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News that Inspires

Daring to Dream: Religion and the Future of the Earth
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There is a dawning realization from many quarters that the changes humans are making on the planet are comparable to the changes of a major geological era. The scientific evidence says we are damaging life systems on Earth and causing species extinction (20,000 species lost annually) at such a rate as to bring about the end of our current period, the Cenozoic era. No such mass extinction has occurred since the dinosaurs were eliminated 65 million years ago by an asteroid.

Our period is considered to be the sixth major extinction in Earth's 4.7 billion-year history, and in this case humans are the primary cause. Having grown from two billion to six billion people in the twentieth century, we are now a planetary presence devouring resources and destroying ecosytems and biodiversity at an unsustainable rate. The data keeps pouring in that we are toxifying the air, water, and soil such that the health of all species is at risk. Global warming is already evident in melting glaciers, thawing tundra, and flooding of coastal regions.

This increasing damage to ecosystems reveals we are making macrophase changes to the planet with microphase wisdom. We are not fully aware of the scale of the damage we are doing and are not yet capable of stemming the tide of destruction.

For decades, environmental issues were considered the concern only of scientists, lawyers, and policy makers. Now the ethical dimensions of the environmental crisis are becoming more obvious. What is our moral responsibility toward future generations? How can we ensure equitable development that does not destroy the environment? Can religious and cultural perspectives help solve environmental challenges?

Among environmentalists, a conviction deepens: though science and policy approaches are clearly necessary, they are not sufficient to do the job of transforming human consciousness and behavior for a sustainable future. Values and ethics, religion and spirituality are important factors in this trans- formation. In 1947, historian Arnold Toynbee declared: "The twentieth century will be chiefly remembered by future generations not as an era of political conflicts or technical innovations but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective."

We might expand Toynbee's powerful statement to declare that the twenty-first century will be remembered by this extension of our moral concerns not only to humans, but to other species and eco- systems as well — the Earth community as a whole. From social justice to ecojustice, the movement of human care pushes out in ever widening concentric circles. The future of our withering planet, a commitment to its protection and restoration, may depend on the largeness of our embrace.

Our challenge now is to identify the vision and values that will spark a transformation toward creating such a planetary civilization. A sustainable future requires not just managerial or legislative approaches — the saving of forests or fisheries — but a vision of that future, evoking depths of empathy, compassion, and sacrifice for the welfare of future generations. We are called to a new intergenerational consciousness and conscience.

Currently, we in the “developed” world are easily distracted from these tasks by mass consumerism, media entertainment, and political manipulation. Our plundering power is almost invisible to the majority of people in the world who are intent simply on feeding their families or, in affluent regions, on acquiring more goods. We need a serious wake-up call from our slumbers.

But solutions must inspire participation and action rather than frighten or disempower people. The next generation is searching for ways to contribute to a positive future. Life in all its variety and beauty calls to us for a response — a new integrated under- standing of who we are as humans. This is not only about stewardship of the Earth, but about embracing our embeddedness in nature in radical, fresh, and enlivening ways. Humans, Earth and the rest of life are bound in a single story and destiny. It is no longer a question of “saving the environment” as if it was something out there apart from us. We humans are the environment, and it is us — shaping our minds, nourishing our bodies, refreshing our spirit.

The task of articulating an integrated vision and identifying effective values requires new language, broader framing, inspiring images, captivating metaphors, and, most of all, new stories and dreams. As cultural historian Thomas Berry says: “If a society’s cultural world — the dreams that have guided it to a certain point — become dysfunctional, the society must go back and dream again.”

Currently the dreaming meets an impasse. There’s a puzzling disconnection between our growing awareness of environmental problems and our ability to change our present direction. We have failed to translate facts about the environmental cri- sis into effective action in the United States. We are discovering that the human heart is not changed by facts alone but by engaging visions and empowering values. Humans need to see the large picture and feel they can act to make a difference.

Failing to Dream

We could name many complex factors that have contributed to this impasse, the failure of dreams. Here is a brief summary of a few of them:

1. Institutions and leadership — in business, in government, and in religion — put up resistance. In business, a corporate mentality operates with a single-minded mantra that economic growth is an unqualified good and ecological cost accounting is unnecessary. Corporate power resists attempts at environmental regulations and insists on economic globalization abroad without limits or restraints.

Government at all levels is no longer widely perceived to be democratic or trustworthy, but rather controlled by special interests, deadlocked by culture wars, and driven by the enormous ambitions of politicians.

Organized religion, too, has lost much of its moral authority. It is either beset by its own scandals, preoccupied with sexual politics, or divided by theology and fearful of science.

2. Academic hierarchies and research traditions minimize the role of values. One indication of this is the tendency of scientists to claim value-free knowledge and shun advocacy. Though they contribute facts based on research, they rarely pose solutions. (Scientific uncertainty is used by politicians to undermine action, as in the case of global warming.) Another academic factor is the influence of post- modern deconstruction, which tends to question the basis and motivations of traditional values and commitments. Though deconstruction is by no means nihilistic in its intentions, for some individuals its discourse can result in relativism or non-engagement with real-world issues or solutions.

3. American cultural assumptions — media-tailored soundbites, anti-intellectualism, instant solutions — deepen the impasse. A consequence of a pragmatic, quick-fix framing of issues is an American antipathy toward complex answers and an absence of understanding of how historical changes take place over time.

An expectation of speed — fast results, fast food, fast relief, fast cars — also holds true for many of the movements pushing for political, social, and environmental change. Activism is often characterized by impatience with anything that obstructs the quick realization of goals. The result is we now have something of an aversion to long-term efforts and long-range planning that demand time and commitment.

4. Faith in technology has become all encompassing. Utopian myths of science and progress automatically regard technology as the answer to life's challenges and the way to usher in a better world. Accordingly, any restraints posed by a pre- cautionary principle about the potential harm of certain technologies on humans or the environment are overridden by an almost blind belief in the saving power of technology. The "technological fix" becomes a means of solving any difficulty, taking away pain, extending life, and manipulating nature and genes to human ends. Management and control of nature are the driving forces behind the unrestrained embrace of technology. The strength of the precautionary principle in Europe (as regards genetically modified foods, for example) suggests that these issues can be approached differently.

Signs of Hope

Against these imposing obstacles, we must learn to cultivate long-term perspective and persistence — also a sense of history, mystery, and humor. Evidence for these is not impossible to find.

It is important to note, for instance, that environmental awareness in the United States is only some four decades old, if we measure its inception from the publication of Rachel Carson's book Silent Spring in 1962. We have cause for impatience and even alarm that after four decades we are not yet far enough along in environmental awareness, action, and change. Nonetheless, many are realizing that change — especially of the magnitude now required — occurs over long periods of time. An engaging environmental movement will demand continued effort to identify broad principles and long-term strategies. History reminds us of the uneven and unpredictable pace of change. The abolition movement against slavery began in the mid-nineteenth century in America, but it was not until the mid-twentieth century that its fruits were claimed in the civil rights movement. This movement for civil rights is still under way in education, job opportunity, and environmental justice. Similar slow but steady progress has been made with women's issues from the time of the early suffragettes in the 1920s until now. Indeed, all social and political movements evolve with both incremental improvements and unexpected breakthroughs.

Our openness to the mystery and serendipity of such change is crucial as we note the unexpected yet successful nonviolent revolutions in South Africa and the Philippines. Likewise, the unpredicted fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 abruptly ended four decades of the Cold War. These are encouraging reminders that even with all the intentional efforts of humans for social and environmental change, it often happens despite us and in ways we could not have imagined. There is a refreshing realization here of the unintended and unpredictable consequences of human action.

Not least we need humor and detachment — the former for our sanity, the latter from our ego. We are working toward large-scale and long-term changes that may emerge well beyond our lifetimes or in times and places we will never know. Such long-term perspective seeds hope.

And despite frustrating trends, hopeful dreams are stirring, especially within religious communities.

Until recently religious communities have been so absorbed in internal sectarian affairs that they were unaware of the magnitude of the environmental crisis at hand. To be sure, the natural world figures prominently in the major religions: God's creation of material reality in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the manifestation of the divine in the karmic processes underlying the recycling of matter in Hindu- ism and Jainism; the interdependence of life in Buddhism; and the Tao (the Way) that courses through nature in Confucianism and Taoism. Despite those rich themes regarding nature, many religions turned from the turbulent world in a redemptive flight to a serene, transcendent afterlife.

Wanted: A New Ontology

But some within religious traditions, such as Thomas Berry, do acknowledge the urgency of our present moment. His concern, which is arising in religious and environmental circles alike, is whether humans are indeed a viable species — whether our presence on the planet is sustainable. As the Greek Orthodox theologian the Metropolitan John of Pergamon has written, the problem is not simply about creating a stewardship ethic in which humans "manage" the Earth. Rather, he suggests that the current crisis challenges us to reformulate our ontology, our very nature as humans. How do we belong to this vast unfolding universe?

We need not deny the limits or the intolerant dimensions of religions that erupt in sectarianism and violence. However, religions have notably contributed to liberating movements for social justice and human rights. Religions demonstrate that they can change over time, transforming themselves and their dogma in response to new ideas and circumstances. Christian churches in Britain and the United States came to embrace the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement of the twentieth. As the moral dimension of the environmental crisis becomes ever more apparent, we have reason to believe that religions will energize and support a new generation of leaders in the environmental movement. Religions have developed ethics for homicide, suicide, and genocide; now they are challenged to respond to biocide and ecocide.

The environmental crisis presents itself as the catalyst pressing individual religious traditions to awaken to their ecological role. In addition, it calls the religious traditions toward cooperation in robust interreligious dialogue. Building on the efforts that have been made over the past several decades in ecumenical and interreligious circles, the

religions may be able to transcend their differences for the good of a larger whole. The common ground for all humanity is the Earth itself, a shared sense of the interdependence of all life.

Among scholars, a new field of religion and ecology is emerging, with implications for environmental policy as well as for understanding the complexity and variety of human attitudes toward nature. The effort to identify religiously diverse attitudes and practices toward nature was the focus of a major international conference series from 1996 to 1998 on world religions and ecology. Held at the Center for the Study of World Religions, at the Harvard Divinity School, it resulted in a ten-volume series of books, published by the Center and distributed by Harvard University Press. More than 800 scholars of religions and environmentalists attended, leading to a continuing Forum on Religion and Ecology that has grown to more than 5,000 participants www. environment.harvard.edu/religion.

The ongoing work of the Forum is now located at Yale at the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies and the Divinity School. These two schools have created a joint master degree program in the area of religion and ecology. In addition, the Center for Bioethics at the Institution for Social and Policy Studies is encouraging a larger understanding of the need for ethics not only for the human sphere but for the whole biosphere.

The major professional organization for teaching religion and theology, the American Academy of Religion, has a vibrant section focusing on scholarship and teaching in religion and ecology. The leadership of the Academy has expressed interest in furthering sustainability work in colleges, universities, and seminaries. A scholarly journal, Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion, is celebrating its tenth year of publication. A two-volume encyclopedia of religion and nature has been published by Continuum. Undoubtedly this field of study will continue to expand as the environmental crisis grows in complexity and requires increasingly creative responses from the world’s religions.

Religions Go Green

As scholars and theologians explore environmental ethics, religions are starting to find their voices regarding the environment. The monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are formulating original eco-theologies and eco-justice practices regarding stewardship and care for creation. Hinduism and Jainism in South Asia, and Buddhism in both Asia and the West, have undertaken projects of ecological restoration. Indigenous peoples bring to the discussion alternative ways of knowing and engaging the natural world. All of those religious traditions are moving forward to find the language, symbols, rituals, and ethics for encouraging protection of bioregions and species. Religions are beginning to generate the energy needed for restoring the Earth in such practices as tree planting, coral-reef preservation, and river cleanup.

Some of the most striking examples of the intersection of religion and ecology have taken place in Iran and Indonesia. In June 2001 and May 2005, under former President Mohammad Khatami, the government of Iran and the United Nations Environment Programme sponsored conferences in Tehran that focused on Islamic principles and practices for environmental protection. The Iranian Constitution identifies Islamic values for appropriate ecological practices and threatens legal sanctions against those who do not follow them. In Indonesia projects of tree planting and restoration draw on the Islamic principle of maintaining balance (mizaan) in nature. Students in Islamic boarding schools are taught such principles and are encouraged to apply the Islamic doctrine of trusteeship regarding the environment.

In the United States, the greening of churches and synagogues leads religious communities to search out sustainable building materials and renewable energy sources through Interfaith Power and Light. A group of Christian leaders in the Evangelical Climate Initiative is focusing on climate change as a moral issue that will disproportionately hurt the poor around the world. The National Religious Partnership for the Environment has been working with Jewish and Christian organizations to promote environmental concern. "Green Yoga" is exploring ways in which yoga practitioners can bring their meditative focus to greater awareness of environmental concern.

The "Green Nuns," a group of Roman Catholic religious women in North America, sponsors a variety of environmental programs drawing on the ecological vision of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, who describe the story of the universe in both sacred and scientific terms. In Canada the Indigenous Environmental Network is speaking out about the negative effects of resource extraction and military-related pollution on First Nations Reserves. Internationally, the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has led several international symposia on religion, science, and the environment, focused primarily on water issues.

And finally, a conviction is emerging in some quarters that we need a new "species identity" to rally humanity to a stronger sense of solidarity than nationhood, faith, or family can muster. It means coming to understand our place within this vast field of force we call nature and evolutionary history. It means embracing a new story, a universe story, one that evokes awe, wonder, and responsibility, and inspires humans to influence evolution in benign directions.

"The time of innocence … is now past," declares Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his 1992 book The Evolving Self.

It is no longer possible for mankind to blunder about self-indulgently. Our species has become too powerful to be led by instincts alone. Birds and lemmings cannot do much damage except to themselves, whereas we can destroy the entire matrix of life on the planet. The awesome powers we have stumbled into require a commensurate responsibility. As we become aware of the motives that shape our actions, as our place in the chain of evolution becomes clearer, we must find a meaningful and binding plan that will protect us and the rest of life from the consequences of what we have wrought.

With an awakening sense of global responsibility comes an emerging global ethics, such as that contained in the Earth Charter.

The Earth Charter, a document of enormous potential, emerged out of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) held in Rio in 1992. The international community under the auspices of the United Nations was seeking principles for guiding sustainable development. The Earth Charter is such a document, outlining the complex interdependency of humans and nature. It reflects the aspirations of the thousands of groups and individuals who helped to shape this people's document in the decade that followed the Earth Summit. It embodies the idea that the physical, chemical, and biological conditions for life are in delicate interaction over time to bring forth and sustain life. Our response to this awesome interplay should be a sense of responsibility for its continuity. The Charter provides an integrated vision of three related areas for a viable future: ecological integrity; social and economic justice; and democracy, non-violence and peace. Care for the whole community of life is embraced by this declaration of interdependence (www.earthcharter.org).

As all these examples illustrate, a many-faceted alliance of religion and ecology along with a new global ethics is awakening around the planet. Attitudes are being reexamined with alertness to the future of the whole community of life, not just humans. This is a new moment for the world's religions, and they have a vital role to play in the emergence of a more comprehensive environmental ethics. The urgency cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the flourishing of the Earth community may depend on it.