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Ecology and Theology

Religion and Science

ECOLOGY IS A PROBLEM that we normally identify with modern industrial society. We are not used to associating ecology with theology, or with medieval history. But this chapter makes that association to suggest that our ecological problems lie very deep. Although we may have "discovered" an environmental crisis only recently, its causes go back at least as far as the Western industrial revolution of the last few centuries. The point of this chapter is that the industrial revolution itself, and the transformation of the human relationship to nature that it entailed, had even earlier causes in Western thought and action. Why, after all, was it Western Europe, of all places, that initiated the industrial revolution? This chapter will explore some of the cultural traditions that might have prepared the way.

Specifically, we will examine two Western cultural traditions that have been linked by some scholars to our ecological and environmental problems. They are the Western religious, or Judeo-Christian, tradition, and the development of science. Christianity and modern science might almost be called the hallmarks of Western culture. Although much of Western history is contained in the struggle between these two cultural forms, they also have much in common. We will