

Religion and the environment

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This chapter focuses on the way the environmental crisis is challenging and profoundly altering every aspect of religious life: theology, institutional self-definition, the everyday conduct of religious people, and ritual. Religious environmentalism as a global movement is described and some interesting problems which the movement faces are discussed.

What's the problem here?

Why does a book like this one need a chapter on religion and the environment? For two reasons: first, because humanity now faces an enormous challenge to its continued existence, a challenge it has created itself. Second, because responding to this challenge is profoundly altering every aspect of religious life: theology, institutional self-definition, the everyday conduct of religious people, and ritual. Along with these profound changes there arise serious questions the answers to which are deeply in doubt. All of these are the subject of this essay.

The environmental crisis has a number of by now familiar, frightening dimensions. Global climate change, species extinction, wilderness loss, and the trillions of pounds of toxic chemicals we have pumped into the air, water, and earth. Future prospects of genetic engineering and nano-technology loom devastatingly larger than present and past consequences of other "miracle" developments such as nuclear engineering/armaments (uncounted tons of as yet undisposable long term poisons, massive contamination sites around nuclear labs, etc.). If the reader has become numb to these generalities (certainly a forgivable response given the overwhelming character of the crisis) one simple "fact" may help focus attention. In 2004 a test of the umbilical cord blood of a dozen randomly chosen newborns at a St. Louis hospital revealed a total of 270 toxic chemicals – with each infant averaging nearly two hundred: carcinogens, endocrine disrupters, substances which adversely affect neurological development or immune system functioning. No one can be sure how these affect developing fetuses – either singly or in concert. (Indeed, what would "experiments" to determine this look like?) But, the chemicals' track records in the labs and for adults are clear.

What does such a dreadful reality mean to *religious* people in particular? Well, for one thing it means something to all of us simply as people. Insofar as Christians or Jews or Muslims have bodies of their own and love their children, this should galvanize immediate and drastic action.

But there are other, specifically religious, reasons as well. First, as members of the Abrahamic tradition, Jews, Christians, and Muslims think of the world not simply as a collection of inert material lying around for human use, but as the gift of a loving God. The

world is “creation” – an act of generosity. Even more, the traditions often teach that the world is ours only temporarily – it still belongs to God. Is this any way to treat the gift of the Master of the Universe?

Second, there are specifically religious practices which are called into doubt. Can Jews sanctify wine if they know it contains poisonous pesticide residues? Can the communion wafer really be the “body of Christ” if it was grown with destructive chemical fertilizers and the people who worked the farms on which it was grown suffer from disproportionate amounts of cancer from using those fertilizers?

Third, religions – all religions – share one basic belief: that *they* have some kind of privileged knowledge of what God wants and how a person should act. What happens to this theological and moral self-confidence when, for example, a fourth grader in religious school asks: “Why have you let this happen?” How much respect can religious teachers demand of a younger generation of future members of the faithful when the older generation seem, rather obviously, to have failed so dismally?

Finally, religions must ask themselves the embarrassing question of how they could have been so dumb about all this for so long. It was, after all, not the leading religious authorities or theologians who noticed that modern industrial practices had some real problems. It was free lance mystics and nature lovers, the occasional believer with no institutional clout, anti-communist western Marxists, and the occasional more or less pagan phenomenologist, who raised questions about what humanity was doing to nature and what that might presage in terms of humanity’s treatment of itself. For their part, religions concentrated on whether or not the fruits of industrialization were being distributed with a modicum of social justice, that’s all. (See Berry 1988; Harrison 1998).

For (at least) all these reasons the environmental crisis is not just a crisis for our health care system, economy, politics, and recreation, but for religion as well. The good news, however, is that over the last twenty years or so religions have risen to this challenge. There now exists a vibrant, worldwide movement of religious environmentalism, one encompassing virtually every faith on every continent, and one which means that religions, even as they were and in some ways continue to be part of the problem, have become part of the solution as well.

Theology

The environmental crisis demands – and has occasioned – some profound theological changes.

In the most general terms these changes involve a denial of centuries’ old ideas asserting that humans are different from, better than, or independent from nature. In turn, these changes are accomplished by four different types of theological strategies.

To begin, there has been an active attempt to recover ecologically promising, even powerful, elements of tradition that have been marginalized. To take but three examples: The Jewish philosopher and commentator Maimonides, a twelfth-century Egyptian generally thought of as the most important Jewish thinker in a millennium, cautioned Jews quite clearly: “Do not think that the rest of the earth was made only for you. Each created thing has its own purpose” (in Hadassah 1993: 110). St Francis, the thirteenth-century mystic and spiritual teacher whose life and teaching became the inspiration for an entire religious order, preached to flowers and would move worms out of the roadway to keep them from being trampled (Sorrel 1988). The Koran flatly declares that “Everything is a community like yours” (6:38) and “The creation of Heaven and Earth is of greater importance than

humanity, yet most people realize this not.”(40:57). Jains and Buddhists both have deep traditions of non-violence towards all of life.

Such statements, and many more that could be offered, provide an initial basis for ecotheology. They are undoubtedly part of the tradition, no fancy footwork of interpretation is needed to give them an ecological direction, and thus they can be (and have been) standard bearers for a greener version of tradition.

More challenging is the need to reinterpret tradition. This does not mean the importation of essentially new ideas, but rather a significantly different orientation and emphasis in the understanding of what is there already. Ecological motifs in the Torah provide a convenient example, not only because of the centrality of the Torah in the Western tradition, but because a great deal of work has been done on it already.

The dominant theme in Biblical understanding of the human relation with nature has been (unfortunately) the classic passage Genesis 1: 26–28, in which God proclaims:

Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

In the context of a two millennia of a human struggle to survive with limited technological power, it is not surprising that this passage was generally taken as license to use nature in a purely instrumental fashion. Thus Nachmonides, an important thirteenth-century Spanish-Jewish commentator, argued that this passage gave people the right to mine the hills and plow the fields to get what we wanted.

However, there is a good deal more to the Bible and in fact to the Torah in particular, than this passage. For one thing “in our image” can be seen in a variety of ways – (particularly because virtually no one wants to take it literally!). Indeed some read it as conferring responsibility rather than simply unbridled power. We are to act, Lawrence Troster (Troster 2001) suggests, as God’s representatives on earth, carrying out God’s purposes here.

How then does God want us to treat nature? The mere term “dominion” does not tell us much. As a matter of fact many other passages in the Torah suggest that God has in mind both clear limits for what we may do and also a clear sense of moral concern that extends to the non-human.

For instance, when the Israelites rest on the Sabbath, they must rest their animals as well. If you see your enemy’s donkey fallen under a heavy load, you must help raise it up – not just the donkey of your friend, but of someone you *really* do not like. And, to my mind best of all, during the Sabbatical year, when no crops are planted, the food that grows from last year’s fallen seeds is to be left not only to the usual code names for the powerless – “the widow, the stranger, and the orphan” – but to “wild animals” as well (Exodus 23:5–12).

What these (and other) passages indicate is that the Bible often teaches respect for non-human nature, and that “care” (as in Adam and Eve’s initial responsibility to care for the Garden of Eden, Genesis 2: 15) rather than “dominion” is the rule. The point is not that this is the “true” interpretation, and that somehow theologians, rabbis, and popes missed it all these years. For clearly there are other biblical passages which support the dominion thesis quite easily. Rather, what is crucial is that one can, by focusing on passages which, even if

they have not been used this way before, are legitimately part of the tradition, find a biblical basis for an ecological oriented religion. One does not have to invent new sacred texts or sweep away the past – one merely has to focus on parts of the tradition that are there already. This work of interpretation has been a central task of ecotheology, one so well performed by this time that there can be little doubt that the most conservative, “orthodox” religious person can also be an environmentalist. (Pope John Paul II used God’s response to creation “And God said that it was very good” (Genesis 1:31) as a proof-text for his own ecological turn. Think of how many other Popes read that verse and made no ecological sense out of it whatsoever. Yet clearly the Pope was not inventing anything new, except the meaning that he was taking from a very old verse (Murphy 1989).)

That said it deserves mention that ecotheologians *also* do a fair amount of both rejection of the past and invention for the present and future. Not everything that has been part of the tradition will remain, and some important new concepts and values must emerge.

For example, we can note the position of Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, who helped create the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, an interfaith coalition with a wide range of educational programs for religious groups and society as a whole. Schorsch, for many years the chancellor of Conservative Judaism’s leading educational institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary, is not hesitant to take Jewish tradition to task and advocate a fundamental transformation. It is a mistake, he argues, to use Judaism’s rejection of paganism to propel Judaism into an “adversarial relationship with the natural world.” When that is done

the modern Jew is saddled with a reading of his tradition that is one-dimensional. Judaism has been made to dull our sensitivity to the awe inspiring power of nature. Preoccupied with the ghost of paganism, it appears indifferent and unresponsive to the supreme challenge of our age: man’s degradation of the environment. Our planet is under siege and we as Jews are transfixed in silence.

(Schorsch 1991)

This statement is all the more significant because Conservative Judaism was, as much as any other form of Judaism, a longstanding adherent of the very “one-dimensional reading” of tradition that Schorsch is criticizing. His claim, then, suggests that Jews have been theologically and ethically misguided.

In the Christian world, the long-standing tendency to make categorical distinctions between body and spirit, the world and the soul, the moral status of people and the non-moral status of everything else, has been sharply criticized. Protestant theologian Sallie McFague (2001), for example, urges us to imagine that far from being simply an immaterial transcendence outside the physical universe, God is also a part of our physical reality. The earth, she suggests, can be thought of as “The Body of God.” After all, if God is not part of the world as we know it, how could we ever encounter Him/Her? John Cobb, one of the earliest voices in ecological theology, admits that with regard to anthropocentrism: “As a Protestant Christian I am impelled to move quickly to acknowledge that Protestant theology has been an extreme case.” This anthropocentrism, he argues, must change (Cobb 2004: 249–50).

Given the different theological orientation of Eastern religions – which have not tended to make such rigid distinctions between humans and the rest of the natural world – the Buddhist and Hindu response to environmental issues necessarily takes a different form. Also, the technology and social forms which have brought about the environmental crisis

have been predominantly Christian and Euro-American capitalist. That does not mean that in the present Hindus and Buddhists are not cheerfully developing economically and polluting a great deal. It means that the practices which allow such pollution are much less rooted in their *religious* culture than they are in Western ones.

However, there is at least one fundamental change that Buddhism and Hinduism have to face, and which under the leadership of their respective environmental thinkers, they are facing. While these traditions lack the West's human-nature dualism, they also lack the tradition of prophetic social criticism which has been essential to Judaism, Christianity and (if to a lesser extent) Islam. That is, they have generally tended towards a kind of social passivity – or at least social quietism – which would make them less contributors to the environmental crisis than inactive witnesses to it. When Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist teacher who has become widely known in Europe and the U.S., *advocates* a kind of “socially engaged Buddhism” which *requires* social activism as much as it does meditation and psychological self-examination, he was roundly condemned by his fellow Buddhist leaders. Such activism, his critics taught, was profoundly unBuddhist! In response Nhat Hanh and other leaders, such as Thailand's Sulak Sivaraksa, have identified social commitment in general and ecological activism in particular as essential to developing Buddhist virtues (Kaza and Kraft 2000).

Institutional commitment

The new ecotheologies have helped religious people think the meaning of their faiths in new, ecologically responsible, ways. Yet religions are not defined by theologians and professors. Their public identity is determined most powerfully by their public leadership – by Popes and Bishops and large national and international councils and publicly recognized authorities. There may be many who differ with the recognized leadership, but that dissension can only be what it is because there are leaders to dissent from.

It is one of the great accomplishments of the world's religions that ecological responsibility has not been consigned to a handful of (probably liberal) thinkers. Rather, the world's religious leaders have stated unequivocally that environmental values are now an essential part of the faith.

Consider for example the dramatic 1997 statement by Bartholomew I, leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians from North and South America, Europe, and Asia.

To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin ... to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation ... to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands ... to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances – these are sins.

(Bartholomew 2004: 229–230)

It is not just Bartholomew's authority which is critical here, but the fact that the powerful theological language he uses directly contradicts any presupposition that the environmental crisis is merely a technical problem or a flawed policy. His assertion that it is a sin (and that these sins should also be subject to criminal penalty) puts our relation to nature in the category of religious morality – along with sexuality and how we treat the poor. This is a direct expansion of both religion and environmental concern.

A similar expansion can be found in important statements by Catholic authorities, including Pope John Paul II in particular and various national councils of Catholic Bishops (Hart 2006). In his first year as Pope John Paul declared St. Francis (one of those traditional yet marginalized ecological voices) the patron saint of those concerned with the environment. Over the next two decades a series of statements revealed two central principles: first, that concern with environmental issues was now to take its place alongside more familiar Catholic social justice concerns such as poverty, abortion, capital punishment, and war. It was now essential to Catholic teaching to resist the cultural and political failures which led to the environmental crisis. Second, that crisis is not defined solely in terms of how it affects people.

This discovery of a transcendent presence in creation, must also lead us also to rediscover our *fraternity with the earth*, to which we have been linked since creation (cf. Gen 2:7). This very goal was foreshadowed by the Old Testament in the Hebrew Jubilee, when the earth rested and man gathered what the land spontaneously offered (cf. Lev 25:11–12). If nature is not violated and humiliated, it returns to being the *sister of humanity*.
(John Paul II 2000)

We might note that this is not only a bold and non-human centered environmental declaration; it is also a groundbreaking move for a religious tradition which for many centuries did its best to destroy any religion which honored the earth.

Similar ideas, accompanied by awareness of the consequences of environmental destruction and the need for fundamentally changed values and policies, have been expressed in a series of statements by councils of Catholic Bishops in the Philippines, the Columbia River region of U.S. and Canada, and America's Midwest. These statements do not rest with theological claims or moral imperatives, but include challenges to existing social structures. From the Philippines comes a serious questioning of the human costs of "development." Does all this destruction of rainforest and pollution of water resources really translate into a better life for the ordinary poor Filipino? From the Columbia River watershed comes a clear assertion that all sectors of society bear some responsibility for ecological threats to the area, and that in particular corporations who clear cut or pollute are responsible for changing their ways and cleaning up the messes they have made (Gottlieb 2006a: 85–95; Hart 2004).


While Buddhism has no central authority structure the way Catholicism does, it does have some internationally recognized leaders. Of these probably the most important is the Dalai Lama. He has made many ecologically oriented pronouncements, linking environmental problems to more comprehensive problems of greed and attachment. And he has also proposed that ~~that~~ Tibet be turned into an international ecological refuge and criticized the Chinese government for unecological practices – including the dumping of nuclear wastes – in Tibet. (Kaza 2000)

It might well be asked what difference all this makes. For example: doesn't a good deal of Christian teaching, of whatever variety, stress the importance of humility, peacefulness, and voluntary poverty? Yet if we examine the U.S., an ostensibly Christian country, it is pretty hard to find these values in place. A huge military machine combines with hundreds of millions of guns in the hands of ordinary, "Christian" citizens. The pursuit and exercise of wealth is widely manifest and endlessly celebrated. If Catholic Bishops or the National Council of Churches or the Evangelical Environmental Network call on their parishioners to mend their ecological ways, why should we expect anything real to happen, any more than it does in these other areas?

This is an important point with a good deal of truth in it. No simple religious declaration will solve the environmental crisis. Most religious people, like most other people, spend their time taking care of themselves and their family without much conspicuous dedication to stringent moral demands. On the other hand, however, it is not a small thing that religious authorities, who have the ear of billions of people, and enormous financial and institutional resources and social capital, have embraced a green gospel. The religious presence in the anti-slavery and civil rights movements was momentous, and has been vital in anti-war efforts over the last century as well. If a few really good statements won't solve our environmental problems, they surely will be at least a little – and quite possibly more than a little – help.

Action

Our answer to these questions need not be purely speculative. The true test of religious environmentalism is the way in which religious environmentalists have been involved in environmental activism. This activism can take a wide variety of forms. Indeed on one end public statements, including books, films, and teaching, are themselves a kind of activism. But here I have in mind more focused efforts which can include lobbying governments or even taking part in governments, involvement in ecological restoration or clean up campaigns, public demonstrations and challenges to polluting corporations. Evaluating religious efforts in this context makes abundantly clear the simple fact that throughout the world religious people have joined – in throngs and for religious reasons – the environmental movement. Here is a sampling of cases (Gottlieb 2004, 2006a, b; Palmer 2003; Taylor 2006).

- In northern California the “Redwood Rabbis” engaged in a public struggle to protect one of the areas last remaining stands of Redwood trees. They challenged the logging company’s head, a leader in his own Jewish community, with going against Jewish values. ~~In violating~~ legal orders the group engaged in direct action by planting new Redwood seedlings in the grove.
- In Tanzania fishermen were dissuaded from their ecologically disastrous policy of dynamite fishing by a local sheik who ruled that the practice was un-Islamic. The fishermen had ignored government decrees and scientific cautions, but were convinced by a religious stricture.
- In the U.S. the Methodist Church engaged in a focused campaign to demand that Staples stores stop selling paper the production of which led to Dioxin pollution.
- In India the Sikh religion has committed itself to a *three hundred year* policy of responsible ecological practices. Since the Sikhs fulfill one of their religious commitments  giving free food to the poor – providing tens of millions of meals a day – this means changing their patterns of energy use, packaging, clean up, etc.
- Religious Witness for the Earth, an interfaith activist environmental group centered in New England, engaged in civil disobedience protesting against the Bush administration’s energy policy, demonstrated at the U.N., and held a 125 mile “Climate Walk” publicizing the dangers of and possible responses to global warming.
- In Taiwan the Shu Tzi organization, founded by charismatic nun decades ago and concentrating on charity and relief work in Taiwan and abroad, has included ecological issues in its activities. One year it helped recycle millions of pounds of paper and metal.
- In the U.S. a loose network of nuns, the “Sisters of Earth,” practice and teach organic agriculture, model low impact living, take part in local ecological efforts, save seeds,

and monitor and criticize the ecologically destructive practices of local and national governments and transnational institutions such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

- In a fascinating instance of the intersection of religion, environmentalism, and political life, there is the case of Nambaryn Enkhbayar, the prime minister of Mongolia, who has led a Buddhist oriented attempt to combine economic development with real sustainability, particular in regard to preserving forests, biodiversity, and Mongolia's unique seven foot long river fish (the Taimen). In Embahkar's words:

Buddhism considers the creation of a good balance or, let us put it in a broader sense – of a healthy environment where everyone and everything can enjoy freedom to realize or improve its potential – is the condition for the qualitative development ...
(Embedkyar: nd)

The Mongolian population has responded favorably towards these conservation efforts, a remarkable fact given the country's severe poverty. Religious support for sustainability seems (at least for now) to have made the difference in garnering broad support for ecologically sound, rather than destructive, economic development.

When religions turn green

As I have stressed already, the examples offered here are only a small percentage of what is out there. And indeed the list is growing all the time. If we step back from this large array, and look for trends in what we have observed, some extremely interesting patterns emerge.

First, as religions become attuned to ecological problems and environmental issues they become increasingly open to ecumenical and interfaith efforts of all kinds. A good number of religious environmental organizations and actions have enlisted a variety of religious participants. (Gottlieb 2006a, b) Interfaith Power and Light, for example, a national U.S. group focusing on local responses to climate issues, with more than 20 state chapters, includes Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims among its members. Well publicized statements by important religious figures on global warming have often been signed by leaders of widely different faiths. Religious Witness for the Earth included Jewish, Unitarian, and Episcopalian clergy in its leadership. Even in Israel-Palestine, perhaps the place one would least expect to find interreligious cooperation, Jewish and Muslim leaders have combined forces on common ecological concern, most notably the sadly deteriorated state of the Jordan River.

These cooperative, respectful efforts extend beyond the bounds of familiar, "major" religions. I have already mentioned the new found Catholic respect for indigenous people's ecological knowledge. In a remarkable and hopeful story, southern Zimbabwe was the scene of a highly effective coalition of local Christian congregations and traditional, spirit medium communities. Facing a landscape ravaged by logging and war, they joined together to plant over 8 million trees, change agricultural practices, and create a new sense of the sacredness of the earth and trees (Daneel 2001). These were religious traditions which in the past would have had virtually nothing to say to each other, nothing respectful in any case. On the Christian side, especially, there is a long and painful history of rejection and contempt for faiths outside the orbit of monotheism. Yet as a member of the Christian side of the coalition

put it: “We must be respectful to the Krallheads and Chiefs – or else where will we plant our trees?” (Daneel 2001: 185)

Perhaps even more remarkably, there have been well publicized cases of religious cooperation with science. Given the long history of antagonism between these two cultural forces, this is no small matter. As a matter of course most of the new ecotheological writings include extensive references to scientific accounts of ecological problems from global warming to the presence of endocrine disruptors in the food chain. This is true not just for theologians but for statements by religious leaders as well. Science is no longer the “enemy” of truth, but a source of critically important knowledge which is essential if people are to fulfill their *religious* imperatives: in this case, to preserve God’s creation and to love one’s neighbor (or at least not poison him). This newfound openness goes both ways. In fact, the initial move in a process which led to a widely read “Joint Declaration on the Environment,” which was signed by leading religious figures and leading scientists, was made by those on the scientific side. (Gottlieb 2004) They publicly acknowledged that their own technical expertise was incomplete until it was joined with reflections on moral values and the ultimate meaning of human existence – resources, in short, that would be best obtained from religious leaders. Would not Galileo, imprisoned by the Bishops for offering an astronomy the Bishops didn’t like, or John Scopes, who was put on trial for teaching evolution, not find the public cooperation of science and religion a remarkable turn?

The next quite interesting development in ecological religion is the tendency towards a leftist political orientation. It is perhaps inevitable that any serious environmentalism will come up against the tendency of global corporations and repressive governments to ecological destruction and unsustainable practices. Capitalism in particular has always structured ecological consequences as “externalities” – monetary and human costs that are outside the process of buying and selling commodities and making profits. The very idea that a global market – in which subsistence labor throughout the world is replaced by wage labor, local production is reoriented towards export, and what was heretofore accepted as “the commons” (land, water, even air) gets privatized – will meet human needs has been seriously questioned by environmentalists of all stripes, now including religious ones.

To take one example, consider some powerful statements by the World Council of Churches, an umbrella organization representing some 400 million Protestants. The WCC has been a frequent observer and at times participant in international meetings on climate change and in those contexts it has at times vigorously contested the conventional acceptance of economic globalization. For example, in 2003, in preparation for a meeting with the World Bank, WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser questioned “the allegedly irrefutable logic of the prevailing economic paradigm” (World Council of Churches 2003). Simultaneously representatives of 70 member churches signed a document stating that “nothing less than a fundamental shift in political-economic paradigms is necessary.” The pieties of globalization have been rejected by the WCC, for it sees this sweeping change in the world social order as often leading to widespread poverty, more national debt, environmental distress, and increased polarization between rich and poor. Beyond these powerful generalities, in 2000 the WCC criticized British Petroleum, Shell and Exxon-Mobil as examples of “transnational corporations” which not only bore some responsibility for global warming, but which were trying to persuade the public that global warming was not real (Gottlieb 2006a: 125–126).

Perhaps even more impressively, a key concept of politically oriented environmentalism – the kind that connects environmental concerns to other dimensions of social justice rather than just focusing on conservation of wilderness and wildlife – is not only employed

by religious environmentalists, but was in fact largely *generated* by a particular Christian denomination.

This fascinating history begins with a 1984 struggle in Warren County, North Carolina, that state's most concentrated African-American region (Gottlieb 2006a: 134–138). The state government decided to locate a toxic waste facility there, which already had the largest number in the state. Fed up with the environmental effects of such facilities, and (rightly) surmising that the racial make-up of the area had something to do with the siting decision, the residents of Warren County mounted fierce resistance. The Social Justice committee of the United Church of Christ was an active participant in the protests, with some members of the Church going to jail for civil disobedience (along with a few congressmen as well!). Surmising that racial inequality in the distribution of toxic materials was not limited to one county in one state, the UCC then commissioned and helped prepare a nationwide, county by county study of *Toxic Wastes in the United States* (Commission for Racial Justice 1987). The 1987 study established that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans were more likely to live in an area damaged by toxic wastes than were whites, and that this was true even for middle class non-white communities. Out of this study came the now widely known concept of environmental racism, and the related term “environmental justice,” which refers to what we would like to see replace the former. In 1991 the UCC sponsored a widely attended and publicized national meeting of People of Color Environmental Activists, which produced a document defining Principles of Environmental Justice. Interestingly the first of these principles, which have been disseminated throughout the world and helped define the parameters of fundamentally new way of looking at both environmentalism and social justice, emphasizes the “sacredness of Mother Earth.” (Gottlieb 2004: 729) In other words, this fusion of resistance to oppression, now combined with an awareness of how modern industrial society hurts both people and other forms of life, was initially couched in a spiritual vocabulary, and sponsored by, of all things, a particular Christian denomination.

Finally, it is important to note that the activist involvement and the leftist (or at least *more* to the left) political orientation of religious environmentalists is not limited to what we might call the “usual suspects” of liberal Protestants, social justice oriented Catholics, and Reform Jews. In the U.S. there has been a significant, and generally increasing, presence of Evangelical Christians in the environmental movement. For over a decade now the Evangelical Environmental Network has issued some quite strong statements, signed by leaders of Evangelical seminaries, editors of newspapers, and widely respected ministers, making clear that humans have an obligation to protect God's creation and change their ways. In 2004 Evangelicals initiated the compelling campaign “What Would Jesus Drive?” They began with public events in Detroit, challenging America's auto manufacturers to produce more earth friendly cars, preceded to cavalcade through the south and ended at the nation's largest Christian rock festival. The theme of the campaign was that basic *Christian* values – as familiar and essential as the Golden Rule – required basic *environmental* values. A few years later several Evangelical leaders held a joint press conference with (of all people) some leading lights of Harvard University's science departments, issuing a collective call for immediate and significant national action on global warming. (Gottlieb 2006a 128–30)

On one level, of course, this kind of expansion of social concern, ecumenism, and openness to the secular world is hardly surprising. The environmental crisis is the most equal opportunity of threats. Racism and class domination will afflict some groups more than others, wars can be localized, and human rights have a drastically unequal distribution. Yet while some regions and groups (as we saw in our account of environmental racism) will

suffer more immediately from environmental damage than others, the crisis as a whole affects us all. Global climate change is, well, *global*. The enormous weight of pollutants affects the bloodstreams of the rich as well as the poor. The earth is precious to everyone. If there is anything that can bring human beings closer together, willing (for once) to focus on what unites us rather than what divides us, the environmental crisis might just be it. In the secular realm of international law, there are, after all, some 300 environmental treaties which did not exist thirty years ago. The few examples sketched above indicate that similar changes are happening in the religious world. Perhaps this crisis will also be, as the Chinese say, a great opportunity.

What religion brings to the table

As a human being who values my own health and that of my loved ones, and cares greatly about the fate of the rest of life, I would be truly delighted to see every religious person rush out and become an active member of some environmental organization. Yet religious environmentalism means a good deal more than that. Religions have distinct institutional, cultural, and moral resources which promise to make critical and very particular contributions to environmentalism, contributions which in many cases will be unlikely to come from other sources.

To begin, there is the rather obvious point that religion – if not always or always as strong as it might – is a powerful motivator of behaviour. In an environmental context often plagued by the phenomenon of “everyone knows about it but no one does anything” a religious motivation can push people to act when other considerations – including economic and health motives – do not. As we saw in the example from Tanzania above, people will sometimes heed religious calls when they do not listen to anything else. Other examples range as far as Beijing, where appeals to traditional Taoist values allow Chinese medical authorities to authorize substitutes in remedies that used to call for parts of now endangered animals; and Saudi Arabia, where Islamic teachings are used to justify nature preserves; to the way even as anti-environmental a president as George W. Bush had to pay some attention to the environmental concerns of Evangelicals (Palmer 2003).

As well, there are important resources from what might be called the “culture” of religion: values and practices which are not necessarily limited to faith traditions, but which as a matter of fact are most widely present in them. For example, there are religious practices which stress the need to confront life’s most difficult aspects, including deficiencies in one’s own moral character. These practices are important because, in a sense, the most significant environmental problems are not present on the usual list of climate change, pollution, species loss, etc. Rather the worst threats are the *human* habits of avoidance and denial. It is above all our inability and unwillingness to face the truth that keeps the environmental crisis in play (Gottlieb 2003: Chapter 2). While in some ways religions – with their emphasis on other-worldly and after-death realities – are prime examples of socially passive escapism, there are in fact some powerful religious resources which move in the opposite direction. For example, the Catholic practice of Confession can be trivialized, but if it is not it provides a profound psychological and moral experience in real self-examination and commitment to personal moral improvement. The sincere Catholic really looks at him/herself, and is willing to acknowledge and change *places* where s/he is doing wrong. In Buddhism, similarly, there is traditional training – e.g. meditating in graveyards to cultivate an awareness of the finitude of life – in being able to be emotionally present to distressing realities. This is a capacity of

which anyone who studies environmental issues needs a great deal. Reading about something like the “Great Pacific Ocean Garbage Patch” – a thick soup like collection of plastic refuse that is *larger than the United States* – takes an enormous amount of emotional strength. Otherwise we simply blot out the distressing reality or imagine that surely “somebody else” will take care of it.

Religious culture is also a repository of values which stress that there is more to life than accumulation. A secularized, globalized world (more on this in a little bit) tacitly assumes that the goal of life is money, toys, pleasure and power. Religious values – rest on the Sabbath, the joys of contemplation, quiet enjoyment of family love, focused study of spiritual texts – are more reliable sources of human happiness. If environmentalism is to achieve the truly global level of support it needs, it cannot simply be the political movement whose catchwords are “No”, “Do not,” and “Stop.” It must offer alternative forms of life which provide real pleasure and prospects of human fulfillment. Religious fellowship is – or should be – pretty cheap, and may involve no more consumption than a modest church supper or the cost of some long lasting hymnals.

Ritual

If rituals are not confined to the sphere of religion, they are among religion’s most cultivated specialities. From the Passover Seder to the Hajj, cultures of faith have produced forms of prayer, meditation, celebration, contrition, and mourning that provide a sense that the world of human experience, no less than the physical world, can be ordered.

In the face of the environmental crisis ritual forms are being devised that meet the distinct emotional needs of our situation. These include special prayers which express our awareness of our individual and collective sins and our commitments to change. A new emphasis on celebrations (e.g. the Jewish practice of holding a special service-and-meal for Tu B’shvat, the new year of the trees) connecting humans with nature joins with the creation of specifically new forms. These latter include, for example, weekend workshops in which people try to imaginatively take on the identity of other forms of life, and engage in a Council of All Beings (Macy 1991) in which each of them will address humanity with their pain and hope that people can change their ways.

The new rituals are supported by religious authorities. For example both the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops have produced tens of thousands of copies of congregational resources which include prayers and services for Earth Day and other opportunities to focus attention on ecological issues. Leading Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh, have offered environmental “Gathas” – short meditative verbal formulas to raise awareness of our environmental situation.

If prayer is the opportunity to open our hearts to God, then the environmental crisis engenders prayers that have never been heard before. In Zimbabwe, one of the leaders of the remarkable tree planting coalition I described above, in the course of a “tree-planting Eucharist,” offered the following:

You, tree, I plant you. Provide us with clean air to breathe and all the other benefits which Mwari [God] has commanded. We in turn will take care of you, because in Jesus Christ you are one with us. He has created all things to be united in him. I shall not chop down another tree. Through you, tree, I do penance for all the trees I have felled.

(Daneel 2001: 185)

Sadly, in the new green liturgy we can also find appeals to heaven that indicate the way victims of environmental suffering can come to feel that only God can help them. In Nigeria's Niger Delta province, where oil extraction by global oil companies working in concert with local governments to repress resistance, has devastated the health and culture of the local population, a minister beseeched God in a way that may never have been done before:

We pray to God on this holy morn that no petroleum oil will be discovered in our communities. Indeed, Lord, let the oil underneath our houses and farms drift away from us. Lord, spare us the pains and the misfortunes and diseases that petroleum oil brings to our people and to our farms and rivers. Lord, protect us from further harm in the hands of those who want our properties, Amen.

(in Fields 2003)

What stands in the way?

The information sketched so far describes a dramatic shift in religion's moral values and public identity. Given the public commitment of its recognized, institutional leaders, there can be little doubt that religion's self-understanding now includes the obligation to value, and work to preserve, our planet's web of life.

As positive as these developments are, it is necessary to conclude this essay with a brief sketch of some powerful social forces which stand in the way of everything religious environmentalism stands for.

Perhaps most important is the force which obstructs every form of environmentalism: globalization. By this term I mean the generalized imposition of market relations throughout the world, the drastic erosion of subsistence labor in favour of wage labor and the orientation of production to global exchange rather than local consumption; the rise in scope and power of transnational corporations and globalizing institutions (World Bank, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund) which drastically limit political sovereignty of local communities or even national governments; and the spread of a media dominated culture of spectacle and endless distraction. For globalization the whole world is a collection of resources to be bought, used in production and sold; and every human being is essentially a consumer and a wage worker. The value of both people and things is measured in money (Steger 2001; Stiglitz 2002).

Globalization has been an environmental disaster. Alliances between local and international economic and political elites make the force of globalization often impossible to resist. Local communities are devastated by the mammoth economic projects it favors: huge dams, ruthless oil and mineral extraction, export agriculture. Yet I believe that the struggle against the values and dynamic of globalization appears as the most important political struggle of our time. If its imperatives are not replaced by humane and sustainable ones, all forms of environmentalism are doomed to be at best extremely limited success. For that reason it is at least a little comforting that through the widespread adoption of the concept of ecojustice most religious environmentalists are able to name and, as best they can, resist the forces of globalization. As religious environmentalism continues to develop, this will provide a basis for continued engagement among different religions and between religious environmentalists and a whole host of secular political groups. Such alliances will, if my analysis is correct, be a very strong element in the resistance to globalization.

On the personal level, religious environmentalism, again like all other forms of the movement, finds in an increasingly widespread consumerism a rigid barrier to needed personal and social change. While people have liked “stuff” for a very long time, and conspicuous consumption by the rich is nothing new. Consumerism in the present is quite different from anything we have encountered in the past. First, what we have now is the identification of desired relationships and personal qualities with the acquisition of material objects. Health, sexual attraction, social acceptance, intelligence, love of family – these and other good things are represented and experienced as commodities you can buy. Second, an unending, addictive attraction to the very act of buying has been engendered. It is not the desired object which is the key, but the experience of desire itself. As a result of these two features consuming is not simply a wanted pleasure, a pastime, or a benefit of a little disposable income, it has become a way of life, seemingly *essential* to one’s sense of self. Against this entrenched attachment, this powerful addiction, calls to care about climate, cancer rates caused by pollution, or the vanishing rainforest may stand little chance (Miller 2003; Kaza 2003).

There is hope, however. A life defined by trips to the mall or one-clicks at Amazon.com simply does not make people happy. There is a growing realization of that fact in the West – and one hopes that some spread of this insight will spread to India, China and other developing nations before the human race completely overwhelms the biosphere. As I have argued above, religious environmentalism, often more than other kinds, is particularly fitted to offer an alternative to consumerism. Rather than represent itself as the stern voice of a judgmental divine force, it will be the task of religious environmentalists to remind people that a spiritually oriented life, if it is anything at all, offers more lasting happiness, contentment, and healthy loving human (and non-human) relationships than lives oriented solely to pleasure or status. In order to make this argument, however, religious environmentalists must themselves communicate – in their person and in the programs they support – precisely the values of calm acceptance, compassion for weakness, self-awareness, at least occasional joy and frequent sincere laughter. Only in this way can they really support their claim that a spiritual approach to living on this earth not only bodes well for forests and trout, but for us as well.

A few tough questions

Any large change in a cultural structure as significant as religion, especially when the change involves profound connections to the worlds of science, politics, economics, and health, is bound to raise all sorts of critical, difficult questions. I will conclude this essay by looking at two such questions.

First, there is the seven hundred pound gorilla in the room that people often ignore: the issue of capitalism. Can our environmental woes be significantly mitigated as long as the forces of production are privately owned; the economy is geared to continued growth; and an enormous political power flows from enormous wealth? Can capitalism be environmentally reformed by cap and trade schemes for greenhouse emission or severe fines and jail terms for pollution? Or does the social influence which stems from corporate power require that such power be removed before anything but the most modest reforms occur? Can capitalism accommodate clean production? Can it limit its drive towards endless growth and the inculcation of limitless needs to consume?

On the other hand, non-capitalist economies have often been accompanied by economic stagnation, terrible human rights records, and the creation of political elites which function

all too much like the ruling class of capitalist societies. Further, in much of the world, including and especially the U.S., the very idea of a serious attempt at socialism is simply not on the political landscape (though with the recent bailouts of major corporations, this might change a bit.)

My own answer, which is that something quite different from global capitalism must be created if the web of life on this planet is to be preserved, is not really important here. I am, rather, simply indicating that this is a problem which must eventually be confronted by religious environmentalists. Interestingly, as this issue takes its place on the agenda, religious environmentalists will have to turn not to theology or scripture, but to the history of social movements in general and the left in particular for inspiration and example. This is, to say the least, no small irony.

Finally, in some ways at the opposite end of the spectrum from religion's confrontation with capitalism is its confrontation with the values which govern its own internal functioning. Consider the place of the lay leadership in religious institutions. Virtually every religion has its version of what Jews often call the "big givers"; i.e. wealthy, interested and therefore influential members of the lay religious community who by virtue of their financial contributions end up in positions of leadership. But not just any rich donor can get a leadership position. If a well-known producer of hard-core pornography, no matter what the size of his bankroll was, endeavored to use his money to become a Deacon, a member of the board of Trustees, or a lay leader, chances are pretty good that he would be refused. Such a person, it would be said, is not the kind of leader we want.

But what if the case concerns not the psychic pollution of porn, but the physical pollution of toxic waste? Would a church refuse an important position to a wealthy CEO of a polluting chemical company? Or a lumber company prone to clear cutting? Or the head of a public relations firm that specializes in "greenwashing" dangerous power plants?

This is a particularly thorny problem because all the members of the church in question – no less than myself and virtually everyone quoted in this essay – *also* bears some responsibility for the environmental crisis. We all plug into the same grid, drive our cars, dispose of our old cell phones, and enjoy the cheap food produced by chemicalized, industrial agriculture.

While this problem has not yet really surfaced as yet, I have no doubt it will, probably reasonably soon. As the confrontation with capitalism raises issues of reform and revolution, so this one leads to a struggle between compassion and judgment, self-criticism and the need to draw moral boundaries, loving the sinner while hating the sin and saying, "No, this is simply not acceptable." This is a very old religious problem, and in the context of the environmental crisis it will be enormously interesting to see how the world's vibrant and diverse religious communities try to resolve it.¹

Note

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