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Ways & Means: Reaching Beyond Ourselves

It's time to recognize our allies in the faith community

by Carl Pope

A year ago in Santa Barbara, at a symposium hosted by Bartholomew I, patriarch of the Orthodox Church, I apologized for the failure of environmental activists to reach out to the religious community. I was not suggesting that environmentalists should necessarily belong to any given denomination, or even to any religious organization at all. But we have ignored to our detriment the power that organized religion can bring to our mission. Witness, for example, the tremendous conviction and enthusiasm with which the National Council of Churches has approached global warming as a moral issue, or the fervor and effectiveness of the Evangelical Environmental Network in speaking out for the Endangered Species Act (see "[The Second Creation Story](#),").

After all, many of the environmental challenges we face today are moral ones. The sin of pride tempts us to imagine that the world exists for our use alone, and Mammon, the god of greed, leads us down the path to environmental destruction. America's impulse to redeem and transform itself—whether in confronting the legacy of slavery, or challenging militarism and nuclear weapons—often begins in church. My personal initiation into the social-change movement happened in the pine pews of Baptist and Methodist churches in the rural South, at a time when churches were among the only major social institutions pressing for civil rights.

Yet for almost 30 years most professional environmentalists stubbornly, almost proudly, denied the need to reach out to the religious community. Many of us have inherited and uncritically accepted the 19th-century idea that religion could be discarded because it had been superseded by science. We failed to realize—as some eminent scientists now tell us—that science and religion offer two distinct approaches to knowledge, and that neither has a monopoly on the truth. We sought to transform society, but ignored the fact that when Americans want to express something wiser and better than they are as individuals, by and large they gather to pray. We acted as if we could save life on Earth without the same institutions through which we save ourselves.

When I began my environmental career in 1970, there were very few works of environmental literature, but those few were very important. (I became an "expert" on air pollution and began lobbying for the 1970 Clean Air Act by reading one book!) A seminal work for my generation of environmental activists was "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" by Lynn White Jr., a historian at the University of California at Los Angeles. White argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition had driven Western civilization to elevate the human and devalue the natural. "We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis," he wrote, "until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."

With that, too many environmentalists considered the case closed. We became as narrow-minded as any religious zealot, and proceeded to glorify creation and smite those who would sin against it on our own, without regard for the faith community.

When I received the invitation to attend the patriarch's symposium, I reread White's essay—and discovered to my chagrin that I and many others had badly misread him.

White does argue that the linear Christian vision of time, starting with Creation and leading up to Judgment Day, led to the rise of Western technology, military dominance, and the Industrial Revolution. Yet while decrying this anthropocentric tradition, he also acknowledges that Christianity is far from monolithic-that it contains strains more ecologically gentle than the subduing and dominating one that became the Western norm.

The Greek Orthodox Church is one of those alternate persuasions, and in Santa Barbara, Patriarch Bartholomew went further than the head of any other faith in his condemnation of environmental destruction. "For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation," Bartholomew said, "to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, stripping the earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands...to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances-these are sins." ("The Greek saint contemplates," White wrote many years ago. "The Western saint acts. The implications of Christianity for the conquest of nature would emerge more easily in the Western atmosphere.")

White found an antidote to anthropocentrism in the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi. "The key to understanding Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility-not merely for the individual but for man as a species," White wrote. "Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures....The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists."

This lesson of open-mindedness and democracy is only part of what environmentalists can learn from religion. Judging by the enthusiasm expressed by my friends and colleagues for this issue, the recognition that we are not the only ones with a commitment to the preservation of Creation is gaining ground. It is by no means new to the Sierra Club, as the frankly spiritual writings of our founder John Muir plainly show. The biblical lesson of the prodigal son is also appropriate: that a family, even if long-separated, can reconcile and celebrate joyfully together.