

Timothy Beal: When Time is Short



The religious scholar argues that religion has fueled humanity's denial of climate change and that—even in knowing ours may be a finite future—there are still places to find hope.

ROGER SANTODOMINGO • 12/15/2022



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Interviewed by Roger Santodomingo, *UU World* Executive Editor.

The idea hovering over the book *When Time is Short: Finding our Way in the Anthropocene* (Beacon Press, 2022) is that climate change threatens human extinction. Timothy Beal argues that religion has informed a state of denial and a view of human exceptionalism that ignores the laws of nature. The author explores difficult questions about our own mortality as a species and how we can find hope in the face of an increasingly dire environmental crisis.

Beal is Distinguished University Professor and Florence Harkness Professor of Religion at Case Western Reserve University. He has authored several books, including *Roadside Religion* and *The Rise and Fall of the Bible*, and has published essays on religion and culture in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *CNN.com*, and the *Washington Post*.

How does religion foster denial of climate change?

Religion's focus—especially Christianity's—on immortality implies a Cartesian split of the soul from the body and a kind of denigration, really, of the material and the animal and the rest of life on the planet, which has contributed to that denial.

In some circles of Christianity, there is this notion that God created the entire rest of creation for us humans, who were created in God's image to be rulers of it. And then the Second Coming's going to come, and we're all going to get swept off into Heaven, and this whole rest of creation was just a stage for us to play out our story on, and it'll be here as long as we need it.

I grew up in Alaska in the '70s and '80s, when the Alaska pipeline was just built. Prevalent at the time was this absurd idea that God just pumped all that oil down in there and that we would be bad stewards of creation if we didn't use it all up. If it causes global warming, that's fine because the end of times and the Second Coming will come before that day anyway. And so we're good to go with this.

You write about human exceptionalism; what is it, and how is it inspired by scripture?

Human exceptionalism is this belief that we as human beings are essentially excepted from the laws of nature that govern the rest of creation. We are apart from it and above it, apart from nature and above nature. It goes back to the first chapter of Genesis and the story that God created us in his image. So we're godlike, not like the rest of creation. We are not subject to finitude, mortality, or subjugation by other forces in nature.

In the early modern era, Francis Bacon and other founders of the Enlightenment and modern capitalism—a period that we might call war capitalism or pre-industrial capitalism—ran with the notion that God created us to subdue and have dominion over the rest of creation.

How did those ideas evolve to be more secular?

During the early period of colonial expansion and the extraction of land, labor, and life from other parts of the non-Western world, the West identified these other peoples and other cultures more with nature than with the modern West.

Indigenous populations were seen as primitive and subject to their dominion because they were close to nature, not above nature.

John Locke justified Western expansion and takeover in North America by saying that Native Americans did not deserve to keep the land because they were not making maximal use of it.

Is it possible for an ecological narrative to be grounded in religion?

Some would say we need to reject religious narratives, some would say revise them, and some would say recover them.

There is just no point in trying to find anything in traditional religions for those who say, "reject and move on."

Others say revise those traditions, reinterpret them and even change them a little bit, but draw from them as resources for building a new pool of imagination. That is a new view of religion compatible with a different understanding of our relationship of interdependence and interconnection with the rest of the natural world.

"A new view of religion [is] compatible with a different understanding of our relationship of interdependence and interconnection with the rest of the natural world."

And those who say there was a misinterpretation of scriptures in the first place?

They would say "recover." Of course, there's nothing wrong with scriptures, and we need to make clear that Bacon, for example, was wrong in reading them that way and just read them correctly, and then we won't have any problem.

What do you believe?

I believe that there are resources in these traditions for revising and building a new kind of spirituality. The Bible has a rich appreciation for different sorts of poetic imaginings of beginnings, cosmic beginnings, human beginnings, and so on. And they're not trying to sync up with one another. So it's, at best, a poetic resource for a pool of imagination for us to draw from.

You say that there are Indigenous traditions in the Bible.

We think of the Bible as a Western civilization book, but it's rooted in early Indigenous, ancient, near-Eastern cultures. There still are traces of those in the Bible that we can draw out and put into conversation with other Indigenous cultures and religious perspectives. That may help us find different ways of thinking about what it means to be human in this world.

Many people are confronting a lot of grief about climate change. Can we remain realistic and hopeful at the same time?

I don't think it's possible to get to hope without moving through grief. Hope without grief is what we call optimism, and sometimes optimism is pretty naive. As we find our way into this new era—the Anthropocene—where human behavior is changing our geological and biological systems more than any other force, we are already facing the harm, suffering, and even the death that it has caused. And we need to be angry as well as grieving before moving to a realistic hope that isn't in denial.

"I don't think it's possible to get to hope without moving through grief."

Is it possible to find hope in science and technology?

Yes and no. Transhumanists, for example, believe they'll defeat death because science and technology will allow us to live beyond our biological limitations. I'm very skeptical of that. However, I believe that humans are in a kind of co-evolutionary process with technology and that human/tech co-evolution is always happening.

Also, governments develop their economic policy to allow growth using technology in a green way too.

I'm also skeptical about that notion. Imagine someone who is terribly ill, and maybe they have little hope, except for a new surgical operation that they could do. It will create untold pain and suffering for the person undergoing it. It will be costly, perhaps bankrupt the family, and it has all kinds of adverse environmental effects as well. But it will give that person a 0.1 percent chance of living another year. So to me, that's what Elon Musk's SpaceX is. And I'm sorry, but the chance that we're going to be on Mars in a hundred years seems like less than a 0.001 percent chance.

I think we need to be talking about reducing consumption and reducing growth. And there are scientific and technological means for working on that, too.&

How would you rethink your relationship with Earth at this critical time?

If I were to use the term salvation, I would want to turn its meaning more toward reconciliation, restoration, and redemption. And if you look at the biblical material in the Hebrew scriptures, salvation there is not about going to Heaven. It's about deliverance from oppression, also about reconciliation in community.

And to me, that's a more meaningful notion of salvation. It could translate into restorative justice and reparations on a social level. Redemption and reconciliation in the human community and the human-animal community. And I feel that that's a very meaningful analogy between palliative care on the individual and human species levels if you will. 🍷

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