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September 4, 2010: The Reaction to Daniel Quinn

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Title: The Reaction to Daniel Quinn

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9/4/2010—One reaction to the hostage-taking by James Jae Lee at the Discovery Channel headquarters, in which Lee demanded that the network present certain of the ideas of Daniel Quinn, is to emphasize Quinn's stand against human population growth. Obviously, Lee's own violence, which led to his death and fortunately harmed no one else, has nothing to do with the ideas of Daniel Quinn, a point Quinn himself has been making. The more significant question is whether Lee's anti-human perspective, in which humans are viewed as parasites of nature, is a genuine outgrowth of Quinn's views. (The Catholic News Agency for example reported that "A pro-life group which believes Lee started an argument at one of their protests said his 'utter disdain for human beings' is at the core of the mindset pro-lifers oppose." [story here]) The idea is that if you do not view population growth as positive, you must inevitably end in violence against humans, either figuratively or, as in Lee's case, literally). It is true that Quinn is a kind of Malthusian, for whom the agriculture race cannot ultimately be won. More food just leads to more people. The only answer is to let people die when food supplies prove inadequate. Quinn never hides his view on this matter, but it is not central to the book *Ishmael* and plenty of people, myself included, have been influenced by Quinn's ideas without adopting that particular one. The basic idea of *Ishmael* itself is that the world is not made for human beings but that humans became human through living in dependence on the natural world. In other words, the western view, including the view of many forms of monotheism, that humans are higher than nature is itself anti-human and a form of oppression. We evolved into what we are now only by being part of nature. If we do not return to our earlier understanding of ourselves, we will destroy ourselves and will destroy much of the current form of the natural world along with us. It is in this context that Quinn suggested that in the Americas before the European invasion experiments were taking place in large-scale sustainable civilization. The indigenous worldview of the Mayan, Inkan, and Aztec civilizations, as well as smaller experiments taking place elsewhere in the Americas, can serve as a reminder that humanity as part of nature is not a dream but has been a functioning reality throughout human history. Of course it is true that sustainable human civilization cannot absolutely privilege the growth of human population above everything else. But it is odd that religious thinkers who insist that human beings must live within all sorts of other limits on their behavior balk at this one limit: that we cannot endlessly reproduce without destroying ourselves and others.