

# **Invoking the Spirit; Engaging Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World**

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Thank you, Peter. It is indeed a pleasure to be here today.

Today I would like to make a three part argument. People of faith and advocates of sustainability are natural allies because

- A. The two communities have important common interests.
- B. They bring together complementary strengths.
- C. Religion adds new value to the effort to build a sustainable world.

I will spend most of my time on the last point, and just a little on the first.

A. People of faith and advocates of sustainability have important common interests.

Both communities tend to look at the world from a moral perspective. Their concerns are larger than themselves, and they tend to be concerned about making the world a better place.

For both communities nature has more than merely instrumental value. A forest is not simply so many board feet of lumber, for example. For environmentalists it is an ecosystem and part of a complex web of life. For people of faith it is often viewed as a miraculous creation of God.

Both communities maintain a critical posture toward consumption. They believe—often for different reasons—that societies and lives that are organized around the acquisition and use of goods are fundamentally defective.

B. They bring together complementary strengths.

Environmentalists and other advocates of sustainability tend to have a strong grasp of science and of public policy. This is largely accepted by most. What is less evident are the many strengths that people of faith possess.

Religions carry several key assets that make them an important source of change within individuals and across societies.

*Moral Authority*--The first is moral authority. Recall Josef Stalin's scornful assessment of papal power: "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?" What would Stalin have made of the role of papal influence, exercised through the Solidarity protest movement in Poland in the early 1980s, in the eventual unraveling of Communist rule in Eastern Europe? Or of the Dalai Lama's influence on Chinese government policy toward Tibet, a land he has not seen since 1959? Or of the Ayatollah Khomeini's role in overthrowing the Shah of Iran in 1979? People often disagree with religious leaders, to be sure, but religious leaders often gain a public hearing on a regular basis.

*Large Numbers of Adherents*—Simply put, the vast majority of the world's people—between 80 and 90 percent—are followers of one belief tradition or another. And these people are often concentrated. In 120 countries, for example, Christians form the majority of the population. Muslims are the majority in 45 countries, and Buddhists are in 9. When most people in a society have similar worldviews, leaders can make mass appeals using a single, values-laden language. Pakistan did this in 2001 when the government enlisted Muslim clergy to launch an environmental awareness campaign based on teachings from the Koran.

Religious concentration can also give religions market power. Some faith groups have recently begun to tap this power. Consider the "What would Jesus Drive?" campaign waged by the Evangelical Environmental Network, which sought to persuade Christians that buying a car is a moral act. Or consider the *Interfaith Coffee Program of the Equal Exchange* coffee company. The company sells only "fair trade" coffee, which means that farmers are guaranteed a minimum price for their harvest, no matter what market conditions might dictate. This helps farmers avoid the erratic price swings that characterize many international commodity markets, which gives them greater economic stability. Equal Exchange is also committed to encouraging farmers to grow organic and shade-grown coffee. So their product has strong environmental as well as social justice credentials.

Begun in 1997, the program has grown rapidly: more than 3,500 congregations participated at the end of 2001, just over 1 percent of all houses of worship in the United States. The potential for people of faith to change coffee consumption patterns is huge. Coffee is the second most widely consumed beverage in the United States, and its ethical consumption requires little or no sacrifice. Yet drinking fair-traded coffee yields great personal satisfaction—it's "drinking a cup of justice," in the words of one Lutheran Interfaith Coffee participant. With 99 percent of the institutional religious market untouched, the program would have a major impact on the U.S. coffee market if religious groups nationwide were to climb on board—and if participating congregants were persuaded to take their new habit home.

*Extensive infrastructure*—Another asset is substantial physical and financial resources. Real estate holdings alone are impressive. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), an NGO 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 30 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. A large share of schools are religiously-run, especially in developing countries.

Some congregations are trying to leverage their infrastructure as demonstration sites for green building. One creative example is 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 persuade the state's Episcopal parishes to undertake an energy audit of their physical plant, and to make green upgrades where possible. The program also capitalized on the state's energy deregulation by persuading parishes to choose energy generated from renewable sources, such as wind, geothermal, and biomass.

The EP&L model has spread to other states, and could have a substantial effect on energy consumption patterns if adopted by religious groups and adherents nationwide. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) calculated in 1995 that an energy efficiency upgrade of the country's 269,000 houses of worship—which account for about 5 percent of US commercial building floor space--would prevent 6 million tons of carbon dioxide from being released to the atmosphere, while saving congregations more than \$500 million. But the real benefits would come from enlisting congregant support for similar conservation activities in their homes. The 44 percent of the American public who visit a church, synagogue, or mosque at least monthly constitutes a huge pool of potential converts to energy efficiency and green energy sources, especially if efforts to green the church are accompanied by efforts to raise consciousness among congregants, as in the EP&L program.

### C. Religion adds new value to the effort to build a sustainable world.

Most important—religions add value to the process. Religion adds values, not just votes, to the effort to build a sustainable world. More specifically, it adds three kinds of value:

*Spiritual value*—Religion helps us to look at sustainability issues in fresh and deeper ways. Consider consumption. Environmentalists are concerned about consumption because of the toll it takes on the natural environment. People of faith often agree with this perspective, but are quick to add that excessive attention to material accumulation corrodes the individual spirit and the social fabric, two powerful additional reasons for opposing consumption as a central priority for people and societies.

*Ethical value*—The role religion can play in adding ethical value to the process of societal development is perhaps best appreciated when the ethical voice is silent or marginalized. Arguably, this has been the case since the Enlightenment, when science emerged as a powerful societal driver, and essentially replaced religion as the supplier of answers to many of life's deepest questions. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, science was a dominant societal force, and the ethical voice that might have shaped science to benefit people and the planet was largely sidelined. As a result, the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned out to be the deadliest, most environmentally destructive century in history. It was also likely the century with the greatest inequality in human history.

Let's look at these assertions:

The deadliest century in history. The following chart shows deaths by war over the centuries, back to the year 0, on an absolute and per capita basis. Clearly, the 20<sup>th</sup> century stands out as an exceptionally violent period. Blind faith in science and technology.

The most environmentally destructive century in history. This could be shown in any number of ways, but let's look at species loss. Blind faith in humanity's ability to remake the world in our image.

The greatest inequality in human history. While more wealth was generated in the twentieth century, by far, than in all previous history, it was also distributed highly unequally. The following chart shows the ratio of wealth of the richest 20 percent of the world to the poorest 20 percent, going back to 1820. Blind faith in free markets and their ability to "lift all boats."

*Value in shaping a new worldview*—Perhaps the greatest influence that religion can have on a society is the capacity to shape people's worldviews. A worldview is the fundamental philosophical grounding out of which a person lives his or her life. It is formed by our answers to the deepest questions we face, such as Who am I? Why am I here? What are my obligations to the world around me? Religion helps us to wrestle with those questions.

But religion is not the only influence shaping our answers. Other societal influences shape our philosophical outlook as well. Historian Gary Cross has argued that consumerism—not democracy, or socialism or any other ism—turned out to be the dominant social movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If true, one could argue that our answers to the deepest questions we face run like this:

Who am I—*a consumer*

Why am I here—*to accumulate goods*

What is my relationship to others—*it's largely competitive, to see who has the most stuff*

What is my relationship to the natural world around me—*it is largely a utilitarian relationship.*

How does religion shape our worldviews, and how might it reassert itself in helping to shape our answers? In many ways. Here are just a few:

*Evocative language*—borrowing the Hebrew tradition of the Jubilee—when prisoners were freed and debts forgiven every 50 years—was a powerful metaphor for the Jubilee 2000 initiative to reduce developing country debt in the late 1990s. And a Norwegian bishop's exclamation that in degrading the environment Christians have "crucified Creation" is another example of the powerful use of language that can reshape our thinking in the direction of sustainability.

*Ritual*—Religious ritual has been instrumental in conserving resources in indigenous traditions throughout history and continues to be important today. Consider the Tlingit people of the Pacific Northwest, who use the bark of cedar trees extensively as an economic resource. Before removing bark from a tree, a Tlingit will perform a ritual apology to the spirits that they believe live in the tree, and promise to take only as much as they need. Imagine if I had the same attitude toward resource use--if I promised, every time I turned on a light, grabbed a piece of paper, or drove a car, to use only as much as I truly needed. What a different posture I would bring to the natural world. Can all religions today help us to recover this sense of respect before the natural world?

Some are trying. Consider the "environmentalist monks" of Thailand, who are finding ways to engage Buddhism in the effort to save the country's forested area, which has declined from 75 percent in 1938 to only 15 percent today. In 1991, in the village of Giew Muang, a monk

named Prhaku Pitak helped to breathe life into an ineffective local forest conservation movement. In addition to dubbing the Buddha “the first environmentalist” (because the Buddha’s life was closely integrated with trees and forests) and stressing the interrelatedness of trees, water supply, and food production, thereby capitalizing on the Buddhist teaching of the interdependence of all things, Pitak used religious ritual to emphasize to villagers the importance of forest conservation. Joined by 10 other monks and surrounded by the villagers, Pitak “ordained” the largest tree in the forest, wrapping a saffron robe around it and following most of the rite used in a normal ordination ceremony. The ceremony infused the conservation effort with sacred meaning. In seeing the trees not just as resources but as part of a larger ecological and mystical reality, the villagers were part of the millennia-long chain of generations that have used ritual to help maintain sustainable resource use.

How, in the end, will environmentalists and people of faith come together? Ironically, a partnership of the two communities is most likely to happen if each retreats first to its corner to rediscover its roots, to drink from its own well. Only then can each community partner authentically with the other.

People of faith may need to rediscover their traditions, (their) teachings regarding the natural world, regarding our obligations to one another, regarding the dangers of too great an emphasis on material values. There is power in these original teachings, and the world needs that power today.

Environmentalists, too, would do well to return to their roots and discover the spiritual depth that lives there. John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, often included spiritual language in his reflections on the grandeur of the natural world.

Perched like a fly on this Yosemite dome, I gaze and sketch and bask...humbly prostrate before the vast display of God’s power, and eager to offer self-denial and renunciation with eternal toil to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript.

Such prose reaches people in a different place than the language that emerges from analysis and statistics—the necessary yet limited language of modern environmentalism—and it motivates in a way that science alone cannot.

The goal is to help us all to make an emotional as well as scientific connection to Nature. The great Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould reflected this when he wrote:

“We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional and spiritual bond between ourselves and nature as well, ***for we will not fight to save what we do not love.***”

Love. Who would have thought that we’d end this talk about sustainability, about the need to preserve forests and rivers and people, with that word? But there it is. You, in the faith community, can help us to infuse our scientific worldview with love, love of one another, and love of God’s Creation. Nothing else will suffice. Nothing less will see us through this historic moment.

Thank you.