Bill McKibben

Where Do We Go from Here?

Hava Tirosh-Samuelson speaks for nearly all religious traditions when she writes that for Jewish thinkers, until very recently, "environmentalism has remained a marginal concern." It's not that religions ignored the natural world—indeed, if you edited out every hymn in the Christian hymnal that testifies to God's presence through the thunder, the dew, or the cycle of the seasons, you would be left with a thin book indeed. But for several millennia some of these ancient religions took the natural world for granted, assumed it as a given, the backdrop against which humans and deities worked out their various relationships.

Now, responding to the urgent alarms of scientists, historians of religion and theologians have pored over old texts and traditions, seeking to find in them sources for a new environmental ethics—a repair guide for what suddenly seems our most broken relationship of all, namely, our human relationship to the natural habitat. The splendid work of these historians, presented in a series of Harvard conferences and books on world religions and ecology and exemplified by the essays in this issue of *Dædalus*, has yielded much that is useful. It turns out that buried in plain sight throughout our various traditions are myriad clues and suggestions about how we might live more lightly on the planet. In addition, the conferences and the books are documenting examples of religiously inspired environmental projects in various parts of the world.

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While scholars and environmental activists have joined forces in these conferences, religious leaders and laypersons still need to become more involved. So far, with notable outstanding exceptions—like the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, the Tibetan Buddhist Dalai Lama, and the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Ismar Schorsch—few religious leaders have stepped forward to make these new understandings central parts of their work. Denominations that addressed questions of social justice and civil rights have adopted a lower profile on equally central questions of environmental ethics. They have faithfully adopted, and then faithfully filed away, any number of right-thinking position papers on toxic waste or global warming (which they deplore) and God's creation (which they cherish). But all in all, it's been a pretty damp squib. So perhaps a useful task, in these closing pages, would be to suggest some of the ways these emerging insights from our texts and traditions might be translated into action, soon enough to meet the urgent timetable laid out by Michael McElroy in his introductory essay. We need to build on the work begun by this project to bring together ideas and action.

My general point is simple: the deepest religious insights on the relation between God, nature, and humans may not emerge until religious people, acting on the terms indicated by their traditions, join these movements. The act of engagement will itself spur new thinking, new understanding.

Another way of saying it is this: for many Christians, a profound understanding of the Jewish story of Exodus as an allegory of liberation followed, not preceded, Rosa Parks's decision to stay in the front seat of a Montgomery bus. She sat there out of some intuitive sense of right and wrong, of frustration and hope. But as the churches took up her cause, they searched more deeply through their traditions, and certain verses came to new and real life; certain themes emerged. Notably, many of the insights formulated by the liberation theologies of Latin America, Asia, and Africa could bring important perspectives to the question of religious understanding of the human-Earth relationship—significantly, in regions of the globe where that question is gaining urgency at the fastest rate.

It is undeniable, as Sallie McFague points out in her powerful essay, that our religions help us determine “who we are in the scheme of things and how we should act.” But of course, as her piece makes clear, that emerges not only through proof-texting or sermonizing. It is true, to use the words of Christopher Key Chapple in his essay on the Jain tradition, that in order to be effective, environmental work “must proceed from a story.” But that story, that new understanding of who we are, will in turn emerge through action.

For instance, within fifteen miles of the *Dædalus* offices, several old coal-fired power plants continue to supply Massachusetts with a portion of its electricity. Local environmentalists have worked for years to force the plants to convert to natural gas, citing a series of studies showing the human health effects of coal soot on New Englanders. But if a hundred priests and ministers and imams and rabbis, joined by several hundred laypeople, descended on those plants in protest, what would be the result? It might or might not change the political dynamic (I think it would), but the act itself would certainly force those participating to think more seriously about what their traditions demand. They would have no choice but to begin viewing the facts about global warming, laid out with understated power by Michael McElroy, as the story of human beings grown too large in relation to their planet, a position that almost requires reference to the Book of Job or Psalm 148.

Or say that the campaign against genetic modifications in food, so far ably led by secular environmentalists, suddenly began to draw significant religious participation. Soon these people of faith would begin to discover what parts of our traditions are actually resonant across secular lines (the tree of knowledge? the stewardship of God?), and from those begin to knit together a new story of who we are and how we should act.

The importance of religious participation in these movements cannot be underestimated. For instance, McFague offers a powerful indictment of neoclassical economics as being unable to apprehend the things that make us fully human. That indictment is common enough in environmental circles, but the search

for some alternative has so far faltered. The political Left has not been much help, offering mainly a critique about distribution, but still tied to the idea of "more." Only our religious institutions, among the mainstream organizations of Western, Asian, and indigenous societies, can say with real conviction, and with any chance of an audience, that there is some point to life beyond accumulation. In the past, that vision was expressed purely in spiritual and aesthetic terms; now it has also acquired a deeply practical urgency. Those in monks' habits are joined by scientists in white coats, and they're saying the same few things: Simplicity. Community. Restraint. That confluence carries enormous potential energy.

This is not to say that there's a great chance this new wave of religious involvement will carry the day. At least in the West, many religious *diktats* are ignored, even among the theoretically faithful. (Consider, for instance, the powerful indictments of neoclassical economics, on justice grounds, by the Catholic bishops of North America.) Still, there's a real opportunity here, one not yet fully tried, and one that can't be ignored, given the severity of the crisis. There are few enough leavening agents left in our society, few enough potential goads to the conscience of the wealthy majority. Potential activists within the churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples doubtless fear marginalization if they get too far outside the mainstream, but in fact they are marginalized now, invisible within the smothering consensus of our society. It is only by getting far enough out to risk seeming extreme that they have any real chance of challenging our consumerist complacency.

This radical discontinuity between religions and the secular mainstream—a mainstream that threatens, remember, to raise the temperature of the planet five or ten degrees before the century is out—might prove more important than the divisions between different religious traditions. Reduced to cases, some of the theoretical conflicts disappear: if you have to decide about drilling for six months' worth of oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a stewardship view of the world might well yield the same conclusion as a more radically biocentric vision. At any rate, the gulfs between traditions are probably a second-

order problem, one to be worked out as the various religions get down to actual work in the territories where they prevail.

And as they do so, I have no doubt they will discover new and powerful visions emerging, stronger than even the foundational work done by theologians so far suggests. Donald Swearer's chronicle of the controversy in northern Thailand over plans to build a cable car up Doi Suthep, one of Buddhism's sacred mountains, is heartening in this regard. He quotes from local newspaper accounts of the massive opposition to the project: The authorities had "underestimated the northern people: the soul of northern Thailand is still alive. Although sometimes not being able to explain why rationally, the northern people want to preserve Doi Suthep as it was given them by Creation, as untouched as possible, as sacred." These same religious-environmental impulses are ingrained in billions of human beings, and one role of religious communities is surely to give them permission to come to the surface.

Ecology may rescue religion at least as much as the other way around. By offering a persuasive practical reason to resist the endless obliterating spread of consumerism, it makes of Creation a flag round which to rally. And it is a flag planted not in the past, but in the present and the future. It is the keystone issue for our moment, the one that makes eco-theology urgent.

And it is to this word "urgent" that I want to return. The poor you may always have with you, but the atmosphere you don't—as McElroy makes abundantly clear in his essay. Climate change is a timed test, and so are most of the other environmental crises we face. So we need more conferences and conclaves of religious leaders, scholars, and activists, but we need them to be different from the meetings we've held in the past. We must gather to discuss not only ideas from the past but how those ideas can be put into action. We need to identify, as the essays in this issue of *Dædalus* have done, the remarkable religiously inspired environmental initiatives already happening in many parts of the world. But we need much more as well.

Imagine gatherings where theologians and scholars and activists came together—and did not leave until they had worked out plans for closing down a polluting power plant, opening up

new funding for alternative energy, or any of a hundred other tasks: specific actions, which they would help to carry out in the days and weeks ahead. Dozens of strategies will emerge from such discussions: mindfulness and protest, witness and lament, nonviolence and celebration—new initiatives like Episcopal Power and Light, the church-based nonprofit that markets green energy; new efforts like the Boston-based Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economics (CERES) to speak truth to the powerful in the corporate and political worlds; new declarations from bolder leaders: that sport utility vehicles are morally problematic, that the Kyoto treaty needs moral support. Most of all, new actions. A thousand things, all done in the name of the sacredness of Creation, all designed to make a real, visible, luminous difference.

Hey! Lean to hear my feeble voice
At the center of the sacred hoop
You have said that I should make the tree to bloom
With tears running, O Great Spirit, my Grandfather,
With running eyes I must say
The tree has never bloomed
Here I stand, and the tree is withered.
Again, I recall the great vision you gave me.

It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives.

Nourish it then
That it may leaf
And bloom
And fill with singing birds!

Hear me, that the people may once again
Find the good road
And the shielding tree.

—Black Elk

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