a delegation of Apaches came to Berlin to raise awareness of a dispute over a planned Observatory being built in the Pinaleno Mountains in Southeast Arizona. The dispute was between the San Carlos Apache tribe, to whom the mountain is sacred, and the University of Arizona, which was building the Mt. Graham International Observatory in conjunction with the Vatican and employed shady legal tactics to circumvent environmental and Native rights laws in order to build the telescope.

My mother started participating in a pen-pal program between Germans and incarcerated Native American convicts. Through this program she met an Apache from the San Carlos reservation in Arizona, Frank Rolling Thunder. Through letters, they developed a relationship, and in 1991 my mother moved the two of us from Berlin to Tucson, Arizona - the city closest to the prison where my stepfather to-be was housed.

We drove to the Arizona State prison every weekend, an hour's drive into the desert south of Tucson. I remember playing with giant ants in the hard baked dirt recreation area, fenced in by chain link and razor wire, the constant blare of cicadas, the smell of the awful vending machine food, and stories and encounters with guards, some mean and callous, others respectful. I played with other kids, but the friendships usually wouldn't last long due to the dynamic circumstances of their fathers' incarcerations and changes in visitation schedules. During those years we spent a lot of time in prison. My mother even married my stepfather in prison. The ceremony was held during regular visitation hours. My mother and I in plain clothes and my new stepfather in his denim bluejeans and blue button-up shirt prison uniform.

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Once Frank was stabbed in the kidney by another inmate. A gang assassination attempt. The shiv was made from the aluminum gasket found in milk crates. Frank was a member of the Warrior Society, the Native American gang, which even the Department of Corrections website states was founded and functions to protect incarcerated Native Americans from other prisoners and racial targeting.

Frank had been in and out of prison since he was a juvenile. It was not an uncommon life path for those growing up on the San Carlos Apache reservation, then a place of deep poverty and hopelessness. A place mostly forgotten, or never even known to exist, by the rest of American society or even the rest of Arizona. The Chiricahua Apache band were some of the last Native Peoples to resist American colonization, until Geronimo, the last warrior chief, surrendered to the United States Army in Skeleton Canyon, Arizona in 1886, and agreed to have his people moved to the San Carlos Apache reservation.

### –Native Life

In 1995, after four years of weekly drives to prison, my stepfather had served his sentence and was released. Together we moved into a new house my mother bought, and we finally began life as a new family.

The first few years went well. Frank showed us Native American life in the Southwest. We had already been attending all the pow wows in and around Tucson. Pow wows are Native American dance gatherings with different categories of dances: Traditional, Fancy Dress, Jingle Bell, etcetera. Pow wows were

where my mother made friends with other women whose husbands were also incarcerated. Once my stepfather was released, we traveled to reservations throughout the southwest and attended and participated in many ceremonies, even some that were traditionally off-limits to non-native people.

We often attended Apache Crown Dances, magical and otherworldly ceremonies where dancers wear ghost-like hoods over their faces and ornate geometric crowns reminiscent of antlers on their heads while dancing to singing and drumming. One dancer usually twirls a bull-roarer, an instrument swung on a string that makes a deep and alien whirring sound. We attended sweat lodges regularly. Sweat lodges are ceremonial saunas where glowing hot rocks are brought into a small hut and drenched with water and incense in pitch black darkness while people sing, drum and pray. The temperatures were intense, much hotter than in European saunas. The intensity of the heat was matched by the intensity of the internal hallucinatory experience. There was an element of machismo involved in bearing the heat, at least there was for Frank. Men and women usually attended sweat lodges separately. There were four rounds, and in between each round the door to the lodge was opened to let some cool air in. For a time we even had a sweat lodge in our backyard, and my stepfather hosted the ceremonies. The most powerful ceremony I witnessed was the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance was a week-long Plains Indian ritual where Sun Dancers fasted for four days without food or water, and at the climax pierced their pectoral muscles with eagle talons, inserted a rope, and were strung up into a ceremonial tree to hang until the flesh tore through, and they fell to the ground.

For me these memories are permeated with the smell of sweet-grass, sage, juniper, and buckskin. Those years of perennial ceremony, Sun Dance, pow wows, sweat lodges and time spent in nature were my religious upbringing. Back in Germany we had not been religious, my mother was an academic and I had always been drawn to science. But the Native sense of spirituality imprinted on me.

### —Christians

Growing up in Arizona also meant coming into frequent contact with fundamentalist Christians. Many of the kids I went to school with were Christian, they attended youth groups and bible studies after class and on weekends. For a time in ele-



mentary school, my best friend and his single Mexican mother lived in the same apartment complex as I did. They were evangelical Christians who made me pray to Jesus before every meal I had at their house. Rural conservative states in the United States are deeply religious in a way that is often hard for Europeans to fathom. After all, in Western Europe Christianity has become more of a cultural foundation than an explicitly religious or spiritual phenomenon.

In the United States and its rural areas in particular, most people identify as Christian, even if they don't go to church regularly or know what denomination their family belongs to. Christian channels fill the airwaves on local TV and radio. US-American politics are explicitly Christian. Christian lobbies are powerful influencers in Washington, especially in the Republican Party under the Trump administration. Up until very recently, it was practically impossible for a US-American politician to identify as something other than Christian. In spite of the fact that many US-Americans believe themselves to be part of a secular and religiously pluralistic society, Christianity is thoroughly embedded in the seat of the United States' culture and power.

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### –Native Religion

By contrast, Native American religion today is a tenuous patchwork sewn together from the threads that survived the long apocalypse. The vague knowledge most westerners have about Native religions today is that they are “animistic” and “shamanistic.” Native culture and religion was long feared and actively persecuted and exterminated by the white Christian culture. Proclaimed as devilry, the books, objects, and records of the Indigenous Americas were burned, ceremonies outlawed, families separated, knowledge erased, cosmologies forgotten. For centuries, it was illegal for Native Peoples to practice their culture and even speak their own language. Native Americans were not guaranteed the right to vote in every state until 1962, and the Sun Dance was illegal until 1978. Only a handful of tribes such as the Hopi, isolated to the tops of the dry mesa buttes of northern Arizona, or the Lakota and Dakota peoples of the plains whose warrior culture was never completely contained, managed to retain some semblance of their religious traditions. The pan-tribal native religion practiced today was woven together from what remains, what was hidden and kept secret, the fragments that were remembered

and guarded, heavily inflected by the traditions of those tribes whose cultures managed to preserve the most remnants. But the basic themes of all tribal religions have always been the same everywhere. Above all, a connection and reciprocal relationship to the land, the animals, the plants and to Earth itself was most important. An attitude of humble gratitude before the ancestral biological community that gives the gift of life. Nature itself was worshipped as opposed to a transcendent anthropo-deity like Europe's Jesus Christ.

### –Relationship with Nature

**A** The relationship to nature is likely the most fundamental difference between the values of Indigenous cultures and white European cultures. For Indigenous cultures around the world, there is an awareness of and a devotion to an ecologically interconnected reality in which the land, animals and other organisms are valued and venerated as equals and relatives. Central to many Indigenous belief systems is the idea that the people's purpose on the planet is to protect and maintain the balance of nature. From the European perspective, on the other hand, reality is seen predominantly through a lens of utility and power and the value of nature is ultimately understood in terms of its extractable use value for humans rather than for any of its innate values, such as being alive, beautiful, or contributing to a wider ecosystem. Most white Westerners are only abstractly aware of this difference in cultural values. Oftentimes they are either ignorant of and uninterested in more "primitive" value systems, or they are incapable of believing in the possibility of valuing nature more authentically or recognizing that doing so does not belong to the realm of irrational superstition, religious delusion, or "cringe." Or they don't believe that native cultures can really be all that different, since people are really all the same. These mindsets arise from ignorance, not from any genuine contact with Indigenous people.

Western culture is unique in its dismissive and domineering relationship to nature. Most cultures on earth hold nature to be sacred, from the Yakut of Siberia to the Yanomami of the Amazon, from the Masaai of East Africa to the Wirangu of Australia. The Christo-European cognition that does not regard nature as sacred and oftentimes believes it to be evil is in fact a cultural minority outlier that has only become dominant on this planet through sheer dumb ruthlessness.

For the most part, Westerners are unaware that viable alternative ways of being exist at all and that history could easily have developed along altogether different lines had Western cultural evolution taken a different turn somewhere along the way. Most don't know that this difference arose historically and contingently, and largely from the systematic ideology and historical evolution of European religion – namely Christianity.

This division between how nature is valued in Native cultures and in white European Christian cultures has perplexed my mind and stayed in my heart throughout my life. Observing a broadly Christian culture from a vantage point embedded both in Native and in ethnic Asian culture, I witnessed the dominant white culture's violence, its ugliness, its hypocrisy, its sense of entitlement, its gaslighting, its weaponized ignorance, its lack of interest in or empathy for other cultures, and its broad disregard for the natural world. Today, as climate change is upon us, these cultural differences are more pronounced and consequential than ever before.

# Why Christianity

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is  
relevant

Today Christianity is often overlooked as a relevant contemporary cultural issue and seen more as a force of the historical past. People are often only dimly aware of how much of their culture was shaped by the history of religion and spirituality, and consequently of how widely it continues to shape culture and cognition in the present day. Westerners are so enmeshed in their own culture that they often struggle to detect Christianity's influence and fail to recognize its far-reaching effects.

In the United States in particular Christianity remains an explicitly powerful ideological force. First, in a direct political sense, as right-wing Christian nationalist forces have become increasingly powerful in recent decades and form the core constituency of Donald Trump. But also in the less explicit, yet culturally deeper sense of having set up the core assumptions, values and frames of reference through which Westerners both on the right and the left interpret reality. This combination of the explicitly political dimension with the implicitly cultural dimension of white Christian Western culture lies at the root of today's ecological emergency.

**B**

At the political level, the Christian right wing is the biggest hurdle to science-based government policy today. We see this clearly now in the right's response to the coronavirus. Many believe it is a political hoax and have defied the recommendations of experts and scientists. Even more dangerously, this response mirrors the right wing's divorced-from-reality attitude to climate change, which they also believe to be a hoax, or at least disputed science. In light of Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, the American evangelical ideology remains the biggest hurdle to action on climate change for the entire planet, which arguably makes it the most dangerous ideological force in the world today.

At the cultural level, Christianity has largely determined the ontological framework and values through which Westerners see the world. Largely created from and propagated through biblical metaphors, this framework has historically defined European values and relationships to the environment, which now dictate the human relationship to the whole planet through global hegemony. Therefore, to fully diagnose the problem of climate change, one must analyze not just at the political and technological level, but also at the cultural and spiritual level. White European culture

is for the most part unaware that the role and legacy of Christianity has anything to do with today's ecological crisis, believing it to be simply the consequence of modernity, industrialization, and capitalism. This mindset fails to recognize how Judeo-Christian cultural and ontological values shape the fundamental character of capitalist systems as well as the specific ideology, policies, values, and driving energy of the Western right wing.

# Politics : Right

**B** In 2020, the Republican Party in the United States has become nearly synonymous with evangelical Christianity. The Republican Party, like the Democratic Party and all US-American institutions, has of course always been implicitly, culturally Christian. But in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan drew the evangelical voting block into politics explicitly. Since then, Republicans have become progressively more fundamentalist and anti-science. Their politics have evolved into a full-blown religious nationalism, or even Christian fascism. Today evangelicals form Donald Trump's main voting block. The leaders of these forces are actively and openly engaged in a campaign to erode the democratic institutions of the United States.

Through networks of bible studies, prayer groups, fellowships, think tanks and other institutions, evangelicals exercise influence and regulate Republican politicians in the state and national government. Many cabinet members and white house staff of this administration and their hangers-on including Mike Pence, Betsy De Voss, Erik Prince, Mike Pompeo, Jay Sekulow, Scott Pruitt, Nicky Haley, Ben Carson, and Jeanine Piro are self-proclaimed evangelical Christians and are tightly connected through right-wing Christian think tanks and organizations.

They are guided by the the evangelical theology known as dominionism, which is a group of Christian political ideologies that seek to institute a nation governed by Christians based on their understandings of biblical law.

The takeover of the government is part of the evangelical strategy called The Seven Mountains of Influence, which seeks to influence the power of nations by bringing seven categories of society under the dominion of Christ:

1	Family	
2	Religion	Spirituality
3	Business	Economy Finance
4	Politics	Government
5	Education	
6	Media	Communication
7	Arts	Entertainment Celebration Sports

#### –Anti-Market

**B** The politics these evangelical groups espouse are explicitly anti-environmental to an irrational, anti-market degree. They actively aim to scrub all environmental laws from the books and are prepared to accept the loss of the commons, the subsidizing of uncompetitive, dirty energy, and the selling off and developing of the last bits of wildernesses left in order to do so, even at the cost of a thriving tourism industry. Ultimately, what motivates evangelicals is not money.

In 2020, we should come to realize that the right wing in the United States is not primarily interested in profits and the economy as it has been branded to be. Instead, its members should be seen as what they have always openly stated themselves to be: first and foremost, Christians – and an increasingly dangerous and fundamentalist form, at that. At this point, even an ideology of greedy, libertarian self-interest would recognize the danger that further ecological destruction poses to the bottom line, for the poor as well as the rich. Large portions of the business world have already recognized this.

A recent example is the voluntary pact between automakers and the state of California to impose emissions standards more stringent than the newly relaxed standards set by the Trump administration. Automakers proposed cutting future emissions standards beyond those required by the Trump administration, recognizing that climate change will also affect their businesses negatively and that the technology to cut emissions is feasible. In response, the Trump administration

has irrationally vowed to block the deal and taken it to the courts. But why would the conservatives not let automakers voluntarily lower their emissions if, according to the automakers themselves, it is in their own best interest?

Meanwhile, environmental regulations are rolled back, protected lands are opened to mineral and gas exploration, Indigenous people's lands continue to be stolen and desecrated, and the United States has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement. Even when the dropping costs and greater employment opportunities presented by renewable energy cast the economic benefits into question. It is as if Christian culture in the United States is actively inciting the needless destruction of the environment.

#### –Biblical Literalism

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While most of the right wing doesn't believe in climate change as a man-made phenomenon, by now they do largely believe that the climate is changing. According to a 2019 CBS poll, only 9% of US-Americans did not believe the climate was changing. Most on the right believe that the climate is changing, but don't believe that human emissions are the cause and therefore don't support a greening of politics.

Strongly under girding the lack of concern about the environment among the US-American right is the deep influence of the biblical-literalist Christian ideology that actually looks forward to and welcomes, or sees as inevitable, the destruction of the world. In this ideology, the destruction of the earth is a sign of the end of times and the imminent return of Jesus, as many Christians believe is prophesized in the Book of Revelation, a text written in the year 95 A.D. that offered fledgling Christians a fictional victory over wider Roman society through an apocalyptic narrative.

Right-wing US-American Christians focus on this book of the bible in particular. It represents the fulfillment of a genocidal sense of entitlement in which all non-believers will be cast into eternal torture in hell, and only the most "faithful" believers (estimated at 144,000 people) will be vindicated and ascend to heaven. These beliefs extend beyond the fundamentalist Christians in the United States to fundamentalist Christian forces throughout the world, like in Eastern Europe and Russia, which US-American evangelicals immediately began missionizing after the fall of the Soviet Union. Or Latin America, where evangelicals are still engaged in the harass-



ment and colonization of Indigenous people and continue to proselytize among them to this day.

The New Tribes Mission, which rebranded to “Ethnos360” after a series of pedophilia court cases, is the largest evangelical Christian missionary organization. Ethnos360 is guided by a prophecy that states Jesus will return only after the last of the 2000 tribes of the Amazon have been converted to Christianity. In 2020, during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, Ethnos360 received special permission from Jair Bolsanaro to seek out some of the last uncontacted tribes in Brazil by helicopter in order to intentionally spread the virus and then force conversion in return for medical help. Bolsanaro even put the former head of Ethnos360, Ricardo Lopes Dias, in charge of FUNAI, the government agency tasked to protect Brazil’s Indigenous Peoples.

**B** Many US-Americans are subsumed by their own Christian conspiracy fantasy-reality, believing Trump to have been chosen by God to battle the Antichrist-deep state. This is the basic narrative of the popular conspiracy phenomenon of Q-Anon, which has twisted itself into an impressive ideological pretzel wherein the government is the great evil planning the subjugation and forced microchipping of US-Americans in FEMA camps, while at the same time the president, the executive branch and the military, (ordinarily the parts of the government that could enact tyranny), are somehow protecting the people from the government or the “deep state” itself.

What is often left out of analyses and discussions of Q-Anon is its embeddedness within a Christian meta-narrative in which this is all just part of a greater biblical battle between God and Satan. According to Q-Anon followers, Trump, the 45th president, has been chosen by god to fill the role of a modern King Cyrus. Cyrus was the first emperor of Persia and is celebrated in the Bible chapter Isaiah 45 for having set free a population of Israelites. One wonders why Christians rally under the ostentatious greed and immorality of Trump, but it is precisely because of his ‘unchristian’ characteristics and strongman behavior that Trump fits the role of King Cyrus in their eyes.

# Politics : Left

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## –Imperceptibility

The power grab by evangelical Christianity has, however, flown largely under the radar of cultural theorists and critics from the left. Christianity remains the left's biggest political blind spot today, and with dangerous consequences. One could even argue that the culture wars, as well as the political struggles of recent decades, were actually religious wars that the left, coded from within by the same religious platform, failed to recognize as such.

**B**

Mounting a sustained critique of Christianity from the left has proved difficult for several reasons. First, Christianity is not often discussed, simply because the white left is so thoroughly embedded within historically Christian culture itself. Extreme and fundamentalist versions of their own culture are camouflaged against the background of general Western culture, making them familiar enough and too boring to warrant closer examination. At the cultural level, Christianity for white people, even secular white people, is so foundational to their way of understanding the world that they are largely unable to perceive its influence at all, let alone how it has structured their basic assumptions about reality. As Terrence Mckenna wrote,

"Like fish in water, people in a culture swim in the virtually invisible medium of culturally sanctioned yet artificial states of mind."

Secondly, the left has largely abdicated any assertion of objective truths or meta-narratives. In the late 20th century they have arrived at a position that treats all claims to truth, like science and religion, as coequal with claims to an entirely constructed and subjective truth. For those on the left, truth is often understood to boil down only to power. Therefore, the imposition of truth as a product of power must be resisted in principle to some degree. However, without a philosophical ground to stand on where one can claim one idea is true whereas another is not, it becomes nearly impossible to effectively counter the claims of a religion and support the claims of science.

Finally, many left-leaning Christians and progressive Christian organizations exist in the United States, confusing the target of criticism. Left-wing Christian organizations, which now include the papacy under Pope Francis, believe that central to the narrative of Jesus is the plight of the poor, and see it as their Christian duty to help them. This progressive Christianity is the very foundation of the Western left and makes it exceedingly difficult for Westerners to recognize concepts of goodness and fairness in configurations not rooted in any version of Christianity. Christianity has branded itself so deeply with the concept of the good that Westerners are hard put to conceive of goodness outside of the bounds of Christianity's basic moral structures. Most are only aware of the vindictive and self-affirming conservative version of the bible on the right, or the class-aware, humanitarian, progressive version on the left.

#### –Left and Right is Biblical

The very structure of western politics as divided between left and right political orientations can itself be understood as an expression of two different readings of the bible. Left-wing narratives are a retelling of the Jesus who cares for the poor, like the Sermon on the Mount or Mathew 25. Meanwhile, right-wing narratives focus on the vindictive and self-righteous Books of Paul, Revelation or the Old Testament. The sacred narrative of the right is that of lordship and hierarchical servitude, while class empathy is the sacred narrative of the western left.

Both narratives are expressions of European farmer cultures. The agrarian condition primes humans to see the world in terms of class and hierarchy. Class divisions within cultures arise through the power ratchet dynamics of agricultural societies. The division of labor and the accrual of property made possible by the sedentary lifestyle of farming creates class and power divisions, whereas hunter-gatherer cultures are largely more egalitarian. In many hunter-gatherer cultures, divisions in social status are regulated by jokes at the expense of anyone seeking too much power. Class divisions are not universal features of human societies. As anthropologist John Gowdy remarks:

“Assumptions about human behavior that members of market societies believe to be universal, that humans are naturally competitive and acquisitive, and that social stratification is natural, do not apply to many hunter-gatherer peoples.”

**B**

It should then come as no surprise that the egalitarian class narrative of Christianity often failed to resonate with Indigenous Americans early on, and only made sense once their hunter-gatherer lifestyles were suppressed and made impossible by environmental degradation. Having been forced to exit a naturally egalitarian and classless way of being, they suddenly found themselves new members of the lowest rung of the Western class system. For centuries, missionaries have come to Indigenous Peoples of the world with their humanitarian compassion for the poor, but they themselves often imported the very conditions of poverty and class oppression necessary for these narratives to take hold. Even during the Native American civil rights struggles of the 1970s, members of the American Indian Movement expressed ambivalence towards Marxist and communist outreach, as it was once again espousing the white man's version of reality. To be clear, I am not arguing that class consciousness and labor struggles are not vitally important in today's political landscape. Nor am I advocating for a de-universalization of compassion, goodness, and fairness. Quite the opposite: I point out that the very existence of classes and social stratification are historical contingencies, and that alternative social landscapes are possible and do exist, in order to break compassion, fairness, and goodness out of their status as Western inventions.

#### –Christocapitalism

Today the Western left most often blames cultural dysfunction on market capitalism and neoliberalism, power imbalances, and inequalities. Embedded within European culture, the left is often unaware that the dynamics of global power today are uniquely European in origin and that they predate capitalism, having been spread and codified largely through Christianity. European Christian culture is historically uniquely greedy and exploitative, and today's global economic systems simply represent the continuity of the Christo-European project. By shifting the focus onto the economy, industry, technology, and "the system," Westerners have managed to avoid blame for and examination of their deepest cultural and spiritual beliefs. This should not be unexpected. After all, who among us finds it comfortable to criticize the beliefs and traditions of their parents, grandparents, and ancestors? Even for secular Europeans and US-Americans, Christianity represents the morals and ambitions of their parents and grandparents at

least, and so is implicitly associated with the good and familial along with the genuinely religious and spiritual.

There is also an aesthetic dimension to religion: ornamentation, architecture, music, iconography, etcetera. These exert their own positive associative powers. A powerful aesthetic experience is similar to, if not the same thing as, a spiritual experience. Both involve a reduction of the chatter that persists in the default-mode-network of the brain.

Capitalism, the nebulously defined, all encompassing, impersonal reification of an economic system, has thus become an abstracted scapegoat for any and all ills of modern society. This is not to say that the current world economic system is not brutally unfair, criminally exploitative, and unsustainably extractive, but rather to point out that it is also the continuation of the global agri-colonial mindset created and spread by Christian European cultural values and beliefs, and forced onto the rest of the planet. When Europeans lay all the blame on «techno-capitalism,» they are in effect blaming their tools for the problems of their culture, which enables them to avoid examining their own deep cultural heritage in which lie the true roots of today's environmental discord.

**B**

# Relationship to Nature

A sensitive diagnosis requires us to turn our attention back to the fundamental relationship Westerners have, or rather do not have, with the natural world. As Indigenous scholar Frederick Martin puts it,

“Europeans are the only people on the face of the earth who hate nature enough to advocate its total destruction. Native Americans don't do that.”

In classical Western cognition, nature is regarded as a limitless set of objects to be used for our own benefit in perpetuity. The anthropologist Wade Davis writes that

“as a Canadian, [he was] brought up to think of a mountain as a pile of rocks, whereas to an Indigineous person, a mountain is a sacred deity.”

These two acculturations produce vastly different results.

Westerners have awoken to their own moderate scale of environmentalism only in the last few decades, and this trend must accelerate in order for us to have any hope of facing the challenges of climate change and biodiversity collapse. Although Indigenous Peoples make up only 5% of the global population, they manage more than one quarter of all land on the planet while protecting about 80% of global biodiversity. Western science is just catching up to some of the knowledge of Indigenous people when it comes to the complexity of ecological dynamics or the benefits of psychedelic medicine.

The Western dismissal of nature runs deep. Core European cultural metaphors depict nature as an enemy to be overcome, a machine to be manipulated, and as property given to man by God to be held in dominion. The narratives of Western culture in movies, in books, and in art are almost always set on the stage of the human, with nature playing only supporting, minor or adversarial roles, if it is present at all.

#### –Marx and Engels and Nature

Many of the Western world's intellectual giants were and are products of this Western mode of cognition. Freud argued that the progress of civilization required

“taking up the attack on nature, thus forcing it to obey human will, under the guidance of science”.

Even Marx and Engels were products of a Christo-European cognition that understood nature as something to be conquered and gotten under control, and thought of Indigenous religious beliefs about nature as “childlike.”

Marx wrote about indigenous societies as «founded either on the immature development of man individually, who has not yet severed the umbilical cord that unites him with his fellowmen in a primitive tribal community, or upon direct relations of subjection. They can arise and exist only when the development of the productive power of labour has not risen beyond a low stage, and when, therefore, the social relations within the sphere of material life, between man and man, and between man and Nature, are correspondingly narrow... This narrowness is reflected in the ancient worship of Nature, and in the other elements of the popular religions. The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of every-day life offer to man none but

perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature.»

True to his European worldview, Marx believed that Nature was in some sense an adversary and something to be rationally controlled for the benefit of man. European culture has developed to see nature as not fundamentally alive in the same way humans are. They didn't understand that other cultures, even hunter-gatherer cultures, were not beneath, behind, or less developed than Western society just because they didn't inhabit the planet with the same technologies and values as Europeans. Marx was a product of a society that lacked the modern ecological understanding of different species as uniquely adapted to specific environments and therefore in no way hierarchical. An ant is not less evolved than a lion, a chimpanzee is not less evolved than a human. All creatures are evolved for their own ecological niches, unique circumstances and timelines.

**B**

Nor did they understand that societies are not linearly progressive and that hunter-gatherers need not inevitably progress into agrarian and industrial societies.\* (A more realistic alternative understanding of societal adaptations can be found in Manuel De Landa's assemblage theory, in which different social dynamics such as hunter-gatherer, agricultural, and industrial are understood as dynamical systems with critical thresholds determining phase transitions between different energetic societal states, similarly to the transitions in materials between solid, liquid, gas and other more exotic states.)

–Nature and Coronavirus

As Martin writes,

“only Europeans enter the natural world with fear and trembling, with recklessness and superstition, guiding their every waking moment, their every conscious step.”

Likewise, Christian disdain toward the Indian has always been a fear of material nature herself. A fear of the moral ambiguities presented by the complexity of wilderness, and ultimately a fear of death.

A recent example of Western ambivalence towards nature is found in the narratives surrounding the effects of the coronavirus, the fragility of health care systems and the unfair impacts of the virus on the poor. Without a doubt, these topics are of extreme importance, especially when the very survival of Indigenous people themselves is at stake as they are being

hit particularly hard by the virus. But a less discussed narrative is the virus's origin in our species' imbalances with nature and scientists' predictions of an increasing frequency of pandemics in the future due to our accelerating destruction of the natural world.

Indigenous commentators have been consistent in pointing out that the crisis has been a time of healing for the earth, and to speak of the virus as the planet's own immune response against humans' relentless destruction. By contrast, the Western right wing can't conceive of nature as an agent in itself at all, and so gravitates towards believing in any conspiracy theory that still posits human actors (the Chinese, the deep state, Bill Gates, 5G) or the devil as the cause of the virus. The left, on the other hand, has had an interesting counter-reaction to the ecological actor narrative. People on the left almost immediately developed an anxiety over eco-fascism, a political position in which right-wing xenophobic beliefs are justified by a concern for ecology. A smattering of real eco-fascists can be found in history and on the internet, but as latent expressions of Christianity, the vast majority of right-wing sentiments do not make room for the environment.

**B**

There are white supremacist online forums whose users often have a strong affinity for Norse mythology and the writings of the Nazi Richard Walther Darré, who coined the term "Blood and soil." But these "eco-fascists'" conception of land is nonetheless framed by a Western agricultural modality in which soil/land is a matter of property and sovereignty. This is a far cry from the interconnected, symbiotic tapestry of ecosystems contemporary ecology presents today and that has always been understood by Indigenous Peoples. At the very heart of the ecological perspective lies the lesson that difference and diversity are essential for well-being. Many Amerindian cultures have always had a place for other ethnicities in their worldviews, strangely enough since before the arrival of Columbus! The Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl, the Mayan tale of Kulkulkan, or the Hopi legend of Pahana all tell the story of a long-lost white brother, a blue-eyed, red- or yellow bearded sage who would one day return from the East and unite with the red man to form a new world religion.

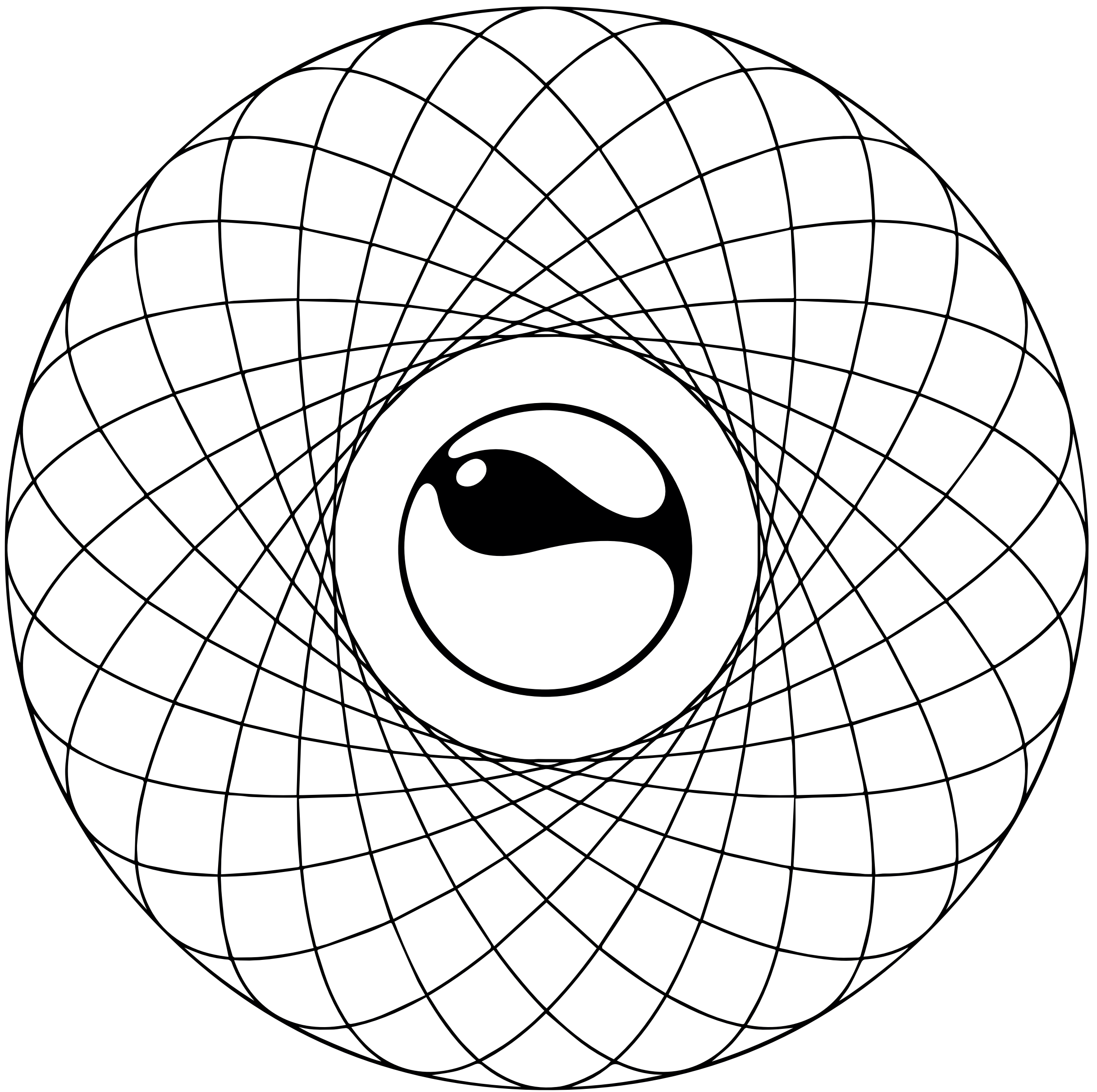
When put into perspective, the handful of right-wing white people who have twisted their ethics into both fascism and (false) environmentalism to justify their inherently anti-ecological racial views is a minor threat compared to the



true anti-ecology fascists who hold the real levers of power. 'Eco-fascist' still remains a popular pejorative used by the right wing to denigrate environmentalism in general. Just visit the website [ecofascism.com](http://ecofascism.com), which warns against such absurd boogeyman concepts as "Aboriginal Supremacism" next to ecofascism.

But the left's knee-jerk reaction against the spectre of eco-fascism displays how even their worldview has a hard time properly metabolizing the introduction of the ecological and Indigenous narrative. They either "cringe" at the sincerity required to express a deep felt concern for nature, as in the popular, sarcastically deployed meme "Nature is healing, we are the virus," or awkwardly wring their hands and warn against the threat of eco-fascism, only to reveal that, like the eco-fascists themselves, they are unable to think in terms of a non-dualistic, non-zero sum universe where a concern for nature does not automatically mean a lack of concern for humans. This is the result of the millennia-old Christian narrative of human versus nature. Indigenous people, on the other hand, have always known that these concerns are one and the same: we must protect nature to save ourselves.

**B**



*All citations will be mentioned in the final version of the text.*

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