

**The Virgin and the Dynamo: Use and Abuse of  
Religion in Environmental Debates**

Robert Royal

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*Review by David Paul Deavel  
Doctoral Candidate in Philosophy  
Fordham University*

*The Virgin and the Dynamo* is designed as a sequel to Royal's *1492 and All That: The Political Manipulations of History*.<sup>1</sup> The first book addresses treatments of history, especially of New World origins, from standpoints that care less for careful historical method than for ideology. *The Virgin and the Dynamo*—the title of which comes from the names used by Henry Adams for science and technology (the dynamo) and the beauty of nature, including the fullness of religious belief (the virgin)—treats similar faulty approaches to environmental concerns and offers a remedy in the dual appreciation of both virgin and dynamo that only the Western tradition has been able to keep in balance.

Royal's introductory chapter, which is worth the price of the book, sets out the historical perspective necessary to understand his argument. That perspective includes a reminder that contemporary worries about global warming or new ice ages caused by human hands neglect the evidence that points to such non-humanly-caused events as the drastic warming that took place around 1000 A.D. or the "little ice age" that happened from 1550–1850. That chapter also notes that environmental concerns are a relatively new phenomenon in our history, possible only after the advent of technologies that allow us to see nature in a less adversarial role. Of course, the scientific achievements that allowed humans to flourish enough to look at nature less adversarially were often accompanied by a one-sided approach to nature that reduced it to a cold, meaningless universe, subject to every human whim. This perspective is what brought about the perceived opposition between human use and the flourishing of nature. Those, such as John Muir, who fought on the side of "nature" felt that their only options were use of nature (bad, or, at best, a necessary evil) and preservation of nature unspoiled (good). This dichotomy still governs the worldview of many environmental thinkers, especially religious ones. In a brilliant polemi-

cal flourish, Royal notes that this dichotomy is based on “a type of fundamentalism about the goodness of creation” that “has obscured an older and far more realistic view” (8). This “more realistic view” of the Western tradition sees the world not as “one interlocking apocalypse” caused by human hands (19), but as a place in which human creativity, as an image of the divine, helps bring about the flourishing of the whole creation. This very rich introduction, which I have only sketched, is a good statement of the argument Royal enunciates, but he fills it out well in two parts. Part One outlines the salient features of this older and more realistic view and shows its advantages in illuminating an approach to the environment. Part Two examines prominent religious figures in the debate.

Royal’s most offensive point, to many environmental thinkers, is his affirmation of the biblical and Western view of the natural hierarchy of the world in which humans occupy the top rung. Part One examines this and other offensive concepts in a chapter humorously titled, “The Bible Made Me Do It? Creation Lost, Found, Mislaid.” Royal chooses good guides in Augustine and Joseph Ratzinger as he wades into the depths of the Western, and perhaps more specifically, Christian tradition, which he believes to be the only tradition “in a position to defend the full truth of man’s uniqueness and to make judgments about what is really good for nature” (37). Royal refers to Augustine’s embrace of linear history that makes room for novelty, discovery, and invention for Christians working in the earthly city.

Following Ratzinger’s excellent catechesis on creation,<sup>2</sup> Royal then examines modern attitudes toward creation that have been so destructive, correctly noting that they are primarily the result of the modern Western abandonment of Christianity. Two closely related and damaging attitudes posit that, with respect to scientific technology, on the one hand, and art, on the other, what humans should do is what they can do, regardless of the categories of good and bad. That these Enlightenment attitudes are both opposed to the bulk of the Western tradition and are sub-Christian, at best, should be obvious. Yet they are still pinned on biblical religion as a reason for ecological crises. Royal’s ready response is that the reason the West has responded at all to environmental concerns, unlike other parts of the world, is that its roots are deeper than the eccentric Enlightenment attitude toward nature. In other words, the West’s belief in the historical efficacy of God’s actions and our own allows it to tackle these problems confidently.

Royal’s next chapter, “A Dull Child’s Guide to the Cosmos,” examines some of the findings of modern science, including those of climatologists as well as Einstein, Hawking, and Heisenberg. Royal argues that the bulk of these

findings do not favor the “fundamentalism” of nature’s goodness or stability, but instead show a world climate that has itself been responsible for the destruction of species (not least the dinosaurs) and has endured an approximately eight-thousand-year spell of relative stability. These findings also show the rise of chaos theory, which dispels any scientific notion of natural stasis. Despite attempts to link developments such as quantum physics to eastern mysticism, Royal cites the dissent of scientific minds such as Stephen Hawking. In short, nature does not know best, is not stable, and does not easily fit with Zen Buddhist cosmologies.

After looking generally at modern science, Royal begins Part Two by examining a list of particular topics that have caused some people in the West to claim that its philosophical and religious commitments have created a “holocaust.” Royal adduces evidence that cries of overpopulation were and are mythical; that the commotion surrounding Love Canal and Agent Orange were speculative at best; that acid rain was a rather miniscule problem; that only two percent of extinctions are caused by human pollutants; and that global warming is still a very debatable proposition. In all, not exactly a holocaust. And even if it were, Royal notes, our alternatives for action—healthy development, reduced activity, or some combination of the two—will not differ substantially.

Having established a position that takes environmental problems seriously, but only when established evidentially, Royal looks carefully in successive chapters at the writings of Thomas Berry and Frederick Turner, Arno Naess, Matthew Fox, the ‘school’ of thought known as eco-feminism, and Leonardo Boff. While Royal’s treatment of these figures is too extensive to be covered in a review, what might be noted in summarizing the thought of so many figures are four general characteristics. The first has already been noted—namely, their aversion to the concept of hierarchy. This aversion, if consistent, leads to a rejection of duality and difference, and finally to a dangerous monism, as in the case of Arno Naess’s deep ecology. The second characteristic is, paradoxically, acceptance of the dichotomy (dualism) between the natural and the artificial, and thus between Muir’s notion of preservation and use. This, despite the fact that even the most “natural” habitats have now been altered by human use.

Third, all except Turner (who rejects the aforementioned dichotomy), whom Royal characterizes as overly credulous about the ability of human progress to right wrongs, seem to have little sophistication when it comes to looking at scientific reports of apocalypse. They take these reports generally without reservation. Similarly, a romanticization of primitive peoples leads to historical

credulity. Berry and the ecofeminists have their attachments to neolithic society in general—ecofeminists such as Karen Warren because of their ill-founded belief in peaceful, matriarchal societies—while Fox and Boff romanticize the natives of North and South America, respectively. Royal adduces the anthropological studies revealing these attachments as pure nostalgia.

Finally, common to the figures and movements that Royal examines is their inattention to economics. For most, this means resorting to socialism of some sort. Berry decries the rise of the nation-state and calls for a “bio-centric” and non-democratic “planetary socialism” (127). Rosemary Radford Ruether and quasi-Marxist liberationists such as Boff write as if economics were a zero-sum game and systems of economic competition always lead to “annihilation” (208). Like their rudimentary knowledge of science and of primitive peoples, Royal’s religious figures betray a stunning ignorance of the evidence they use authoritatively.

*The Virgin and the Dynamo*, entertainingly written and well-documented, is a good book for those who believe in the market economy and care about stewardship of creation. If any criticism can be leveled, it is that Royal occasionally cites his opponents from secondary source material. But Royal never takes the easy way in the arguments themselves. He admits that we can, and sometimes do, greatly harm parts of the earth. Yet he has a long enough view to note that periods of unsustainable development are sometimes necessary transitions on the trek toward sustainable development. His view is broad enough to eliminate the false dichotomies between natural and artificial, use and preservation, and environmental activism and development. For that alone he should be commended.

## Notes

1. Robert Royal, *1492 and All That: The Political Manipulations of History* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992).

2. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “*In the Beginning. . .*”: *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and Fall*, trans. by Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).