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METAPHYSICAL PROTESTANTISM:
A COMPARATIVE LITERARY ECOLOGY

The influence of religions on human attitudes toward the non-human, whether beneficent or deleterious, has been the subject of serious scholarly debate since at least the publication of Lynn White Jr.'s important essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis"¹ in the 1960s. This essay issued a near-wholesale condemnation of western Christianity for providing the fallow ground upon which the western world would cultivate its abuse of the non-human. Some have looked to the early modern period to corroborate this, finding supporting evidence from the late Middle Ages to the Enlightenment and sometimes a brief but potent organic worldview in the humanism of the 16th and early 17th centuries.² In contribution to this ongoing dialogue, careful to eschew a search for culprits and benefactors, I would like to focus on a phenomenon that I believe recurs in these accounts but has not yet been sufficiently born out in the scholarly literature: the way that religious change and conflict are mapped upon the environment and inform environmental attitudes. Oriental³ sources since the Renaissance have been enlisted in debates about the nature of matter and the human relationship to it. In the early modern period, Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, and the language of alchemy were commonly enlisted in imagining the environment, as in the Metaphysical poetry of Henry Vaughan. Similarly, Confucius and the *Bhagavad Gita*, in addition to these former, were enlisted by Thoreau and Emerson to define new conceptions of the human relationship to the non-human, illuminating the contours of a genealogy of a pliable orientalism meant to cleanse our perceptions of "nature." In this essay I will focus particularly on these two literary camps, the metaphysical

¹ Lynn Jr. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 3-14.

² Cf. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

³ I use this term following Hanegraaf to describe the rhetoric of appealing to ancient "eastern" wisdom sources, usually Plato, Zoroaster, and Hermes Trismegistus from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance. Modern environmental primitivism exemplified by Thoreau prefers east and south Asian and indigenous American cultures but follows the same rhetorical thread. Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 5-73.

poets and divines of the 17th century and the Transcendentalists of the 19th, to bear out the continuity of the project of Anglo-Protestant self-fashioning against the politically and philosophically fraught non-human. These are themes that I argue run through Western environmental rhetoric since the early modern period. I have chosen to focus on literature due both to the discursive and aesthetic nature of modern environmentalism and to build on previous ecocritical work.⁴

A rich literature exists on the history of and relationship between Protestantism and modern environmentalism. In his 2015 book *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, historian Mark Stoll charts the history of the 20th century American environmental movement, showing that behind the nation's first conservation efforts were artists, activists, and religious leaders with deep roots in Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches. He argues that certain attitudes of Calvinism, evident both in the 16th century writings of its founder and in the attitudes it would inspire in its English adherents, gave birth to a definite environmental ethic and aesthetic that took concrete shape in the mid-19th century and shaped the ensuing movement of the 20th. Primary among these was the impulse to seek God in creation. Stoll examines the aestheticization of the American landscape by Reformed landscape painters, an artistic production influenced by Reformed suspicions of iconography, but which echoes Calvin's own views on the emblematic nature of God's creation.⁵ Other works of environmental intellectual history, such as Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, chart the changing attitudes toward the non-human in early modern England, from the late medieval conception of human supremacy over the natural world to the problematizing of this in the Enlightenment, which maintained that the world was meant for human purposes but also decentered the human being from the cosmos. Drawing on largely artistic and literary sources, Stoll and his predecessors intuit the power of religious aesthetics, for good or for ill, to form an environmental ethic in modernity.

⁴ Zane Johnson, "'All Things unto Our Flesh Are Kind': Corporality and Ecology in *The Temple*" 52, no. 1 & 2 (2019/2018): 128–45; Zane Johnson, "Starhawk, Henry Vaughan, and the Environmental Imagination," *Seeing the Woods: A Blog by the Rachel Carson Center* (blog), 2020, <https://seeingthewoods.org/2020/11/18/starhawk-henry-vaughan-and-the-environmental-imagination/>.

⁵ Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10–53.

However, what I wish to highlight is that, while the new science and the Reformation alike influenced the modern environmental ethic of their own and in conjunction, both produced crises of Euro-Christian identity that projected upon the natural world and have continuing ripple effects in how Euro-American, religiously inflected environmentalism is presented today. The following is a creative attempt to illustrate the continuity between early modern and properly modern anxieties of religious identity.

Metaphysical Poetry and Embattled Nature

In beginning this survey, the most obvious point of departure is George Herbert, Anglican poet and priest of the early 17th century. Not only was Herbert beloved of radical New England Protestants, including the early Anglo-American poet Edward Taylor, but he was also quoted directly by Ralph Waldo Emerson himself in his essay "Nature," one of the primary texts of 20th century American environmentalism. George Herbert's poem titled "Man" best exemplifies, in Emerson's words, that "wonderful congruity which subsists between man and the world; of which he is lord, not because he is the most subtle inhabitant, but because he is its head and heart, and finds something of himself in every great and small thing."⁶ Or, in Herbert's words, from this poem:

Man is all symmetrie,
Full of proportions, one limbe to another,
And all to all the world besides:
Each part may call the farthest, brother:
For head with foot hath private amitie,
And both with moons and tides.⁷

This impulse to see the sympathy between the human being and the natural world is a product of the intermediate position that Herbert occupied within shifting attitudes toward materiality in this period. The new science of Descartes and Francis Bacon — the latter of whom was a friend and associate of George Herbert, who translated Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* into Latin — instituted a sharp divide between mind and matter, which is trespassed by Herbert's meditation on human sympathy with

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 44.

⁷ George Herbert, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 332.

the non-human. Here, Herbert extolls the curative opportunities for human traffic with nature, transgressing the Cartesian divide with the analogical reasoning of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, in which the universe is arranged in a system of correspondences, mapped upon the human body: "Man is one world, and hath another to attend to him". Against the assumptions of the new science, Herbert presents a vision of right relationship based on the Calvinist understanding of God's providential creation and the Renaissance trope of the great chain of being.

Elsewhere in Herbert, this issues in a more clearly defined environmental ethic. Carolyn Merchant in her ecofeminist classic *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* noted the preponderance of imagery of sexual violence in the writings of Bacon to describe the mission of the new science to uncover the secrets of the natural world. Despite Herbert's connections to Francis Bacon, his image in "Vantitie (I)" of "The subtil Chymick [who] can deuest / And strip the creature naked, till he finde / The callow principles within their nest"⁸ presents these associations – the "Chymick" as plunderer and the misogynist notion of nature as female⁹ – towards an image of ethical constraint against the earth's plundering. Stanton J. Linden suggests that Herbert may be "mocking the natural philosopher who, following the propositions of Francis Bacon and the New Science, was increasingly concerned with the 'rational' and empirical investigation of the world." He further suggests that the poem might represent "an early literary reflection of the historical passage of alchemy into chemistry," an acknowledgment that underscores the historical hybridity of Herbert's poetry, and that of his literary disciples, in their intellectual attitudes toward self and nature.¹⁰

For Herbert and others, the divorce of mind and matter enables something of a communion, albeit a one sided one: the "earth is our cupboard of food and cabinet of pleasure" as much as "all things unto our flesh are kind," both sentiments expressed in his poem "Man". While Herbert is certainly not abdicating his throne as lord of the universe here, the prevailing attitude well beyond early modernity, he envisions a benevolent universe in which the human microcosm is at home, and which is

⁸ George Herbert, *The English Poems*, 308.

⁹ See Ynestra King, "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology," in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Toronto: Between the Lines, n.d.). for an ecofeminist appraisal of the trope of nature as woman.

¹⁰ Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hieroglyphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 192.

emblematic of God's own providence over creation. It is easy to see here the affinity that Emerson held with this contemplative vision of the divine household (Greek *oikos*) through which the human being finds its fulfillment.

The "nature" of materiality itself was embattled in the 17th century, enmeshed in actual wars over the precise mechanisms of God's work in the world, and his mediation in it by human ecclesial-political formations. On the aesthetic front, poets and artists skeptical of both the legacies of medieval scholasticism and the emerging new science enlisted other models of God-world relationship, drawn from the discourses available in the Hermetic Renaissance. Vaughan's poem, "And do they? have they a sense" criticizes the medieval Scholasticism of a previous age and the new mechanical philosophy alike:

And do they? Have they a Sense
Of ought but Influence?
Can they their heads lift, and expect,
And groan too? why th'Elect
Can do no more: my volumes said
They were all dull, and dead,
They judged them senseless, and their state
Wholly inanimate.¹¹

In "Cock-Crowing," Vaughan offers another model of divine working in the world drawn from Hermeticism, which asserted that heavenly rays magnetically attract and infuse earthly objects:

Father of lights! what sunny seed,
What glance of day hast Thou confined
Into this bird? To all the breed
This busy ray Thou hast assigned;
Their magnetism works all night,
And dreams of paradise and light.¹²

The "cock" is an emblem of alchemical Sulphur, the fiery principle of creation which quickens earthly beings. While Herbert reasserts the microcosm-macrocosm cliché of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, his poetic disciple Henry

¹¹Henry Vaughan, "[And Do They so? Have They a Sense]," in *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets*, ed. Mario A. Di Cesare (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 154.

¹²Henry Vaughan, "Cock-Crowing," in *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets*, ed. Mario A. Di Cesare (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 167.

Vaughan engaged more fully in the occult. This syncretism is the result of a number of historical factors. New translations of classical Hermetic and alchemical texts from the Arab-Muslim world in Florence in the previous century made these texts available to the intelligentsia of the period. A return to Platonism in Northern Europe was evidenced by the Cambridge Platonists led by former Puritan Henry More, whom Stoll cites as a particularly important influence upon the Calvinist theological schools of the 19th century United States, an “ally” to them “against the twin threats of materialism and philosophical atheism.”¹³ Vicious debates on the nature of matter were spurred on both by the infusions of classical sources, such as Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, and by the Reformation itself.¹⁴

As Katherine Eggert has argued, alchemy was a particularly useful framework for “forgetting” Roman Catholic dogmas, especially transubstantiation, and esoterically reimagining the processes by which the divine interacts with the mundane.¹⁵ Alchemy represented a mythopoetic mode of natural inquiry that tended to emphasize an occult “tie of bodies” which Herbert’s later disciple, Henry Vaughan, brother of alchemist Thomas Vaughan, marveled at. Herbert, for example, in his poem “Whitsunday,” the contemporary English term for the feast of Pentecost, saw an appropriate metaphor for the descent of the holy spirit in the Hermetic “hatching” of the fiery seed of the spirit in material creation, leading to a metallurgical eschatological vision of the Creation transformed:

Listen sweet Dove unto my song,
And spread thy golden wings in me;
Hatching my tender heart so long,
Till it get wing, and fly away with thee.¹⁶

While the image here is surely of the Holy Spirit descending at Pentecost, according to Jonathon Nauman, such ‘hatching’ by the Holy Spirit had even wider implications. Rather than merely describing by extended metaphor the action of God at the regeneration of a human soul or the creation of the universe, it

¹³ Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 24.

¹⁴ See Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

¹⁵ Katherine Eggert, *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 55-109.

¹⁶ Herbert, *The English Poems*, 213.

was accepted as a straightforward physical description of all processes performed by God on man and matter.¹⁷

Alchemy was a tool for thinking about human situatedness in divine and natural economies for Herbert and Vaughan and challenging both emerging and forgoing religio-scientific frameworks.

What is most interesting about Vaughan for my purposes, however, is that he seems to presage a certain trend in modern environmentalism by which supposedly ancient – and invariably “eastern,” as Hermes and his science were Egyptian – authorities and concepts are enlisted towards an environmental aesthetics. Henry Vaughan and contemporary neopagans alike draw on sources from what we now call the current of Western esotericism to imagine the environment in a pristine past amidst present turmoil and change. Emerson and Thoreau’s fascination with both Plato and Vedic scriptures represent a continuation of this discursive tradition, as European colonialism gathered more source texts for thinking about the God-world relationship amidst Euro-American spiritual and political crisis. Closer to late modernity, beat poet Gary Snyder locates early and pre-modern esotericism in a perennial stream of ecological thought he has discovered through Zen Buddhism in his *Earth House Hold*.¹⁸ In any case, the Platonic and Hermetic currents that undergird Henry Vaughan’s and to a lesser extent George Herbert’s poetics leads to an emblematic representation of nature wherein creatures are either shadows of the divine mind, sometimes illuminated by an individual poetic insight, or else they are enlivened directly by astral energies. It is important to bear in mind that this rhetorical move has historically been polemical.

Transcendental Orientalism and Emblematic Nature

The tenets of Transcendentalism are well known: self-reliance, breaking from tradition for new pastures, immersion in nature for spiritual renewal. Both the role of New England Protestantism and fascination with oriental sources are also well-attested. I turn now to the continuities with the poet-priests of the English Renaissance that these themes represent. Orientalism emerges more definitely as a popular concern in the

¹⁷ Jonathon Naumann, “Herbert the Hermetist: Vaughan’s Reading of *The Temple*,” *George Herbert Journal* 17, no. 1 (1993): 30.

¹⁸ Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold* (Cambridge, MA: New Directions Publishing, 1969), 114-115.

19th century.¹⁹ As Tomoko Masuzawa has argued, struggling with the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism and emerging notions of race, a Euro-Christian intellectual pursuit was underway to search for alternative origins for Christendom to divorce it from its problematic Semitic origins which it found in Aryan philology and religion.²⁰ This mirrors the search for alternative origins among the 17th century divines discussed above, but introduces new factors, namely the prospect of leaving Christianity behind altogether. Indeed, both Emerson and Thoreau were deeply versed in the literature of the English Renaissance, as evidenced both by Emerson's quote of George Herbert introduced at the beginning of this paper and in Thoreau's frequent allusions to John Milton and John Donne throughout *Walden*. These authorities, alongside quotations of Confucius and Mencius, are employed to a critical end, as in Thoreau's invocation of Donne's "To Sir Edward Herbert, at Juliers" to rail against the slovenliness of modern urban life and advocate a Platonic ascent above such dross: "I fear that we are such gods or demigods only as fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite, and that to some extent, our very life is our disgrace." Predictably, it is to the "Hindoo lawgiver" we should look to order our material affairs and re-dignify again human life.²¹

Despite writing in distinct times and places, there are notable similarities and continuities between the concerns of 17th century England and 19th century America, namely an intensifying crisis of religious identity. It is somewhat predictable that white, educated New England Protestants would look to Anglophone literature to substantiate their critiques. More than this, however, they participate in the same cultural work of searching for alternative origins and ideals for modern life, which they locate in Renaissance poetry itself and in Asian sources. According to her biographer, Waldo's aunt, Mary Moody Emerson offered the prototype to her nephew of individualism and contemplative refuge in nature that she saw "more centrally than either Calvinist or Hindu belief ... [in] the English poet-priests" and the strong tradition of Renaissance

¹⁹ Though Masonic and para-Masonic bodies flourished in Europe throughout the 18th century, retaining the earlier fascination with secret "Asiatic" brotherhoods and lineages deriving from Egypt.

²⁰ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 147-178.

²¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 174.

Platonism.²² Consistent with what I am describing, she attempted to revive New England Protestantism “by infusing it with energies not its own.”²³ Emerson’s life is in some ways emblematic of the tension between orthodoxy and fidelity to traditional Reformed doctrine, and a more expansive, Platonist-inflected view that in some cases supplements and others criticizes that. In his own life, the church to which he was ordained was in the process of splitting between orthodox Calvinist and progressive Unitarian camps. Emerson’s aunt encouraged him to hang on despite the tension, and herself and her writings served as source texts for his own Platonist-Transcendental thought, and indeed has been acknowledged as the primary influence upon his life and thought.²⁴

In terms of how this plays out upon the screen of “nature,” both the Metaphysicals and the Transcendentalists appropriated a correspondence model of reality in parts, as in Thoreau’s statement that the universe responds to the human imagination and will and Emerson’s originating impulse to this line of thinking, as well as a Platonism that sees in nature the shadow of the Divine Mind (“nature is a symbol of spirit”²⁵), the former of which sometimes must be cast off to realize the individual’s spiritual nature. Thus, their conception of the non-human environment is emblematic. Emerson sees in Herbert’s emblematic depiction of the divine-natural economy in “Man” a benevolent cosmos rigged for human benefit; Thoreau sees in Walden Pond a cosmic mirror: “A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. ... We shall, perhaps, look down thus on the surface of air at length, and mark where a still subtler spirit sweeps over it.”²⁶ Here is an attempt to breach the Cartesian divide that the Transcendentalists’ Metaphysical forerunners sought to attempt, looking at the environment through the dual hermeneutic of Calvinism’s providential creation and Renaissance Platonist esotericism.

It is interesting to consider the influence of the Renaissance emblem book format upon this line of thinking, books of emblematic images accompanied by explanatory verse or prose text. Their image-laden religious poems engage in this tradition,

²² Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 178.

²³ Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 180.

²⁴ Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 174.

²⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, 20.

²⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 150.

sometimes taking concrete geometric shapes on the page, such as Herbert's "The Altar" and "Easter Wings," but most often in the use of concrete images, such as the cock as image of alchemical fire in Vaughan's poem "Cock-Crowing". Stoll identifies the emblem as an early source in the stream of Reformed art, recalling controversy around the proper Reformed use of images. While not icons or sacramentals in the proper sense, the emblem book format was useful in aestheticizing an embattled nature in this period, while also performing a catechetical function. An early popularizer of the format, Francis Quarles, describes the hieroglyphic nature of God's creatures, mirrored in the emblem:

"An emblem is but a silent Parable ... Our blessed SAVIOUR ... in holy scripture ... is sometimes called a Sower; sometimes, a Fisher; sometimes, a Physitian; And why not presented so, as well to the eye, as to the eare? Before the knowledge of letters, GOD was knowne by *Hieroglyphicks*; And, indeed, what are the heavens, the earth, nay every Creature, but *Hieroglyphicks* and *Emblemes* of his glory?"

Emerson states it even more explicitly: "Have mountains, and waves, and skies, no significant but what we consciously give them? The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind." Henry Vaughan and other Metaphysicals such as Thomas Traherne have been called predecessors to Romanticism, which birthed Transcendentalism in America, a progenitor in turn of the modern environmental movement. Their historical situatedness between late medieval Catholicism and the emergent new science provided a unique set of rhetorical tools to think about the relationship between humanity, nature, and God in such turbulent times. As religious writers, they used images to encourage ethical constraint upon the rapacious use of the environment for human benefit – the express goal of the New Science in Descartes' understanding – while thinking about their entanglement in this natural economy through Reformed principles and alternative theories of matter and spiritual-material economies. This is precisely what the Transcendentalists are trying to achieve and with similar discursive tools. The providential creator becomes the oversoul in Emerson which is best read in the pristine text of nature, a site of theophany in the Protestant imagination since the beginning.²⁷

²⁷ Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain*, 22.

Transcendental depictions of nature continue the English Renaissance tradition, even as they strove for “new lands, new men, new thoughts,”²⁸ as Emerson calls for in his introduction to “Nature.” However, due to their historical situation in the 19th century and the new, albeit limited, availability of East and South Asian literatures in translation, the primary sources of Transcendental orientalism lie in India and China and thus approach our current understandings of spiritual exoticism. As recent studies of metaphysical religion – the strand of American popular religion that was largely influenced by Emerson and later New Thought proponents through to the New Age and historically unrelated to Metaphysical poetry – have shown, this is a complicated legacy that has continued unabated in 20th and 21st century America, despite recent pushback from indigenous and immigrant communities from these largely white, commercial appropriations.²⁹ Contemporary metaphysical religionists draw on a continued tradition of rejection of institutional religion championed by Emerson and the movement known as Transcendentalism. Yet, it is important to remember that Transcendentalism arose from a discursive stream of Protestant self-understanding that began in the early modern period.

Rather than arguing for an unbroken Christian Platonist tradition that extends from the early modern period to the middle of the 19th century, I wish to highlight here a continuity in the ways that religious change and religious criticism have invariably been expressed in terms of relationship to the environment and have constituted a discursive pattern in Euro-American literature and culture. Both Henry Vaughan and Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau turned from the profanity of the worlds around them, marked by unjust wars (and slavery in the Transcendentalist context), and attempted to retreat to their respective natural worlds. Today, metaphysical religion in America, profoundly influenced by Emerson and Transcendentalism – though I wish to be careful to not conflate contemporary New Age spirituality with Renaissance Platonic Christianity and Transcendentalism³⁰ – is split on the issue of

²⁸ Emerson, “Nature,” 7.

²⁹ Mark Silk and Christopher White, eds., *The Future of Metaphysical Religion in America* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), xiv.

³⁰ Though as Grainger notes, there are remarkable similarities between early modern European occultism and New Age religion: The doctrine of correspondence central to harmonialism [a tenet of New Age spirituality] has a long history in Western thought, including ancient practices of astrology and the alchemical traditions of the Hermetic Renaissance.” Brett Malcolm Grainger, “The Place of Nature in Metaphysical Religion: A Brief History,” in *The Future of*

materiality between those that adhere to a “mind over matter” metaphysics and those that seek a relinquishment of self to the cosmos.³¹ In all cases, nature serves as the foreground to self-transformation and also the site of theophany in their particular contexts.

Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted a comparative reading of the Metaphysical poets and the Transcendentalists to bear out what I have identified as a rhetorical pattern about the “nature” of man, nature, and God that have arisen at particular times of religious crisis in Euro-Christian history. The Metaphysicals were responding to the Reformation, already a generation old at the point of their writing, and the emerging new science, challenging these with appeals to Calvinist ethical understandings of God’s providential creation and with what we would call “esoteric” infusions of the language of Renaissance Hermeticism and Platonism, a manifestation of what Wouter Hanegraff calls “Platonic orientalism.” The Transcendentalists, reading and citing this milieu and other English works of the same period, draw on the language of Platonism, which mingles with their own New England Protestant inflections and the influx of South and East Asian materials to recast the spiritual-material economy as a corrective to a wayward society. The widely documented influence of Emerson on New Age spirituality transmitted to the 20th century and beyond the tenets of positive mind metaphysics, a rejection of institutional religion, and a proclivity for seeking spiritual growth in the non-human world. Yet even within the New Age milieu we can see a similar rhetorical pattern, initiated in the Renaissance, of enlisting “oriental” sources to think about religious identity in the midst of a fraught and changing world, and thereby what the essential “nature” of that world is. The rejection of Christian roots is near total among metaphysical religionists today, yet this discourse, which continues to have great purchase, arises from a great tradition of contesting and defining those very roots.

Metaphysical Religion in America, ed. Christopher White and Mark Silk, *Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 26.

³¹ Grainger, “The Place of Nature in Metaphysical Religion,” 37.