

Spirit, Stewardship, Justice, and the Earth: The Power of Religion for the Sake of the Environment

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SUMMARY

Religious communities are becoming vocal and involved in efforts to protect the environment. While the number of religious groups actively engaged in environmental work is still relatively small, growth and interest appear likely to continue growing rapidly in the coming decades. Because of this growth and the size and influence of the religious community collectively, environmental leaders are seeking to develop partnerships with religious groups. The author offers an introduction to three basic religious themes around which religious-environmental work can be organized – spirit, stewardship, and justice in relation to the Earth. Drawing on his experience as leader of GreenFaith, an interfaith environmental coalition, and as an Episcopal priest, he articulates a broadly religious basis for environmental care, and offers an introduction to concepts and language that environmental leaders can use to build relationships with people of diverse religious backgrounds.

KEY WORDS

Religion, environment, spirituality, environmental justice, stewardship, religious environmentalism, GreenFaith

Over the past several years, there has been tremendous growth in religious engagement around the environment, building on work conducted by a small, dedicated number of individuals and groups since the early 1990s and before. During the fall of 2007, for instance, several thousand religious institutions hosted screenings of *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Oscar-winning documentary on global warming, educating hundreds of thousands of individuals about this issue and providing opportunities for response. Several years before, a publicity campaign entitled, "What Would Jesus Drive?" caught the nation's eye, focusing attention on a religious critique of the nation's SUV craze. Increasing numbers of authors have noted the potential power of the religious community on behalf of the environment, citing statistics about the large number and collective power of congregations and religious communities, both domestically and globally. The media has invested significant attention in a recent growth in nascent environmental leadership emerging from the evangelical Christian community, a welcome, interesting development. The growth in religious responses to the environment is palpable. Momentum is clearly building.

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To enable a partnership between religious and environmental communities to reach its potential, environmental leaders must understand what motivates people of diverse religious backgrounds to engage the environment. There are three basic themes around which all religious engagement pertaining to the environment gathers. These themes are spirit, stewardship and justice in relation to the earth. This essay seeks to introduce various religious dimensions of these themes in an effort to support the growth of this partnership.

To describe what these three themes mean from a religious perspective, let me tell you some stories.

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THE PRESENCE OF SPIRIT IN NATURE

An eight year old boy pesters his father to get him a Game Boy, a handheld electronic video game. His father, seeing that all their son's friends have such a device, relents. The boy is instantly hooked and, as if surgically attached, is inseparable from his new gadget. There's no place that's off limits, and arguments ensue about where he can and can't play – not at the dinner table and only after homework is finished. The father regrets the purchase immediately.

Several months later, the father takes his son from New Jersey to southwestern Montana, to visit the boy's grandparents who summer in a trailer outside of Yellowstone Park, in the Madison River Valley. The boy is enthralled by his Game Boy, mashing the buttons in the back seat as they drive to the Newark airport. After takeoff, when the stewardess announces that electronic devices are now permitted, the boy turns on his Game Boy as if it were a life support system. Hours later, after landing, they rent a car and head north from Salt Lake City through high desert country. The boy plays his video game during their entire drive.

Finally they arrive. The boy gets out of the car and stretches. He looks around him at the 10,000 foot mountains that rise on either side of the Madison Valley, jutting up towards the clouds like muscles coming up out of the earth. He cranes his neck and looks up at tall, elegant pine trees, reaching straight up to the sky, one hundred and twenty five feet of green verticality. He's mesmerized by the tremendous river, filled high with snow melt from the mountaintops, surging and crashing through its banks not even 100 yards away. He inhales deeply; the cool, crisp air tickles his lungs and quickens his heart.

For the next week, his Game Boy is forgotten.

When I tell this story while preaching, people smile. They understand. "As a father," I tell them, "as odd as it sounds, to me this is a story about power. There aren't many things powerful enough to

separate an eight year-old from video games for an entire week without any argument.” People nod, and they smile again. They know it’s true. They also know, without needing to be told, that it’s a story that’s not just about children and their video games – it’s a story about adults and the ways we distance ourselves from connecting with the earth. We’ve all had experiences like this, whether in relation to a charismatic landscape halfway around the world or the unique elegance of the curve in a tree limb right down the block. We’ve all, at one time, put down the equivalent of our own Game Boys and let our jaws drop. We’ve all had our breath taken away by the power and splendor of creation.

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The human experience of the depth and sacred dimension of nature is universal, powerful and transformative, full of hope, awe and strength. People from every cultural, religious and socio-economic background have had spiritual or religious experiences in the natural world, and the power of these experiences is considerable. This connection is the first reason the environmental movement is strengthened by a relationship with religious communities.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN NATURE – A UNIVERSAL RELIGIOUS RESOURCE

I have spent half a decade listening to people tell these stories in a range of settings – in their churches and synagogues, in their homes, at conferences, in coffee shops, and elsewhere. These stories are a wellspring of joy. To watch people tell them is, to use a loaded phrase, to see them born again, to see them re-animated and re-enchanted with the possibility of life. For people of widely diverse backgrounds,

these stories stand as reminders of our capacity for depth of feeling and also as sources of genuine gratitude in the midst of a culture frequently numbed, despite its efforts at vibrancy. In the Book of Exodus, Moses tells Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Let my people go.’”¹ Today, the Earth speaks these words to us, stuck unwittingly as we are in the midst of our own cultural traps. These spiritual experiences in nature, in a unique way, have the power to free us to become more truly human.

In addition to the fact that all people have these experiences, I’ve noticed that the words people use to describe them are either implicitly or explicitly religious. Following from this, a second reason that religious involvement in the environmental movement is important is that religious language, symbols and metaphor help people access and assimilate the power of these experiences.

Many people, for instance, describe these experiences and the natural world itself as a gift, implying the existence of a Compassionate Giver whose giving evokes a regenerative gratitude. Others speak of awe and wonder at creation’s raw splendor, speaking with uncharacteristic boldness about being convinced of a Mighty Creator’s existence through their experience of nature. Still others speak of a liberating sense of fear and humility in recognizing that they are small, and they use language that recalls the psalmist’s sense that “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”²

The language of religion, in a broad, non-sectarian sense, can often be a genuine asset as people make sense of their experiences in nature – an asset that I have seen serve valuable purposes with people who range from traditionally observant to contemporary spiritual seekers. The environmental movement can be strengthened by attention to this language of gratitude, awe, humility and love. At their best, religious communities can provide one kind of home base where the broadly religious dimension of our experience of nature can be recognized and affirmed. And where the power of these experiences can be integrated into peoples’ conscious identities.

This is certainly not to imply that religious communities are the only places where we can find language powerful enough to affirm and liberate our love for the earth. Poets, artists and others speak,

¹ Exodus 5:1

² Psalm 111:10

write and create in ways that reflect a deep knowledge of the earth and human moods in relation to it – language and modes of communication that pulse with life of their own. Religion, however, is a place where many people turn to engage and make sense of the most important experiences of their lives. As such, it is an important partner for the environmental movement in its efforts to reconnect people with the earth.

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So far, I have focused on the positive impacts of these experiences on the human soul, and the usefulness of religion to help us integrate the power of these experiences into our lives. There are two other important dimensions here. First, if engaged consciously, these experiences strengthen our bond with the natural world, helping us learn to love the earth. In an effort to assert this sense of relatedness as a basis for the social ethic of sustainability, Thomas Berry has written, “The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”³ In a 2002 interview in the *New York Times*, Professor Daniel Botkin of the University of California, Santa Barbara, said:

We will not attain sustainability until we learn to love both nature and people. To love nature you have to make a deep connection with it. If more Americans felt connected to nature they would feel a bigger stake in policies that cut resource consumption.⁴

The spiritual experiences of millions of people, experiences too often unexplored, are the fertile soil from which this sense of human

³ Berry, Thomas and Tucker, Mary Evelyn. *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*. Sierra Club Books, 2006.

⁴ Dreifus, Claudia. *Managing Planet Earth: A Conversation with Daniel Botkin/ Adjusting Attitudes on Energy to Keep Our Favorite Things*. *New York Times*. August 20, 2002.

relatedness to the earth can arise. Our ability to feel a relationship of care with the earth is a critical requisite for the growth of a sustainable society. Engaging people's spiritual experiences of nature is important, then, for multiple reasons. This engagement promotes human spiritual well-being. It supports a reawakening of a compassionate relationship with creation. These deepened sensibilities then provide the opportunity for an ethos of sustainability to arise, an ethos that is based not only on law and social mores, but also on love.

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There is one other value to the sensibilities these stories evoke. Giving priority to this language of joy, gratitude, awe and humility is not simply a matter of spiritual liberation, a means to strengthen our bonds with the earth, or a foundation for environmental sustainability. For the environmental movement, it is also a matter of narrative survival.

Too often, the environmental movement's narrative lacks hope and a positive vision, and resorts instead to dreary, scoldingly moralistic apocalypticism. Look over the communications material of many major environmental groups, and what you see, what you feel, is catastrophe – actual, impending, or both. The basic narrative of the environmental movement is that there is a disaster in progress, that we must respond radically and immediately, and that perhaps it is too late.

This message – at least the first two thirds of it - is certainly true on a scientifically objective level. There is no question, for instance, that global warming is in the process of wreaking havoc on the web of creation and causing massive preventable suffering and destruction. Let me be clear that I do not mean to suggest otherwise. However, from the perspective of a narrative strategy, clergy know that it is difficult to motivate one's followers solely by sharing bad news. Wise spiritual teachers know that the best way to promote change is to offer hope and vision in addition to sounding the alarm. Environmental

leaders can learn from great religious movements like the abolition movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and others. They can learn that promoting change requires a positive vision, a vision that in this case will connect people to the earth at the level of their deepest humanity.

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This, in many ways, was the *modus operandi* of most early environmental writers. Read Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, David Thoreau or others and you cannot escape a sense of wonder and a rousing wake-up call. The sadness is there, as is the anger and disappointment with our culture's mistreatment of the earth. Before the anger, however, underneath the disappointment and activism, there is an immersion in joy, a baptism in earth-based wonder, and a clear call to action. Too often, today's environmental professionals have forgotten to invoke this heritage and its life-giving sensibility as they communicate. What's left behind is a rigid, frightened litany of horrors and, as a result, people are immobilized by despair. If we want people truly to know how awful our treatment of the earth is, if we want the environmental movement to flourish, we must reconnect people to their love and gratitude for earth first. Everything else can follow; without this connection, we risk creating a future that is as joyless as the present is fearsome.

CONSUMPTION, STEWARDSHIP, AND SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Gary Gardner is director of research at the Worldwatch Institute, a leading environmental think-tank in Washington DC. He tells this story.

Recently, I had a good friend visit me from out of town. We had invited him to stay the night at our home. He eats cereal for breakfast in the morning, which I do not, so before he arrived I went out to the grocery store to buy him a box of cereal.

I walked into the supermarket and then into the aisle where the cereals are displayed. I was stunned when I was faced with the huge array of breakfast cereals – many different brands and sizes. Out of curiosity I began to count, to see how many different types of cereal there were. I counted over 120 different brands and sizes, all on display in that one aisle.

This made me think. In my work, which focuses in part on Third World and global development and the environment, one of the operating assumptions is that a country becomes more developed when its citizens have more choices. The conventional thinking is that the more choices you have, the better off you are. This is obviously true in a number of important ways, but when I stood in that supermarket looking at the shelves of different breakfast cereals, I began to see that there were real limits to the truth of this understanding which links development, choice and consumption.

Then, I began to think about some of the most important choices I've made in my own life – choices about my job, my marriage, my family. I realized that when I chose my job, I didn't have 120 options – I had only a couple – and choosing from between this small number forced me to become clear about who I was and what kind of work I valued most. When I was choosing who to marry, I didn't have 120 options – I had one person that I chose, and committing to that single choice, over the years, has shaped me in deeply important ways. These experiences of limited choice have been some of the most important occasions for spiritual growth in my entire life. I wouldn't be the person I am today if I hadn't wrestled with these choices with very limited options.

THE LIMITS TO CONSUMPTION, THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

This story, like the Game Boy tale, is easily and widely recognizable. It is also a story, like the first one, that has both religious and environmental implications. In addressing one of our culture's shortcomings – a consuming commercialism that degrades soul, society and soil – it invites us to recognize another reason that religion

can be an important partner for the environmental movement. Both religious and environmental leaders believe that human individuals and cultures find well-being and a truly good life, not through the obsessive pursuit of material consumption, but rather through reverence offered to a greater power and through service offered to a wider community. The time has come for religious and environmental leaders to find common language and to develop shared strategies to make it clear that human restraint in relation to the earth is necessary for human survival, flourishing, and genuine happiness.

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In traditional religious spheres, reverence has been divinely focused and the wider community has included vulnerable members of the human community – the poor, the marginalized, the sick and suffering, the imprisoned and the dying. For environmentalists, reverence has often been nature-focused with citizens of the wider community including plant and animal life and earth itself. Now, as religious communities discover the environment as a point of focus, they are increasingly joining environmental leaders to address First World consumption as a moral and environmental issue.

CAPITALISM, RELIGION, AND THE EARTH

Let me offer a basic narrative on First World consumption to illuminate this opportunity. And let me start by acknowledging capitalism's tangible benefits and material blessings. My aim here is not to condemn capitalism, but rather to argue that the manner in which it is currently practiced, the rules it has drawn to govern its own operation, and the single-minded narrowness with which it has too often bound itself to its goals, are environmentally ruinous and must be changed.

Consumer capitalism today holds out the prospect of fulfillment and well-being, a vision of a good life, through ever-increasing material consumption, consumption dependent on the use of natural resources for their manufacture and transport. This, as many have observed, is a quasi-religious system. It offers a vision of how one achieves ultimate well-being (consuming), educational/motivational resources that seek to elicit belief in this system's claims (advertising), the methods for pursuing consumption (cash or credit), and even shrines (shopping malls). What's more, consumer capitalism is an extremely powerful system. Consumer capitalist societies mobilize many of their best minds and extensive human and financial resources on behalf of increasing material consumption. The impact of the corporate sector in developed countries generally rivals or outstrips the power of the society's governmental or civil sectors.

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO CAPITALISM

This narrative is unacceptable from both religious and environmental perspectives. From a religious view, several problems emerge immediately. First, no religion teaches that life's purpose is material consumption and accumulation. Counter to this, religions hold that life's true value, and human beings' deepest fulfillment, can be found in response to the call of God. Every religion demonstrates that deep religious commitment may in fact call followers into counter-cultural stances that place them at odds with the wealthy and powerful on behalf of society's dispossessed, or in support of values not in vogue. This is an obvious reason that consumer capitalism as currently practiced cannot be comfortably reconciled with a religious approach to life.

Secondly, religious leaders have recognized for centuries that capitalism, with its tendency to classify human effort and natural resources as commodities, requires regulation and safeguards to prevent it from spoiling its own nest or mistreating its workers. Capitalism's history, with all its successes, has a dark side; labor and environmental leaders know this better than most. Religious leaders too have recognized that the capitalist urge can become, like any system, a fundamentalist one, rejecting even wise restrictions on its practice. With their long-standing commitment to human rights and

the well-being of the poor, religious leaders have been active in efforts ranging from the local to the global, offering support to those who suffer from capitalism's shortcomings and advocating for a better life for society's most vulnerable communities.

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Many religions also teach that one mark of spiritual maturity, whether on an individual or social level, is demonstrated through wise restraint in relation to the material world. In past centuries, these teachings were often expressed through spiritual practices designed to increase people's spiritual and moral strength. A common religious practice such as fasting, for example, has traditionally been intended to teach that humanity "does not live by bread alone," to serve as a reminder of our creatureliness and as an aid to a genuine humility. Or consider the Jewish custom of Sabbath observance, which sets aside a day each week during which people and animals are to abstain from work and to participate in the celebration, recognition and worship of God. These customs and others have served through the centuries as a religious reminder that our attachment to the material world is to be animated by and structured in response to our relationship with God. These kinds of spiritual practices, found in all religions around the world, are intended to free the human soul from false attachments – to set it truly free.

While these spiritual practices have traditionally served as aids to human spiritual growth, they can often be re-interpreted, given a new layer of meaning, in relation to the environment. For instance, fasting could be understood both as a discipline that strengthens the bond between God and the soul and as a practice that raises our awareness and gratitude for earth's sustenance of human life. Sabbath observance could be understood in similar ways, both as a practice

that strengthens the human-divine relationship and that ritualizes, through abstinence from work and excessive consumption, a weekly gesture of respect for the earth. These practices can support increased social awareness and solidarity around issues of environmental care. In addition to influencing individual behavior, they could also shape the social consciences of people from religious traditions around the globe. In drawing new meaning out of ancient practices, religious leaders can remind us that the relationship between human beings and the material world is not simply an issue of consumer choice but rather an arena of moral and spiritual significance.

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THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRITIQUE AND A “STEWARDSHIP” ALLIANCE

From an environmental perspective, the problems of capitalism are well-recognized. Current capitalist economies in the First World cause severe environmental threats, polluting air, water and soil while destroying life and habitat on a massive scale. Emerging consumer cultures in countries such as India and China will add billions of new consumers to the ranks of their First World peers, multiplying these problems. The scientific community has articulated a widespread consensus that our current relationship with earth’s ecosystems, a relationship increasingly dictated by consumer capitalism, is unsustainable.

In the midst of these problems, the environmental community has had the courage to announce the troubling news that if we want to preserve life and secure a future for human civilization, we will have to respect necessary limits to our use of earth’s resources. While this does not imply that capitalism per se must be replaced (remember the environmental destruction wrought by many communist regimes), it

does clearly mean that the way we practice capitalism must be overhauled.

Religious and environmental leaders working together can comprise one of the most important and powerful coalitions on behalf of changing the shape of capitalism. These two communities have an opportunity for partnership around the religious theme of stewardship, and its ecological counterpart, sustainability. The most famous definition of sustainability, from the United Nations' Brundtland Commission report in 1987, offers a foundation around which this partnership can be built. Defining sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," the Commission sounded a note that continues to resonate in environmental circles. Additionally, it has created opportunities for many business leaders to rally around a commitment to capitalism as a force for both economic growth and environmental healing. For instance, when British Petroleum re-branded itself as "Beyond Petroleum," it catalyzed public imagination about the future importance – environmentally and economically – of renewable energy.

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The word "stewardship" is often used to define a religious engagement with the concept of sustainability. Religious articulations of "stewardship" normally include three themes. First, God, not humanity is the rightful owner of creation. From this perspective we cannot do whatever we want to the earth because it does not belong to us. Second, human beings are responsible for caring for the earth, for stewarding it according to God's interests, not our own. This assertion of human responsibility and power strikes many as dangerously anthropocentric. I would suggest that, like it or not, it is a realistic appraisal of our decisive impact on the planet.

A third aspect of many definitions of stewardship speaks to the issue of accountability and judgment. Religious traditions hold that

we are responsible to God for the manner in which we carry out our stewardship. Poor stewardship of the planet, as increasing numbers of religious leaders are articulating, is morally wrong. This ecological sin has a two-pronged trajectory. It is wrong because it inflicts suffering and destruction on current members of the community of creation, with the greatest impact falling on the most vulnerable communities – human and beyond-human. Ecological sin is also wrong because it inflicts suffering on and diminishes life for future generations. This two-pronged focus is characteristic of an understanding of the moral wrong of environmental destruction shared by people from a wide range of religious backgrounds.

STEWARDSHIP AS A RELIGIOUS-ENVIRONMENTAL VALUE

If a first pillar of a religious-environmental partnership revolves around themes of spirituality, a second pillar revolves around themes of sustainability and stewardship. Religious and environmental leaders have a significant opportunity to provide leadership in a growing global conversation about constructing a realistic and ecologically considerate concept of a good life. These conversations must also address the issues of human consumption and our relationship with the earth.

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Clearly, billions of people in the developing world must consume more to have a decent life.⁵ Equally as clearly, developed countries must dramatically reduce the size of their collective ecological footprint. Environmental leaders have been at the forefront of the latter conversation for decades; religious leaders have offered leadership in relation to the former for millennia. Together, the religious and environmental communities have an opportunity to offer a life-saving vision about what a good life looks like from the

⁵ In a speech at the Wharton Economic Summit on February 1, 2006, Dr. Jeremy Siegel explained “It is estimated that 86.6% of the global population resides in developing nations but only 44% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).” <http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/0506/gazo5.html>.

perspective of the human race and the entire planet – a vision organized around themes of environmental sustainability and stewardship.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: A NATURAL CONNECTION

Ana Baptista is a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University in New Jersey. She grew up in Newark, New Jersey's Ironbound section, a predominantly immigrant working-class neighborhood that suffers from a range of environmental health threats.

Growing up in the Ironbound neighborhood in Newark, I experienced firsthand the impacts of environmental injustice. Although I felt a great sense of pride for my hardworking, diverse community I could never shake a sense of resentment about the degraded conditions we lived in – the abandoned dump sites, foul odors, lack of green space. When we'd take school trips to the suburbs, I was shocked at how pristine everything looked and thought to myself – are my classmates and I not worthy of this as well? At the time I didn't know these issues were central to environmental justice; I just wanted to be part of something that could improve conditions in my community. I was heavily involved in the leadership of my local Catholic Youth Group where environmental issues were not considered much by city kids. The environment was some foreign hippy issue – but in the context of social justice, service and compassion, I found I could rally my friends into action through clean ups and other local activities.

As a teenager I joined my first protests of hazardous waste incinerators and I haven't stopped since. I started my academic career dedicated to traditional studies in ecology, which later evolved into an interest in public policy and urban studies. The problems I experienced in Ironbound, I realized, were not just the product of isolated issues in our community or mere physical problems related to local industries but were the result of economic, social and political problems facing communities like Ironbound throughout the world.

My journey has brought me full circle. I am completing my doctorate at Rutgers University's School of Planning and Policy focused on environmental justice policy development and working part time as an environmental justice coordinator for the same organization that first invited me to join the incinerator protests as a teenager – Ironbound Community Corp. I still try to channel those youthful feelings of anger

into activism based on compassion for members of my community and a deep sense of justice.

While all people suffer from environmental degradation, research has demonstrated conclusively that communities of color and poor communities suffer a disproportionate burden, a pattern that is known as “environmental racism” or “environmental injustice.” A 1987 report by the United Church of Christ’s Commission on Racial Justice was one early study which confirmed this ugly reality, demonstrating that there was a strong, positive correlation between the ethnicity of a community and its poverty level (in that order), and the toxicity of its environment. Two decades later, in February of 2007, the United Church of Christ’s Justice and Witness Ministries published *Toxic Wastes and Race at 20 – 1987-2007*, a follow-up research report which concluded that there had been no meaningful changes in these trends.

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It is widely recognized that pollution degrades the natural world. As Ana’s story and the research identifies, pollution also degrades the human environment, and raises issues of social justice. This is a third reason that the environmental movement can benefit from an alliance with the religious community. For millennia, all of the world’s great religious traditions have had a commitment to social justice embedded deeply within their sacred texts, traditions, and communal practices. For equal lengths of time, these traditions have demonstrated repeatedly that they can mobilize significant numbers of their followers behind efforts to create a just society.

SOCIAL JUSTICE – A POWERFUL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Understanding the environment as an issue of social justice would provide a morally legitimate and familiar framework in relation to an

unfamiliar area of concern for millions of religious people. However, the points of connection between traditional issues of social justice and the environment are either not clearly understood or prioritized either by religious or environmental leaders. For the most part, religious institutions have not addressed environmental racism despite considerable investments in a wide range of other issues of social justice. And while the environmental movement has made important contributions in relation to the urban environment and environmental health, most major environmental leaders do not invest heavily in publicizing or addressing the link between pollution, race, and poverty.

This creates a problem for the environmental movement in relation to engaging broad religious support. On one hand, a large U.S. religious community, generally speaking, does not understand environmental degradation as a moral wrong, an injustice, though it simultaneously invests substantial resources in the pursuit of a just society. On the other hand, the environmental community often fails to highlight the ways in which environmental degradation creates and exacerbates social injustice. As a result, tragically, a tremendous opportunity lies unaddressed.

OUT OF MIND MEANS OUT OF SIGHT – WHY THE MINDSET MATTERS

I have spoken with hundreds of people from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds, comparing the conceptual frameworks they use to understand the issue of poverty with their understanding of the environment. Members of religious communities almost uniformly understand poverty as a moral issue, an issue of social justice. Theological and moral language regarding poverty is widely understood in diverse religious communities, as is religious action in response. While people also understand poverty as an issue with political and economic dimensions, the moral framework is most powerful.

One could certainly summon evidence to argue that this moral framework, while widespread, has not translated into strong U.S. anti-poverty policies. That, however, is not my point. Poverty is inextricably linked in the minds of millions of people with a condition

that is morally wrong and unjust. This mental framework legitimizes and supports an extensive religious response.

Religious institutions undertake a range of anti-poverty initiatives, understanding these initiatives to be an expression of their core mission. These responses include job training programs, education and tutoring efforts, affordable housing initiatives, drug and alcohol treatment programs, homeless sheltering, advocacy and legal action, living wage campaigns, and other social programs. These programs create a self-reinforcing, virtuous cycle of religious engagement in the fight to eliminate poverty. By bringing religious people into personal contact with the effects of poverty on communities and individuals, these initiatives result in concrete acts of service and advocacy, and connect people of faith with the suffering and pain poverty causes. By volunteering in a shelter or a soup kitchen, thousands of people of diverse faiths have been reminded of their connection to their fellow human beings and their moral responsibility to help.

While religious responses have obviously not been society's only responses to these critical issues, religion's response has been substantial and has made a significant difference. For example, religious leadership played a decisively important role during the Civil Rights era. Without religious support the development of low-income housing would have proceeded at a much slower pace. Religious efforts to address poverty are ubiquitous and diverse, and grow out of the religious community's understanding of poverty as a moral issue.

In comparison, my experience is that within religious institutions, people's mental frameworks for understanding the environment differ significantly. For most people, the environment is primarily a political issue, and secondarily an economic issue. Rarely do people articulate an understanding of the environment as a moral issue, an issue of justice, until prompted to do so. The sole widespread exception, in my experience, is that many people feel a sense of moral guilt if they do not recycle. This absence of a theological framework depicting environmental issues as moral issues, issues of justice, lies behind the relative lack of religious engagement of the environmental movement. If an issue is not understood as an issue of justice, religious institutions have much less reason to invest their time or energy. For a majority of religious leaders, the link between environmental degradation and social justice is invisible. Without awareness of this

relationship, they lack the eyes to see our society's widespread environmental injustices.

Further, while many people of faith may have visited places of natural beauty, many fewer have visited sites of environmental devastation and injustice. As a result, very few religious leaders have had the kind of "conversion experience" that would empower them to become passionate advocates for a clean, healthy environment for all people.

If an issue is not understood as an issue of justice, religious institutions have much less reason to invest their time or energy. For a majority of religious leaders, the link between environmental degradation and social justice is invisible. Without awareness of this relationship, they lack the eyes to see our society's widespread environmental injustices.

I have organized a number of "Environmental Health and Justice Tours" of blighted urban areas, taking ordained leaders, congregants and community members to toxic dumps, to Superfund sites, to polluted urban rivers, to incinerators and industrial sites often in the midst of crowded communities of color. For most people, even those living in these overburdened communities, this is the first time they have seen these sites with an eye to their social-environmental implications. When people hear stories of environmental injustice, when they see communities afflicted by asthma and riddled with toxic dump sites, they are genuinely moved – just as people are moved around issues of poverty when they volunteer in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Unfortunately, the number of religious leaders who have had such an exposure is statistically insignificant. There is, at present, little experiential basis and few opportunities for religious leaders to develop an understanding of and a commitment to the fight against environmental justice.

Imagine a different scenario. Imagine a world in which all ordained religious leaders take part in an Environmental Health and Justice Tour as part of their seminary training, supported by major environmental groups interested in educating these leaders about

environmental racism and injustice. Imagine if even half of all houses of worship took part in initiatives designed to create a safe, healthy environment for society's most vulnerable communities – initiatives ranging from urban tree planting to job training for brownfields redevelopment, from clean air advocacy to litigation aimed at cleaning up toxic dumps, from community organizing for increased urban parks to advocacy and education to eliminate lead poisoning as a health threat for urban children. As described above, religious groups have developed a wide range of responses to poverty. There is no reason that they cannot develop a similarly wide range of responses to environmental injustice.

In the end, protecting and preserving life, particularly the life within vulnerable, marginalized communities, is a fundamental religious commitment. Environmental protection is about protecting life; environmental justice is about protecting life in vulnerable human communities. To partner effectively with religious communities, the environmental movement will need to place a greater priority on environmental racism and injustice. Without such a focus, powerful religious energies on behalf of the environment will remain latent.

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ENGAGING US ALL IN THE PROCESS

In 2002, I left my work as a parish priest and began work as a religious-environmental activist. One of the first things I did, thanks to the encouragement of my board of directors, was attend the United Nations' Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It was a powerful experience. I joined nearly 10,000 people who gathered from all over the planet for discussions and negotiations about two of the most pressing issues facing the human family. The first issue: how to create economic growth to lift the world's poorest 2 billion people, who survive on less than \$2 a day, out of crushing poverty into a better and more fulfilling life. The second issue: how to create this growth while protecting and restoring the earth, which supports all life. Day

after day, I saw passionate, intelligent, committed leaders leaning into these daunting issues, exploring their massive ramifications and potential solutions. The enormity of what was at stake became increasingly clear. After several days I began to feel that I was watching the future of human civilization being debated and negotiated.

Each day of the Summit, there was a different topic that was the focus of discussions. One day, for instance, the topic was water, another day energy, and so on. Every morning, to orient those attending, there was a roundtable discussion of experts on the day's topic. Their discussion was broadcast onto large video screens, so that everyone attending could listen in and develop some shared language.

These roundtable conversations were compelling and the diversity of people seated at these experts' roundtables truly wonderful. There were people from all possible locations throughout Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, small island states and the rest of the globe. To enhance the diversity further, there were people from every imaginable interest group including members of the business community, medical community, labor movement, women's groups, indigenous people's groups, and many more. The range of people and perspectives was genuinely encouraging and inspirational. These conversations seemed like a sign of hope, demonstrating that so many strong minds were committed to addressing these critical social and environmental issues.

Several days into the conference, one of the experts took the microphone and suggested that for a moment we all pause to recognize that every person who had a stake in the outcome of these negotiations and discussions had, in some representative way, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. Thirty or forty years ago, he said, that would not have been true – the voices of women, for example, would not have been so well represented. Thousands of people throughout the assembly hall nodded in agreement. He was recognizing something self-evident and good.

At that moment, the youth representative of the day, a young African woman of sixteen or seventeen, took the microphone and addressed the group. She said that in fact, those people who had the greatest stake in the outcome of these conversations had no seat at the table and no voice in the conversations whatsoever.

That was, she continued, because they were not yet alive.

I sat there, having served as a parish priest for a decade, and realized what I'd already known, but in a deeper way. From a religious perspective, we all live on an earth that is the gift of the boundless generosity of the Creator, a gift we did nothing to create, a gift that was in many ways beautifully formed before our species even came into existence. Our job is to take care of that gift for the wellbeing of all life, present and future.

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A partnership between environmental and religious leaders is an indispensable part of fulfilling that responsibility. The three themes described in this essay – spirit, stewardship, and justice in relation to the Earth – offer a reliable map of the terrain that must be engaged for this partnership to reach its potential. Religion offers a tremendous potential asset to the environmental movement, and the environmental crisis offers religion a chance to make a new, deeply significant contribution to the life of the planet. May leaders in both communities seize the opportunity to unite for a common cause.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Reverend Fletcher Harper, an Episcopal priest, is Executive Director of GreenFaith, an interfaith environmental coalition based in New Jersey. An award-winning spiritual writer and nationally-recognized preacher on the environment, Harper preaches, teaches and speaks weekly at houses of worship from a wide range of denominations in New Jersey and beyond about the moral, spiritual basis for environmental stewardship and justice. A graduate of

Princeton University and Union Theological Seminary, Harper served as a parish priest for ten years and in leadership positions in the Episcopal Church prior to joining GreenFaith. GreenFaith was founded in 1992 as New Jersey's interfaith coalition for the environment. GreenFaith inspires, educates and mobilizes people of diverse spiritual backgrounds to deepen their relationship with nature and to take action for the earth.

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