

**RESURRECTION II: HOPE FOR THE PLANET; LUKE 24:36b-48; 4/26/ 2009;
ORIGIN OF SPECIES, CONCLUSION; THOMAS H. YORTY, WPC**

We are in the third Sunday of Easter. We are talking last week and today about environmentalism and faith. Today, I would like to explore the role of religion in helping to reverse climate change.

What I propose is that religion rather than a detriment to progress – which has been a bad rap for the church ever since Voltaire and the Enlightenment – will play a key role in the renewal of the earth. You could even say, I think, that if there is to be a reversal of climate change it will not happen without religion.

This may sound ironic because we tend to look to science and technology to usher in the new age. But that age will never come unless the religions of the world and the followers of every faith turn their spiritual resources and practices to the environmental crisis.

First, the bad news. According to Yale environmentalists Mary Tucker and John Grim there is the growing conviction in the scientific community that changes humans are making to the planet are comparable to the changes of a major geological era.

We are damaging life on earth and causing species extinction at a rate, 20,000 annually that will bring about the end of our current period, the Cenozoic era.

No such mass extinction has occurred since the dinosaurs disappeared 65 million years ago. Humans devouring resources and destroying eco-systems at unsustainable rates are indisputably the cause.ⁱ

While climate change was considered the province of scientists and policy experts there is no debate today that every man, woman and child is affected.

And here is the good news: because we know that the human heart is not changed by facts alone but by engaging visions and empowering values the environmental crisis *can be* impacted by religion. Abolition, civil rights, and women rights, are examples of societal change and transformation because religious leaders and movements played a key role.

Science and technology alone are not enough, don't have time enough to reverse climate change. Nor will frightening people about the crisis work. But religion that offers a vision of humans as part of the environment to which our destiny is inextricably linked and that reminds us we each have an impact and moral obligation could bring about widespread change.

In fact, theological principles central to the great faiths provide the foundation for such a vision and for making climate change a spiritual and moral priority.

Islam, Judaism and Christianity share the story of God the Creator of the material world. Hinduism and Jainism believe in the recycling of all matter as the holy process of karma that underlies creation.

Buddhism believes in the interdependence of all of life; Confucianism and Taoism hold to the 'way of all the earth' that courses through the planet.ⁱⁱ Native American, Celtic and other tribal religions honor the earth. The wisdom of Greek philosophy is rooted in the earliest nature religions.

But if the bad news is that climate change is destroying the earth and the good news is that religion can be a force for reversing climate change, then why don't we have more religious efforts to protect and preserve the environment?

The short answer is because we are human; the longer answer is because the practice of faith requires discipline, community and ultimately surrender to whatever name a religious community calls the transcendent power it worships.

Religions do lose sight of the principles of their traditions. One illusion of religion is there is only one right practice of a given faith and that God wants and the world would benefit from uniform adherence to that faith. So religious communities fight themselves and one another and fall prey to legalistic obsession. But we also know when religious communities are focused on service and justice they and their wider communities flourish.

One powerful example is the recent case of Tanzanian fishermen who used dynamite to increase their catch of fish but were depleting the fish stocks and destroying the sheltering coral reef in the process.

These fishermen paid no attention to government pamphlets, stringent laws or international pressure. What led them to stop and begin using sustainable fishing practices was the Koran.

Sheiks brought together by the Alliance for Religions and Conservation, the Islamic Foundation for Environmental Science and the World Wildlife Fund issued a statement that dynamiting transgressed Koranic injunctions against wasting God's creation. The practice stopped immediately.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is not a unique case. Iran and Indonesia are leaders in exploring, with the UN, Islamic principles for environmental protection and have strict laws for enforcement.

In the United States churches, synagogues, mosques and temples are going green using sustainable materials and renewable energy; the National Religious Partnership for the Environment wields influence; 'Green Yoga' which explores ways to direct meditation to the environment is increasingly popular; the Green Nuns offer ecological programs across religions boundaries.

Earth Charter is a growing movement of enormous potential, focusing on ecological integrity; social/economic justice; and democracy and peace.^{iv}

Maybe the message is that the environmental crisis is not a Christian or Muslim or Buddhist concern; neither is it an evangelical or liberal cause; nor a red or blue or even a green issue. It is all of these. An interfaith response would generate transforming synergy.

From conservationists of the 19th century to environmental groups today, environmentalists have talked about the sacredness of the earth, the wilderness as a temple, and the way in which encounters with nature help us transcend the limitations of the competitive, grasping ego. This is ultimately a spiritual issue.

A famous historian said 'the 20th century will be remembered not as the end of political conflict or technological innovation but when humans dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as their objective.' This awareness which is the highest expression of spirituality can also include concern for other species and eco-systems.^v

Today's lesson from the Gospel of Luke refers to fear as the predominant Easter emotion. We talked about this two weeks ago.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God. Presumably, a dead god gives us nothing to fear since a dead god, being dead, is incapable of disturbing us or demanding anything of us.

Easter is not unambiguous good news. Easter is not only the news that Jesus is raised from the dead but that Jesus is raised for us. He returns to us, he demands obedience of us, he speaks and commands. No wonder we try to keep Jesus sealed in the tomb of ignorance or lethargy or fear.^{vi}

If Christians are to embrace a theology of sustaining life not just for the human family but for all species and eco-systems then we will need nothing short of the power of the resurrection to do so.

Facing up to the current crisis of the environment is daunting if not depressing; choosing to reverse the behaviors that have led to the current abuses of the earth and the attitudes that prolong and even justify it is not unlike a match between David and Goliath.

But those are precisely the odds religious folk have been known to accept as they have fought the forces of darkness in every age. The only thing I can imagine that allowed our ancestors to live with hope against such odds is that the God who defeated death was on their side.

The great nature writers from Henry David Thoreau and John Muir to Rachel Carson and Wendell Berry use the language of salvation when they describe their experience in nature. They see cathedrals in forests, choirs in wind and storms, and have heard the words of Jesus and the Psalms in the trees.^{vii}

It may be that the one spiritual experience all religions have in common is the transcendent experience of nature.

Darwin, a student for the ministry before his epic voyage not surprisingly used religious language to talk about his new theory. "There is a grandeur in this view of life," he said "with its several powers having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."^{viii}

Baptizing William Evans Emblidge today reminds me that what we are talking about is not theoretical nor is our commitment to him confined to the walls of this sanctuary.

The pledge we made to be the church of Jesus Christ, to be children of God, to be religious people in the best sense of the term continues when we leave here and purchase a new car or paint our house or plant a garden or decide which candidate to vote for or remember or not to take our own grocery bags to the store – in these and hundreds of ways we take steps to preserve or imperil the earth.

Aren't William and his friends from the right whale to the white pine the endless forms most beautiful and wonderful Darwin was talking about? And if they are, isn't it up to us to see that they flourish? Amen.

ⁱ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “Daring to Dream: Religion and the Future of the Earth,” from *God’s Green Earth: Creation, Faith, Crisis: Reflection Magazine*, Spring 2007, 4ff.

ⁱⁱ Tucker and Grim, 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roger Gottlieb, “The Beginnings of a Beautiful Friendship: Religion and Environmentalism,” from *God’s Green Earth: Creation, Faith, Crisis: Reflection Magazine*, Spring 2007, 12ff.

^{iv} Tucker and Grim, 9.

^v Tucker and Grim, 4.

^{vi} William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, April, May, June 2009, 21.

^{vii} Willis Jenkins, “Nature and Grace: Making Environmental Issues Matter for Christian Life,” *God’s Green Earth: Creation, Faith, Crisis*, Spring 2009, 19.

^{viii} Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1964) 488, 489.