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The Second Creation

Redefining the bond between religion & ecology

by Trebbe Johnson

After everyone has joined hands in a circle, the Reverend Willie T. Snead offers up a prayer in a voice that thunders with emotion. "We know that there is evil in this world, but the gates of hell shall not open before us. Jesus was resurrected and through Him we can prevail!"

The gates of hell that Reverend Snead has in mind are just down the road from the now sadly misnamed River of Life Christian Fellowship Church in St. Charles Parish, Louisiana: Shell Oil's megalopolis of steaming smokestacks, scaffolding, skeletal towers, and fences posted with signs warning of dangerous chemicals that stream through vast networks of pipes—one of with signs warning of dangerous chemicals that stream through vast networks of pipes. It is one of 27 oil refineries and chemical plants squeezed up against communities along this stretch of the Mississippi River.

Snead, president of the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America, is part of a delegation of nine leaders of African-American and mainline religious denominations on a "toxic tour" organized by the National Council of Churches of Christ to challenge environmental racism in the New Orleans-Baton Rouge corridor known as Cancer Alley. Even the clerics who are all too familiar with the ubiquity of waste facilities and toxic industries in low-income communities of color are deeply affected by what they see.

Accidents involving hazardous materials are more frequent here than anywhere else in the country—on average, one occurs every seven days. The air pollution at night, when the level of toxic emissions is permissibly higher than in the day, is so severe that people have to stay inside with the windows shut. Most families have suffered cancer, respiratory disease, burning eyes, or chronic skin problems. Yet children swing and seesaw directly in front of the refinery on a playground donated by Shell.

Margie Richard is a former schoolteacher and one of the community's most fervent environmental activists. As a child, she played on the 15-acre farm her grandfather leased on the once-fertile bottomland where the plant now sprawls. Ten years ago, after her sister died of sarcoidosis, which destroyed her lungs, and her daughter's lungs collapsed while she was outside playing, Richard was ready to leave for good. But she felt a responsibility to stay and fight for the sake of her grandchildren. "The earth was not placed here to be corrupted," she says. "If there's going to be a change, God needs somebody to take that step by faith. I feel called to do this." She sees the ministers' visit as a gift from God.

Nationally and locally, the environmental and religious communities are re-examining their roots, taking note of shared values and missions, and seeking ways to work together. This activity is gaining momentum, not only in endangered communities on the Mississippi, but among loggers, farmworkers, and fishermen testifying before Catholic bishops in the Northwest; among Jewish scholars debating the ecological meanings of ancient texts; at rallies of evangelical youth; at gatherings of environmental leaders; and in thousands of churches and synagogues. The National Council of Churches has taken a stand on global warming, declaring that the Kyoto Protocol is "an important move toward protecting God's children and God's creation." The Central Conference of American Rabbis has said that preventing desecration of Headwaters Forest is "part of the covenant with the

Creator" and called on Congress to pass the Endangered Species Recovery Act (H.R. 2351). A coalition of evangelical Christians was instrumental in halting Congress' attempt to throttle the ESA in 1996.

That people have an ethical responsibility to care for the earth is not a new idea. Native Americans have long held that the land is sacred, along with all its beings, animate and inanimate. Among non-Indians, a religious fervor to conserve wild and beautiful places inspired the nascent conservation movement in the 19th century. John Muir, on a ledge high above a waterfall in the Sierra or kneeling down to gaze at a daisy, could not contain his rapture. "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." Almost 90 years later, Rachel Carson wrote, "Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."

In recent decades, however, expressions of humility and awe have faded from environmental language. Though various nature writers such as Linda Hogan and Terry Tempest Williams are fluent in adoration, many other environmentalists have been reticent about spiritual insights gleaned from nature or connections between their religious creed and their work. Ecstasy like Muir's is a little embarrassing to professional environmentalists trained to experience the natural world in more scientific terms. Privately they might find inspiration in climbing mountains or rafting wild rivers, but publicly they have taken a secular approach.

"My text this evening is an apology," Sierra Club Executive Director Carl Pope began, speaking last November at the Symposium on Religion, Science, and the Environment in Santa Barbara, California. "The environmental movement for the past quarter of a century has made no more profound error than to misunderstand the mission of religion and the churches in preserving the Creation." Pope went on to discuss the Greek Orthodox concept of sin as intellectual blindness, concluding, "I stand here to confess that sin."

Pope believes that the environmental movement dwelt less on values in the 1980s and '90s because it assumed that "the public had decided it wanted to protect the environment. Our job of convincing them was done and now we had to make policy changes. This was a big mistake."

Other environmentalists are also searching their souls. "I think the environmental movement has lessened its effectiveness by not thinking more about the relationship between the human community and the natural community and how the two work together," says William Meadows, president of The Wilderness Society. "We need to find ways in which people can pay more attention to the places where they live. That's the heart of a spiritual relationship with the land."

Meadows points out that people of faith and environmentalists actually have much in common, including a sense of stewardship and a missionary zeal for the work they do. Although Meadows has no current church, he considers himself a religious person. "Christianity was a social gospel," he explains. "Christ urged people to act on their beliefs. That's been at the core of my value system."

Meadows sees religious and environmental values being brought together in his own organization. "The environmental movement has been a secular movement," says Meadows, "and now I see it becoming, not a theological movement, but a movement based on ethical values and beliefs."

Seventeen members of the Green Group, a coalition of leaders from 30 national environmental organizations, examined some of those beliefs in April 1997 at a retreat at the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, led by Paul Gorman, executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. For three days, men and women accustomed to racing against deadlines spent time in contemplative silence, heard representatives of different faiths explain how ancient texts speak to current environmental issues, and explored core values and sources of inspiration in their own work. Since the retreat, several Green Group members have continued to meet to discuss the spiritual dimensions of their work.

Robert K. Musil, executive director of Physicians for Social Responsibility and an enthusiastic participant in the Green Group gatherings, cautions that religion and science must not blur the boundaries of their own

disciplines. Gesturing around his office in downtown Washington, D.C., he says laughing, "If I started hanging up crosses instead of pictures of birds, people would head for the doors! I can't give up my worldly self, my functional self, my urge to change things. But it's great to feel there are ways of going deeper."

"For evangelicals, the emphasis is on biblical teachings as our sole motivation," says Stan LeQuire, director of the Evangelical Environmental Network. "The Bible speaks very clearly on how to care for Creation. For example, Ezekiel decries the waste of God's gifts: 'Is it not enough for you to feed on good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet?' "

LeQuire helped organize the delegation of evangelical Christians who traveled to Capitol Hill in January 1996 to protest legislation that would weaken the Endangered Species Act. The engagement of a religious group in an environmental issue startled some members of Congress, especially the conservative Republicans many evangelicals had voted for. The event was featured on ABC Nightly News, and prompted an indignant response from the bill's prime backers. But the evangelicals' presence is widely credited with having helped prevent rollbacks of the law. "If God says it, we do it," LeQuire states.

For a long time, however, Scripture was widely interpreted in a very different way, one that encouraged exploitation of nature. Had not God exhorted Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth"? Had not zealous exploiters of natural resources used this passage from Genesis to justify their actions?

"There can be no full conquest of the earth, and no real satisfaction to humanity, if large portions of the earth remain beyond his highest control," trumpeted Mormon hierarch and irrigator John Widtsoe-whose attitude was widely shared by other Christians and by the secular proponents of Manifest Destiny, the 19th-century's faith-tinged euphemism for conquest. Such invocations have led some environmentalists to cite biblical passages that seem to propound an anthropocentric worldview as grounds for dismissing Judeo-Christian religions. In doing so, they reflect the influence of the late historian Lynn White Jr.'s famous statement that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man." But White concluded that the remedy to this religious anthropocentrism "must also be essentially religious." There are, after all, biblical injunctions against human arrogance, reminders that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

Although many American churches have long been active in the civil rights, peace, and labor movements, they have only relatively recently begun to redefine social justice to include the whole planet and all its creatures as members of a community in need. For example, when it called for a "new ecological ethic" in 1986, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops acknowledged that "Catholic social teaching on the care of the environment is still in the process of development."

"In church time, it's not a long time," says Walter E. Grazer, director of the Environmental Justice Program at the U.S. Catholic Conference. "The church doesn't just jump in right away. We're at what I'd call a re-emergence. We're at the beginning."

And in the past few years, there has been enormous progress for Christians and Jews in bringing into existence what could be called the Second Creation story. Although Genesis bids humanity to "subdue" nature it also says that God placed Adam in the garden to "tend" it. As Rabbi Daniel Swartz explains, the Hebrew word *shamar* means "to guard or to watch over." This language, Rabbi Swartz says, indicates that the earth does not belong to people but is entrusted to them. Concurring with this interpretation, the U.S. Catholic Conference echoes Pope John Paul II's emphatic (though woefully underreported) environmental teaching in its publication *Renewing the Face of the Earth*. "Men and women . . . bear a unique responsibility under God: to safeguard the created world and by their creative labor even to enhance it." As the Reverend Charles W. Treadwell of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in McKinney, Texas, puts it, "We have multiplied. We have subdued the earth. Now it's time to focus on the Second Creation story."

An even sharper pronouncement in defense of nature has been issued by a religious leader from a very different branch of Christianity. The day after Carl Pope made his confession, the featured guest of the meeting, Bartholomew I, patriarch of the Orthodox Christian Church, declared: "To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin." This was the first time that an international religious leader of such stature had applied the word "sin" to acts of environmental degradation.

An important force in promoting these changes in philosophy is the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. The group was founded in New York in 1993, says Executive Director Gorman, on the premise that "caring for Creation is a fundamentally religious imperative that transcends denominational differences and partisan politics." The Partnership comprises most major American faith groups and denominations: Roman Catholic, Jewish, mainline Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, historically African-American Protestant, and evangelical Christian. (Although Islam has more than 3 million followers in the United States, it has no umbrella organization and hence was not included.) Members of the Partnership credit their unity to Gorman's respect for each tradition. He encourages each faith group to focus on discerning what it means to be "environmentally engaged" from within its own traditions. Howard Ris, executive director of the Union of Concerned Scientists, who helped assemble the Partnership's science advisory panel, says of what may be the largest interfaith organization ever formed: "We could disagree comfortably on how the earth's creatures were created, but we really needed to work together to save what was left."

By the end of 1994, each group had developed its own educational materials and sent them to congregations nationwide—a total of more than 140,000. The organization offers trainings, provides scholarships, helps members respond to local and global environmental issues, and distributes tens of thousands of action alerts on public policy. A campaign is under way to draw a parallel between choosing to live simply, a key virtue in all religions, and stemming the tide of overconsumption that takes a toll on the environment.

The Partnership monitors the activities of more than 2,000 "green" congregations, ranging from community gardens tended by youth groups to services focusing on behavior toward the earth at Yom Kippur to the development of energy-efficient cooling systems for churches. For congregants, this more holistic approach to religious life means that spiritual practice and environmental activism can become intertwined. At Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Norfolk, Virginia, a Lenten liturgy focusing on the story of the Woman at the Well included meditations on water as a life-enhancing force—a theme with special impact for parishioners attempting to restore the severely polluted Elizabeth River.

Besides flourishing in individual churches and synagogues, the new ecological conscience is addressing problems in entire ecosystems. Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane and other Catholic bishops in the Northwest and British Columbia have begun a three-year study of the Columbia River and its watershed that will culminate in a pastoral letter, the first by a regionwide group to focus on the condition of the natural world. Supported by grants from the Partnership and the Environmental Justice Office of the U.S. Catholic Conference, the bishops are in the first phase, "reading the signs," or visiting sites along the river to listen to the testimony of people who depend on it. Frank Fromherz, director of the Office of Justice and Peace and the Campaign for Human Development in the Archdiocese of Portland, says he has been struck by the way dredgers, Latino farmworkers, barge operators, Native fishers, and recreation buffs not only speak from the heart but stay to listen to one another's stories. "It sounds like they are seeking truth and the common good. They are saying, 'This is how we see the cosmos.' They're conscious that this is a good occasion to express mystery, spirituality, humility, and ethics in relation to their interest in the river."

Citing God as a supporter of one's point of view can make for a daunting argument. But critics of religious involvement in environmental issues have focused on the philosophical positions of those involved. Thomas Sieger Derr, professor of religion at Smith College and the author of *Environmental Ethics and Christian Humanism*, takes offense at the "biocentric" viewpoint, which places equal value in all forms of life. "I argue for the primacy of the human," says Derr. "Natural processes are not necessarily good. Was the bubonic plague good? Of course it's important to restrain consumption. But you do it for the sake of your descendants, not for the earth, as some claim."

Calvin Beisner, a professor of religion at Covenant College, says that although he favors environmental activism by Christians in principle, he believes they have a tendency both to misinterpret Scripture and to make claims about issues whose scientific roots they don't sufficiently grasp. Beisner, who believes that reports of endangered species have been greatly exaggerated, cautions, "As Christians, we're supposed to care about the truth." This was also the response of Republican congressmen to the evangelical stand against a weakened ESA.

Stan LeQuire counters that his evangelical organization has a large cadre of Christian biologists who are college professors, and "they're the one group we have the least trouble convincing that species extinction is a grave problem." He adds, "All Creation belongs to God, and we dare not touch it without the humblest and most prayerful consideration of how our acts affect the Creator."

Mainline faiths are by no means the only groups awakening to the environment. The movement toward linking environmental concerns and spiritual beliefs includes a wide spectrum of nondenominational approaches, such as the celebration of solstices, goddess worship, practices inspired by Native American teachings of respect for and reciprocity with the earth, and guided wilderness journeys that feature periods of contemplation in solitude. Often dismissed as "pagan" or "New Age," these beliefs and practices actually have much in common with traditional faiths: a sense that the natural world is an expression of oneness and harmony greater than the individual, recognition that principles of ecology offer ethical as well as scientific models of the interconnectedness of all forms of life, love of a particular place, gratitude for the awe and inspiration that nature evokes, and, most important, recognition that all these benefits will diminish unless humans change their behavior.

Environmentalists and spiritual leaders are searching for language meaningful to both. For Meg Maguire, president of Scenic America, an important concept that has been missing from many discussions of the environment is beauty. "No one is indifferent to it," she says, "but people are afraid to use words like 'scenic' and 'beauty,' because they see them as representing soft values." The Sierra Club's Pope notes the absence of the word love in environmental literature. "People love a swamp. They love birds. They love quiet. They love something larger than themselves and they want to be a part of a community that shares that love." Joseph Chuman, leader of the Ethical Culture Society in Teaneck, New Jersey, sees members exploring ways of relating humanist values such as reciprocity and egalitarianism to the natural world.

Finally, there is another, more difficult truth that draws these two communities together, one that religion has always been called upon to assuage: the reality of grief and suffering. Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, explains: "The notion of a suffering God is a notion deep in Judaism and Christianity. This says that God experiences the sufferings of the world and takes them into the godhead, or 'knows them,' if you will, in the sense of deeply experiencing them." Rasmussen says that seminary students have created prayers, psalms, and liturgies to express grief for the extinction of species or the loss of a beautiful place in nature that they knew as a child but is now gone. "I know there are lots of things that inure us against this," he says, "and suffering is kind of un-American. On the other hand, people do experience it and often need some kind of opportunity to pour it out." Communal, ceremonial forms for expressing grief, as well as hope, love, and other responses to the earth can strengthen the community and inspire people to become more actively involved in caring for the environment.

It is long after dark when the african- American religious leaders and members of religious and eco-justice groups accompanying them return from their tour. Gathering at dinner in a New Orleans hotel, they begin to formulate a response to what they have witnessed. First, they agree to tell the story of the four ecologically threatened communities they visited. There is enthusiasm for congregations from each faith group devoting a Sunday to the subject of environmental justice. The religious leaders, whose collective membership numbers in the tens of millions, will also meet with Vice President Al Gore to present their findings and recommendations.

Then one of the ministers mentions the haunting sight of children playing in the shadow of the Shell complex, and around the table are murmurs of shock, outrage, sorrow. Bishop P. A. Brooks of Detroit, presidium secretary of the Church of God in Christ, shakes his head. "What this is about," he says, "is children. It is about the earth. It is about life."

Children. The earth. Life. More than any other commonality, it is these three elements that bind the work of the religious and environmental communities. Still, each has its own distinctive part to play as it considers how to confront the problems that threaten the planet. The religious community must insist on hope through faith, even in the face of unspeakable misery; the environmental community must implacably expose a dire situation becoming ever more urgent. Religion must look inward, bringing people together; environmentalism must look outward as it battles institutions whose usurpation of natural resources is anathema to life. Religion must remind us that we're part of a greater whole; environmentalism must do whatever is necessary to protect that whole. Perhaps by working together, religion and environmentalism can develop a Second Creation story, one that will inspire us to build a safer future for children, the earth, and life.

Trebbe Johnson has written for *Parabola*, *The Nation*, *Harper's*, and National Public Radio. She is the director of Vision Arrow, an organization that sponsors spiritually oriented wilderness trips.