Religion and the quest for a sustainable world
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RELIGION AND THE QUEST FOR A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

by Gary Gardner

As the U.S. debate over drilling for oil in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) gathered steam in early 2002, an unusual ad appeared on television. Over magnificent shots of seacoasts, forests, and mountains, the narrator intones a Jewish prayer in which God is saying, "This is a beautiful world I have given you. Take care of it; do not ruin it." The ad then argues against drilling in ANWR and proposes that the United States' energy needs be met through conservation, higher fuel efficiency standards, and greater use of solar and wind power. Perhaps the most arresting statement is the last one: "Brought to you by the Sierra Club and the National Council of Churches."

The teaming of a prominent U.S. environmental organization and a coalition of mainstream Christian churches is especially surprising because environmentalists and people of faith have had limited connection since the start of the modern environmental movement. Nevertheless, such alignments may represent an emerging trend. Spiritual traditions—from large, centralized religions to local tribal spiritual authorities—are beginning to devote energy to what some see as the defining challenge of our age: the need to build just and environmentally healthy societies.

In this endeavor, religious institutions and leaders can bring at least five strong assets to the effort to build a sustainable world: the capacity to shape cosmologies (worldviews), moral authority, a large base of adherents, significant material resources, and community-building capability. Many political movements would welcome any of these five assets. To be endowed with most or all of them, as many religions are, is to hold considerable political power.

Looking at the first of these assets, we see that religious cosmologies regarding the natural environment are diverse, and the broad range of teachings might suggest that some religions are naturally "greener" than others. But the reality is more complex. Nearly all religions can be commended and criticized for one aspect or another of their posture toward the environment. A religion's environmental credentials may depend on whether its teaching, its practice, or its potential for "greening" itself is being assessed. And scholars see great potential for developing environmental ethics even within traditions that have lacked them.

Growing out of religion's capacity to shape worldview is the capacity to inspire and wield moral authority. Asked in 1935 if the pope might prove to be an ally of the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin is said to have replied scornfully, "The pope? How many divisions has he got?" But papal influence exercised through the Solidarity protest movement in Poland in the early 1980s was an important factor in the eventual unraveling of communist rule in Eastern Europe. Similarly, the Dalai Lama, even though he has lived in exile since 1959, strongly affects Chinese government policy toward Tibet. Charisma and moral suasion are not the exclusive reserve of religious leaders, of course, but religious leaders have extensive experience in these matters.

Turning to the more worldly assets, a third source of power for religions is the sheer number of followers they claim. Although only estimates are available, it seems that over 80 percent of people on the planet belong to one of the world's 10,000 or so religions, with 150 or so of these

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having at least a million followers each. Adherents of the three largest—Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—account for about two-thirds of the global population today. Another 20 percent of the world subscribes to the remaining faith traditions. About 15 percent of people are nonreligious.

Degrees of adherence among the billions of religious people vary greatly, of course, as does the readiness of adherents to translate their faith into political action or lifestyle choices. And many believers within the same religion or denomination may interpret their faith in conflicting ways, leading them to act at cross purposes. But the raw numbers are so impressive that mobilizing even a fraction of adherents to the cause of building a just and environmentally healthy society could advance the sustainability agenda dramatically.

Influence stemming from having a large number of followers is further enhanced by the geographic concentration of many religions, which increases their ability to make mass appeals and to coordinate action. In 120 countries, for example, Christians comprise the majority of the population. Muslims are the majority in forty-five countries, and Buddhists dominate in nine. When most people in a society have similar worldviews, leaders can make mass appeals using a single, values-laden language.

The fourth asset many religions can bring to the effort is substantial physical and financial resources. Real estate holdings alone are impressive. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), a non-governmental organization based in the United Kingdom, estimates that religions own up to 7 percent of the habitable area of the world. And buildings abound: Pakistan has one mosque for every thirty households; the United States has one house of worship for every 900 residents. In addition, clinics, schools, orphanages, and other religiously run social institutions give religious organizations a network of opportunities to shape development efforts.

While headlines regularly expose the less than ethical use of religious wealth, some exemplary cases illustrate the impact that religious institutions could have in helping to nudge the world toward sustainability. In the United States, the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), representing 275 Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish institutional investors, has been a leader for more than three decades in shaping corporate operating policies through the use of social policy shareholder resolutions. More than half of all socially oriented shareholder resolutions filed in the United States in the past three years were filed or co-filed by religious groups; on more than a third of them, religious groups were the primary filers. This role has caught the attention of secular activists on corporate responsibility. "One of the first things we do when we run a campaign is make sure that the ICCR is on board," says Tracey Rembert of the Shareholder Action Network, which advocates ethical investing and shareholder action.

Finally, religion has a particular capacity to generate social capital: the bonds of trust, communication, cooperation, and information dissemination that create strong communities. Development economists began to recognize in the 1970s and 1980s that economic development is fueled not just by stocks of land, labor, and financial capital but also by education (human capital) and healthy ecosystems (ecological capital). By the 1990s many theorists added social capital (community building) to the list because of its importance as a lubricant and glue in many communities: it greases the wheels of communication and interaction, which in turn strengthens the bonds that community members have with one another.

Data from the United States support the interpretation of religion as community builder. Analyzing survey data, sociologist Andrew Greeley showed that religious institutions or persons, which are responsible for 34 percent of all volunteerism in the United States, generated volunteers not just for religious work but for other society-building efforts as well. About a third of the educational, political, youth, and human services voluntarism, about a quarter of the health-related voluntarism, and about a fifth of the employment-related volunteer work was undertaken by people motivated by their faith. The willingness to work for societal betterment, not just for the particular interests of a religious group, holds potential for the movement to build a sustainable world, especially because the environment is an issue of common concern for the planet and for future generations that transcends religious and national differences.

As deforestation, climate change, water shortages, extensive poverty, and other global ills have assumed greater prominence in the public mind, and as the religious and environmental communities increasingly appreciate their common interest in combating these problems, the two communities have begun to work together on the agenda of sustainable development. And the pace of meetings and collaborations among religious and environ-

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mental groups has increased markedly since the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) sponsored an interreligious meeting in Assisi, Italy, in 1986 that brought together representatives of five of the world's major religions. That germinal meeting was followed by other major conferences and important initiatives, both between the two communities and among religious traditions. Some of the initiatives have blossomed into networks: for example, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment in the United States and the Alliance for Religions and Conservation in the United Kingdom bring together diverse faith groups to plan strategies for raising awareness and taking action on environmental issues. The increased activity and commitment represented by the initiatives suggests that environmentalism is not just a passing fad for religious groups.

One development of particular note was a ten-part conference series on world religions and ecology held at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions from 1996 to 1998. The series brought together the most diverse spectrum of individuals and institutions ever convened on the topic, with more than 800 scholars and environmental activists from major religious traditions and from six continents participating. The conferences are noteworthy not only for the scholarship they produced—nine volumes on environmentalism from the perspective of major religious traditions, with another forthcoming—but also for their extensive engagement of people from outside of religion and religious studies. Scientists, ethicists, educators, and public policymakers all took an active part. Perhaps most significant for the religion/environment dialogue, the Forum on Religion and Ecology (the follow-on organization to the conferences) is housed at Harvard's Center for the Environment so that scholars of religious traditions can be in continuing contact with environmental scientists and policymakers.

But despite these many laudable advances, serious obstacles remain to more extensive religious/environmental collaboration. They fall into two major categories: mutual misperceptions and differences in worldview that produce opposing positions on sensitive issues.

Today's misperceptions of religion by environmentalists, and of the environmental movement by people of faith, are manifestations of the centuries-long growing chasm between science and spirituality. A landmark 1967 essay by historian Lynn White may have helped widen the breach, at least between groups in the United States. White argued that the Judeo-Christian mandate to subdue the Earth and to be fruitful and multiply set the philosophical foundation for environmentally destructive industrial development in the Christian West. The claim is controversial and has been strongly critiqued by many religious scholars, not least because White's argument is founded on just a few lines of scripture. Still, many critics of White acknowledge that parts of the Bible may have helped create a functional and implemental view of nature among Jews and Christians.

Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope takes the critique of White in a different direction, arguing that an entire generation of environmentalists was soured on religion by their skewed reading of White's essay. He notes that environmentalists have widely ignored the fact that, whatever the merits of the critique, White also asserted that religion would need to be part of the solution to the growing environmental crisis. The incomplete reading of White's essay, Pope argues, gave many environmentalists the belief that religion is the problem and led many environmental groups to shun religious communities in their work. He sees this as a great mistake.

At the same time, some negative perceptions of religion aren't entirely unfounded, and these pose special challenges to religious institutions and people of faith. To the extent that religion acts as a conservative social force, it may correctly be perceived as an obstacle to sustainability, since a sustainable world won't be built without major changes to the world's economies. Where religions neglect their prophetic potential and their calling to be critics of immoral social and environmental realities, they are likely to be distrusted by those working to change those trends. Indeed, some would argue that religions and religious people today too seldom wear the mantle of the prophet in the sense of being a critic of the established order. Franciscan writer and author Richard Rohr asks, "Why is it that church people by and large mirror the larger population on almost all counts? . . . On the whole, we tend to be just as protective of power, prestige, and possessions as everyone else."

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But Rohr doesn't despair. He sees a long tradition of reform of religion that allows it to get back to its roots—and to the power and influence found there. Paradoxically, that charismatic power emerges from an embrace of powerlessness, vulnerability, and spiritual freedom (liberation from undue attachment to the material world) that are found at the core of the great religions.

Beyond the differences in perception lie tensions that emerge from differing worldviews. Consider the issue of the status of women. Advocates of sustainability often view women as being denied equality and even oppressed by some religions, while some religions see the question of gender equality as a nonissue, given their view that family and societal roles played by men and women are naturally different. Because of the central role of women in combating malnutrition, reducing infectious disease, promoting education, and stabilizing populations, the perception that religion contributes to the marginalization of half of humanity is a serious obstacle for collaboration on development issues. On the other hand, the fact that women are more involved than men in nearly all religions offers hope that their voices will one day carry equal weight with those of men.

Similarly, divergent views of when human personhood begins—at conception, or later—have left many religious people and sustainability advocates at odds over abortion, an especially sensitive issue. Representatives of the Vatican and of Muslim countries, for example, battled with proponents of reproductive rights over language to be included in the final declaration from the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, in 1994—a battle that left each side more wary than ever about prospects for future dialogue, much less cooperation. As long as the two communities hold their current positions, cooperation is unlikely on those issues.

The profound issue of what constitutes truth is another difference in worldview that can separate the two communities. Some religious positions are based on a belief that the universe contains a set of objective truths—things that are true in all places, at all times—such as that God exists, or that all sentient beings have a right to live. For many people of faith, objective truth is not negotiable. When the two communities are separated by an issue that religious people see as containing an objective truth, compromise would seem to be impossible. On such issues, the two sides may simply need to agree to disagree, respecting each other's views while putting disagreements aside and working together on areas of agreement.

In addition, different perspectives on the place of humanity in the natural order can also separate the two communities and create divisions within them. Some deep ecologists, for example, see humans as one of many species in the natural world, with no greater or lesser moral value than other species, while more mainstream environmentalists would assign a special place to humanity, even as they demand that humans live in a way that respects the entire natural world. Similar divisions can be found among spiritually inclined people as well, with some spiritual adherents to the Gaia hypothesis—the idea that the planet is a single, interconnected organism, all of which is vital—taking positions similar to those of deep ecologists.

Despite the tremendous challenges, collaboration is possible, even between science-oriented environmentalists and scripturally centered religious traditions. Evangelical Christians in the United States, for example, have formed an Evangelical Environmental Network to promote conservation and environmental stewardship—not only because of scientific arguments for conservation but because they see the natural world as God's creation that must therefore be protected. The group is credited with playing a pivotal role in blocking attempts in the U.S. Congress in 1996 to weaken the Endangered Species Act, calling it the "Noah's Ark of our day" for its role in preserving species, and accusing Congress of "trying to sink it." The credibility of the evangelical group with moderate members of Congress—combined with a $1 million lobbying effort—helped persuade some of those members not to dilute the act.

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Consider also the many statements in recent years by religious leaders on behalf of the environment. The Dalai Lama has made environmen-

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tal protection the theme of numerous major statements since the mid-1980s—including several speeches at the Earth Summit in 1992—and environmental protection is one of the five points of his peace plan for Tibet. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, symbolic leader of the 250-million-member Orthodox Church, has been in the forefront of bringing scientists and religious leaders together to study water-related environmental issues. And Pope John Paul II issued major environmental statements in 1990 and 2001 and a joint statement with Patriarch Bartholomew in June 2002.

Religions have long had a strong interest in restraining consumption, although for reasons very different from the concerns of environmentalists. The ecological argument against excessive consumption—that population growth, ever-greater levels of individual consumption, and one-time use of materials have combined to deplete stocks of raw materials and to degrade ecosystems—is solid, well established, and stands strongly on its own. But religious traditions broaden the discussion by citing the corrosive effect of excessive consumption not only on the environment but on the development of character, both of individuals and of societies. Living simply, many religions teach, frees resources for those in need and frees the human spirit to cultivate relationships with neighbors, with the natural world, and with the world of spirit. Adding these social and spiritual arguments for moderation to the newer ecological one yields a powerful case for simplicity and situates consumption more clearly in a comprehensive understanding of what it means to be a developed person and a developed society.

Despite a history of teachings on the spiritual corruption associated with excessive attachment to wealth or material accumulation and the issuing of occasional statements on the topic, religious leaders and institutions in industrial nations have largely failed to address the consumerist engine that drives industrial economies. There are few concrete initiatives to promote simple living—such as simplicity circles in pockets of the United States and Europe, where neighbors gather to discuss how to achieve simplicity in a high-consumption culture—and most aren't promoted or sponsored by organized religion. The newly installed Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has said that curbing the culture of consumption will be a large focus of his ministry as head of the Anglican Church. But he must be sobered by the experience of Pope John Paul II, who set as a strategic goal of his papacy a dampening of the influence of consumerism in industrial cultures. Despite centuries of experience preaching against the illusion of satisfaction provided by earthly wealth, religion in industrial countries is struggling in its efforts to counter the consumerist tide.

These traditions might find encouragement in the spiritually-rooted ethic of moderate consumption found in the developing country, Sri Lanka. Since 1958, a grassroots development effort there known as Sarvodaya Shramadana has promoted village-based development programs that explicitly integrate material and spiritual development. The movement, whose name roughly means "awakening of all through sharing," motivates villagers to undertake a broad range of development projects—from latrine building to establishment of preschools and cultural centers—within a framework of Buddhist principles. The movement has grown to encompass more than half of the country's 24,000 villages and is now the largest development NGO in Sri Lanka. Its success draws on two major assets that religion brings to development: the motivational power of religious principles and the ability to generate and use "social capital" for development.

A creative example in the United States is the work of the Regeneration Project in California, an initiative of the Episcopal Church. It includes Episcopal Power and Light (EP&L), a ministry that promotes green energy and energy efficiency. EP&L was started in 1996 when Reverend Sally Bingham realized that she might capitalize on the state's deregulation of energy to persuade a bloc of customers—the state's Episcopalians—to choose energy generated from renewable sources, such as wind, geothermal, and biomass. The project also encourages participating parishes to undertake an energy audit of their buildings. The Regeneration Project also includes California Interfaith Power and Light, which does political advocacy to promote renewable energy. In its short life, the Regeneration Project has spread to seven states, and it could have a substantial effect on energy consumption patterns if adopted by religious groups and adherents nationwide.

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There is more that could be done. By reading the "signs of the times" through the lens of their own scriptures, religious traditions might demonstrate the relevance of their teachings for the major issues of our day, even as they help address the tremendous environmental and social needs of this moment in history. Several tools—retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction—are used by some theologians for evaluating scripture and tradition in the light of contemporary circumstances.

Retrieving teachings that have lain dormant but that are especially relevant today has already been discussed. But religions can also reevaluate and reconstruct traditional teachings in light of present realities. A good example of this comes from Africa, where the high rates of HIV infection have pushed some churches and mosques to rethink their teachings on condom use. Increasingly uncomfortable with prohibitions of condom use as they watch masses of people—often their own congregants—lie sick and dying from a disease that prophylactics could largely prevent, many local leaders have questioned religious policies against their use. Muslim communities in several African nations have changed direction on teachings about condoms. And a Catholic bishop in South Africa has called for a reversal of his church's teaching on condom use.

Whether these particular reevaluations and reconstructions should be adopted broadly by various religions is a question to be decided by each tradition. The point here is simply that established religions have centuries of experience reading their central tenets in the light of contemporary realities. Some scholars even suggest replacing the term *religious traditions* with *religious processes*, so consistent is the theme of adaptation in the history of most religions.

The challenge for environmentalists and other advocates of sustainability, meanwhile, may be to build a greater appreciation for the importance of spirituality. All development activities are embedded in a cultural context; if pursued unwisely, they can provoke a cultural backlash. The shah of Iran, in his attempt to "modernize" that country between the 1950s and 1970s, paid too little attention to religious sensibilities in the process and learned firsthand, through the 1979 revolution that dethroned him, how costly this insensitivity can be.

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A good demonstration of the sensitivity needed is found at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which works around the world on issues of reproductive health. In Kenya, where UNFPA seeks to prevent the spread of AIDS by halting the contraction of HIV among sex workers, the agency collaborates with both Catholic parishes and secular health clinics—but in different ways. UNFPA underwrites the provision of condoms at the health clinic. But at the parishes, the agency follows a policy sensitive to Catholic teaching about condom use and funds programs that offer income-generating projects as an alternative to the sex work. In sum, UNFPA identifies common ground for collaboration rather than focusing on areas of difference—a helpful model for traversing the bumpy spots in the relationship between sustainability groups and some religious communities.

In addition to respecting the religious sensibilities of a culture, environmentalists might seek ways to express spirituality in their own programs and communication efforts. Such expressions need not be religious, of course, but might instead focus on creating an emotional/spiritual connection between the public and the natural environment—an indispensable and largely missing link in the effort to generate commitment to sustainability. As the late Harvard biologist and outspoken humanist Stephen Jay Gould suggested, "We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love."

Building on Gould's thought, environmental educator David Orr challenges scientists (including environmentalists) to knead emotion into their work. He notes that most biologists and ecologists "believe that cold rationality, fearless objectivity, and a bit of technology" will get humanity out of its environmental predicament. But those tools have long been used with minimal success. What is missing, Orr unabashedly asserts, is love. "Why is it so hard to talk about love, the most powerful of human emotions, in relation to science, the most powerful and far-reaching of human activities?" He notes that passion and good science, far from being antithetical, are as interdependent as the heart and the brain. Both are needed if we are to fully understand our world and our role in it.

Gary Gardner is director of research for the Worldwatch Institute. This article, with the permission of the Worldwatch Institute, is adapted and abridged from chapter eight, "Engaging Religion in the Quest for a Sustainable World," in State of the World 2003: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society, *published in January 2003 by W. W. Norton and Company.*

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