Sensing, Minding, Creating

[The first few pages of a draft article sensing-minding-creating in the study of religion and ecology]

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Sensing, minding, and creating are integrated ways that the human senses, thinks about, and finds novel pathways in the immensity of the world and more immediately with the “tangled bank” of life. I have used both styles of presentation, namely, sensing-minding-creating connected by dashes, and sensing, minding, and creating distinguished by commas. Each style refers to that process of universe emergence. One emphasizes by dashes the simultaneity and interwoven character of this threefold interaction; whereas the uses of commas emphasizes their distinctive manifestations. Sensing is placed first here although the integrated actions of all three are simultaneous and interactive dimensions. Sensing is emphasized to draw attention to the world’s multisensory experience of itself as foundational to existence. That is, sensing, or “reaching out,” characterizes both inorganic and organic existence, and minding, or “inner patterning” or “consciousness,” characterizes all reality from the primal flaring forth of our universe. Creating, or emergence, follows from the bending back of sensing-minding on themselves giving rise to novel space for existence to flourish, change, and evolve.

Sensing and the woven-fabric of sensations occurring in the lifeworld discern in their reaching out that which enables pattern and flourishing. Thought
or consciousness, what I call minding here, arises, for example, in cellular discernment and is the context for flourishing life. Creating, or emergence, results from that reaching out and discerning which returns, or bends back, in ways that open new possibilities for pattern or flourishing.

Sensing in some cultural modes has been positioned as an ancillary role for minding and creating. In this exploratory statement I seek to reposition sensing of the world as central to understanding the human. Moreover, I want to emphasize ways in which humans, following the evolution of life and of material forms in the emergence of the universe, have experienced, reflected upon, and been brought to new places of questioning and knowing by the world.

My own particular concerns for the study of religion and ecology opens an awareness in me of ways in which the human becomes attentive to the world as other-than itself through sensing-minding-creating. Thus, I focus here on religion and ecology as an approach for understanding sensing-minding-creating, not as an end, final or ultimate exemplar of these integrated dimensions. Rather, it is one expression in life’s communities of their integral dependence on Earth’s ecosystems, a dependence which has also given rise to creating, that is, emergence of novel social expressions among living and non-living existence.

This way of studying religion and ecology explores ways that humans interrogate the world. This is a search, as I see it, for ultimate transformation within the boundaries of existence in the universe. Human encounters with the
natural world, as well as engagements with their own social and built worlds, all stand in relation to one another as sensed realities that give rise to thought, doubt, and question. Perception of the world via our senses arouses commitments that the world is as our sensations reveal. Yet, that commitment to perception continually flounders as our senses themselves rise up against our efforts to rationally order the changing world.

The Paleolithic cave paintings and grave offerings of our human, and hominid, ancestors demonstrate a reaching out into the world some 30,000 years before the present to 2 million years BP. Wouldn’t we also say that that life manifest in the ordered styles of the cave paintings is also filled with doubt, contestation, and question? All this questioning has not simply occurred in some speculative realm but in direct relation to our ancestors’ lived-experience of the celestial realms, seasons, landscapes, and biodiversity in the relational terms I call sensing-minding-creating.

This questioning begins with the human person in the world as a space in which the ultimate presence and meaningful pathways of religions appear. This human space cannot be separated from the surrounding world. Immediately transformed by the mutual perceiving of self, world, and other the neutral space that had formerly been empty and formless, becomes a place of sensing-minding-creating. [Consider hierophany here. What occurs in the sensing, minding, creating immediately before or after hierophany?]
Religions are examples, then, of the ways that sensing reaches, bodies think, and engagement creates. In these ways the human and the world come to understand and clarify themselves. In this process they continue to reveal and to question the deeper structures of reality in relation to each other. Truths are composite narratives that initially frame sensing-minding only to be changed and charged in the dynamic bending of their engagement back upon themselves to open creating in the community of life.

For the human sensing-minding-creating are responses within the world as a communion of subjects. Sensing, minding and creating present a process approach, then, to the study of religion and ecology in which the diverse religions can be interrogated regarding: 1) the sense of the human and the world for each other leading to a consciousness of their mutual regard and need for each other; 2) the capacity of human intelligence to frame conceptually the sensible world so as to creatively renew itself in a discovered presence of an ultimate; 3) the human quest to return creatively to the revelatory place of the ultimate even as the flow of perceived events carries their world forward.

Sensing, minding, and creating are presented as specific modes of questioning for understanding the diverse religions in their formative and ongoing contacts with different ecologies. Religions are after all composed of human beings with bodies who experience the world, and who, according to the particularity of religious traditions, experience a revelatory message with regard to the world. That aspect of religion, namely, its relevance to the world, is a
primary consideration here though it may not be situated as primary within a
given tradition. For example, Torah was given to the Jewish community in both
oral and literate forms as a questioning-knowing covenant between the Divine
and the Chosen as primary. Among Indigenous Tewa peoples, for example, of
San Juan Pueblo, summer lineages interact and vie with winter lineages in
questioning-knowing relationships. The ground upon which that questioning-
knowing occurs in the world may be one way of interpreting these covenant and
community relationships subject to expressive forms of scrutiny.

Sensing, minding, and creating provide us with an interrogative approach
appropriate even for the seemingly transcendent-orientations of religious
traditions. A transcendence, I sense, that may not necessarily be other-worldly
or, even when heaven oriented, is still reaching out from bodies for novel
flourishing. This approach, then, acknowledges the questioning process at the
heart of our human experience of a changing world even as it creatively searches
for that abiding place where ultimate knowing resides. In this sense, our
approach is not a quest for philosophical insight as much as an opening to the
multiple ways in which ecosystems and world-pictures have affected the quests
of religious life. Acknowledging the seminal roles of thought, or minding, in the
emergence of religions, this approach also emphasizes the particular turns in
religions we call creating. One move that appears evident in the religions is the
bending back of sensing and minding that effects a doubling in the flow that
opens to creative mystery.
The intention of this approach is to bridge the divide that has been established between the human and the natural world, culture and nature. Sensing the world, and attention to the world as sensing the human, are presented as unific ground, that place from which minding, or thought about the world, is situated. Such an opening to religions as complex interactions of sensing-minding-creating presumes experiencing bodies, thinking minds, and creative engagement. Such a generative place is not without doubt and questioning, but a shared ground, and a sense of shared bodies gives perceptual depth to doubt and question. It is the case that anthropological studies have described cultures in which distinctions are made between the realm of human society and the non-human world. While not ignoring these meaningful, symbolic, pragmatic distinctions of cultural “together doing” from the wild “away from people,” the nature-culture separation may be more modern. Thus, a deeper human sense of difference from ecology may pervade the religions that we need to reconsider. As the indigenous scholar Jack Forbes writes, “People can be, and indeed are, part of ‘nature.’ The objective is to understand that together-doing of the balanced kind and the Away from People have never been mutually exclusive and that ‘nature needs people’ (just not too many of them!).”

This differs from a variation on an older comparative religions approach often identified with Friedrich Max-Müller. In that 19th century view religious thought and language relate to ecological realities as corrupted remnants of lived-experiences in the world. Thought, or minding, from that perceptive
would faintly echo the sensed, experienced world. The position taken here, and presented in the process approach of sensing, minding, and creating, emphasizes the seminal role in the religions for creative doubt and question in the lived-experience of the world. Rather than experiences of the natural world frozen in language, the religions transmit the capacity for ongoing experiences and expressions of body-mind in the intertwined worlds of culture-nature. In this sense there are no established patterns or categories to guide a study of the mutual influence of bioregions and religions. Certainly, patterns are developed in the traditions themselves for expressing places of ultimacy and transformation. Certain, also, are the historical studies of the many ways religions relate to ecosystems. These can be described using categories from scientific ecology and even more pointedly using terms drawn from the particular religions themselves. What this work seeks to elucidate here are the underlying dynamics that have generated such patterns of interaction between religions and ecologies, their contemporary relevance, and the ongoing doubt and questioning they present.

While Bertrand Russell stood in his biography at the edge of a dark ocean crying into the night of his fading 19th century Protestantism, the larger prospect of all the human religious communities may be more poignantly described by the chasm we have created between the world. Climate change and all that it entails confronts us like a chasm between ourselves and all that we have known. As W. G. Sebald described in his novel Austerlitz it is “truly terrifying to see such
emptiness open up a foot away from firm ground, to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its unimaginable opposite on the other. The chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate…”

1 This phrase is used extensively by Thomas Berry e.g. The Dream of the Earth.
2 I am thinking of Levi-Strauss and the structural attention to dualisms of culture and nature, but also Alphonso Ortiz’s studies of the dualisms within Tewa/San Juan Pueblo culture, as well as the article by Jack Forbes in Indigenous Traditions and Ecology, and the distinctions made by Richard Nelson in Make Prayers to the Raven.