

Bhakti as Environmental Ethic: Assessing the Religious Vedic Tradition of Bhakti-Yoga as a Potential Environmental Ethic

By

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Declaration

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Abstract

This research project critically assesses the contributions that religious ethical traditions may offer towards solving the global environmental crisis. Historically, religious worldviews had been at the forefront of describing and prescribing humanity's ideal ethical relationship with the natural world. With the rise of secular worldviews and philosophies, humanity has drifted away from such prescriptions, and has for the last few centuries been guided by anthropocentric worldviews in relation to nature. The 1960s saw a rising awareness of the role religious worldviews play in environmental issues and has been subsequently dubbed the "dawn of religious environmentalism" (Taylor, 2005). From that time on, environmental ethicists have worked to assess and analyse the extent to which religious ethics may be useful in mitigating the current catastrophic environmental situation.

My study contributes to that wave of religious awareness in environmental ethics, by specifically assessing the ethical aspects inherent in the theological traditions of the *Vedas*. The spiritual culture of *Bhakti* in particular, holds what some eco-theologians consider the formula for ethical and equitable relations between humanity and the natural environment. *Bhakti* as the practice of loving devotional relations between all conscious living beings is described in *Vedic* theology as the prerequisite for harmonious relationships on earth. This understanding requires at least the acceptance or belief in an original source or conscious entity, referred to generally as God, who embodies the relational potential of all beings to each other and towards God. My study questions whether the acceptance of God as the original source of conscious existence forms the sufficient and necessary condition for ethical relations between conscious beings; and if the denial of such a conception of an original source has any causal relation with the environmental crises the world faces.

I follow the assertion made by Lynn White (1967), that if our environmental troubles are understood to have their roots in the misinterpretations of certain theological worldviews, then the solution necessarily requires a theological reappraisal of the value of all life on earth. Making use of the *Vedic Bhakti* tradition, this study will show that the ancient tradition contains theological evidence to support the claim that environmental calamity is as a result of a mistake or 'sin' viewed in religious dimension. From consideration of this theological tradition, I conclude that it gives us an understanding of how and why humanity has either failed or is unwilling to recognise non-human nature as of equal value to human nature. Moreover, the *Vedas* also provide a solution to this fundamental 'sin' or distortion of humanity's relation to

other life forms: by virtue of all of creation's inherent relation with God, all life forms possess intrinsic value. Meaning, we all have equal value before God. I conclude by sketching out a relational environmental ethic ('prema-culture') based on this theological framework, which I propose might have wider appeal beyond the *Bhakti* tradition alone, to secularists and religious folk alike.

Keywords: *Bhakti*; eco-theology; *prema-culture*; religious environmental ethics; relational ethics; sacrifice; sin; *Veda*.

Abstrak

Hierdie navorsingsprojek ondersoek op kritiese wyse die bydrae wat religieus-etiese tradisies mag maak tot die oplos van die globale omgewingskrisis. Histories het religieuse wêreldbeelde die toon aangegee rakende die beskrywing van en voorskrifte vir die mens se ideale etiese verhouding met die natuurlike wêreld. Met die opkoms van sekulêre wêreldbeelde en filosofieë is hierdie godsdienstige voorskrifte op die agtergrond geskuif en het die mensdom sig die laaste paar eeue laat lei deur antroposentriese wêreldbeelde in verhouding tot die natuur. Gedurende die 1960s was daar egter 'n toenemende bewuswording van die rol wat godsdienstige wêreldbeelde speel in omgewingskwessies, daarom is hierdie dekade die 'dagbreek van godsdienstige omgewingsdenke' gedoop (Taylor, 2005). Sedertdien het omgewingsetici gewerk aan die vraagstuk tot watter mate godsdienste gebaseerde etieke nuttig mag wees in die bekamping van die huidige katastrofiese omgewingsituasie.

My studie dra by tot hierdie golf van godsdienstige bewustheid in omgewingsetiek, spesifiek deur die etiese aspekte inherent aan die teologiese tradisies van die *Vedas* te ondersoek. Die geestelike kultuur van *Bhakti* in die besonder bevat wat sommige eko-teoloë beskou as die formule vir etiese en gelykwaardige verhoudings tussen mens en natuur. *Bhakti* as die praktyk van liefdevolle toegewyde verhoudings tussen alle bewuste lewende wesens word in die *Vediese* teologie beskryf as die voorvereiste vir harmonieuse verhoudings op aarde. Om hierdie aanspraak te verstaan, moet 'n mens minstens aanvaar dat 'n oorspronklike bron of bewuste entiteit, genoem God, bestaan, wat die verhoudingspotensiaal van alle wesens ten opsigte van mekaar en ten opsigte van God self beliggam. My studie vra of die aanvaarding van God as die oorspronklike bron van bewuste bestaan die noodsaaklike en voldoende voorwaarde is vir etiese verhoudings tussen bewuste wesens; en of die ontkenning van so 'n opvatting van 'n oorspronklike bron enige kousale verband het met die omgewingskrisis wat die wêreld in die gesig staar.

Ek volg Lynn White (1967) se aanspraak naamlik dat indien ons omgewingsprobleme gewortel is in die misinterpretasies van sekere godsdienstige wêreldbeelde, dan verg die oplossing noodwendig 'n teologiese herwaardering van die waarde van alle lewe op aarde. Binne die *Vediese Bhakti* teologie moet die huidige omgewingskrisis volgens my lesing daarvan toegeskryf word aan 'n sekere fout of 'sonde' wat begaan is deur die mensdom. Ek konkludeer dat hierdie teologiese tradisie ons 'n bepaalde begrip gee van waarom en hoe die mensdom faal of onwillig is om die gelykwaardigheid van nie-menslike en menslike natuur te erken. Boonop

verskaf die *Vedas* 'n oplossing vir hierdie fundamentele 'sonde' of verwringing van die mens se verhouding met ander lewensvorme: danksy die ganse skepping se inherente verhouding met God, besit alle lewensvorme intrinsieke waarde. Dit beteken ons het almal gelyke waarde voor God. Ek sluit af deur sketsmatig 'n relasionele omgewingsetiek ('prema-kultuur') voor te stel gebaseer op hierdie teologiese raamwerk. Ek stel voor hierdie etiek kan wyer appeleer as die Bhakti godsdiens, ook tot ateïste en godsdiensstige persone van alternatiewe godsdiensstige tradisies.

Sleutelwoorde: *Bhakti*; eko-teologie; *prema*-kultuur; godsdiensgebaseerde omgewingsetiek; verhoudingsetiek; offerande; sonde; *Veda*.

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that request: you have spent your whole life in service to others and all you ask of us is to simply do the same, that is to serve all living beings as equally important parts of God. I will carry this request and continually strive to share what I have learnt with others. In this small way I endeavour to follow in your footsteps.

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Introduction and Theoretical Background

“We will understand ecology better when we understand the religions that form the rich soil of memory and practice, belief and relationships where life on earth is rooted. Knowledge of these views will help us reappraise our ways and reorient ourselves toward the sources and resources of life” (Chapple, 2000: p. xiii).

“What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion” (Lyn White, 1967: p. 1206)

i. Rationale for Study

In his introduction to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature* (2005), Bron Taylor highlights a key historical period in the development of environmental awareness and the role world religion plays in response to the global environmental crisis. The 1960s was a time of great social and cultural upheaval in American society and the world at large. Taylor identifies this period as the “cusp of the age of environmental awareness and concern ... characterized by an explosion of interest in religion and nature” (Taylor, 2005: p. xiv). Since then, religious perspectives in environmentalism have been discussed and presented through encyclopaedias and handbooks dedicated to the wide expanse of voices on the topic by the likes of Chapple & Tucker (2000), Taylor (2005) and Jenkins (2017) to name a few. However, this interest of the intersection between religion and nature was most significantly highlighted for me by Lynn White Jr.’s landmark paper, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (1967).

White’s thesis implicated the monotheistic Abrahamic traditions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), particularly Christianity, as “fostering anti-nature ideas and behaviours” (1967: p.1205). He argued that modern humanity’s drive towards industrialisation by a systematic domination over the non-human world was influenced by certain (mis)interpretations of the Bible, and has resulted in the global ecological catastrophe prevalent today. According to

White's analysis of certain interpretations of the Bible, human beings were created in the image of God and were thus the rightful heirs of His earthly kingdom. As such humans are supposed to 'dominate' nature to meet their ends, thus 'properly' utilising God's creation. Under these auspices, Christianity, through the endorsement of the "Great Chain of Being", made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of non-human beings. The Great Chain of Being or *scala naturae* is a classical conception of the metaphysical order of the universe in which beings, from the most basic up to the most perfect, are hierarchically linked to form an interconnected whole (Brandt & Reyna, 2011). Medieval Christianity moralised these stages of God's creation in terms of how easily they could participate and relate to their spiritual origins – God the perfect spirit. Predictably, this hierarchy favoured the mental and rational categories, which seemingly only humans possessed, while disparaging the sensual and carnal, the category of non-human nature; thus, allowing humans to solidify their justification of 'dominion' and be free to exploit non-human nature indiscriminately, as 'God's intended right for them. It's worth noting, however, that this view historically favours the white (likely Christian) male, who for the last few centuries have been similarly exploiting 'lesser' human beings, including the more 'animalistic' women and people of colour. Nor have indigenous peoples who adhered to ancient worldview shown the same exploitative tendencies as employed by white-supremacist, patriarchal capitalism. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis I speak of humanity in general, in our relation to the wider, natural non-human world.

White's critical conclusion was that the Bible does give humans, by their likeness to God's image, some leeway to extract from nature their necessities for life; but that an interpretation which pursues a logic of domination by humans over others is an over-simplification (misreading) which largely contributed to the ecological crisis of our age, characterised by a crudely exploitative relationship with non-human nature. White's critique shows that environmental considerations are inextricably connected with the religious sphere in social dynamics, saying: "Since the roots of our [environmental] troubles are so largely religious; the remedy must also be essentially religious" (White, 1967: p.1207). He thus invites further consideration of the relationship between religion and nature.

Bron Taylor et al. (2016) supplement White's reading in a paper titled, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis" (2016), where they note that one environment-related religious dynamic that has received little attention from both White and others in the field of religious environmental ethics, "is that a

wide variety of religious people attribute environmental circumstances and changes, whether welcome or harmful – to divine favour or disfavour” (Taylor et al., 2016: p.312). According to Taylor et al.’s findings, beliefs around the world about the power of God, the gods, or spirits, and regarding divine favour and disfavour expressed through natural phenomena, are an especially important influence on environmental understandings and behaviours. This finding is evidenced by numerous citations from religious texts as to the consequences of non-adherence to certain religious precepts or instructions. One of the most notable of these transgressions, taken from the Biblical tradition, is called the “original sin”.

Timothy Morton’s treatise *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016) provides a useful analysis of the “original sin”. He says: “Foundational Axial (agricultural) Age stories narrate the origin of religion as the beginning of agricultural time: as *an origin in sin*” (2016: p.46. Morton’s emphasis). Morton makes use of the Genesis narration of Adam and Eve as an instantiation of one such story about humanity’s sin in the world and its subsequent consequence. As the story goes, Adam and Eve are instructed by God to “eat only of the tree of life” but not of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil”. The tree of life is representative of eternal life, attained not so much from the fruit¹ itself, but by the adherence to God’s instruction; while the tree of knowledge of good and evil refers to moral knowledge or ethical discernment. Biblical commentary sheds some light on this interpretation:

Adam and Eve possessed both eternal life and moral discernment as they came from the hand of God. Their access to the fruit of the tree of life shows that God’s intention for them was eternal life. In eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve sought a worldly source of discernment in order to be morally independent of God (Bible, 1995: Genesis 2:9; with commentary).

Theologian John Collins elaborates further,

this tree [of good and evil] is the means by which humans were intended to acquire knowledge of good and evil if they stood the test [of obedience to God’s instruction], they would know good and evil from above, as those who have mastered temptation; sadly, they came to know

¹ Fruit here refers to the proceeds or rewards from ones labour.

good and evil from below, as those who have been mastered by temptation” (Collins, 2011: p.13).

In Collins’s view the moral independence sought by man represents being mastered or overcome by the temptation and desire to enjoy or ‘know’ the pleasures of God’s creation, without God’s oversight. As such, rebellion or disobedience to God’s instruction regarding humanity’s relation to the rest of creation is understood as the ‘original sin’ of man in relation to God. The resultant consequences of that rebellion are of significant concern here.

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return... So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken (Bible, 1995: Genesis, 3: vs. 17-24).

In these verses, God metes out the consequences for Adam’s disobedience. The most notable is that Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden of Eden, the place of eternal life and land of providence, to the place of dust and death (temporary life). They and their descendants (humanity) would now have to toil for their subsistence and satisfaction; no longer would it be easily provided as in the garden. This ‘original sin’ of Adam, as the representative or progenitor of humanity in this world, illustrates the (environmental) consequences of disobedience to God’s instruction – disobedience that stemmed specifically from the desire to experience the creation outside of their allotted quota.

Arguably a stretched interpretation, yet, this Biblical history does highlight a key theme I wish to pursue in this thesis – that the consequences of sin or disobedience to God’s will or instruction, is in some sense naturally/environmentally related. The ‘original sin’ is a common theme shared across ancient theocentric worldviews (Morton, 2016), where the notion of transgressing divine authority leads to unintended circumstance of global and even universal proportion. As Collins puts it:

I would not put the relationship with sin, as simply cause and effect. Rather, I would say [for example] that the sin of Genesis 3, under the influence of a Dark Power [moral

temptation or desire for that which is not permitted] has opened the door to all manner of evil in the world, and that evil has come rushing through (2011: p.14).

Understood in this way, White, Taylor et al. and Morton make a case for the inextricably intertwined nature of religious understandings and human attitudes towards the environment. Possibly because religious and mythic frameworks and worldviews serve to orient humans comprehensively vis-à-vis the whole of reality, they convey time-honoured insights into norms for proper, sustainable co-existence with the natural world. The negative relationship humans currently have with the non-human environment may therefore from this perspective be interpreted as a result of their illicit longing to know² the pleasures and benefits of God's creation³ outside of His permitted allotment.

If this reasoning is accurate, then it follows that a renewed investigation into the divinely ordained relation between humans and nature as conveyed by these religious stories and theologies is called for in our time of natural catastrophe. In that case, White's argument about the roots of our environmental crisis and thus some suggestions towards its remedy also being in the religious domain, should at least be interrogated further. Thus, my project aims to analyse one such religious or theocentric approach to environmentalism – wherein the theme of 'original sin' and its consequences have expressly, though, not limited to environmental dimensions. And where adherence to divine instruction, expounded through religious duty, could potentially provide a framework for a morally worthy environmental ethic.

ii. Introduction to Field of Study

Describing the concept of an "environmental crisis" has become an increasingly complex task, not only because of the interconnected nature of the issues that affect ecological degradation, but also because its causes are unresolvedly intertwined with so called "human developmental" activities which purportedly aim to sustain human livelihoods on the planet. Hoffman and Sanderlands (2005) explain that ecological problems are not primarily technological or even

² Knowledge as experiential, gained through the senses - taste, touch, sight, smell, hearing and the mind. Also 'knowing' as in using or appropriating for oneself.

³ Because of the religious framework to be investigated in this study, the natural world will often be described as 'creation', which places a different spin on what we talk about. This inflection or framing of the natural world as originally belonging to God, is different in important ways, from the secular terms, 'nature', 'environment' and 'non-human life forms' abounding in most Western environmental ethics discourses.

economic, but rather are behavioural and cultural. “Although technological and economic activity may be the direct cause of environmentally destructive behaviour, it is values, both cultural and institutional that guide development of that activity” (2005: p.143). Social and cultural values are what underpin human behaviour, and it is social institutions (associated with religion, philosophy, politics and science) as the repositories of such values that are called into question in the quest for a solution to the environmental crisis. As Willis Jenkins puts it in his introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2017): “When research fields organize as environmental humanities, they underscore a shared epistemological claim: there can be no adequate ecological knowledge without understanding the culturally embedded humans who are changing ecological systems” (2017: p.24). Because social values define what is right and good for humans in relation to their environment, it is those values that also define the extent, nature and reasoning for environmental protection.

The way in which humans have responded to the environmental crisis inevitably centres on the values societies hold to be valid. These values are defined by their metaphysics, that is, “by their taken-for-granted assumptions about man, nature and God” (Hoffman & Sanderlands, 2005: p.143). Metaphysics here is understood as uncovering the nature of being, reality and experience, the fundamental nature of what it means to be human, what constitutes the natural environment, and whether or not there is a God or intelligent creator at the helm of this complex locus of experience we call the universe. Hoffman and Sanderlands argue that, “it is only by reaching to this deepest level of metaphysics that we begin to reckon affectively with our current environmental dilemma” (ibid). In this light, investigations into metaphysics as the origin of social values and affective orientations⁴, especially how those values describe the “right” actions in relation to those considered “other” than human beings is in my view the first step to understanding how to solve the environmental crisis.

Since the early days of modern Western environmental ethics there has been debate about whether values in nature are anthropocentric (human-centred) or ecocentric (nonhuman-centred) (Hoffman & Sanderlands, 2005; Kopina et al., 2018). This dichotomy has come to serve as the broad spectrum upon which environmental concerns are drawn and justified. Anthropocentrism as a concept is defined as “attitudes, values or practices which promote human interests at the expense of the interests or well-being of other species or the environment

⁴ By ‘affective orientations’ I mean here instinctive or pre-reflexive responses regarding certain human behaviours as either ‘cruel’, ‘inhumane’, and destructive, or ‘normal’ and even ‘natural’.

as a whole” (Kopina et al., 2018: p.112). Furthermore, anthropocentrism has been said to culminate in existentialism – “a philosophy of subjectivity that takes man to be everything. Existence is what man makes it to be. Existentialism, in other words, defines man by his free will and finds that man exists only as he exercises his freedom in the world and over nature”. (Hoffman & Sanderlands, 2005: p.147). As a position which sees all value(s) as ‘man-made’ and thus as existing only in relation to humans’ values, the concept is generally associated and cited as a substantial causal factor of environmental problems caused by humans, most pronouncedly through the processes of industrialisation and mechanisation – which drove increasing human demand for natural resources since the Middle Ages. The anthropocentric perspective holds that human responsibility to the natural environment is indirect and only goes as far as humans have a responsibility to look after their own interests and those of their *kind*, both present and future. This perspective generally advocates the value of the non-human environment to be subordinate and thus in-service to (and derived purely from) human interest and needs.

On the other hand, the ecocentric perspective promotes the intrinsic value of non-human nature, that is to say “non-human beings are not simply of value as a means to human ends, but have an intrinsic nature or properties that are non-relational to human needs” (O’Neill, 1992: p.120). Ecocentrism is said to culminate in naturalism – a philosophy of objectivity that takes nature to be everything. “Naturalism defines man as one of the numberless facts of nature – as one of the flowers upon one stem upon one branch upon one limb of the great tree of existence” (Hoffman & Sanderlands, 2005: p.147). This definition forms the basic premise for an ecocentric ethical stance in environmental concerns. It dislocates the objectification of value and instrumentalization of the non-human world from the stringent grip of human norms and interests. From this premise the non-human world or more-than-human world is fully acknowledged as possessing intrinsic value. As such, the ecocentric position underlies ethical perspectives that propose an explanation of what that intrinsic value is.

Hoffman & Sanderlands critically comment that between these two ideologies, the subjectivity of existentialism and the objectivity of naturalism, “there is no middle ground and thus no place to stand for compromise, there is ground only for polarising debate” (ibid: p.148). Hoffman & Sanderlands go on to express that, either way is fatalistic for humanity because these positions deny any meaning for life. On the one hand, as the centre of their own existence, humans find that their only “true freedom” lies in the choice not to “exist”, as exemplified by the unremitting existential angst. For if they choose life where their individual selves are dislocated from the

centre of existence i.e. through the lens of eco-centricity; then what else would be the meaning or purpose of their life? This means that if humanity were to privilege the ‘other’ over their own selves, they would not find the same meaning to life as when their value is determined by their choices. Hoffman & Sanderlands argue, on the other hand, that ecocentrism’s objectivity merely white-washes or envelopes humanity as another part of nature’s unfolding process. Yet again, humans’ meaning is obscured, only now within nature’s meaning and value. If humanity sees no reason for their active role in engaging in a system that dislocates their meaning and only gives them meaning in self-annihilation, then there is certainly a need for an alternative approach. However, this objectification of humanity is not necessarily the fault of the ecocentric model. The objectification explained by Hoffman & Sanderlands arises from humanity’s preconceived notions of their own subjective self-importance (as is the assumption in anthropocentrism), and when environmentally concerned humanity attempts to move towards the ecocentric model – that notion of self-importance is carried with them, but fails to receive the same recognition within a nature-centric model where all parts are considered equally and intrinsically valuable for the wellbeing of the whole system.

The critical point being made by Hoffman & Sanderlands in relation to the anthropocentrism-ecocentrism binary, is that rather than (environmentally concerned) humanity choosing one or the other, there is a middle ground to be found. Such an intersectional position dissolves the problematic binary and locates value neither in one nor the other (which statically reside there), but instead in the dynamic relation between them. In relational ethics, meaning is located within a specific relationship itself – “the value of a relationship is found not in what is to be gained from it instrumentally by either party, but is itself the good sought after and gained by the related beings” (Chan et al., 2016: p. 1463). Examples of relations may be understood in general social dynamic, as well as ecological ones, wherein the value is not in what one party gains individually from the other, but how the relation between two or more parties benefits them all, and to a great extent constitute them as what they are (Bhakitvedanta Swami, 1972; McFague, 1987). Hoffman & Sanderlands suggest that such a relational ethics is most readily found in religious thinking (2005: p.145).

Advocating the intersectional nature of human values, religiosity and environmentalism, Willis Jenkins (2017) proffers that:

Environmental issues are inescapably entangled with human ways of being in the world ... For religious studies, that thought carries two basic implications. First, however a

scholar imagines religion, it is inescapably entangled with environments. Religion is ecological, at least in the sense that it is a significant part of humanity's evolutionary history. Particular religious inheritances, traditions, communities, or practices cannot be fully understood apart from the environmental history from which they emerged and whose ecological relations they in turn influenced. Second, because environmental issues are entangled with human ways of being in the world, they are entangled with religion. Insofar as religion is involved in how people inhabit and interpret their world, it is involved in ecologies (2017: p.23).

Jenkins thus makes clear that religion is inescapably “entangled” with our most basic relation to our environment, and that environmental thinking cannot ignore religious orientations. Each has to incorporate the other explicitly, since they already do so implicitly. Commenting on the promise that religious views have to offer to environmentalism, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim add that, despite world religions being slow to respond to current environmental crises, “their moral authority and their institutional power may help effect a change in attitude, practices, and public policies ... the challenge is in broadening their ethical perspectives” (2017: p.7). Tucker & Grim point out the invaluable role religious leaders have played in raising awareness of environmental concern. Advocacy by the likes of Pope Francis in his Papal Encyclical: *Laudito Si': The care of our common home* (2015), they say, “encouraged the moral force of concern for both the environment and people to be joined in integral ecology” (ibid: p.3).

These elements of moral authority and institutional power carried by religious denominations add more weight to the argument that religions should be included in the discourse of environmental ethics. The promise of an environmental ethics embedded in religious values has encouraged many theologians and environmentalists alike to investigate the potential of religious or theocentric environmentalism, both as independent doctrines and more pertinently, as part of a potentially pluralistic project. Tucker & Grim are stalwarts in the academic field of religion and ecology, having organised and contributed to numerous academic conferences which paved the way for scholars in the field. An important seminal event in this regard was a conference series on “Religions of the World and Ecology” held at Harvard University from 1996 to 1998, which helped organize many dispersed projects into a shared field of overlapping research interests. Led by Tucker & Grim, the conference series gave rise to the “Forum on Religion and Ecology” (now at Yale) (Jenkins, 2017: p.25). The result of the Harvard conferences was the development of three basic theses that made it possible for scholars of

many traditions and methods to recognize a shared conversation, viz., (i) that religious worldviews are significant for environmental behaviour, (ii) that scholars should critically engage religious traditions with the ecological values and ideas needed for humanity to find new and sustaining relationships to the earth amidst an environmental crisis, and (iii) that environmental crises are also cultural crises of a religious depth (ibid).

Jenkins explains that the first thesis redirected debates over whether and which religious traditions are culpable for exploitative environmental attitudes. The second thesis combined the notion of religious importance in environmentalism with a “commitment to critically re-examine traditions”. Finally, the third underscored the “cultural significance of that work by suggesting that modern environmental problems put into question fundamental human-earth relations, about which the shared symbol-making capacity that has endured in world religions can be a source of wisdom” (ibid). These three ideas shaped collective inquiry across religious worlds and connected diverse projects in a coherent cultural endeavour. It is now standard to find religious scholarship deployed to engage environmental questions.

It is prudent to bear in mind the fact that Western eco-theology developed in response to ecological critiques of Christianity, by the likes of Lynn White (1967) and John Passmore (1970). Christian eco-theology was thus on the scene earlier, and therefore played a relatively larger role than other faith traditions in giving shape to the field of religious ecology. This led scholars such as Jenkins (2017) and Haberman (2017) to ask whether Christian theology had a distorting influence on subsequent environmental inquiries in other traditions and other disciplines. Moreover, Jenkins notes that such suspicion towards Christianity’s hegemony over religious environmentalism raises a broader question: “How should a pluralist field receive confessional scholarship? Does it have shared terms by which to critically assess work developed with the particular logics internal to some traditions of faith?” (Jenkins, 2017: p.27). For without some shared terms to guide comparative inquiry, “the field would risk becoming either too inclusive (an uncritical clearing house for any expression of religious environmentalism), or too exclusive (excising major forms of scholarly production because modally improper)” (ibid). Jenkins warns that either response to traditional work would impoverish the field’s pluralism. His recommendation to this problem is that:

When constructive religious production happens because some religious world responds to environmental stress with its interior logic of reflection – for example,

reading scriptures with ecocritical tools – the issue for the field is not whether it belongs, but what should be asked about it (ibid).

What I take from Jenkins' recommendation is that, to make possible the work of highlighting the environmentally applicable ethics of a certain religious worldview, specific questions need to be asked of the tradition. Questions that will draw-out the nuances and highlight how those key points are useful to the larger project of religious environmentalism. Thus, a research project centred within the field of religious environmentalism, aimed at critically engaging with and contributing towards a pluralistic position, seems a fitting task for a master's candidate in applied environmental ethics. Motivated toward such an end, I make a case for the consideration and inclusion of a theocentric environmental ethic based on the religious doctrine of the *Vedas*. Accepting the above-mentioned considerations as guidelines for research within religious environmentalism, I assimilate these in formulating specific questions of the *Vedic* theistic worldview, which are aimed to draw out what I consider an essential ethics applicable to environmentalism.

iii. Research Questions, Hypothesis and Aims

As mentioned earlier, Bron Taylor et al.'s research in "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis" (2016), presents a research avenue I consider noteworthy and of interest to pursue. Taylor et al. note the idea of "divine favour and disfavour" expressed through natural phenomena, as an especially important influence on environmental understandings and behaviours (2016: p.312). My interest is drawn to this dynamic for many reasons, but particularly because what seems most concerning to religiously-oriented people is the fact that religious or spiritual life, for many, is a process of repentance or amending obstinate ways of living; and embracing a path of obedience to certain principles laid out by a divine authority. In order for one to come to terms with their personal and collective spiritual path, it behoves them to come to terms with their sin of disobedience in the first place; whether that was or continues to be in an individual and direct manner, or understood through narrations of collectively relevant historical dimensions wherein all implicated parties are taken as co-conspirators and thus equal recipients of the consequences of such an original and collective disobedience.

Against this backdrop and of the debate sketched so far, my own research question for this study revolves around the consequences of sin or disobedience to religious authority. I embark on a critical investigation of scriptural references that allude to the consequences of religious sin from the *Vedic* theistic tradition. I explore certain concepts within the doctrine which I consider fruitful for reorienting human relationship with the rest of the living world, as well as possible shortcomings. Of prime concern in this regard is the equal and intrinsic value of all life, considered under the theistic notion of being parts of God's creation; and thus deriving their individual value from their relationship to the whole of God's creation.

The *Bhakti* tradition (a denomination within the greater *Vedic* corpus) specifically focuses on relational value as justification for environmental care and is the motivation for practitioners engaging in devotional care with all beings of God's creation. Thus, the *Bhakti* tradition recommends a remedial form of religious practice through loving relationships. This entails that humanity may correct their original sin – the fundamental, attitudinal error of trying to instrumentally exploit God's creation in a mood of egocentrism, in violation of their relations with creatures as much as with their Creator. Humanity has thus collectively failed to appreciate creation as an extension of God's own personal form to be cherished as a relatable subject. *Bhakti* in this sense is taken as “love for God and creation”, and is believed to be the cure to that original relational error. In this way, a relational religious culture expressed as ‘devotional practice’ is what my thesis seeks to emphasize within *Vedic Bhakti's* ethics, as a suggestion towards their potential application as ‘environmental ethics’ – a relational culture my thesis terms: “*Prema*-culture” or a “Culture of Love”.

In conversation with Lynn White (1967), my project adopts this hypothesis: **If the roots of our environmental crisis have their origins in religious sin, then the concomitant solution to said crisis should similarly be understood from a religious perspective.** Thus, the first major aim of my study is to assess the extent to which the environmental crisis has its roots in religious context; while the second aim assesses the theoretical potential of the *Bhakti* tradition as an environmental ethic. I do the latter specifically through answering the third in a series of three guiding questions I intend to address for this study: (1) What was, if any, the original sin or mistake committed according to *Vedic* religious insights or narratives, that led to a punitive or corrective response by a Supreme Spirit/Source/Self or God? (2) How does that original fault and its consequences relate to the environmental crisis as it is known today? (3) What solutions can be drawn from the *Vedic* religious traditions, particularly the *Bhakti* traditions, to reverse

or make amends for that original transgression – solutions that might represent environmental ethics?

iv. Chapter Outline

In my first chapter, I begin with the creation narrative according to the *Vedas*, highlighting its importance for humanity, as the *Vedas* contain detailed cosmological stories of how and why the creation of the universe takes place. It is here in chapter 1 that the first question of my thesis is addressed, pertaining to the original sin in relation to *Vedic* creation cosmology. The *Vedas* not only prescribe an appropriate relational ethic for human-environmental care dynamics, but also describes the intention behind the ethics in the first place. Based on these narratives, the *Vedas* also describe the negative consequences experienced by earthly inhabitants when these prescriptions are neglected. These consequences are embodied in the concept of *karma* or the negative reactions experienced as a result of previous sinful actions. This notion of *karma* will address the second of my guiding questions, dealt with in chapter 2, relating specifically to the environmental dimension of said consequences and linking them to contemporary environmental crises.

The third guiding question will be dealt with in chapter 3. Regarding this question, generally, most *Vedic* traditions uphold the same basic worldview described by the term “*sarvatma-bhava*”, which means “that everything is part of a unified and radically interconnected reality, alternatively called *Atman* or *Brahman*, and refers to the primacy of a conscious entity considered the source of life and creation” (Haberman, 2017: p.36). According to differing interpretations there are a variety of prescribed methods designed to ameliorate the initial sin of humanity and thus aid individuals and communities in assimilating relational ethics with non-human creation. One of the most contentious issues in *Vedic* traditions, as noted by both Chapple (2000) and Haberman (2017), is the debate between the ascetic *Jnana* (renouncer) and *Bhakti* (devotional) traditions.

Many of the ascetic traditions teach that the phenomenal world is ultimately an illusion and is meant to be transcended, while the devotional traditions affirm the reality of the world and honour it as a divine manifestation (Haberman, 2017: p.36). The denial of the physical world as illusory is generally coupled with an understanding of a formless or impersonal conception of *Brahman*/God as the ultimate reality (Chapple, 2000: xxv). The specific issue of whether

the identity of *Brahman* is personal or impersonal forms the essential component for consideration when addressing the third question of my thesis. Here, I depend on and explicate the understanding inherent within the *Bhakti* tradition of *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*, who essentially recommend loving (emotional) devotional service towards all of creation, and most especially to the Supreme Being (God in a personal form) – as a direct practice of relational ethics.

v. Introduction to *Vedic* Religious Traditions

Ancient India with its vast collection of spiritual knowledge in the form of the *Vedas*, is understood by some to be the origin of spiritual or religious doctrine and culture on the planet (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987; Knapp, 2000; Frankopan, 2015). Colloquially, the spiritual praxis of the *Vedas* followed by most people in India is known as Hinduism, but this is considered a misleading term imposed by Persians in the last millennium and has been subsequently rejected for centuries by scholars and spiritualists alike (Haberman, 2017; Chapple, 2000). When Persian invaders arrived on the subcontinent of India (circa. 530 B.C.E), then internally known as *Bharat Varsha* (the empire of an historical king named *Bharat*), they described the inhabitants of that land who lived on the eastern side of the *Sindhu* river (also known as *Indus*) as “Hindus”, a mispronunciation of *Sindhu*. This not only designated them geographically, but referred to their spiritual culture as well. Thus, the various practitioners of *Vedic* spirituality, with their wide range of cultural expressions and customs, were all classified as “Hindu”, or those on the other side of the *Sindhu* river (Chapple, 2000: xxxviii). Haberman highlights the complexity of the term Hinduism, and how today it is the accepted designation of a vast array of religious beliefs and practices of the majority of the Indian population. He specifies that, “as in the case of every world religion, it is more accurate to speak not of a single Hinduism, but rather of a rich multiplicity of Hinduisms” (Haberman, 2017: p.35).

In their anthology titled *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water* (2000), religious environmental ethicists Christopher Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker, curate a wide range of perspectives informed by the spiritual practices and beliefs of Hinduism. Authors in this anthology such as Dwivedi (2000), Haberman (2000) and Seshagiri Rao (2000), argue that certain Hindu values are inseparable from environmental values, and as such should be taken up not only by Indian people, but be propagated through various avenues for the enlightenment of all people in general to the possibilities this tradition holds for

environmentalism. Haberman (2017) importantly notes that previous overviews of Hinduism and ecology have tended to focus on the philosophical (*jnana-yoga*) texts and practices of ascetic traditions, which advocate renouncer values, such as minimal consumption, and how such values might positively contribute to environmentalism. However, he juxtaposes the ascetical Hindu traditions with the *Bhakti* traditions, in favour of the latter, and writes:

I find myself in agreement with Vasudha Narayanan who has pressed for a shift away from an emphasis on the ascetic traditions in our understanding of Hinduism and ecology to the *Bhakti* devotional texts and rituals, since devotional exercises seem to be the greatest potential resource for ecological activists in India (Haberman, 2017: p.35).

In his contribution to the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2017), Haberman explores this relatively under-represented tradition of Hinduism with the aim of presenting its potential for environmental activism. Owing to that potential, along with the comparatively limited attention afforded it by religious-environmental scholarship; and buttressed by a growing personal interest in Hinduism or rather *Vedic* knowledge systems, I have chosen to focus my research study on the *Bhakti* tradition, with the specific aim to critically engage the tradition's teachings in the field of environmentalism.

vi. Methodology and Theoretical departure points

Tucker and Grim, with their decades of commitment to the field of Religion and Environment, provide a few methodological approaches for eco-theologians, three of which I consider useful to my project. (1) Firstly, they highlight the problem of religion's ability to provide pragmatic solutions to environmental practices. This they say is due to the disjuncture between their principles and their practices, as history has borne witness to the increased exploitation of nature usually with the endorsement of religious traditions. Now religion stands as the vital swing vote that can make or break the struggle against environmental crises. They write, "The challenge now is a broadening of religions' ethical perspectives" to once again fit the whole earth as God intended (Tucker & Grim, 2017: p.7).

(2) Secondly, Tucker & Grim provide a methodological approach for assessing religious traditions and applying such traditions to modern times. They mention that there is an

“inevitable disjuncture between the examination of historical religious traditions with all their diversity and complexity; and the application of their teachings, ethics or practices in contemporary situations” (ibid). This holds particularly true for my thesis; firstly, because of the potential for misinterpretation of culturally relevant descriptions, largely due to the historical time gap between ancient *Vedic* doctrines and the present age. And secondly, because *Vedic* texts were predominantly written in Sanskrit, an ancient language dating as far back as 2000 B.C.E., and has today been translated in many languages with a myriad of interpretational meanings (Chapple, 2000). Because of this, the potential for the inevitable disjuncture of historical religious traditions and their application in modern scholarship, as suggested by Tucker & Grim, is a real concern in my research. Therefore, they recommend a three-fold analytic approach to assist the religious environmental ethicist “retrieve, re-evaluate and reconstruct” dated religious traditions and help apply them contemporarily.

The approaches are explained as follows: (a) “Retrieval involves the scholarly investigation of scriptural and commentarial sources in order to clarify religious perspectives regarding human-earth relation” (Tucker & Grim, 2017: p.7). This requires that historical and textual studies uncover resources latent within the tradition, while also identifying ethical codes and ritual customs of the tradition so as to better apply them. (b) Under “Re-evaluation”, traditional teachings are evaluated according to their relevance to contemporary circumstances, assessing to what degree the teachings, ethics and ideas of the traditions are appropriate for shaping ecologically sustainable practices. (c) Finally, “Reconstruction” suggests ways that religious traditions might adapt their teachings to current circumstances in new and creative ways, which might lead to syntheses or creative modifications of traditional ideas and practices – to better suit modern modes of expression (ibid: p.8). I focus mostly on “retrieval” in my study, especially in the first chapter relating to the original sin in *Vedic* context. Though, I do offer suggestions about how the *Bhakti* tradition might be “re-evaluated” and “reconstructed” for modern applicability in the second and third chapters respectively.

(3) The third methodological concept I adopt from Tucker & Grim, is what they describe as “religious ecologies and religious cosmologies”. They explain that in the process of retrieving, re-evaluating and reconstructing traditional religious worldviews – religious ecologies and cosmologies are uncovered and identified. These ecologies and cosmologies are expressed as “ways of orienting and grounding, wherein humans undergo rituals and practices of nurturing and transforming self and community in particular cosmological contexts that regard nature as inherently valuable” – through these cosmological stories and practices, humans narrate and

experience the larger matrix of life's mysterious unfolding (ibid). Religious ecologies and cosmologies may be distinguished from each other, but not separated, thus they help provide context for navigating life's challenges – providing spiritually rich stories of religious persons of old, and painting the landscape of the admired human-earth relational ethics of the tradition. This knowledge is incorporated in symbolic language and pragmatic norms such as prohibitions, taboos and limitations of ecosystem usage. Lifestyle adaptations such as restrictions on diet and considerate use of environmental resources are examples of such concepts. The overwhelming attribute of religious ecologies and cosmologies is that they are “based in an understanding of nature as source of nurturance and kinship” (ibid). It is such a relational principle of environmental care that forms the heart of religious ecologies and cosmologies, and will be emphasised in my study.

In the course of my analysis I assume a few theoretical departure points that provide clarity to the reader. As noted, the concept Hinduism encompasses a complex and multifaceted enclave of practices and lineages shrouded in historical ambiguity. Thus to avoid confusion and set my study apart from that ambiguity, I prefer the term *Vedic* when referring to the religious culture and literatures that the *Bhakti* tradition is embedded within. Furthermore, to assist me delve into the vast texts of the *Vedic Bhakti* tradition, I predominantly rely on translations and commentaries by His Divine Grace, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896 – 1977)⁵, a foremost *Vedic* scholar, teacher and sage of the modern era. I also make substantial use of the works of his contemporary students who have since added invaluable elucidation to these esoteric translations.

Bhaktivedanta Swami appears in the lineage of *Brahma-Madhva-Gaudiya Vaishnavism* (*Gaudiya Vaishnavism* in short), which is believed to date back to the inception of the *Vedic* culture (Rosen, 2007). The practitioners of *Vedic Bhakti* are also referred to as *Vaishnavas*. The essential features of *Vaishnavism* are the “recognition of *Vishnu* (also known as *Sri Krishna*) as sole Supreme Godhead; and the adoption of *Bhakti* or emotional service in a mood of love and devotion as a means of spiritual realization” (Kapoor, 1976; p.1). The life works of Bhaktivedanta Swami, the founding teacher and preceptor of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), are considered a modern continuation of the ancient scholarship in the *Gaudiya Vaishnava* lineage. They consist of over eighty volumes of

⁵ For ease of reference, all works cited by Bhaktivedanta Swami are given in-text with the date of publication only, and the relevant sections of the citation are noted in the footnotes. This is because the online repository used as reference does not display page numbers, only indicating the volume, chapter and verse.

translations and commentaries on the various scriptures in the *Vedic* literatures, which especially enunciate the cultivation of *Bhakti* (devotional service) to Sri Krishna (The personality of Godhead) as the highest goal of life. The literatures include the *Bhagavad-Gita* (The song of God), the multi-volume *Srimad-Bhagavatam* and the *Sri Isopanisad*. Being among the first fully translated English volumes of these literatures, Bhaktivedanta Swami's contributions are accepted as spiritual tutelage the world over, and are regarded as an invaluable source of translated *Vedic* literatures from the *Bhakti* perspective, hence my decision to utilise his works over the numerous other translations available today.

Finally, in as far as I relate the ideas drawn out of the *Bhakti* tradition with modern established eco-theological and even eco-feminist paradigms, it is not my intention to seek a kind of justification or perhaps a legitimisation of *Bhakti* in the eyes of eco-theologians. Such a comparative analysis rather serves (for now) to highlight some important parallels I came across in my study. For example, I periodically refer to ideas prevalent in the works of Christian eco-theologian and feminist Sallie McFague (1987), such as the 'anti-monarchical' stance in the God-creation relation, as well as principles of 'relationism' advocated by the likes of Metz & Miller (2016). My interest is to draw attention to what Jenkins (2017) and Haberman (2017) note as Christianity's eco-theology having proliferated earlier than other theological traditions, at least in the modern academic context, making the tradition the unofficial gatekeeper of modern theological environmentalism. More importantly though, such scholarship reassures me that key principles and themes useful in assessing *Bhakti's* potential as an environmental ethic have not only already been highlighted by other traditions and their scholars, but that such principles are fluidly translatable in the languages and cultural heritages of so many other worldviews. This is certainly a laudable take-away from the pioneering work of Mary Evelyn Tucker & John Grim in the field of Religious Environmentalism. There are surely more parallels and resonances that could be drawn between recognised environmental paradigms and the *Vedic* traditions in general, but such a task falls outside the scope of my current undertaking.

Chapter 1 - The Vedic Worldview and the Original Sin

1.1 Introduction to the *Vedas*

I am seated in everyone's heart, and from Me come remembrance, knowledge and forgetfulness. By all the Vedas, I am to be known. Indeed, I am the compiler of Vedanta, and I am the knower of the Vedas (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁶

In this chapter I provide an overview of the *Vedic* worldview, with specific reference to its creation cosmology, with the aim to explicate what is considered the “original sin” causing a schism between humans and the natural world in its context. I do this by first highlighting the stand-out feature of the *Vedic* corpus, which is its depiction of the inherent relatedness of all things and beings in the universe. I then go on to explain what is considered the ‘ethically correct’ understanding inherent in this cultural view, I do this in sections 1.1 and 1.2, respectively. In section 1.3, I delineate the metaphysical order expressed in the *Vedas* which implies a certain (environmental) ethic. I then explicate the mistake or “sin” according to this cultural context. Finally, in section 1.4, I discuss the consequences of said sin and how those may be interpreted as constituting an environmental crisis.

The term *Veda* from the ancient Sanskrit root *vid*, means “to know” or simply “knowledge”, referring to knowledge of the creator, the creation, and the purpose thereof. As such, the *Vedas* claim not to merely espouse worldly knowledge as the observations and speculations of human thought, but are referred to as *apaurusheya*, meaning “not of human making”, or as having “Divine” origins⁷ (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1993: p.1)⁸. *Vedic* scholar and *Bhakti* practitioner, Steven J. Rosen, helps define *Veda* further. He writes; “in a pragmatic and broad sense, *Veda* refers to any abiding knowledge ... many Indian sages and *Vedic* scholars refer to all sacred texts as *Vedic*, regardless of cultural origin or sectarian affiliation” (Rosen, 2006: p.49).

In a narrower sense, the more familiar understanding of *Veda* refers to the four *samhitas* (holy books) of ancient India, known as *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva Vedas*. Rosen explains that

⁶ Bhagavad Gita: 15.15.

⁷ I am aware that from a philosophical point of view such claims are problematic. One need not necessarily accept this claim in order to follow the narrative and reasoning and thus learn something from this theistic exposition.

⁸ Sri isopanisad: Introduction.

the *Vedas* give three kinds of religious understanding to humanity – (1) *karma-kanda*, or activity that allows one to live in harmony with God and nature; (2) *Jnana-kanda* (pronounced *gya-na*), the activity that allows for the above, along with the advancement of knowledge (of the necessary relation between God and the creation); and (3) *Upasana-kanda*, the essence of worship and devotion to God and His devotees (considered most important of the three). The *Vedas* once patently brought these concepts forth for humanity, but over time the interpretative meanings of the deeply mystical and metaphysical hymns led to variations in understanding, and there arose a need for clarification (ibid: p.51).

The *Vedas* claim that they emanate directly from God, the Supreme Being known as *Vishnu* (also known as *Sri Krishna*) – the cosmic creator, maintainer and annihilator. The knowledge contained in them was initially passed down by oral tradition from *Vishnu* to *Brahma* (the deputed universal engineer), who in turn instructed it to the inhabitants of the created universes. They were then transcribed to written medium by *Veda Vyasa* (the compiler of the *Vedas*) some 5 000 years ago (Knapp, 2001). *Veda Vyasa* is viewed in Pan-Vedic consciousness as an incarnation of *Vishnu* (*saktyavesha-avatar*)⁹, and is thus understood to have appeared in order to clarify the original meaning of the *Vedas* which had been lost to humanity. The specific problem of meaning that arose was that in the days of antiquity *brahminical*¹⁰ priests transferred the *Vedic* hymns from teacher to disciple –

through mnemonic techniques that enabled them to memorize the sacred texts and to properly pronounce them. These procedures required rigorous practice of tightly defined poetic methods. The end result was that a class of priests who knew the recitations of the incantations began to overemphasize the phonetic over the cognitive dimensions of the *Vedas* (Rosen, 2006: p.53).

In this way, the overarching meanings become lost over time. Though their complete meaning was shrouded in ambiguity¹¹, the original (four) *Vedas* did reveal one principal theme, namely

⁹ “The saktyavesha incarnations are of two kinds--direct and indirect. When the Lord Himself comes, He is called saksat, or a direct saktyavesha-avatara, and when He empowers some living entity to represent Him that living entity is called an indirect or avesha incarnation” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987: SB.3.5.21, purport)

¹⁰ The Vedic social order designates four spiritual and four social classes known as varnashrama. The brahmin are considered the priestly/godly class and thus hold the most prominent position in Vedic society, even above the royal class. This is so because the brahminical class is meant to guide society towards the attainment of set spiritual goals.

¹¹ I am familiar with the field of philosophical hermeneutics and deconstruction, which have shown that all texts allow for multiple, even self-destructive, readings. I therefore convey these sentiments as representative

the central importance of the “Cosmic Person” or *Purusha*, the Supreme Personality of God known in the *Vedic* tradition as *Vishnu*. They describe the preeminent position of *Vishnu*, indicating that all living beings (human and non-human) are descended from and are thus inherently related to *Vishnu*.

The individual living beings of this world, having descended from *Vishnu*, are understood to be naturally subordinate to Him¹². In the various world religions, when speaking of this approach to religion that focuses on awe and reverence to the Supreme Person, they refer to the –

religious fear before the fascinating mystery (*mysterium fascinans*), or sometimes, the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*). Practitioners in this mood respond to the power of God and bow down to His majesty, for they see duty and obligation as prime spiritual objectives and the mandate of scriptural injunction as the central imperative or motivating factor of their religious lives (Rosen, 2007: p.11).

This hierarchical structuring might attract certain criticisms relating to interpretive suggestions that allude to unconditional obedience on the part of the subordinate beings, as is the case made by Christian feminist and ecotheologian Sallie McFague in her robust critique of the “monarchical model of God” (McFague, 1987). Yet, relational theory ethicists Thaddeus Metz and Sarah Clark Miller, contend that such hierarchies constituted of superior and subordinate, when concerning ethical relations, “involve reciprocity, a relationship in the interests of both parties to it, and hence comprising action informed by sympathy, compassion, generosity, and the like” (Metz & Miller, 2016: p.3).

Within their descriptions, the *Vedas* mention various levels of living beings created by and thus subordinate to *Vishnu*, chief among whom are the *devas* (demigods) who act in service to

of those shared by leading authors in the field of Vedic studies and are not necessarily my own views on the matter.

¹² In Vedic theology, the concept of gender in divinity is not the same as expressed in the conditioned or embodied reality. In the Bhakti traditions, the whole divine reality is expressed in both masculine and feminine aspects, Krishna (Vishnu) is the divine masculine and Radha is the divine feminine. “Krishna is the soul of souls; Radha is *his* soul. She is non-different from Krishna; she is his counter-whole. She’s the supreme power, and he’s the supremely powerful” (Comtois, 2020: p.227). Additionally, the living beings in creation are understood to be derived from the feminine aspect of divinity; while the creation itself is derived from the masculine. As such, the figurehead of divinity from the perspective of embodied beings in creation is that of the masculine; for this reason, when referring to the figurehead of creation throughout my thesis I refer to divinity in the masculine aspect. For this I utilise case sensitive masculine pronouns He/His.

Vishnu to fulfil the purpose of creation. In relational ethics terms, hierarchical structures help create the context for such themes as generosity and reciprocity. Indeed,

Those in a superior position, while having more responsibility, are obligated to act for the sake of those in a lower one, while inferiors are expected to show respect for superiors, which need not mean unquestioning deference and can include remonstrating (Metz & Miller: pp.3-4).

In this light, the *Vedas* recommend that the categorically “lower” beings (such as humans) have a duty to show respect, and engage in forms of ritual sacrifice towards categorically “superior” beings (such as the demigods and *Vishnu*). Rosen explains that the underlying reason for this sacrificial worship of the demigods by humans, for example, is a show of reciprocal thanks-giving for the continued blessings which are received in the form of vital ingredients for the sustenance and prosperity of the subordinate human beings. This represents a reciprocal yet asymmetrical, ontologically dependent relationship, characterised by care from the superior and gratitude from the inferior. McFague (1987) suggests this kind of unequal relationship is best expressed in the metaphor of mother and child.

In *Vedic* terms, these kind of ritual practices are referred to as *yajna* (sacrifice), and are said to help the living beings realise the “truth” of their existence – that truth encompassing “the radically inter-dependent and reciprocal nature of all living beings in the cosmos” (Rosen, 2006: p.58). Such truth is meant to lead to the understanding that the sustenance and prosperity of all living beings is ultimately guaranteed and supplied by the Supreme Being, *Vishnu*. This is because all natural energies/elements¹³ are bestowed as divine gifts by God, and the demigods are deputed agents who facilitate the distribution of those energies. These gifts of maintaining, sustaining and enjoying life, are to be accepted by humanity with gratitude and decorum, in the mood of awe and reverence of the mysterious power of the Supreme supplier (ibid: p.59). The *Vedas* thus recommend various elaborate sacrifices as a form of reciprocation to the demigods, as well as *Vishnu*, known as *Yajna Purusha*, the Supreme recipient of sacrifice, for the benevolent supply of life sustaining energy. Building a practice of sacrifice into one’s habitual consumption and enjoyment of life-sustaining goods, reminds one of one’s dependence upon the Supreme Being.

¹³ The material elements of the universe (earth, water, fire, air and ether) are the basis for all forms of sensory experiences, and because the living entity has no capacity to create these elements, s/he must accept them where they come from, with gratitude and humility. (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972: Bhagavad Gita: 7.4)

This introduction is an indication towards my first guiding question, identifying the original sin and honing in on a possible cause for our current environmental crises. According to the *Vedic* tradition, humankind's original mistake revolves around the lack of reciprocation of appreciation, for the divine gifts in the form of nature's bounty given to the living beings by *Vishnu* and the demigods. How the living beings in the universe reciprocate with God and His creation forms the focus of my thesis, and to further illuminate this matter, an explanation of the *Vedic* creation cosmology is necessary.

1.2 *Vedic* Creation Cosmology

We are not material beings who have spiritual experiences, rather we are spiritual beings having a material experience – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881 – 1955).

In this section, I explain how the inherent relation between God (as creator) and the creation is understood to be established and sustained, and how that relation serves as the basis for an ethical relation for all beings in creation. The *Vedic* creation narrative describes *Vishnu* as the creator, maintainer and annihilator of the entire cosmos. The cosmic universe is understood to have begun as a seed which sprang from the gigantic body of *Maha-Vishnu* (Great *Vishnu*, the source of universal creation)¹⁴. That seed then transformed into a golden egg into which a partial portion of *Vishnu* entered as the *Virat-Purusha* (the Cosmic Person within the universe) (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)¹⁵. That golden egg is considered to be the universe in the shape of an egg¹⁶, and is the epicentre of the material energy. That energy is known in its gross manifestation as the elements earth, water, fire, air and ether, as well as the three subtle elements of mind, intelligence and ego (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)¹⁷. Once The Cosmic Person entered the universal egg, His body then developed into the physical and mental worlds. For example, His mouth became speech, presided over by the fire-god; his nostrils became

¹⁴ Maha-Vishnu is considered an expansion of Krishna, the Original Spiritual Person. Such expansions are compared to candles, the first flamed candle, from which all other candles received their flame, is here called the origin. So Krishna is the reservoir of all other expanded/incarnation personalities of God that bring forth from his spiritual body. In this way Krishna expands Himself into innumerable forms, all of these are called Vishnu-tattva (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1975: Sri Caitanya Charitamrita: 1.2.89).

¹⁵ Srimad Bhagavatam: 3.26.51-53.

¹⁶ Many ancient cultures around the world share this cosmic egg theme in their creation narratives (Prime, 2002).

¹⁷ Bhagavad Gita: 7.5.

breathing and the sense of smell, overseen by the wind-god; his eyes became the sense of sight, controlled by the sun-god; movement appeared along with his legs, rivers along with his veins, and mind along with his heart. The moon was taken to be his mind and the demigods *Brahma* and *Shiva* were his intellect and ego (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)¹⁸.

As De Chardin's quote suggests, the defining feature of spirit souls in the world is their conscious awareness, which is conceptually "higher" than unconscious matter. Similarly, in the *Vedic* perspective, consciousness is understood to pervade the entire universe and all within it, and so forms the underlying basis of reality. After developing the material elements, the Cosmic Person then expanded Himself into the consciousness of the individual living entities. Considered the self or original source of the numberless living beings in the universe, including the demigods who are the entrusted administrators of the universal order, *Vishnu* is said to give life to all living beings by way of expanding His own spiritual or conscious self.

The nature of that spiritual expansion is explained in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (2.2.13), and emphasized by Bhaktivedanta Swami throughout the *Bhagavad Gita* (As It is): "*Nityo nityanam cetannas cetananam eko bahunam yo vidadhati kaman* – He (Vishnu) is the prime eternal among all eternal. He is the supremely conscious Being of all conscious beings, and He alone provides and maintains all life (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)¹⁹

Vedic philosopher and author Ravindra Svarupa explains further the relation between Creator and creation:

In effect, there is a class division in conscious beings. It says that there are two categorically different types of conscious or spiritual beings. One category is singular in number – *nityo*, a set with only one member. This, then, is the category of God, who is one without a second. The other class is plural – *nityanam*, containing innumerable members. This is the category of all individual living beings that inhabit the universe. The members of both classes are eternal, conscious and blissful spirit. Yet one of them is unique, peerless, in a class by Himself, for He is the singular, independent self-sustaining sustainer of all others. Each of the others possesses a multitude of peers, and all of them alike are intrinsically dependent upon the One. The One is the absolute, the many are relative (Ravindra Svarup. 1996: p.1).

¹⁸ Srimad Bhagavatam: 3.6.4-27.

¹⁹ Bhagavad Gita: 7.10; Purport.

The following analogies only partly reveal the inherent relation between The Personality of Godhead and the innumerable living beings. That relation is said to be like fire and its sparks, the primeval flame of consciousness *Vishnu* is the source of all spark-like souls. Or, God is like the vast ocean, and the living beings are like droplets of that ocean. As such, the soul and the Super-soul are said to be simultaneously one with (in quality), and different to each other (in quantity/magnitude) (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1975; 1993)²⁰.

This understanding is captured in a unique concept embedded in the *Gaudiya Vaishnavism* lineage. Termed: *acintya-bhedabhedha-tattva*²¹, the simultaneous oneness in quality, yet difference in quantity, of the two categories of conscious spirit beings. Spiritual by constitution, the soul (*jivatma*) is described as a minute fragment or sample of God, who is the Super-Soul (*Paramatma*) of all living beings. All souls are one in ‘quality’, for both the creature soul and Super-soul are conscious spirit; yet different in ‘quantity’, as the magnitude of *Paramatma* is complete, limitless, and consciously pervading all creation; while the magnitude of the *jivatma*’s consciousness is limited to its individual body. Their equal quality is reflected in three distinct but inseparable characteristics of conscious spirit. God’s body is understood to be of spiritual form known in Sanskrit as: *sad-cit-ananda-vigraha* – an “eternal form of bliss and knowledge”. Similarly, the individual souls, being expansions of Him, share those same spiritual qualities (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)²². In this way the living beings are qualitatively related with God. This relation naturally engenders God to be intimately concerned with the sustenance and wellbeing of the living beings who are created in His qualitative “image”, but even more, they are ontologically (a small part) of Him. The *Bhagavad-Gita* puts it unequivocally when *Sri Krishna* declares: “by knowledge [of the spiritual constitution of the living beings] you will see that all living beings are but part of the supreme Spirit, or in other words, that they are Mine” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)²³.

Once the material universe is created from the material elements (*bahiranga-sakti*), *Vishnu* enters into every atom of matter as well as into the heart of each living being, and sits alongside

²⁰ Sri Caitanya Caritamrita: Adi.7.116.

Sri Isopanisad: Verse 7; purport.

²¹ This understanding forms the key distinctive element between the Vaishnava or Bhakti schools that is investigated here, and other Vedic schools of thought that share the same perspective on the creation cosmology; yet hold different opinions as to the fundamental constitution and ultimate purpose of the living beings.

²² Bhagavad Gita: 10.12-13; purport.

²³ Bhagavad Gita: 4.35.

the individual conscious soul as *Paramatma*, the Super-soul. He resonates His own super-consciousness which enables the minute souls to thus *be*²⁴. *Vishnu* as the *Para-brahman* is the basis of all life in matter, and by His presence, He pervades and animates the material bodies of the living entities, enabling the soul to perceive and interact with the created material world and with all other souls. This phenomenal realm is thus a combination of matter (*bahiranga-sakti*) and spirit (the *tatasta-sakti*), wherein material bodies made of temporal elements are inhabited by eternally conscious spiritual energy.

When *Vishnu* expands Himself as the universal creation, the souls enter the created world of matter from their origins in the spiritual universe motivated by the desire to enjoy God's creation²⁵. In order to fulfil their desires, they require material bodies in which to enjoy the interactions of the senses with their objects – the material elements. The material bodies of living beings are made of eight elements that match the elements of creation, namely earth, water, fire, air, ether, mind, intelligence and ego. These constitute the separated energy of God manifest from His *bahiranga-sakti* (material energy). The fragmental souls manifest from the *tatastha-sakti* (marginal energy) and are the conscious spiritual element that animate and exploit the material elements (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)²⁶. The universe is thus an expression of the multifarious desires of the living entities – which, as they mutate and evolve through different bodies, compound and continue to imbue the universe with more living beings (in the form of offspring) along with their (the offspring's) desires to enjoy God's creation, driving a perpetual cycle (Prime, 2002: p.20).

In this way the relation between God, living beings and the natural world is described. The implied meaning of which is that this inherent metaphysical relation calls for an ethical communion between all beings and the natural creation. When this foundational, constitutive relatedness among all living things and God, is shunned by certain beings, that process is what my thesis identifies as the “original sin” in *Vedic* context.

²⁴ See: “Morphic Resonance: The Nature of Formative Causation” (2009), by Rupert Sheldrake.

²⁵ Scholars/practitioners of Gaudiya Vaishnavism do not clearly elucidate exactly why jivas (souls) have this desire for separation from God. The practice of bhakti, as a practice of sharing love and devotion, requires immutable free will in which the jiva always has the option of choosing not to focus their existence on God directly. Thus, Bhakti cannot be forced or compelled; this creates a situation where some jivas will choose not to act devotionally (Fici, 2020: p.92).

²⁶ Bhagavad Gita: 7.4-5.

1.3 The Original Sin

In the *Vedic* understanding God is ultimately considered a person. The individual souls, as the offspring of God, are also persons; who only fully manifest their authentic identity in relationship with the supreme Person. To say the supreme Spirit is a person, is to say He has senses (*indriya*), senses through which God feels and enjoys His own energy, including the activities and feelings of the individual souls. In the same way that an artist might enjoy their own artwork, or a parent might enjoy the activities of their children; similarly, God enjoys the genuine feelings generated in relation to His energy.

Christian theologian Sallie McFague echoes this same sentiment in her metaphoric description of “the created world as God’s body”. She writes:

God knows the world immediately just as we know our bodies immediately. God could be said to be in touch with all parts of the world through interior understanding. Moreover, this knowledge is empathetic, intimate, sympathetic knowledge, closer to feeling than to rationality. It is knowledge by acquaintance; it is not information about. Just as we are internally related to our bodies, so God is internally related to all that is – the most radically relational Thou. (McFague, 1987: p.73)

As fragmental parts of the supreme whole, the minute soul’s essential nature is understood as being of service to God by facilitating feelings that are pleasurable to His senses, specifically through a personal interactive relationship. In the same way any limb of the body works not for its isolated pleasure, but acts to serve the whole body; the essential duty or *dharma* of the fragmental soul is to serve the supreme whole. God sustains all living beings by His energy, so the appropriate reciprocation would be for the living entities to return the favour, so as to bring pleasure to God, just as a child upon receiving palatable foodstuff from a parent, humbly thanks and offers first taste or significant portion to their beloved parent. Such filial sacrifice is not demanded by the parent; but inevitably by such reciprocation the relationship thrives and the system of supplier and sustained is maintained. Relational ethics stresses that the relationship between beings is a good itself – it creates the goods of companionship, joy in each other's and in one's own existence (McFague, 1987; Chan et al. 2016; Metz & Miller, 2016).

Along with the personal qualities, individual souls are also understood to inherit a minute quantity of God's sovereignty. However, the individual souls because of this impulse towards sovereignty, tend to evince their relative freedom by desiring to become prime enjoyers, apart from God, to sever the intimate and loving relationship with Him. That is, they desire to enjoy the creation separate from God the creator, without either acknowledging Him as its source or offering any reciprocal service in return as a show of gratitude. This is the categorical mistake of the living beings in this world. *Vedic* adherents thus view God's response to the soul's desire for sovereignty, as Him granting them independent lordship in the material world just so they may attempt to fulfil their desires. As a loving parent, He does not require that souls who are trying to enjoy independently show Him any direct worship or acknowledgement, for as the parental analogy conveys, the adolescent souls do not yet recognize their innate dependence on God. Thus, they are not bound by a sense of obligation to Him²⁷(Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)²⁸.

However, the *Vedic* understanding is that God does not require that souls directly acknowledge Him as their guarantor, but expects that living beings, through their observation of reality, at least consciously come to an appreciation of their congenital dependence on each other. The implication of this fact that the spirit souls are not at home in the material world. The created world it is taken as a place of sojourn where souls are meant to ultimately cultivate a deep appreciation of their constitutional dependence on God, and their radical interdependence with other beings in creation (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987; Suhotra Swami, 1996; Prime, 2002). It is this realization that reveals *Vedic* theology's potential contribution towards an environmental ethic for me. The failure to recognize and appreciate this inter-relational co-dependence is said to induce negative consequences for the embodied souls.

Having denied their authentic spiritual identity as parts of the supreme whole, living beings enact an illusory independence, wherein they reject their inherent interrelatedness with the rest of creation. The original sinful desire of the living being is captured in the statements: "why can't I be God?"; and, "why should *Vishnu* be God?" (Ravindra Svarupa, 1996: pp.3-4). It is this wayward intent on denying and destroying primordial bonds and relations, that my thesis

²⁷ This is akin to the Genesis story of Adam and Eve who desired moral independence from God.

²⁸ Srimad Bhagavatam: 3.16.26; purport.

refers to as the “original sin” of the living beings who desired an independent life from God their creator and well-wisher.

This desire to be as independent as God, is said to have led to a forgoing of their inherent duty as servants or agents of God, and instilled in them an idea to become gods (controllers) themselves; by so doing, subjecting their fellow living beings to a status of servitor to their selfish desires. Sallie McFague advances a similar point. Speaking about a metaphorical theology for understanding the universe as “God’s personal body”, she states that:

Sin, in this metaphor of the world as God’s body: is the refusal to be part of the body, the special part we are as ‘*imago dei*’ (God’s own self-actualization through humankind). To sin is to refuse to take responsibility for nurturing, loving, and befriending the body and all its parts. Sin is the refusal to realize one’s radical interdependence with all that lives: it is the desire to set oneself apart from all others as not needing them or being needed by them. Sin is the refusal to be the eyes, the consciousness, of the cosmos (McFague, 1987: p.77).

Bhaktivedanta Swami unequivocally states that, “the root of sin is deliberate disobedience to the laws of nature through disregarding the proprietorship of the Lord” (Bhaktivedanta, 1993)²⁹. Such desires for freedom and blatant disregard in recognising God as the lord of material nature, are understood to be the origin of the living beings’ active pursuit for individual or self-centred sense pleasure. And these lead to subsequent reactions (*karma*) which are the immediate cause of suffering in the world. This is because by neglecting their service to the whole creation, which sustains and maintains their bodies, the living beings are factually depriving themselves, as parts of that whole.

The *karmic* reactions will be addressed further in chapter 2, as the consequences of the “original sin”. Because the spirit souls are not meant for existence in the material realm, they become affected by a false sense of lordship over it, they come under the influence of God’s material energy (*bahiranga-shakti*), which is categorically different from His spiritual energy (*antaranga-sakti*). Thus becoming conditioned into a belief that they are wholly constituted of matter. This conditioning covers the pure knowledge of the soul’s being a part of the supreme Spirit, and as such it covers the knowledge of their eternal spiritual selfhood and its intendent relations to other spirit souls. The living being, so motivated to believe they are of material

²⁹ Sri isopanisad: Mantra 1; purport

origins, as a result of their original desire to be gods themselves, easily reject any subtle or spiritual cause for the material world and go on assuming it is solely meant for their enjoyment.

The desire to enjoy God's energy separate from its creator, without acknowledgement, gratitude or thanks, has led to the material conditioning of the spirit souls in this world. In this world they gain the opportunity to fulfil that self-centred desire, but by doing so they concomitantly reject their original spiritual identity along with its attendant relational implications. When beings in this world do not feel related or connected to others, a subsequent neglect for the wellbeing of those others is experienced. That neglect leads to an experience of suffering that both the perpetrating and recipient beings feel.

1.4 The Suffering Soul

The quest by conditioned souls for materially based happiness in this world is considered futile. The spirit souls naturally seek a kind of happiness that is in accordance with their eternal spiritual and relational nature, yet they seek it where their experience is temporary, as when the living beings evince an egocentric engagement with material elements. The fulfilment of the most common and basic desire, that of transcending death and thus enjoying unrestrictedly, has not once met with success; but the materially conditioned souls do not know that reality is just the opposite of what it seems (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1993; Ravindra Swarup, 1996; Kapoor, 1976). Temporary gratification of their senses is in fact said to induce perpetual suffering, not perpetual happiness. This is because each act of material sense gratification, such as the desire for nutritional sustenance, or bodily comfort, or reproduction and maintaining material possessions, all in the eventuality of impending death of the material body – act to intensify the soul's false identification with the material body and its temporal nature.

The deeper problem alluded to here by the *Vedic* view, is that the souls, as a result of their original sin and subsequent material conditioning, understand themselves only on the material level, that is as only being constituted of a material body. The souls' suffering results from a direct disequilibrium experienced between the eternal conscious nature of the soul, and the temporary inert nature of matter. The soul tries to enjoy matter eternally, because pleasure and eternity is its constitutional nature; but ultimately faces frustration due to the inevitability of death, which breaks the cycle of sense pleasure in that body (Kapoor, 1976). Consequently, when the body undergoes disease, senescence, and death, the materially absorbed living beings

experience all these as happening to themselves, and so suffer. But viewed in *Vedic* terms, such reality is considered to be false, death is considered an illusion imposed upon them covering their eternal nature. Yet in the name of avoiding this illusory suffering, and in search of pleasure, they heinously exploit material nature (Prime, 2002: p.78).

In the *Vedic* perspective, when the soul leaves one body, that process is known as death. The same soul then enters another body, to continue their attempts to attain their unfulfilled desires. This process is known as “*mrtyu-samsara* or reincarnation” – the cycle of repeated birth and death³⁰. The soul is said to pass through all forms of life from single-celled micro-organism, to stationary life forms like plants, to insects and animals, and finally to humans and the universal administrative demigods – thus the evolution of the soul³¹ sees it transmigrate from one material body to another in search of nuanced types of pleasure, derived through sense gratification in those various species (Prime, 2002: p.21).

This concept shares affinity with “The Great Chain of Being” or “*scala naturae*”, which is a conceptual hierarchical structure of the universe, first conceptualized by Plato and Aristotle and further developed during the middle ages. The Chain of Being describes an interconnected web of greater and lesser links. Each link in the Chain is an individual species of being, creature, or object. Those links higher on the Chain possess greater intellect, mobility, and capability than those lower on the Chain. Accordingly, the higher links have more authority over the lower (Brandt & Reyna, 2011; Wheeler, 2018).

Identifying with various material bodies sequentially, the soul is plunged into a cycle of perpetual attempts to fulfil its desires, and thus remains trapped in the revolutions of repeated birth and death. The identification by the embodied souls with their psycho-physical coverings of its material body and mind, is said to be the direct cause of their suffering.

Indeed, all living entities within this world are under the control of material nature, which inflict a threefold suffering known as: *adhidaivika-klesa*, suffering caused by the demigods, *adhibhautika-klesa*, suffering caused by other living beings, like insects and

³⁰ There are in Vedic terms, 8,4 million different species of material body and senses, and the soul transmigrates through all these (B.G 13.21; purport).

³¹ Interestingly, Leif Jensen in a book titled “Rethinking Darwinism” (2010,) writes about how the theory of Darwinian evolution seems to borrow the idea from the “evolutionary process of the soul” described in the Vedas. Instead of the evolution of species, the Vedas indicate an evolution of the soul, that begins in categorically lower species, up till the superior positions of human beings and the cosmic administrators, the demigods.

enemies, and *adhyatmika-klesa*, suffering caused by one's own body and mind, such as mental and physical infirmities (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1975)³².

It is these miseries that are experienced as the negative reactions to the living beings' egocentric pursuits for personal gratification, and that I elaborate on in detail in the following chapter.

1.5 Chapter Summary

In section 1.1 of this chapter, I clarified what the *Vedas* or *Vedic* literatures are, and why they are considered invaluable to not only adherents of *Vedic* religious *dharma*, but for anyone seriously exploring the religious perspective to environmentalism. The first chapter was used to answer my first of three research questions. That question asked, what was the original mistake or sin committed in religious understanding, that led to a punitive reaction in the form of an environmental crisis. To answer the question, I first had to describe the *Vedic* creation cosmology in section 1.2: as told in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the living beings are considered fragmental parts of the supreme Divinity, and so have a relational duty to serve God in a personal way. Section 1.3 then discussed the original sin explaining that, as elaborated by Ravindra Svarupa (1996) and McFague (1987), the living beings desiring an egoistic sense of pleasure, manifested a "sinful will", which is the enactment of the minute soul's attempted / illusory independence from the supreme Soul. This saw the soul's desire to usurp God's position as supreme enjoyer. Overwhelmed by their desires for independent lordship, souls are said to have become conditioned into a psyche of egoistic, self-centred and ungrateful over-consumption of God's material energy. Section 1.4 briefly explained the consequences for the soul (suffering) of this original sin. The next chapter will expand on these consequences when it links the original sin to the current environmental situation. I do that by arguing that the three-fold consequential miseries mentioned in the *Vedas*, can be directly and indirectly understood as the manifest environmental crisis.

³² Nectar of Instruction: Text 2; purport.

Chapter 2 – Consequences of the Original Sin

2.1 Introduction

The original sin of desiring independent lordship and the subsequent denial of God as the source of creation, caused the souls' descent into the material world as a means to fulfil their desire. The material embodiment of the fragmental souls binds them to the laws of material nature, which dictate how they experience the world. In this chapter, I respond to the second guiding question of my thesis: how does the original sin, as explicated in the previous chapter, relate to the environmental crisis. To do this, I draw a causal link between the three-fold miseries caused by the demigods, caused by other living beings and miseries inflicted on oneself through the body and mind. These miseries are better understood as *karma*, described in the *Vedas* as the reactions for neglecting one's *dharma* or sacrificial duty, that of relating ethically with the rest of God's creation.

Through a 're-evaluation' of the *Vedic* understanding of *karma*, I make the case that the conditioned soul's desire for lordship in this world culminates in a psyche or attitude of over-consumption of God's creation, a state the *Vedas* describe as an "atheistic or demonic mentality". I argue that atheism in this religious worldview may be considered the precursor to modern, secular anthropocentrism, and is the fundamental attitude that continues to drive the environmental crisis. To understand anthropocentrism as embedded in an original or primordial mis-orientation towards reality, akin to a 'forgetfulness of Being' in the Heideggerian sense of the world, can assist believers and non-believers alike in thinking about how to overcome this problem at an ontological level. I therefore also briefly show how this over-consumptive attitude has been historically imbued in the Scientific and Industrial revolutions of the past centuries, and continues to be propagated through certain religious perspectives, especially those that propose the "monarchical model" of God, which itself tends to describe God in an impersonal and un-relatable mode. I conclude by noting alternative models for relating with God, and make the case that the ancient *Vedic* traditions exemplified just such alternative views. These alternative models of God subsequently advocate the second of a two-fold purpose for the material creation, that of liberation from the world of matter, specifically by cultivating a "personal relationship" with God.

Regarding the purpose of the material creation, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* tells us that the living beings are in this world are to cultivate either sense gratification (egocentrism), or liberation from the world. This two-fold purpose pervades the *Vedic* understanding which describes *yajna* or acts of sacrifice meant to be performed by conditioned souls, particularly human beings. The human form of life situated on the earthly plane is understood to be the most conducive of all the life forms that the conditioned soul may perform sacrifice from. Sacrifice is understood to be a kind of remediation aimed at instilling the necessary reciprocation for God's role in facilitating the material world. This reciprocation, i.e., to consciously and gratefully enter a concrete relationship with God in order to acknowledge our deep dependence upon Him and his creation, is according to the *Vedas* not only directed at God as the original source of creation, but also at His deputed administrators the demigods, as well as other living being in creation.

But when humans, enamoured by the material laws of nature and their overwhelming desire for egocentric sense pleasure, neglect to engage in any sacrifice – they are forced to endure the three-fold miseries, specifically in reaction to humanity's neglect of their sacrificial duties. However, when humans do engage in their *dharma* or duty, namely that of sacrifice towards the Supreme Personality of Godhead, and as such, to all His parts in the form of creation – then those souls become qualified for liberation from this world thereby returning to the spiritual realm of existence, where souls have an uninterrupted relationship to the complete spiritual whole. It is this liberation from the pangs of material life that the *Vedas* advocate as the second purpose of the material world; and within which I argue, can be detected and reconstructed certain key ethical principles necessary for our time of environmental and relational crisis.

Section 2.2, highlights the two-fold purpose of the creation explained by the *Vedas*, and emphasizes the complementary nature of these purposes to facilitate the desires of the living beings. Section 2.3, explains the means by which the living beings can accomplish the two-fold purposes. I go on to explain the human problem in section 2.4 as the *Vedas* explain that these purposes are best accomplished in the human form; while also the most harm is caused when humanity does not act towards their expected duty of serving God and creation. Section 2.5 delineates the specific environmental context of the negative reactions to humanity's failure to perform their duty. This section provides a definitive answer to the second guiding question of my thesis: the consequences of the original sin. Section 2.6 presents the concept “demonic mentality” as a gross over-consumptive attitude driven by egocentric desires for material sense pleasure and having resulted from the original sin described in my previous chapter. In sections

2.7 and 2.8, I argue how such an attitude has been the driving force behind the development of modern Western society and whose prevalence is noted by scholars within certain of religious traditions.

2.2 Purpose of Material Creation

From a theistic perspective, God is considered the original person, who creates all else, all that is created is in effect a part of God. In the *Vedic* philosophy the complete form of God is described as *sat-cit-ananda* (*sat*- eternal/consciousness, *chit* – meaning/knowledge, *ananda* – pleasure/happiness). As parts of the whole, the individual souls and the material world, as will be explained in this section, all that emanate from the complete body of God; and likewise reflect these three aspects. The introductory verse to the *Sri Isopanisad* states:

The Personality of Godhead is perfect and complete, and because He is completely perfect, all emanations from Him, such as this phenomenal world, are perfectly equipped as complete wholes. Whatever is produced of the Complete Whole is also complete in itself. Because He is the Complete Whole, even though so many complete units emanate from Him, He remains the complete balance (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1993)³³.

This invocation denotes that when God expands Himself in the creation of the phenomenal material world, He is not reduced, but remains a complete whole. The parts that emanate from His form are themselves also complete, referring to their qualitative sameness as *sat-cit-ananda* (Suhotra Swami, 1996). Although complete in qualitative sameness, the parts that emanate from God are in effect partial, because they are not quantitatively the complete whole. They represent a fractional part of God's completeness, while God represents and embodies the complete whole (Amaladass, 1991). For instance; a drop of water may represent the complete qualitative properties of the body of water it is drawn from, yet the drop itself is not quantitatively the complete reservoir.

In this way the qualitative attributes (consciousness, meaning and pleasure) of the supreme Soul are reflected in the fragmental souls, as well as in the material energy. As such, the fragmental souls who possess free will or a relative independence, choose to pursue an

³³ Sri Isopanisad: Invocation verse.

individual or separate sense of conscious self-existence. “*Sat* or consciousness is the ability to choose what to focus one’s attention on ... Choice or consciousness therefore, involves the selection of certain relationships to reality – these can be itself or something other than itself” (Dalela. 2017a). This choice is expressed primarily by the pursuit of meaning (*cit*), and happiness (*ananda*). When the object of conscious attention is primarily oneself, expressed by the original sinful desire for independence from God, the pursuit of meaning and happiness is called “sense-gratification” or self-centred pursuits for meaning and pleasure.

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* describes this individualised sense gratification as one of the two-fold purposes of the material creation:

By activating the material elements (the material creation), the primeval Soul of creation has sent forth all living beings in higher and lower species so that these conditioned souls can cultivate either sense gratification or ultimate liberation (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)³⁴.

This verse indicates that God’s intended purpose for the material realm, is as a place and opportunity for the rebellious souls to experience their desired independence, where God’s supremacy does not hinder their aspiration for lordship (Suhotra Swami, 1996; Ravindra Svarupa, 1996). Through that independent will, the souls are “free” to consciously choose their own types of meaning and pleasure in the world. The underlying motivation in life though, is considered to be the pursuit of happiness; for even meaning brings a sense of happiness. Inevitably their choices, being governed by the false ego (the conditioned sense of self) leads them into self-absorption – meaning their pursuits for pleasure and meaning are centred around themselves and not on God or the creation. The creation is instead taken to be the objects for the fulfilment of the souls’ desires and not as fellow parts of God, because the soul has already denied their constitutive relation with the whole, so they similarly deny any connection between the creation and God. In this way, sense gratification is understood to be the first purpose of the material world, a disposition which exposes the egocentrism of the conditioned soul and hinders their ability to ethically relate with God and creation.

The desire for independent sense gratification and meaning making (i.e. anthropocentrism where the sense-maker is seemingly proudly disentangled from the whole to which it belongs) comes with a price. When souls are not conditioned by the desire for independence, their

³⁴ Srimad Bhagavatam: 11.3.3.

activities are understood to be in unison with the supreme Soul's. As such, whatever they do is naturally in relation to the meaning and pleasure of God and not their independent whims (Suhotra Swami, 1998). An example of a soldier is applicable here; when a soldier under orders of the state commits acts of violence, they are lauded and not punished. Yet, if they were to commit those same acts out of their individual desires, they are judged a criminal (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)³⁵. This is because when the individual acts in compliance with the desires of the whole (the nation state in this example, and God in the point being made), they are not judged to be individually responsible if their acts are for the sake of the whole; but if the individual acts out of an independent egocentric desire, then they are held individually responsible. Thus the price for independence from God comes in the form of responsibilities and duties the rebellious souls incur for desiring and acting out of mis-alignment with God's desires.

Hence, the principles that govern the material world are known as the "laws of nature", meaning that they govern the processes of action and reaction or cause and effect in the world. It is these laws and reactions that are described as the basis for the three-fold miseries in the *Vedas*; they govern the appropriate reactions for the soul's chosen actions. When the soul acts for their own sense gratification, they are judged in the same way as the soldier who acts independently of the orders of the state; that is, they are considered a criminal and incur reactions that are negatively experienced (Suhotra Swami, 1996). Their crime is acting outside of an accord with the unified purpose of the whole, that of acting for the satisfaction of God, and by extension His creation.

As for the second purpose given by the *Vedas*, the souls, having had a sufficient experience of negative reactions, desire to become liberated from the cycle of action and reaction. So only after having sufficiently experienced the negative results of their desire for self-centred sense gratification over time do living beings yearn for liberation from the phenomenal world. Thus, the second purpose of the world is understood as engagement in the recommended processes for freeing the souls from their entanglement with the material world, processes that are considered duty or *dharma* for the conditioned souls.

³⁵ Bhagavad Gita: 18.17; purport.

2.3 Duty and Sacrifice

In the *Vedic* understanding, the responsibility of souls in the material world is encapsulated in the concepts *dharma* and *yajna* (duty and sacrifice). Although the souls are (temporarily) separated from the supreme Soul, they still have a responsibility to act for God's satisfaction, as they are still a fragmental part of His body (see also how McFague 1987 explains the same notion in the Christian tradition). Only now their duty is enacted indirectly by satisfying the rest of creation, because they rejected their direct duty. Their duty is transferred from the personal form of God as the epicentre of their being, to the manifest creation, including other living beings who are the indirect representational parts of God. The creation thus represents God's benevolence to the rebellious souls by acting as the sustaining potency of souls in this world. This is evidenced for example, by the fact that all beings require food, shelter and companionship to derive meaning and happiness in the world. The ingredients for these needs take the form of material elements (earth, fire, water, air, space), as well as other conscious living beings. Because all fragmental parts of God share in His quality of *sat-cit-ananda*, both the material elements and the living beings are applicable to the category of sustaining principle for the wellbeing of the soul³⁶. In this way all living beings are considered to be radically interconnected, where they are dependent on each other for their sustenance (McFague, 1987; Prime, 2002; Rosen, 2007.)

The material ingredients are said to be governed by the laws of nature. However, these are described not as arbitrary laws, but rather are considered as personal beings who regularly engage their specific abilities for the maintenance of the universe. Since the demigods are capable, they are powerful, and so they are duty-bound to carry out their particular desires of control over material nature. They are morally committed to maintain the universal order (in the seeming absence of God), thus they are considered the ruling personalities of the material world (Dalela, 2018a).

As for the other living beings, specifically humans, animals and vegetative species; they also possess abilities according to their personalities, and so have duties in accordance with those. The demigods possessing greater ability naturally assume greater responsibility expressed by their maintenance of all others, but the other beings also have duties towards the universal

³⁶ This may be a contradictory point from the view of modern science, which basically holds that matter is inert and thus unconscious. But from the Vedic view all matter is conscious and has either the potential to give or receive meaning and happiness (Suhotra Swami, 1996).

order. Their duties though, are specifically towards the demigods and each other, i.e. humans have a duty towards demigods and other lower species, and the lower beings have a duty primarily towards themselves, which plays a role in sustaining other non-human beings as well as human beings. This fact is reflected in nature where a biologically diverse ecosystem has the capacity to sustain the members of that community – humans and non-humans alike. However, in order to ensure the maintenance of that system, humans and non-human beings rely on the supremacy of the demigods who control the vital ingredients needed by all beings.

The *Bhagavad Gita* advises that all these duties are enacted through the process of *yajna*, translated as “sacrifice”. The idea of sacrifice entails forgoing or sacrificing something pleasurable or meaningful, in order to gain them in greater quality in the future. Dalela (2017b) equates the sacrificial components that one may make, with the characteristics of the soul *sat-cit-ananda* (opportunities, meaning and happiness). This means that the soul potentially has three aspects of itself that it is able to sacrifice in order to gain more of a certain desired aspect. For example, one may sacrifice something that represents pleasure or happiness for itself, in order to gain something of meaning or something that affords certain desired opportunities. Likewise, one may also sacrifice something that represents meaning, for pleasure or opportunities. In this way sacrifice is prescribed as the method for obtaining one’s desires in the material world³⁷. As such, God in the *Bhagavad Gita* prescribes sacrifices be made to the demigods, who are the controlling persons behind material ingredients and processes that bring pleasure and meaning for living beings. He declares the necessity and importance of the sacrificial method for humanity:

In the beginning of creation, the Lord sent forth generations of men and demigods, along with sacrifices for Vishnu and blessed them by saying; Be thou happy by this *yajna* [sacrifice] because its performance will bestow upon you everything desirable for living happily and achieving liberation. The demigods being pleased by sacrifices, will please you and, thus by cooperation between men and demigods, prosperity will reign for all. In charge of the various necessities of life, the demigods being satisfied by the performance of *yajna* [sacrifice], will supply all necessities to you. But he who

³⁷ A reminder that this idea of sacrifice still falls within the purview of the first purpose of the material world, so such an idea of sacrifice is not quite the same as the sacrifice I advocate as useful in environmental ethics, which I come to in chapter 3.

enjoys such gifts without offering them to the demigods in return is certainly a thief (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)³⁸.

It is instructive to note here that God gifts or sacrifices His own energy in the form of the material elements just for the satisfaction of the rebellious souls. That energy He gives, is the same energy the demigods are deputed to distribute for the benefit of all other lesser beings, in the form of conducive conditions for a life of independent enjoyment. The demigods being the administrators of material affairs supply air, light, water and other benedictions for maintaining the material bodies of every living entity. “The material bodies of living entities subsist on grain (and other eatables) produced by rains, and rains are produced by the performance of sacrifices, and sacrifices are born of prescribed duty” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)³⁹. The prescribed duty recommended for each being is induced by their specific desires to enjoy material energy, which gives rise to their unique bodily identities. The living entities in lower forms such as animals, plants and microorganisms constitute what is contemporarily referred to as “nature or the environment”. The sacrifices of these beings are automatically conducted by following their biological instincts which are so tuned to bring them their desired sense pleasure.

In this way the lower species of life act in necessity to their personal needs, thus they are considered categorically lower than humans and demigods. Humans are considered higher than non-human nature because their consciousness is more developed, and so they possess the power to either act in accordance with the universal order of dutiful sacrifice, or not. Whereas nature responds instinctively because their ability for conscious choice is underdeveloped, and so their actions are automatically in accord with the universal order (Prime, 2002). This helps explain how nature when left untouched by human intervention, maintains a balanced and symbiotic system, where the interdependence of the various entities ensures their collective sustenance. More importantly for my current study, this point highlights the poignant position of human life in the material world, wherein, their actions have the potential to either maintain the ecological and universal balance or throw it off. Leading to the crux of this current chapter, guided by the question: how the sins of the living beings, more specifically the human beings, are the cause of environmental calamity – by neglecting to act according to their duty to uphold the universal order.

³⁸ Bhagavad Gita: 3.10-12.

³⁹ Bhagavad Gita: 3.14.

2.4 The Human Problem

According to the *Vedic* worldview, the human form of life is situated between the higher demigods and the lower non-human species (i.e. animals, vegetation etc.), but such categorisation does not imply any deep separation or differentiation between the human and non-human categories. As already mentioned, all parts of God are characterised by consciousness, knowledge/meaning and happiness. Humans represent one category of living beings, whose defining capacity is their ability to understand two ideas – choice and responsibility. Ashish Dalela (2018b) offers a most illustrative description of what it means to be human in *Vedic* philosophy. He writes:

Humans indeed have a greater symbolic ability relative to animals, but even more importantly, humans have the judgment of truth, right, and good. The capacity to judge what is true leads to language and the pursuit of knowledge. The capacity to judge what is right leads to social organization and the norms of right and wrong. The capacity to judge what is good leads to art, music, poetry, and dance (ibid).

Lower beings, on the other hand, do not have the capacity to judge truth, right and good; and so do not have capacity for language, social organisation, morality or arts. By this definition, those humans who have a better judgement of truth, right, and good are *more* human compared to others. Among humans, those in whom these judgements are diminished, are said to be closer to animals (ibid). The possession of a human body, therefore, does not completely identify humanity, rather the development of the judgements of truth, right, and good determine which individual should be considered human, and either more, or less human.

As previously mentioned, the price the living being pays for their independence from God, is the responsibility they must incur for that choice. Responsibility is an unavoidable consequence of choice itself. Dalela (2017c) succinctly explains that in *Vedic* understanding: “the force of circumstances due to which we are compelled to make a choice is due to *karma* – it puts us at a crossroads where we must pick”. *Karma* is defined as the system of action and reaction based on choice and responsibility – where choice of an action leads to the responsibility for the reaction (Dalela, 2017c; Suhotra Swami, 1996). In simple terms, what we choose has a consequent reaction, for which we are responsible. Now, due to the soul’s desire for independent meaning and happiness in the world, with a heavier leaning towards happiness;

the soul inevitably chooses its own happiness over that of others – having judged what it interprets as being primarily good for itself. The *Srimad Bhagavatam* affirms this point, that “for every being the dear-most thing is certainly his own self – therefore the embodied soul is self-centred” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁴⁰. Yet, if what a soul in a human body interprets something as good for itself; and that turns out to be bad for another being, then the consequences for that choice may not be what was desired, i.e., instead of pleasure they receive misery; because the choice may be good in the short term, but that may not be true for all the beings affected by that choice, and so is not *right* in terms of the universal order⁴¹. If a choice is not good for others, in a world where all beings are radically interconnected, then that choice is equally not good for the individual making the choice, making it untrue and not right. Thus, a selfish choice equates to an immoral choice, and a selfless choice equates to a moral one (Dalela, 2018b).

In this way then, the ability to judge truth, right and good is the specific qualification of human beings, and the category of human is the sufficient position from which the living being can understand and contemplate choice and responsibility. The relevance of this analysis is reflected in humanity’s choice to either engage in sacrifice for the satisfaction of others (God, demigods, humans and non-human nature); or engage in egocentric sense gratification. The sacrifices to be performed by humans are understood in two primary divisions: the sacrifice of worldly possessions (objects of pleasure), and sacrifice in pursuit of knowledge. Those who desire bodily pleasure, sacrifice their material possessions to satisfy the demigods. While those who desire liberation or freedom from their material bodies, sacrifice everything including their material possessions, and the time used to study the metaphysical intricacies of reality such as through philosophical and scientific methods – even up to the point of renouncing their temporary identities as a result of coming to know themselves as spiritual beings rather than material beings (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁴². All these sacrifices are prescribed so that souls in human bodies may learn, firstly, how to attain the initial purpose of the material world –

⁴⁰ Srimad Bhagavatam: 10.14.50-51.

⁴¹ Because only humans and the demigods are understood to have the capacity to contemplate choice and responsibility, so these category of beings are most affected by their choices to either follow or neglect their duty to creation. But because they are also categorically superior on the spectrum of living beings their actions have more impactful consequences on the rest of creation. And so, the unintended consequences (i.e. the negative karma) of absconding their duty, has more of an impact on those lower to them, the non-human environment.

⁴² Bhagavad Gita: 4. 25-28; purport.

efficient sense gratification; and secondly, for those who have realised the futility of sense gratification, learn how to attain liberation.

What this analysis means in *karmic* terms is that, actions in accordance with prescribed duties result in positive or “good” *karma*, while actions in violation of prescribed duty result in negative or “bad” *karma*. Good *karma* in this instance contributes to the maintenance of universal order, which facilitates the first purpose of the world, and bad karma is the disruption of that order – which has disastrous consequences. Thus, for the purpose of sense gratification to be attained by living beings, all must contribute to the universal order by adherence to their prescribed duty, their *dharma*.

However, humanity appears to be failing to adhere to their prescribed duty by neglecting their sacrificial obligations to both the demigods and other beings. This is evidenced by the negative reactions currently being endured by inhabitants of the earth in the form of catastrophic environmental disasters, as a crude example. These negative reactions are described in the *Vedas* as the threefold miseries, *adidaivika-klesha*, *adibhautika-klesha*, and *adiatmika-klesha* – reactions by the demigods, other living beings (both human and non-human), and one’s own mind and body. For this essay, I only focus on the reactions caused by humanity’s failure to uphold their sacrificial duty to specifically the demigods and other living beings (*adidaivika klesha* and *adibautika klesha*); in order to substantiate my hypothesis, that the original sin of desiring independence from God (as both creator and creation) leads to a crisis of nature.

2.5 Karma and the Environmental Crisis

“The force of karma keeps people trapped in the destructive patterns of consciousness responsible for our planetary crisis. Under the control of karma, people instinctively pursue material gratification and possessions, thus fuelling the overconsuming economy that overwhelms the environment with pollution of all kinds” (Cremo & Goswami, 1995: p.88).

Micheal Cremo & Mukunda Goswami, authors of *Divine Nature: A Spiritual Perspective on the Environmental Crisis* (1995), suggest that the *Vedas* describe the universe as indeed guided and conducted by “higher-order laws” that govern the interactions of conscious beings. The universal law for living beings dictates that they positively contribute to the universal order.

Humans in particular are advised to sacrifice their desires for egotistic sense gratification, for the sake of the whole of creation, but if they neglect that duty they are liable to be punished under those laws. The *Sri Isopanisad* establishes what the laws of nature are based on, and advises humanity of their duty based on that law:

Everything in the universe is owned and controlled by the Supreme Lord. Therefore, one should only accept those things that are necessary for their existence, having been set aside as their quota – and not take more, knowing well to whom it all belongs (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1993)⁴³.

The specific duty for humanity is established as only utilising God’s material energy as far as required for their sustenance, and to show thanks to the demigods for their role in administering and maintaining God’s creation. Humans do this by sacrificing a portion of their material possessions and means of pleasure to the demigods, not because the demigods need their offerings, but because that sacrifice exemplifies their gratitude and informs the demigods that they are adhering to their duty (Prime, 2002: p.26). When the demigods are pleased by the increasingly selfless attitude shown by humans, they are motivated to maintain the supply of essential ingredients for their sustenance. But if humans do not adhere to their duty, they displease the demigods and incur their wrath (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁴⁴. This wrath is manifest as *adhidaivika-klesha*, the miseries caused by the demigods, in the form of natural disasters like earthquakes, droughts and excessive or insufficient heat, winds and rain – that impede the adequate environmental conditions and natural resources essential for sustenance on earth. These reactions are undoubtedly miserable for the human and non-human beings, and are the direct consequence of trying to enjoy God’s energy without acknowledging the authority of the demigods. In this sense, one might say that *Vedic* cosmology contains deep ecological wisdom about the finitude of Earth’s resources, and what life on Earth requires in order to be able to sustain itself against human predation. As such, it condemns the very logic of self-centred, consumption and aggrandisement, which sees the extravagant accumulation of material wealth far beyond what is needed for survival, as well as limitless exploitation of all other life forms and natural resources.

⁴³ Sri Isopanisad: Mantra 1.

⁴⁴ Bhagavad Gita: 3.11-13; purport.

It is affirmed that those who try to enjoy the gifts of nature without offering them first to the demigods, are to be considered “thieves possessing a demonic nature” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁴⁵. The controlling demigod of the material world is also known as *Durga-sakti*, or the superintendent of the “prison or rehabilitation house” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁴⁶. This rehabilitation manifests as various environmental catastrophes, designed to alert the living being to their sinful ways of living. Being identified as thieves, the *Vedas* indicate that corrective treatment is required to rehabilitate the unappreciative beings back to a state of optimum reciprocation. For such correction to be effective, punitive action is necessary for the soul to learn the negative consequences of neglecting their duty (Prime, 2002; Rosen, 2007). Avoidance and reward are natural means to induce this realisation, for if the conditioned soul learns by punishment that neglecting sacrifices to the demigods leads to adverse natural circumstances that impede their sense gratification – then they might avoid neglecting their duty. Similarly, by rewarding the sacrificial behaviour of the conditioned souls by the unimpeded supply of natural resources, the demigods teach that reciprocation is the first principle to a happy life on earth (Mukunda & Goswami, 1995).

In the *Vedic* understanding, planet Earth is understood and respected as a demigod, the physical form of *Bhumi-devi*. Ranchor Prime comments that Earth and the sun are pivotal to human experience.

The sun, said to be the eye of God, fertilizes the Earth whose womb bears all life-forms. Therefore, the sun is understood as father and Earth as mother. Earth is addressed as *Prithvi*, the abundant mother, who showers mercy on her children (Prime. 2002; p.23).

Prime presents a few verses from the *Athrvā Veda* that capture the essential position Earth holds for the adherents of the *Vedas*:

O mother, sacred are your hills, snowy mountains, and deep forests. Be kind to us and bestow upon us happiness. May you be fertile, arable, and nourisher of all. May you continue to support all races and nations. May you protect us from your anger [in the form of natural disasters]⁴⁷. With your oceans, rivers and other bodies of water, you give us land to grow grains, on which our survival depends. Please give us as much

⁴⁵ Bhagavad Gita: 3.12 & 16.4.

⁴⁶ Srimad Bhagavatam: 1.9.44; purport.

⁴⁷ My insertion.

milk, fruits, water and cereals as we need to eat and drink. And may no one exploit and subjugate your children (Prime, 2002: p.24).

As the mother of the all living beings who sit on her lap, *Bhumi-devi* wishes to see her children live a peaceful and prosperous life, that culminates in their liberation from material existence. Mother Earth desires that her children learn gratitude and servitude to each other so as to live in harmony and attain their desires. Prime emphasises that a mother is moved by affection for her children and produces milk from her breast to feed them; similarly, mother Earth's production of food depends on the quality of the living beings' reciprocal behaviour – the mother will be moved to provide more abundantly for them, if they honour their parents by symbolically sacrificing the bounty she provides them, back to the original source, the supreme Father (ibid: pp.25-6).

Prime explains sacrifice plainly when he says; “the best thing to do is take as little as possible and always reduce your needs. Whenever you take, eat, or consume you must consider whether you have left something for others – for God, for nature, and future generations. This is sacrifice, or *yajna*” (Prime, 2002: p.52). But, when humans take more than their quota, they unfairly exploit Earth by offering nothing in return, and are thus condemned as thieves possessing a demonic mentality and are thus liable to be punished under the laws of nature.

2.6 The Atheist / Demonic Mentality

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* relays a cosmological story that encapsulates the atheistic or demonic mentality of humanity. It tells of a king named *Vena*, who out of vanity and pride for his power and wealth stopped religious functions (sacrifices) and began his own cult that required the citizens to worship him as god. That self-worship, in this case, is an instantiation of the original sin of envying the supreme position of God, envy that led to the desire to be positioned as God is, as the recipient and supreme enjoyer of sacrifice; as well as the sin of neglecting to offer sacrifice to the demigods. As a result of this deviation from the religious path set out by God for the good of all beings, mother Earth, who in this story is personified as a cow, withheld her bounty from man, resulting in environmental catastrophe, famine and unrest. This is but one example described in the *Vedas* of an ancient environmental crisis that was the consequence of

the atheistic nature (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁴⁸. King *Vena* was then advised by the priestly order, that the king's duty is to encourage religious activity through sacrifice amongst the people, for only then would mother Earth as a demigod, be pleased and reward humanity with her natural prosperity.

What was committed by king *Vena* in ancient times, is now being perpetuated by modern governments and global corporations, whose aim is to maximally exploit Earth's resources for profits and not only survival, from food-grains to precious metals and minerals, not to mention other living beings both human and non-human. And they offer no sacrifice in return to God, the demigods or their fellow living beings. The nature of the atheistic mentality is vividly described in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Those who are demonic ... say that the world is unreal and has no foundation, or God in control ... is produced of sex desire⁴⁹ and has no cause other than lust. Following such conclusions, the demonic ... engage in unbeneficial works meant to destroy the world – they believe that to gratify the senses is the prime necessity of the living being (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁵⁰.

The *Vedas* emphasize that the advantage of human life, is the chance to live in a civilised society where there are rules and regulations to assist the conditioned soul attain their material desires. These regulations are enunciated by religious scriptures for those especially faithful to understanding the “truth” of this material world – the truth that to achieve one's desires requires adherence to duty and sacrifice. When these regulations are neglected, such persons are termed “demons or atheists”. Demons in this regard are described as those humans who either do not know the laws of nature and how they impel one towards specific duties; or have no inclination to follow them driven by an overwhelming urge for egoistic enjoyment (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁵¹. In this way they neglect what is actually good for themselves and society. Civilisations led by such demonic or atheistic leaders fall into a collective kind of peril as a consequence of their collective *karmic* reactions. Therefore, the *Vedic* injunction is that one who does not

⁴⁸ Srimad Bhagavatam: 4.14.

⁴⁹ Arguably, the most significant contribution offered by modern psychology was Sigmund Freud's analysis of human behaviour being primarily motivated by sex desire (Freud, 2016).

⁵⁰ Bhagavad Gita: 16.7-9.

⁵¹ Bhagavad Gita: 16.7; purport.

follow the cycle of sacrifice advised in the *Vedas* (or any other religious worldview), leads a sinful life of self-centred sense gratification⁵².

Modern sciences have shone light on the importance of causal relationships in the physical world. Every physical action is understood to have a cause, and in turn is the determinant of another action or event. The *Vedas*, however, “extend this concept to include human’s moral and spiritual life as well. *Karma* plays a leading role in the world’s drift towards environmental catastrophe, and a large part of this *karma* is generated by unnecessary killing” (Cremo & Goswami, 1995: p.82). Every year, approximately 150 billion land and sea animals are killed for human consumption⁵³ (Sahadev, 2013; Prime, 2013). As a result of the anthropocentric mentality that underpins modern human civilisation, and which values everything else only in relation to human gratification, people fail to recognise and respect the conscious living beings within animal bodies. Verily, scientists and philosophers are still grappling with understanding consciousness in human bodies, let alone give credence to non-humans. This has resulted in a mood of general apathy towards the plight and feeling of non-human beings – beings, who, just like the souls in human bodies, simply desire to live a life of comfort gratifying their senses. Moreover, the law of *karma* holds that the natural order is disturbed when the biological development of any living being is terminated. Such termination of the natural development of other living beings, reflects “a selfishness and lack of compassion, which can be seen as a kind of pollution of human consciousness” (Cremo & Goswami, 1995: p.87). Failing to recognise the spirit soul within, humans torture and kill countless animals for their consumptive desires, which leads to *karmic* reactions experienced (largely) as environmental catastrophes.

Scientists are increasingly becoming aware of the devastating effects of animal agriculture on the environment. In 2006, the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) published a global study titled “*Livestock’s Long Shadow*”. The report concluded that the livestock or animal agriculture sector has become one of the biggest contributors to the most serious environmental problems. Contributing to issues such as deforestation and land degradation, air and water pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss; even social injustice

⁵² Interesting to note the similarity in this idea and the one expressed by Euthyphro in dialogue with Socrates. Euthyphro’s argument is that piety (being a good person) means serving the demigods. Socrates retorts by asking what humans could offer the demigods that would please them. Euthyphro’s response is “honour, reverence and gratitude” (Woodruff, 2020). Such a definition of piety agrees with the Vedic version, that to be a good person is to give the demigods honour for their service of supplying necessities of life. This attitude of gratitude is the basis of piety and its absence is certainly impious/sinful.

⁵³ <https://www.live-counter.com/animals-killed-worldwide/>

and destabilisation of communities, and the emergence and spread of zoonotic diseases (Steinfeld et al., 2006). This strongly suggests that the way humanity is interacting with other living beings, is having a detrimental effect on the collective wellbeing of all Earth's inhabitants.

The *Bhagavad Gita* explains the ideal ethical perspective for humanity in relation to other living beings. It mentions that one who is enlightened by true knowledge of the spiritual origins of all living beings, sees with equal vision humans, animals and nature, and considers all living beings as dear as his or her own self (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁵⁴. But when humans devoid of such knowledge engage in acts that are wholly detrimental to other living beings, they become enamoured by negative *karmic* reactions. *Vedic* ethicist Cristopher Fici elaborates on the negative repercussion in spiritual terms for the souls of both animals and humans, by the wholesale slaughter of the former through systematic industrial animal farming. He says:

Through the creation of systems and structures like the industrial animal agriculture system, the embodied condition of the animals within these systems are negatively affected through systematic violence ... which unnecessarily checks progress of these *jivas* (souls) on their natural path back to their original spiritual reality (Fici, 2020: p.101).

The violence of killing the bodies of animals and other living beings unnecessarily hinders those souls from fulfilling their desires in this world. In such situations the laws of nature as *karma* act on the perpetrators in a way that will negatively affect their aspirations in their current or subsequent births in this world. Such is an instantiation of *adibautika-klesha*, the miseries caused by unethical interactions with other living beings.

It might be asked then, if the same *karmic* results are experienced by carnivorous animals that live by preying off the bodies of other animals. But, by nature's laws those souls in the bodies of carnivores are wholly within their right to kill, because that is the specific desire that soul incarnated in such a body for. To this point the *Srimad Bhagavatam* explains the categories of food designated according to the desires and bodies of each living being:

By nature's arrangement, fruits and flowers are considered the food of insects and birds; grass and other legless living entities are meant to be the food of four-legged animals like cows and buffalo; animals that cannot use their front legs as hands are meant to be

⁵⁴ Bhagavad Gita: 5.18; 6.32.

the food of animals like tigers, which have claws; and four-legged animals like deer and goats, as well as food grains, are meant to be the food of human beings (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁵⁵.

Bhaktivedanta Swami here, points out a poignant consideration from the *Vedic* perspective regarding human diet and the environment – that the recommended diet for humans are grains, fruits and milk; but if so desired, they may eat the flesh of four-legged animals such as goats and deer. Cows, he advises, “are never meant to be killed or eaten by humans. In every *Vedic* scripture cow killing is vehemently condemned. Actually, one who kills a cow must suffer for as many years as there are hairs on the body of the cow” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁵⁶. The religious significance of the cow plays a pivotal role in conceptualising an environmental ethic from the *Vedic* perspective, which I focus on in greater detail in my final chapter (Prime, 2013; Sahadev, 2013; Fici, 2020).

A significant consideration when understanding this *Vedic* injunction, is that those humans who do desire the flesh of animals, should go about it in a “fair” manner, for example by the practice of hunting which affords the animals a fighting chance, or through sacrificial methods enunciated in various religious scriptures. More importantly, the systematic rearing of animals (most especially the cow) solely to meet the appetite of exploitative humans, is a grievously sinful practice and is directly connected to the overall suffering of all Earthly beings. It is worth noting here that ethical consideration in animal rights that follow on Jeremy Bentham’s argument of sentience or Tom Regan with consciousness (being the subject of a life) as criteria for affording rights to animals, is a similar notion to the *Vedic* perspective (Kniess, 2019). Although, within the *Vedic* idea, consciousness is not limited to just pleasure or pain, but rather as an indicative factor of the soul’s fundamental, constitutive, relation to God.

In this way, if Earth is understood as the mother of all living beings, then such killings do not bode well for humans. Certainly, as a loving mother, Earth reciprocates with the living beings according to their spiritual development. If the living beings respect each other in natural harmony, only taking what they need and not more, and without disturbing the wellbeing of others, she provides all their necessities. Thus, allowing the soul to peacefully pass their lives in this world. Souls on the human platform have an increased responsibility, they are by this point in their spiritual evolution they are expected to be wrapping up their sensate activities

⁵⁵ Srimad Bhagavatam: 6.4.9.

⁵⁶ Srimad Bhagavatam: 6.4.9; purport.

and begin working on their liberation from the material world. As such, graduating from the first purpose, to the second cumulative purpose of the material world.

This is why the human position is considered hierarchically “superior” to other beings – because they have a qualitatively higher order activity to perform. That is, to follow the system of sacrifice in reciprocation to God and the demigods and subsequently achieve “self-realisation” which is only possible in human life. While the objective for animal life is simply to satiate their carnal desires such as the urges of their stomachs and genitals. This conception is corroborated by the “Great Chain of Being” mentioned previously; but the key difference in the *Vedic* conception is that the superior position does not grant leeway for exploitation of nature. Rather, it imposes a greater responsibility on the human to maintain peace and harmony among living beings and their environment (Prime, 2002). Hence, the *Vedas* recommend a *dharmic* life of duty, sacrifice and respect for all creation.

I now briefly make a case for how the demonic or atheistic mentality of egoistic sense gratification that causes concomitant negative environmental effects, can be traced through the development of modern Western society over the last five centuries, a development centred in the scientific and industrial revolutions of modern Anglo, European and American history, and culminate in what could be termed the ‘dawn of anthropocentrism in modern history’.

2.7 Scientific Roots of the Modern Environmental Crisis

“The dream of economic progress and its subsequent “religion of consumption” is certainly a theme of critical importance in environmental affairs. Consumption appears to have become an ideology or quasi-religion, not only in the West but also around the world. Faith in economic growth drives both producers and consumers, although the dream of progress is becoming a distorted one.” (Tucker & Grim, 2017: p. 4).

The modern environmental crisis may be understood from several perspectives, but from a secular understanding refers to the destructive and depreciating force the global economy exerts upon earth’s life supporting systems or environments – a force emanating from human society’s demand for natural resources to meet their unregulated consumptive habits. As Du Nann Winter puts it:

The earth has a limited ‘carrying capacity’ to support biological life. At the present rate of resource consumption compared against the rates they regenerate, there is a depreciating balance that is ultimately unsustainable to support the increasing human population (Du Nann Winter, 2003: p.6).

Deborah Du Nann Winter, a psychologist with an environmental focus writing at the cusp of the millennium’s turn, provides a useful framework to help understand the modern environmental crisis from a secular perspective. In *“Ecological Psychology: Healing the Split Between Planet and Self”* (2003), she succinctly brings to light the underlying assumptions of a “psychology of over-consumption” – which are taken as the driving force of the exploitative and destructive mentality pervasive in modern civilisation. She considers over-consumption to be the biggest depletive element of earth’s carrying capacity”, which is driven by the view that: “(1) nature is composed of inert physical elements, (2) that can and should be transformed by (3) individual human beings who are seeking private economic gain, and (4) which results in progress, mostly economic development *and environmental degradation*” (Du Nann Winter, 2003: p.27. *my emphasis*). These assumptions, having developed over centuries, go unquestioned and form the psychological dimensions and beliefs that encourage the use and abuse of nature. Taken as “common sense”, this psychology and the behaviours derived from it are taken as the norm in modern society, such that conceptions of “progress or development” refer generally to the extent to which sense gratification has become more streamlined and easier to attain (Cremo & Goswami, 1995). Thus, to satisfy these ends, human society, led by ‘demonic’ leaders in *Vedic* terms, have devised and appropriately justified means to the attainment of such gratification.

The *Bhagavad Gita* explains the deep-rooted cause of this unconscious psychological bias towards gratifying self-centred desires. When asked what compels the living being to act sinfully (selfishly), even unwillingly as if by force – God replies: “it is lust only, which is born of contact to the material nature, that is the all devouring enemy of the world” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁵⁷. Lust here is taken as the excessive appetite for sensual pleasure, that is derived from the living beings’ desire to enjoy God’s energy (Cremo & Goswami, 1995; Prime, 2002). Therefore, I suggest the psychology of over-consumption can be equated with the demonic mentality aforementioned. Driven by lust, this mentality is fundamentally characterised by the

⁵⁷ Bhagavad Gita: 3.37.

assumption that “there is no God in control” and that “nature is composed of inert matter to be consumed” for the sole enjoyment of the human being.

In this view, modern civilisation appears to be at the first of the two-fold purpose the *Vedas* describe for the material world – that of egoistic sense gratification. Albeit, the desire to consume and gratify their senses has overwhelmed the intelligence of the conditioned souls, resulting in their neglect of the prescribed sacrificial process – the reciprocation of which, the *Vedas* mention is the actual means of happiness in the world, and not the mere consumption of matter (Rosen, 2007; Ravindra Swarup, 1996; Cremo & Goswami, 1995). This fact is corroborated by studies which show that people, especially in “developed” countries, report lower satisfaction levels at having more resources for sense enjoyment, as opposed to an increased satisfaction from meaningful and reciprocal social relations (Du Nann Winter, 2003: p.22). This finding underlines the relational nature of spirit souls, over their consumptive nature. It is therefore a fundamental deception to think that if sense gratification is pleasurable, more sense gratification will satisfy all human needs.

The neglect of religious sacrifice (and thus in modern terms the neglect of human interrelatedness with God and with everything in creation) in ancient *Vedic* history was exemplified by many pretentious personalities like king *Vena*, but in the modern era, that religious aversion is characterised by the global rise of a secular, reductionist, scientific and capitalist worldview. Cremo & Goswami comment that; “the science-based, technocratic civilisation of our time, originated a few centuries ago in Europe and spread all around the world. In preindustrial Europe, people assumed human life had a divine purpose and destination; as such material progress in society played a subordinate role to that of spiritual elevation” (1995: pp.64-65). Medieval thinkers, they mention, did not have to speculate about a unified theory of physics, because God was understood to be that unifying principle and harmonizer of all contrasts. “Love gushes from Him to all creatures and returned to Him by the creatures [through sacrifice] in proportion to their abilities” (ibid). In this way humanity’s duty (*dharma*) was prescribed as cultivating their activities in relation to God.

Du Nann Winter adds:

In the vast majority of [ancient] human cultures, nature is seen as a living, organic unity, intimately tied to the activities of human beings. Even most Western history shows allegiance to the idea that the natural world is divinely ordered and alive. The world was thought to be united by a ‘spiritus mundi’ (soul of the world), which Plato, in his

Timaeus, proposed was the source of all movement and activity in the universe. Likewise, for the Stoics of 3rd century B.C. Athens and 1st century A.D. Rome, the world was an intelligent organism ... [However], modern civilisation's orientation sees natural phenomena like weather, earthquakes and volcanoes, to be the result of inherently inert matter that responds to physical rather than spiritual forces. Caused by shifts in wind, temperature and other mechanical forces, not the work of angry gods and goddesses (2003: pp.32-33)

As the era of European Renaissance and Enlightenment dawned, the perception of God as the underlying basis of everything became increasingly diminished. The universe began to be explained more impersonally, through precise mathematically expressed physical laws, as opposed to a divine conscious arrangement. Du Nann Winter, as well as Cremo & Goswami, identify a crucial build-up of contributing protagonists to this shift in orientation.

They point to the period between 1500 and 1700 in Europe, beginning with the conception of Copernicus' (1473-1543) heliocentric model, which replaced the previously held geocentric model of the universe. In the heliocentric model, the earth moves around the sun, instead of heavenly bodies around the earth. "This new model struck at the core of Aristotelian and Christian belief because it removed the earth from the centre of the universe; and so from the focus of God's purpose. In the new scheme, man was no longer the creature for whose use and elucidation the cosmos had been created" (Cremo & Goswami, 1995: p.33). It was during this period that the natural world came to be understood as a lifeless machine, made up of small, separate units (atoms) operating according to mechanical laws.

Other contributors to this shift were the likes of Descartes (1596-1650), who postulated a disjuncture between God and His creation. God was understood to have created a world of unchanging laws of physical reality; thus, once created, the world operated like clockwork without a need for God's intervention⁵⁸. Descartes' contribution went further, he viewed everything in the universe to be mechanical, except for one thing – the human mind, which he believed was a separate and distinct substance, called the mental/soul⁵⁹. The mind-body

⁵⁸ Note how such a conception follows the first of the twofold purpose of the material world mentioned in the Vedas. The universe was created, presumably, for the living being's gratification, and God is of no importance in this consumptive life – leading to an exclusion of God in daily life.

⁵⁹ The Bhagavad Gita mentions that the mental platform is also part of the material energy, although a subtler component. The "soul proper" is explained as the conscious part of us, who bears witness to the activities of the body and mind. (Bhagavad Gita: 7;4-5).

dualism provides the basis for the human – non-human split, where the conscious “human soul” was distinguished and elevated from inert matter, including the body and bodies of lower animals and nature. Interestingly, such a view appears similar to the *Vedic* affirmation that the spirit soul is distinct from the material body (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁶⁰; although in the *Vedic* model the soul is considered categorically different from the mind and body. The consequence of which, is that the spirit can never really contact matter, thus the endeavour to do so by egotistic sense gratification is fruitless for the living being (Suhotra Swami, 1996: p.39).

With this dualism in place, the mind/soul was said to be under the jurisdiction of the church and by extension, God. While the rest of material nature fell under the mechanical laws of nature, which had been alienated from God after creation. This is a crucial factor in the justification of the exploitation of matter, which ensued in the centuries following Descartes. Sallie McFague asserts this same point in her criticism of the monarchical model of God. She says:

In the monarchical model, God is distant from the world, relates only with humans, and controls it through domination and benevolence ... Whatever one does for the world is not finally important in this model, because its ruler does not inhabit it as his primary residence, and his subjects are well advised not to become too involved in it either (McFague, 1987: p.65).

This meant that God was aloof and played no active role in the universal affairs, so humans were free to exploit nature without moral consequence – thus fulfilling the soul’s desire to lord over nature. It also meant that humans owed no obligation to God’s deputies, the demigods, because natural events were now explained according to strict mechanical principles, not in conscious reciprocal relationships.

Du Nann Winter, quoting Carolyn Merchant’s “*The Death of Nature*” (1983), emphasises:

The rise of mechanism laid the foundation for a new synthesis of the cosmos, society and the human being, constructed as ordered systems of mechanical parts subject to governance by law and to predictability through deductive reasoning. A new concept of the self as rational master of the passions, housed in a machine like body, began to replace the concept of the self as an integral part of a close-knit harmony of organic

⁶⁰ Bhagavad Gita: 7.5.

parts united to the cosmos and society. Mechanism rendered nature effectively dead, inert and manipulable from without (Du Nann Winter. 2003: p.34).

With the reduction of nature to mechanism, came the call to control nature; the most prominent figurehead in that plea was Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Bacon is viewed to have ushered the secular worldview to primacy over the medieval Christian worldview. As an important architect of the Scientific Revolution, he strongly advocated that knowledge should not only be produced by controlled observations of the material universe, but that “knowledge as power” should be used to advance the desire of man to control and manipulate matter (Cremo & Goswami, 1995: p.68). He argued that the role of science was to study nature, who was seen as female⁶¹, by “controlling and torturing nature’s secrets from her” (ibid). Secrets that presumably spelled unlimited sense pleasure for man – the implication of which, again, was that God or His administrators were of no necessity to man for the satisfaction of their desires. Instead, their rational logic would provide that through the vexation of feminised nature.

Bacon, like his contemporaries, utilised religion in the propagation of his ideas. He used the Biblical story of creation to justify the subjugation of nature, by positing that when Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden, they lost their “dominion” over the earth and its creatures, and became subject to the earth’s dangerous forces. According to Bacon, science was the way back to paradise, God had bestowed upon man the fruits of creation and the intelligence to consume it. In this way, paradise lay proverbially just behind the “veil of nature”, which could be regained by exerting power over her. This veil covering nature points to the mysteries of nature that entice the curiosity of man, driven by the now legitimised desire to extract unlimited sense pleasure from her. Thus, science would see man return to their original state of dominion over the natural world. Science, in other words, “would give man control over the rest of creation, which would return them back to God’s favour, dominating the material world” (Du Nann Winter, 2003: pp.36-37).

In this sense, God was effectively removed from the earthly perceptions and concerns of humanity, and man was His successor. This idea culminated in the “death of God”, where the

⁶¹ The implications of the feminisation of nature are integrally connected to my current thesis – but an explanation of which, I think goes further than the limits of my scope. I do note, however, the shift in perception from “nature as mother” to “nature as impersonalised female” from whom secrets are tortured and no longer reciprocally transmitted – played and continues to play a pivotal role in the exploitation of matter (Merchant, 1983: p.165).

position of “enjoyer of creation” was usurped, and man’s⁶² drive for egoistic sense pleasure became their primary motive in life, as opposed to a union with God (Suhotra Swami, 1996). This concept helps account for the rise of secularism and the forsaking of traditional beliefs in God. If God was no longer taken to be the centre and prime enjoyer of creation, then who else but humans would assume such a responsibility? This mentality / attitude is the same atheistic mentality that is understood to drive the soul into the phenomenal world.

Yet, as Fici points out, it would be a mistake to flatten out all of humanity into a homogenous “anthros”. Rather, such a psyche in the modern era is reflected in the “predominance of five centuries of Eurocentric colonization led by the mechanics of whiteness. The triumphant whiteness of the coloniser over and against the colours of the colonised expresses the triumphant narrative of the conquering alabaster Christ of European Empire (Fici, 2020: p.23)⁶³. One might call this the dawn of white-supremacist-religious anthropocentrism. What this shows is that, the anthropocentrism that developed in modern Europe also became embedded in modern Christianity. As European men expanded their reach for natural resources globally by the colonial project, they transplanted those anthropocentric ideals in what is today understood as the “developing world”, where even indigenous cultural peoples have become consumed by the rampant wanton for sense gratification, a desire arguably not as prevalent prior to their contact with the “demonic mentality”.

2.8 Chapter Summary

In summary, I argued that the consequences of the original sin as the denial of God, led the rebellious souls into the material world, a context in which they could experience a false sense of sovereign enjoyment. The pursuit of individual happiness inevitably leads to an imbalance in the universal order, an imbalance I have shown, can be causally linked to what is today considered a crisis of nature or an environmental crisis. In this way the second guiding question

⁶² I do not regard the term 'man' to refer to all of humankind – here the sexually specific meaning is retained, precisely because the activity itself has been gendered in the modern worldview.

⁶³ Like the gendered aspect of nature, I similarly acknowledge the racial implications of anthropocentrism. But as my thesis is dedicated to the implications of anthropocentrism on humanity’s relation with God and creation, I intentionally leave out an analysis of these broad themes. I only make indications as to how strained relations with God and creation has implication along such lines as gender, race and class.

of my project is addressed. That is, the consequences of the original sin, lead to a crisis of nature.

The remedial consciousness recommended to rectify the suffering of the souls in this world is concomitantly described by the *Vedas*. The *Bhakti-yoga* doctrine of the *Vedas*, especially reveals and recommends to humanity a “radical relational ethic” be embraced by all living beings. As parts of God, all souls are inherently related and thus have a constitutional duty to serve one another and ensure their mutual wellbeing. In the third and final chapter, I address the third of my guiding questions, and assess the *Vedic* tradition’s theological ethics as potential environmental ethics.

Chapter 3 – Remediation of the Original Sin

The practice of Bhakti is simultaneously an act of religious devotion and an act of prophetic creative resistance against the banality of evil, the ordinary structures, loyalties, and securities which reinforce the evil of Earth-denying mind-sets and practices, Bhakti refuses to be fully contained, acting as an agent to break down our ordinary expected loyalties (Fici, 2020: p.84).

3.1 Introduction

My thesis has thus far illustrated how the original sin, in the *Vedic* religious context, led to a crisis, a threefold breakdown of relations between God, humanity and non-human nature – a relational crisis driven by the exploitative will of human beings as a manifestation of their desire for egoistic sense gratification. The pursuit of the desire for egoistic sense gratification at the clear expense of others is the specific context in which humanity denounces their inherent relation with God and creation, and so falsely absolve themselves from any moral obligation thereto. This attitude is denoted as an atheistic or demonic mentality, under which ancient and certain modern societies, alike, have been operating for at least the last five centuries.

In this final chapter, I address my third guiding question which asks whether there exists an ethical framework within the *Vedic* traditions that could be useful in ameliorating the current crisis-stricken situation of our planet – a framework that specifically seeks to promote and restore the foundational ethical relation among all living beings as part of God’s creation. To answer this question, I will analyse the principal doctrines of *Vedic* understanding, which can broadly be divided into two schools, the personal and impersonal schools. Both these camps in *Vedic* theology recognise *Brahman* as the expansiveness of conscious divinity, they subscribe to the two-fold purpose of the material world, enjoyment and liberation, and both adhere to a pursuance of the second purpose, liberation from the material world. Their difference though, is that the impersonal school emphasises ascetic practices that aim to reduce one’s interaction and dependence on other living beings and material nature. This view underlines that divinity is without individual personality and so makes no consideration for improving relations with a personal God or creation.

The personal schools on the other hand, hold that divinity does in fact possess personal features and even incarnates on Earth periodically for the purpose of re-establishing the conditioned souls' forgotten relationship with Him. *Bhakti* or devotional service out of love for the divine, is thus revealed as the principal motivation to encourage this remembrance. God's appearance and activities in this world exemplify ideal ethical relations with creation and living beings, and are meant to motivate humanity to follow such examples so as to reengage their inherent loving relationships with God and creation. For this, I consider and suggest the theological perspective of the school of *Bhakti* as potential environmental ethics.

The progressive path to uncover this inherent devotion for God is described in the *Vedic* literatures such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, where it is explained that in order to come to the realisation of loving relationship with God, requires first and foremost acquiring knowledge about God as the creator and maintainer of all beings. As the prime relational person, God or '*Krishna*' as He is known by practitioners of *Bhakti*, is the embodiment of the quintessential aspects of relation – that is, He is simultaneously capable of affording pleasurable interactions to all others, while also able to receive pleasurable service from all others. This aspect is possible only to a limited extent in the individual living beings due to their partial likeness to God in quality, as explained in chapter one. Yet, for *Krishna* the ability to fully serve all others, as exemplified by His role in creating and maintaining the material universe and ensuring the basic needs of all beings. Indeed, this is best exemplified for human seekers by His wonderfully magnanimous *lilas* or pastimes during His periodic incarnations, where He showed by personal example the importance of prescribed duty⁶⁴. But as argued in my second chapter, humanity failing to reciprocate God's clemency by not performing their sacrificial duties, inevitably causes disharmony to the symbiotic order, as such, creating a crisis of nature. The solution revealed by the *Vedas*, is that *Bhakti* or devotional service, as the deepest form of sacrifice, must be rendered to all beings in creation. However, being limited in their ability to adequately relate with each and every being in creation, humanity is advised to strive for a loving relationship with *Krishna* as the representative and fountainhead of all relatable subjects.

I begin the chapter by laying out the progressive path towards the second of the two-fold purposes – liberation. As explained, the first purpose is understood as the pursuit of egoistic enjoyment of creation, the causal factor I argue is the heart of our environmental crisis. Therefore, the recommendation by the *Vedas* is that humanity specifically pursue the second

⁶⁴ Elaborately described in the Tenth canto of the *Srimad Bhagavatam* (1987).

purpose, that of liberation from the world of egoistic enjoyment. That path in the *Vedas* begins with *karma-yoga* and *jnana-yoga*, which I describe in section 3.2 as preliminary steps towards liberation, and concludes with *Bhakti-yoga* as the most effective means of attaining liberation. In section 3.3, I elucidate how the adherents to the impersonal school in *Vedic* traditions generally ascribe to the philosophy of *jnana-yoga*, which emphasises renunciation of personal interactions with other living beings and a reduction in the utilisation of material nature for one's personal benefit or pleasure. This philosophy has been widely attractive to environmentalists who see use for it in developing a holistic environmental ethic, which I explain in depth in section 3.3. However, in section 3.4, I disagree with such a proposition and instead suggest that the theological philosophy of *Bhakti-yoga* offers a more effective solution to environmental concerns. In section 3.5, I conclude with recommendations by scholars of the *Bhakti* school who specifically address environmental concerns with precepts from its theology and philosophy.

3.2 *Karma and Jnana Yoga*

The process of sacrifice as recommended in the *Vedas* is also known as *karma-kanda*, the performance of certain actions with the hope of material fruitage. Living entities desiring sense pleasure in earnest, focus their attention on performing sacrifice according to the *Vedic* rituals and regulations. Instead of trying to enjoy unrestrictedly, followers of the *Vedic* system are advised to engage in sacrifices to attain prosperity, as well as the nullification of their negative *karmic* reactions. In secular terms, these practices encourage patience, prudence towards resources, and the postponement of immediate sense gratification. The system of sacrifice is explained as the way for the sensate conscious person to satisfy their desires without becoming entangled in *karmic* reactions (Rosen, 2006). These rituals act to purify the conscious being, helping them realise that their prosperity in this world depends on their conscious efforts to live in harmony with others. By so realising, pious humans performing sacrifice are said to begin re-establishing their innate connection with living beings as parts of God (Prime, 2002).

The recognition of this subtlety is the beginning of the *yoga* process, as *yoga* denotes action towards reunion with the supreme Being. *Yoga* is explained in the *Bhagavad Gita* as follows:

When we speak of *yoga* we refer to linking our consciousness with the Supreme Absolute Truth. Such a process is named differently by various practitioners in terms

of the particular method adopted. When the linking process is predominantly in fruitive [consumptive] activities it is called *karma-yoga*, when it is predominantly empirical it is called *jnana-yoga*, and when it is predominantly in a devotional relationship with the Supreme Lord it is called *Bhakti-yoga* (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁶⁵.

Bhaktivedanta Swami explains that, when one is frustrated from “living a rigid life of regulated sacrifice”, they become eligible for the process of “self-realisation”, in either of three ways – *karma-yoga*, *jnana-yoga* or *Bhakti-yoga* (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁶⁶.

Burijana Das, scholar and teacher of *Vedic* philosophy, elucidates the point that one who has experienced the results of sacrifice, gains more trust in the processes recommended in the *Vedas* and becomes receptive to the philosophy of transcendence or liberation. The soul learns to detach from egocentric behaviours and by performance of altruism, “they begin to taste the joy of sacrificing the hard-earned results of their work. Their goal slowly evolves, they no longer think of attaining more material happiness, but of leaving the temporary material world, seeking an eternal life in the spiritual world” (Burijana Das, 1997: p.87). Satisfied with material pleasures of life, the aspirant now contemplates the *jnana-kanda* section of the *Vedas*, which describes the non-material or metaphysical constitution of this world. Such a practitioner is no longer a *karma-kandi*, but a *jnana-yogi*. One who has accepted liberation from the material world as their objective in general is referred to as a *yogi*, or a transcendentalist. Furthermore, a *yogi* guided by *jnana*, philosophical knowledge of the metaphysical constitution of the world, thus becomes known as a *jnana-yogi*. There are understood to be two kinds of *jnana-yogis*: the *brahmavadis* (impersonalists), and *bhaktas* (personalists). For both, their activities are no longer motivated by desires for pleasure in this world, the impersonalists strive for liberation into the undifferentiated source of life and creation, known as *Brahman*. While the personalists accept devotion to the supreme personality of Godhead, *Sri Krishna* as their goal of life. (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁶⁷.

One of the major differences between the impersonalists and the personalists is the way they relate to the status of the world experienced through the senses. Those who ascribe to the impersonal school are known to follow strict asceticism or renunciation, as they view the phenomenal world as *maya* or illusion (Haberman, 2017: p.36). The practitioners of the ascetic

⁶⁵ Bhagavad Gita: 6,46; purport.

⁶⁶ Bhagavad Gita: 3.16; purport.

⁶⁷ Bhagavad Gita: 12.5; purport.

traditions such as *Smarta-Brahminsism*, *Mayavadism* (monism), *Advaita-vadaism* and to some extent *Buddhism* – are known generally as *jnana-yogis*, whose goal in life is to transcend the material world of pleasure and pain, and ultimately merge into supposed ‘oneness’ with the undivided spiritual whole, *Brahman*. David Haberman explains the *Vedic* view of *Brahman*:

“[According to the] *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, there are two aspects of ultimate reality or *Brahman*: one is identified with all forms (*murta*); the other is identified with the realm of the formless (*amurta*). *Brahman* as all forms is everything that is manifest and transitory, whereas *Brahman* as the formless is un-manifest and unchanging. These are not two separate realities, but rather different modes of the same unified reality” (2017: p.37).

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* confirms these two aspects, that of *Brahman* the formless feature of ultimate reality, and *Paramatma* the archetype of divinity who gives form to all other things in creation (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁶⁸. The *Bhagavatam* discloses a third aspect to the absolute truth, which encompasses both. That third reality is God in His original position as the personality of Godhead – *Bhagavan*. These three stages of realising the absolute truth are perceived by different seekers, but the learned transcendentalist or *yogi* knows that all three features are different expressions of the same divine reality.

An analogy of the sun from three different perspectives is referenced in the *Vedas* to describe this understanding; wherein the sun rays are likened to *Brahman* the effulgence of God’s energy, the sun disc or planet is likened to *Paramatma* the archetype of creation, and finally the personality at the helm of the sun planet is likened to *Bhagavan* the personality of Godhead (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁶⁹. ‘Self-realisation’ as the progressive understanding of one’s identity as an individual spirit-soul, manifests through these three stages of realising divine reality. The self-realisation experienced at the *Brahman* stage, attunes the *yogi* to their original identity as spiritual beings, part of an intricately interconnected spiritual whole. The self-realisation experienced by the *yogi* at the *Paramatma* stage awakens them to the identity and position (in the hearts of all living beings) of the archetype of spiritual personhood. Finally, the self-realisation experienced at the level of *Bhagavan*, reveals the intrinsic relation between the individual spirit-soul and the archetype-spiritual whole. In this way aspirants on the impersonal path seeking cessation from their worldly troubles, which are inevitably experienced on a

⁶⁸ Srimad Bhagavatam: 1.2.11.

⁶⁹ Srimad Bhagavatam: Introduction.

personal level, do so by disregarding their spiritual selfhood or individuality; whereas the personalists seek to affirm their individual identity in relation to *Bhagavan* (Suhotra Swami, 1997).

The *Vedas* declare that for those aspiring for transcendence from material life may attain one of five kinds of *mukti* or liberation. The *bhaktas* by their aspiration for personal relationship with God, are eligible for four of these: *salokya* – residing on the same planet as God; *sarupya* – possessing similar bodily features as God; *sarsti* – possessing equal opulence as God; and *samipyra* – constant association with God. The fifth kind of liberation is called *sayujya* – merging into the *brahmajyoti* (effulgent energy of God), is designated to the impersonal *yogis* who have only realised the divine as far as the *Brahman* platform. These five kinds of liberation inherently correspond to the five archetypical relationships an individual soul may have directly with God.

The term *rasa* is used to denote a particular mellow of relating with the personality of Godhead. These *rasas* or mellows are categorised in order of their degree of association to the personality of Godhead: *shanta-rasa* – neutral in relation (e.g. inanimate objects like trees); *dasya-rasa* – mood of relating with a venerable superior (e.g. master-servant); *sakhya-rasa* – relation in friendship; *vatsalya-rasa* – relation in the mood of parental affection; and *madurya-rasa* – relationship in the mood of conjugal lovers. The specific correlation between the five liberations and the five moods of relation is highlighted by Bhaktivedanta Swami (1987)⁷⁰: *sayujya-mukti* correlates with *shanta-rasa*; *salokya-mukti* correlates with *dasya-rasa*; *sarupya-mukti* correlates to *sakhya-rasa*; *sarsti-mukti* correlates to *vatsalya-rasa*; and *samipyra-mukti* to *madurya-rasa*.

What this intricate delineation means for the present analysis, is that the four kinds of liberation (*shanta*, *salokya*, *sarsti* and *samipyra*) are specific only to the *bhaktas*/ devotees of God, because they are personal in nature, they lead the devotee to interact with God in one of the four personal *rasas*/mellows “*dasya*/servitude; *sakhya*/friendship; *vatsalya*/parental; *madurya*/conjugal). While the impersonalists are limited to *sayujya-mukti*, wherein their desire for self-annihilation manifests as a neutral relationship (*shanta*) with the personality of Godhead. Advocating a similar personal model for the God-world relationship (God as friend, mother/parent, lover), McFague argues that because the personal model is the most relatable in terms of it being: “the only metaphor we know from the inside”; and that the richness of relatable experiences from a

⁷⁰ Srimad Bhagavatam: 6.9.45; purport.

personal model of God make it more favourable than impersonal ones: “it is more interesting, illuminating and richer to speak of a God as a friend than as a rock”; most importantly, that: “the current understanding of personal agency allows personal metaphors to reflect a view of God’s activity in the world as radically relational, immanent, interdependent, and noninterventionist” (1987: pp.82-3). Set in the context of a natural world of interdependent organic community, a personal God gives us a “credible” model of ethical activity desperately needed in the world today: “for to imagine God as the personal presence in the universe who epitomizes personhood, that is, *who has intrinsic relations with all else that exists*, is to possess a highly suggestive model for God’s saving grace” (ibid: p.83; *McFague’s emphasis*).

Set against this contrast between the personal and impersonal Vedic schools, I will give a brief overview of the contribution impersonal *Vedic* traditions have had on modern environmentalism. It is from such impersonal traditions that the Hindu/*Vedic* contribution to environmentalism is commonly punted (Haberman, 2017; Seshagiri Rao, 2000). Although, not the main focus of my study, I find such an avenue of analysis necessary in order to draw a recognisable contrast to the personalist *Bhakti* tradition and its contribution to environmentalism. The crux of that contrast shapes the most essential component I find the theosophy of *Bhakti* to hold for the field of environmental ethics.

3.3 *Jnana-Yoga* and Environmental Ethics

A common critique levelled against religious perspectives in environmentalism revolves around the idea of personal salvation overriding the importance and sometimes the sanctity of the material world. Scholars have argued that *Vedic* philosophy, particularly the ascetic traditions, “dismiss and perhaps denigrate the ontological status of the physical world. Simultaneously, renouncer tendencies place highest religious value on leaving behind the things of the world, relegating the Earth to a secondary status” (Chapple, 2000: xliii). Because the *jnani* traditions only ascribe to the *sayujya* kind of liberation from worldly affairs, they have one sole desire – to end their individual or personal suffering by attempting to disengage from their personal bodily identities.

The desire for self-annihilation in this way is understood to stem specifically from such aspirants having experienced the negative *karmic* reactions to their self-centred behaviour (Rosen, 2006; Dalela, 2017c). As such, having fed into the illusion of self-serving

consciousness over time, these souls become increasingly enamoured by the negative karmic reactions their selfish actions have brought on them. Desiring relief from these negative reactions, which I have argued encompasses an environmental scope too, adherents of the *jnana-kanda* doctrines postulate the philosophy of *brahmavadism* an impersonal and formless conception of ultimate reality. Upon this basis impersonalist *Vedic* philosophers perceive the individual spirit souls as well as the creation, as being constituted of solely conscious spiritual energy, who is at once part of the spiritual whole, *Brahman*.

Dwivedi (2000) mentions that “the prerequisite for understanding this concept in *Vedic* thinking is to accept the view that *Brahman* is the ultimate source and cause of the universal common good, not only of humans but for all beings in creation” (2000: p.12). *Brahman*, as described by Haberman, is the formless, un-manifest spiritual whole; as well as, the complete substance of all form in the material realm. From the devotional perspective however, both aspects are taken as the supreme person’s effulgence or emanations from His spiritual form, like rays from the supreme sun. God in this way is understood as both the basis of all material form, while simultaneously being the concentrated centre of all spiritual forms or living beings. This theological understanding is called ‘panentheism’, meaning; “all things have their origins in God and nothing exists outside God” (McFague, 1987: p.72). Accordingly, God and nature are seen as ‘one and the same’, though it does not mean that God is reduced to these things. Vitality, this means that humanity or any other category of living being, holds no special privilege or authority over others. However, being superior in their conscious ability to understand God and creation, certain living beings do have more “obligations and duties” towards others (Dwivedi, 2000: p.6; Prime, 2002).

By and large the overarching principle of environmentalism in *Vedic dharma* is that the common good such as protection of the environment and the welfare of other living beings, takes precedence over the private or personal good. Under such a system, “the *dharmic* citizen should act for *sarva-kalyankari-karma*: activity for the common good of all” (Dwivedi. 2000: p.12). Dwivedi asserts that:

Dharma exists for the general welfare of all living beings: hence, that by which the welfare of all living creatures is sustained, is *dharmic*. Thus, *dharmic* can be considered an ethos, a set of duties, that holds the social moral fabric together by maintaining order in society, building individual and group character, and giving rise to harmony and understanding in our relationship with all of God’s creation (ibid: p.13).

Dharma then, requires that humanity consider the entire universe as an extended family, for only by such an understanding will humans learn to cultivate the necessary maturity to respect other living beings. The conception of *Brahman* certainly offers a useful and overarching understanding that is key to addressing the ethical or relational concerns in environmental ethics. This conception may also be categorised within the realm of religious monism.

Monism is the view that holds that the entire substance of the universe is understood to have its source in one cosmic entity/being (i.e. *Brahman*). Material elements and the spiritual component, that is the individual souls, all have their foundation in that unified being, where all exist in a state of “oneness in the infinite”. The realisation of *Brahman* is to “recognize one sole substance in the universe, which is at once God and nature, body and spirit, matter and energy, as inseparable and infinite” (Suhotra Swami, 1998: p.35). Within this monistic understanding exists an inherent inter-relatedness of *being* that transcends the bounds of the material elements and bodies made of those elements. Thus, qualifying an ethical or moral concern for non-human environment – where the essence of the living being is at once and always related to the spirit of all other beings. From such a view then, it is plausible to make the case for an ethical extension that encompasses all living beings as well as material nature, which could arguably help overcome the general anthropocentric ideals prevalent in the field of environmentalism (Kopina et al., 2018).

The objective of *dharma* within the impersonal schools of *jnana-yoga*, is to bring the living beings back into a consciousness of the interconnectedness of reality, with their foundation in *Brahman*. The ethical rules and norms prescribed therein, all strive towards emancipation from the limited consciousness of seeing themselves as different from reality, and thus as superior to nature (Seshagiri Rao, 2000: pp.26-7). The return of the individual self (*sayujya-mukti*) into oneness with *Brahman*, gives the *jnani* a purpose to strive for in life. This is to say that the perceived goal of a unified oneness with all reality, that absolves the soul from their individual liability in *karmic* terms, does seem like a worthy purpose to pursue in human life (given the dire state our civilisation’s current *karmic* debt). Such a purpose would see each living being striving towards a balance between self and others’ interests, and by such a striving the human species would return back into the fold of the natural order, no longer seeing themselves as superior to, but as part-of the collective living force to which all beings belong and which all must strive to serve. Such a position suggests a viable ethical perspective for environmentalism, that to some degree mitigates the anthropocentric tendency and offers a possible solution to the

relational crisis at hand, at least theoretically. But from the perspective of *Bhakti*, such a view falls short of a genuine spiritual or relational ethic.

Bhaktivedanta Swami as one of the most prominent advocates of devotional personalism within *Vedic* theology and philosophy, brings attention to the danger of the monistic and impersonal view. He notes that the monistic view discloses at its foundation a formless, inactive, impersonal, unvariegated and ultimately unrelatable conception of God (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972; 1975)⁷¹. The *Vedic* scriptures explain that this is only one of three features of God, the *Brahman* conception. This point is crucial to understanding how at its core, the impersonal model displays an egoistic (and by extension anthropocentric) nature of the living being – in that the conceived oneness of *being* includes one's individual self; and so the individual self assumes, by its merging into oneness with the supreme Self, the status of God. In my view, this stands as a definite instantiation of the highest hubris and a return to the 'original sin', because the core relational aspect disappears when the human merges with the divine. *Adi Shankaracharya* (8th cent. CE) arguably the most important proponent of *Vedantic* monism, also known as *Advaita-vedanta*, advocated the idea that "*Brahman* or *Atman* is the only reality, that the individual self and the Absolute Self are identical... the individual soul has no existence apart from *Brahman*, and the soul achieves Godhood upon liberation" (Buch. 1921: p.12). This is to say that the individual self at its primacy *is* God, and thus the advocated liberation from the material world by the process of *sayujya-mukti* / liberation reveals one's identity as simultaneously one with the supreme Being, an identity that is fundamentally fluid, without fixed structure of hierarchy, and thus no norms to govern interaction.

Herein lies (by my analysis) a return to the original sin of the soul, envying the supreme position of God leading to a desire to usurp it from Him; though in this case the desire of the living being is not to become lord of the material energy, but to become absolved from the pains incurred as reactions to their illusory lordship by merging into the inactive – and so reactionless *Brahman*. In this attempt, adherents of *jnana-yoga* conceive of God as formless, in much the same way as muting moral obligation to other living beings by casting them under the guise of "non-being" or "insignificant beings". Though, conceived in reverse now – they postulate, "God as equal with all other beings and by such equality they consider themselves God by a negation of all to nothingness" (Suhotra Swami. 1998: p.39). As such, they declare that no

⁷¹ Bhagavad Gita: 2.12; purport
Sri Caitanya Caritamrita: 1.5.34; purport.

direct worship or sacrifice is necessary to satisfy a personal God, but their only requirement is the full renunciation of material possessions, designations and identities. Hence, proponents of the devotional traditions critically view *jnani* schools in *Vedic* theology, because they essentially negate any positive features with which to relate to God (Suhotra Swami, 1998).

The critical issue this raises has to do with relationship, or the lack thereof. Metz and Miller mention that, “a relational theory implies that a being warrants moral consideration only if, and because, it exhibits some kind of other-regarding property, one that is typically intentional or causal” (2016: p.2). The consequence of a monistic or impersonal view is that the individual living beings become merged into an undifferentiated conglomerate of *being*. In such a state it is ambiguous to see how the complementarity of variety and interrelatedness with others will continue to play an influential role in the impersonalist conception, especially when the ethical duty imposed by *dharma* is to ensure the wellbeing of others, necessarily through relationship. In such a ‘oneness’ of being, there is no possibility of relation with, and thus satisfaction of others, because there is no longer an ‘other’ to speak of. If there is no one other than oneself to interact with, then where is the scope for relationship, let alone ethical relations?

McFague expresses the same sentiment where she highlights that our experience of God should not be taken as “submersion into”, but rather an “encounter with”. She writes:

We view ourselves as embodied spirits in the larger body of the world which influences us and which we influence. That is, we are the part modelled on the model: self:body::God:world. We are agents and God possesses a body: both sides of the model pertain to both God and ourselves. This implies that we are not mere submerged parts of the body of God but relate to God as to another Thou. The presence of God to us in and through God’s body is the experience of encounter, not of submersion (1987; p.76).

Though the *Vedic* philosophy of *jnana-yoga*, shows definite potential as a unifying metaphysical doctrine for beings in the world; however, it appears to fall short as a substantive relational ethic, which is essentially what I understand environmental ethics to be seeking. What is evident from this analysis, is that for a truly relational ethic to be defined that harmonises the human/non-human paradigm and seeks to remedy the consequences of the original sin, a religious perspective that holds to a personal conception of God is necessarily required – because only in a personal conception can there be relationship, the basis of ethics.

3.4 *Krishna* Consciousness – A Personal Conception of God

The conception of God and the conception of Absolute Truth are not on the same level. The *Srimad-Bhagavatam* hits on the target of the Absolute Truth. The conception of God indicates the controller, whereas the conception of the Absolute Truth indicates the “summum bonum” or the ultimate source of all energies. There is no difference of opinion about the personal feature of God as the controller because a controller cannot be impersonal (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1987)⁷².

After giving an exposition of the *Vedic* theological position that holds to an impersonal conception of God, I now turn to the *Bhakti*, where emphasis is on a personal and relational conception of God. Bhaktivedanta Swami, asserts that the impersonal view of *Brahman* as the Absolute Truth is an “incomplete understanding”. As followers of the personalist school of *Vedic* theology, *Bhakti-yogis* affirm that the Godhead simultaneously encompasses both impersonal and personal aspects. They too subscribe to the understanding that God’s nature or His energy *Brahman*, is the source of the individual living entities; but explain that the key difference between the source and the derivative is in terms of quantity and primacy, as explained through the concept of *acintya-bhedhabhedha-tattva* discussed in the first chapter. Explaining how to avoid this conflation of the individual soul with God, Bhaktivedanta Swami points out that, though the individual living entity may also be referred to as *brahman*⁷³. in *Vedic* texts, it should not be confused with *Parabrahman* the Supreme *Brahman*

Furthermore, in antithesis to the monistic view of *jnana-yoga*, devotees in *Bhakti-yoga* hold firm to a fundamental affirmation by *Sri Krishna* in the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Never was there a time when I did not exist, nor you, nor any of these kings; nor in the future shall any of us cease to be” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁷⁴. This verse highlights how *Sri Krishna*, who in the *Bhakti* tradition is considered the all-knowing supreme Being, is declaring that the underlying constitution of all living beings has and will always be individual – at no time do they merge into an undifferentiated oneness. A helpful analogy to illustrate this is: if a green bird flies into a green tree, one may lose sight of the bird’s individuality, but fundamentally the bird and the tree remain separate beings. Similarly, when the individual living being attains liberation and

⁷² *Srimad Bhagavatam*: Introduction.

⁷³ I use lower case ‘brahman’ to denote the subordinate living entity, and uppercase to denote the Supreme ‘Brahman’ as God.

⁷⁴ *Bhagavad Gita*: 2.12.

factually realises their union with *Brahman*, then it may appear from a certain point of view that they lose their individuality due their inherent likeness as *sat-cit-ananda* (eternal, conscious and knowledgeable); but fundamentally they remain unique individual entities (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁷⁵.

Bhaktas believe that *Sri Krishna* incarnates in various avatars in order to perform specific activities for the benefit of all living beings in creation. He is said to appear in order to demonstrate ideal ethical or mutually beneficial relations with living beings, specifically as a means of reminding the conditioned soul of their ideal modus of being (Cremo & Goswami, 1995; Prime, 2002; Fici, 2020). That ideal modus of being entails the sacrifice of the individual soul's pursuits for egocentric happiness, in favour of the mutual happiness of others around them. Utilitarian as it sounds, the fundamental basis of this form of sacrifice for believers is that their eternal or "true" happiness, lies not in the sensual interaction with material nature, but in the bliss experienced in mutually beneficial relationships with others.

Regarding spiritual relationship, *Bhaktivedanta Swami* gives the following understanding of the constitutional relationship between the individual soul and *Sri Krishna*:

Everyone has a particular relationship with the Lord, and that relationship is evoked by the perfection of devotional service. But in the present status of our life, not only have we forgotten the Supreme Lord, but we have forgotten our eternal relationship with the Lord. That relationship is called *svarupa* ... By the process of devotional service, one can revive that *svarupa*, and that stage is called *svarupa-siddhi* – perfection of one's constitutional position (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁷⁶

Bhakti then is taken as a liberating invitation for all living beings to deeply empathize with each other's conditioned situation, and encourages us to make conscious sacrifices to alleviate the negative experiences of all other living beings (Fici, 2020). But, such a proposition would seem untenable due to the fact that it is seemingly impossible for one individual to empathize and relate with each and every other living being in creation. In most cases it is difficult enough to empathize with those closest to us, let alone trying to extend relational care to the innumerable others of the world. This is where *Bhakti-yoga's* radical relational promise is pronounced. Through the doctrine of *acintya-bhedabheda-tattva*, the truth of simultaneous

⁷⁵ Bhagavad Gita: 18.55; purport.

⁷⁶ Bhagavad Gita: Introduction.

oneness-and-difference between divinity and creation, the theology of *Bhakti* empowers the practitioner to conceive of God and the individual soul as present in the same body, yet remaining distinct individuals. This is explained by *Sri Krishna* in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

The Supreme Truth exists outside and inside of all living beings, the moving and the non-moving. Because He is subtle, He is beyond the power of the material senses to see or to know. Although far, far away, He is also near to all. Although the Supersoul appears to be divided among all beings, He is never divided (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁷⁷

By understanding and abiding by such a conception, the *bhakta* is able to empathize and relate with all beings, not by directly contacting each and every being, but rather by approaching the Super-soul believed to be situated within each being, as well as every atom of material creation (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁷⁸. *Sri Krishna* as the Super-soul, is regarded by *bhaktas* to be the central figure in whom all creation rests, identical to the conception held by the impersonal *jnanis*; but for the personalists, the individual soul does not ever merge into a conglomerate oneness with the divine. By remaining individual, the soul is first able to have a relationship with God situated in their own heart – then because *Krishna* is simultaneously in all beings as the same supreme individual Super-soul, the *bhakta* is also able to establish an empathetic relationship with all other beings through the connection established in their own hearts. The connection to other beings is established by a connection through the Super-soul, therefore, the *bhakta* who strives to serve all beings is enabled to do so by serving the Super-soul in their heart. A useful analogy explains it thus: in attempting to care for a tree, one does not try to water each leaf, flower and fruit, seeing that those are the vital appendages of the whole body. Rather, one caters to the root of the tree which ensures holistic satisfaction of each leaf, flower and fruit. Similarly, *Sri Krishna* as the root, is revered as the sole recipient of service and sacrifice, in order that His leaves and fruits (the living entities) become satisfied.

When the *bhakta* firmly establishes their internal relation with Krishna and becomes adept at empathizing with the feelings and needs of all other beings as manifestations of God, they learn to transform that empathy into active service for the benefit and happiness of the other. Through this sacrificial service the *bhakta* is said to initiate a loving relationship with both God and

⁷⁷ Bhagavad Gita: 13.16-17.

⁷⁸ Bhagavad Gita: 6.29.

other souls simultaneously. That devotional love when matured into selfless service for the happiness of others and God, is termed “*prema*” (Bhaktivedanta Swami, 1972)⁷⁹. According to the deeply relational ethic contained in this tradition, to enter devotional, selfless service of God and all other beings, is not to overcome or lose oneself; the devotee discovers that the relations thereby cultivated, also constitute his or her own highest well-being and satisfaction. Understood as the deepest relational love experienced between the individual soul and God, the concept of *prema* stands out for me as the *Bhakti* tradition’s greatest potential towards a religiously informed environmental ethic. I close this chapter and the thesis with an overview of some contributions made by notable environmental ethicists from the *Bhakti* tradition.

3.5 *Bhakti-Yoga* as Environmental Ethic – Toward a *Prema*-culture

In this final section, I briefly give an overview of some suggested practices to aid environmental ethicists to translate the relational potential of the *Bhakti* theology into a lived reality. The path of *Bhakti-yoga* is said to lead the practitioner into a “restorative and regenerative relationship with all living beings. This regenerative and restorative relationship with all beings reflects and expresses the restorative and regenerative relationship the living being experiences with the divine” (Fici. 2020: p.99). In this way the practice of *Bhakti* gives access to the original connecting relational bonds between God and the created world. This relationship is fundamentally premised on an ethic of “relational humility” which engenders an attitude of loving reciprocal servitude towards others. It is this empathetic attitude of servitude to God’s creation that is *Bhakti-yoga*’s promise towards an environmental ethic.

Resonating this underlying theme, Cremo & Goswami (1995) conclude their presentation of *Bhakti* informed environmentalism. They give four environmental solutions for humanity to address the environmental crisis, and ensure that humanity learns of their spiritual identity by fostering an eternal relationship with God, expressed in devotional service to others. They advocate that the earth can never be perfect and devoid of calamity, but it can be restored to a healthy condition, from where humanity may attend to their spiritual goal of life. They propose that the drive towards a peaceful and harmonious life on earth should not be to facilitate the unregulated sense gratification of ungrateful humanity; rather, it should be approached as a

⁷⁹ Bhagavad Gita: 4.10; purport.

way for the soul to learn how to realise their inherent relation with God and creation (Cremo & Goswami, 1995: pp.109-110). Thus, environmental harmony of the planet is not in-and-of itself the end goal of a *Bhakti* informed environmental ethic; it is the devotional relationship of the soul with God and creation that is the primary motivation, of which environmental harmony is but one outcome. Hence, I chose to focus on *Bhakti* as environmental “ethic”, rather than *Bhakti* as environmental “activism”, to which, authors such as Ranchor Prime (2002), Pankaj Jain (2011) and Christopher Fici (2020) have done well to elaborate on.

The first concrete recommendation Cremo & Goswami (1995) make in this respect, is that humanity adopt a new diet. They advocate for the complete abandonment of meat-based diets, citing how the meat industry is one of the most substantial contributors to the environmental crisis from both a materialistic and spiritual point of view. Holding fast to the *Vedic* prescription of a vegetarian diet, they insist that it is the *karmic* effects of mass slaughter of animals, especially the cow⁸⁰, that is the direct cause of environmental calamity. In order to reduce the *karmic* impact, humans need to reduce their murderous activities, which stand as blatant offenses to God and His creation. Conversely, by caring for cows, as well as other non-human living beings, humanity may learn to please God. Thus, a vegetarian diet is considered to have the least impact in *karmic* terms, though there is still some *karma* attached to eating and killing plants because they are also living entities. A vegetarian diet has long been advocated by many religious traditions for many reasons, but the *Bhakti* tradition points specifically to the fact that through a vegetarian diet the spiritual aspirant has a chance to be favourably engaged in a reciprocal relationship with God, without becoming entangled in *karmic* reactions. In this way a new diet is a key steppingstone to an ethical relationship with God and His creation.

The second recommendation Cremo & Goswami put forward is for humanity to more consciously and concretely cultivate “nonmaterial forms of satisfaction” (1995: p.114). By this, they mean moving away from egoistic sense gratification. As explained in my second chapter, the living being gains only misery by their attempt to please their own senses due to the temporal nature of the sense objects in the material world. Thus, for real satisfaction, *Bhakti* doctrines hold that the spirit soul requires spiritual sources of gratification – sources such as the chanting of God’s holy names, hearing or reading and meditating on His various pastimes

⁸⁰ As mentioned in chapter 2, the cow as personified Earth is accepted as mother of all living beings. As such the cow is a symbol of great respect and care in Vedic cosmology and environmentalism, so killing her is considered sinful (Prime, 2002).

and incarnations, and partaking of the sanctified food that has been offered to Him. These are but a few sources of spiritual gratification humans can have. The objective of cultivating spiritual satisfaction is two-fold. Firstly, by experiencing a ‘higher taste’ in the form of spiritual pleasures, the soul gradually loses interest in material forms of pleasure, the unlimited desire for which, as my thesis has tried to show, is the root of the environmental crisis. Secondly, by a reduced demand for material gratification, there is room for an increased desire for spiritual pleasure, which is necessarily gained through a personal loving reciprocation with *Sri Krishna* – the reservoir of all pleasures.

In that light, Cremo & Goswami’s third recommendation is the reintroduction of a “spiritually based, God conscious cosmology” (ibid: p.111). They emphasise the effect that secular scientific reductionism has had on the environmental situation, which provided more means as well as an apparent justification for extracting from the earth material resources for sense gratification, and has led to a heavy price humanity has had to pay for their denial of God. They argue that the *Vedic* cosmology offers a more comprehensive model for understanding the material sciences, which ultimately fall under the spiritual science of the soul. Thus, only by understanding the systematic relationships between the supreme conscious Self and the minute conscious self, can humanity come to a more complete understanding of the cosmos, from which a holistic perspective on the environment is portrayed. Such cosmologies certainly require thorough analysis, as well as systematic dissemination. For only when a threshold of the population is enlightened by this knowledge, can substantial change take place in people’s lives, specifically as they relate to the environment around them.

The final recommendation Cremo & Goswami make, pertains to a “new form of community” that will help foster and facilitate such God conscious cosmologies (ibid: p.115). The overwhelming impact of urban-industrialisation has led many environmentally conscious groups and societies to migrate towards a rural-agrarian or village lifestyle, from which people will be able to focus on a spiritual consciousness, and thus come closer to God. In the *Bhakti* tradition the principle of *ishavasyam idam sarvam* – meaning everything in creation is owned and controlled by God – is the guiding principle to communal livelihood. *Vedic* theologians reckon that when society understands from whom everything comes and to whom it all belongs, there will no longer be a need for so many atheistic ideas and philosophies around the control and consumption of material resources (Prime, 2002). In that way people would be free to engage in communal lifestyles that concentrate more on the spiritual values of life rather than emphasizing temporary material gratification. Bhaktivedanta Swami elaborates on the

Gandhian principle of “simple living and higher thinking”, which denotes that life should be conducted in as simple a manner as possible so as to give space and time to cultivate higher/spiritual values.

Christopher Fici (2020) adds to this fourth recommendation. By building on the work of Larry Rasmussen (2013), Fici proposes what they call “anticipatory communities”. These are described as places where “renewed intimacy and belonging to Earth can be cultivated afresh and anew” (2020: p.44). They are places that have been set apart as havens based on an intentional de-coupling from the pressures of a fossil-fuelled society. Furthermore, these communities are dedicated to creating and recreating Earth ethics as their collective vocation; meaning the moral, cultural and especially economic assumptions that have been guiding the current Earth denying psyche are re-examined and set aside to make way for ideal ethical community formation. Finally, anticipatory communities, he says:

aim to expose the fault lines of modernity, those social, political, economic and theological assumptions and tragic misinterpretations of doctrines and practices of well-being, such as the ideals of unlimited economic growth and progress, which have placed the relationship between humanity and the Earthy world in unprecedented peril” (Fici. 2020: pp. 44-45).

The aim and meaning of human life as elaborated in the *Vedic* literatures is not to find one’s comfortable place in this material world, but to utilise the material elements in the service of *Sri Krishna*. By such service, humanity may rehabilitate their relationship with God and concomitantly become purified of their original sin, because they no longer see God and creation as their objects of envy and desired wards to be lorded over; but as recipients of loving affection in a mood of devotional servitude. When the living entity desiring their eternal happiness comes to the realisation that their only satisfaction lies in re-establishing their relationship with God, then *Bhakti* or devotional service becomes their path of religion. In that light, devotees of *Sri Krishna* practice what I have come to term a “*Prema-culture*”.

I first heard this term *Prema-culture* from my spiritual mentor *Kadamba Kanana Swami*⁸¹, who took inspiration for the coining of this term, from the earth-care management philosophy known as “permaculture” denoting “permanent agriculture”, popularized by Bill Mollison in the late 20th century. The word *prema* in Sanskrit means “love or affection”, and more

⁸¹ <https://vimeo.com/431603492> - timestamp: (33:01)

specifically “love for God”. Thus, *Prema-culture* fundamentally stands for an eco-theological practice and culture, which at its core is motivated and driven by a reciprocal love for God and His creation, the material environment. Incorporating the four recommendations above from Prime, Cremo & Goswami, and Fici, my thesis may therefore be viewed as culminating in the practical ideal expressed in the term *Prema-culture*.

Addressing the ethical roots of the environmental crisis, I conclude, requires the practice of *Prema-Bhakti*, devotional love towards God in a personal form. All genuine religious doctrines that hold to a personal conception of God, and that advocate and teach a practice that returns humanity to their natural relationship with God and creation, might well fall under the concept of *Prema-culture*. There are indeed many concepts and terms that various environmental ethicists and theologians (from various religious traditions) have coined that encompass the same ideal as *Prema-culture*. For example, Fici coins the term *Eco-bhakti* as a “concept and practice [that] reveals the original, ever-present relationality between the Divine and creation” (Fici, 2020: p.15). Though our concepts are derived from the same doctrinal source in the *Bhakti* tradition, for purposes of this thesis I have focused on *Prema-culture* as a promising eco-theological ethic applicable for our age of environmental crisis.

3.6 Conclusion

I embarked on this thesis in dialogue with Lynn White’s observation that: if the roots of our environmental crisis have their origins in religious sin, then the concomitant solution might well be understood from a religious perspective. The aim of my study was primarily to assess to what extent the modern environmental crisis could be attributed to an ontological or cosmological error described in religious context; while the secondary aim was to assess the theoretical potential of the religious tradition of *Bhakti-yoga* as a basis for environmental ethics.

To address these aims I set about answering three guiding questions, which were systematically dealt with in three corresponding chapters. These questions were: (1) What, according to this tradition, has led to the alienation of humanity from the natural world and the consequent current global environmental crisis? This question is answered in a very specific way in the *Vedic* tradition as an original sin committed by humankind, which led to a punitive or corrective response by God’s laws. (2) How does that original fault and its consequences relate to the

environmental crisis as it is known today? (3) What solutions can be drawn from this same religious tradition (in conversation with other religious traditions and cosmologies) to reverse or make amends for that original transgression – solutions that might be represented as an environmental ethic?

I identified within the *Vedic* religious tradition of *Bhakti-yoga*, doctrinal precepts that provide answers to these questions. The *Vedas* describe the cosmic creation as a place where living beings, who are made in the qualitative image of God and who desired independent lordship outside of God's purview, come to experience partial independence from God. Their desire for independence from God is understood as the original sin of the living beings, a sin that led them to enter the world of cosmic material creation. As qualitative parts of God, the souls in this world exhibit their desire for independence from God by attempting to lord it over the created world. This attempt ignites a crisis in nature, because the soul as a part of God's creation has an inherent relational duty to uphold the purpose of creation. That purpose is understood as cultivating an attitude of relational harmony through acts of sacrifice, a harmony that encompasses all of creation, human and non-human nature. An attempt to subvert this purpose, driven by a desire for self-centred pleasure and aggrandisement over harmonious co-existence, is what my thesis proposes as the unequivocal root of the environmental crisis.

As understood from the *Vedas*, the role of religion is to help cultivate a loving relationship with God and creation as the goal of life for all beings. The material environment, understood as God's energy, helps facilitate the relationship between living entities and God by providing the means for harmonious reciprocal relations. Therefore, when beings in this world disrespect creation by unlimited exploitation, destructiveness, cruelty and ingratitude, they also disrespect its creator. By that disrespect, they hinder their prospective relationship with God. In order to fix their relationship then, humanity especially must learn to repair their relationship with creation; and vice versa – to redress their relationship with nature, humans must learn to cultivate a relationship with God. The *Vedas* reveal that only through a restoration of the living entities' original reciprocal relationship with God, can the original sin of independent lordship and its concomitant environmental effects be solved.

Through my study I concluded that religion must necessarily be based on a personal conception of God so as to fulfil the mandate of an ethical relation. For without a personal God, there can be no reciprocal exchange. This personal conception must also extend to God's creation if humanity is to engage in ethical relations with nature. This necessitates the adoption of a

religious ethic that promotes loving relations with God and creation. By investigating the *Vedic* religious and spiritual tradition of *Bhakti-yoga*, I believe my thesis has addressed the aims I set out to achieve – that is, the ethical framework of the *Bhakti* tradition shows great potential to be used as a blueprint for an environmental ethic with practical outcomes that are rooted in a meaningful cosmology.

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