

Articles

How Faith Communities Are Helping to Save the Planet Part 1: God Is Green: Finding Environmental Values in Religious Tradition

By Oliver D. Ferrari
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In March 1967, historian Lynn White published a seminal article in the magazine *Science*, which blamed environmental degradation on two pervasive Judeo-Christian ethics: perpetual progress and humanity's dominion over nature. White's article was merely a printed formalization of the growing divide between faith groups and environmentalists. For many in faith communities, environmentalists represented leftist causes that threatened to erode social values, while many environmentalists accepted White's claim that followers of Judeo-Christian ethics were responsible for years of ecological damage. A rift was created before a union had a chance.¹

More than three decades later, this rift is being repaired. In 1999, Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions concluded a series of conferences that provided theologians with the opportunity to research and present their own religions' teachings about ecology. They produced volumes of dense, scholarly prose, which can be crudely summarized into one statement: practitioners of all major religions, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Baha'i, Buddhism and others, have a moral obligation to protect the earth.²

Professor White cites Genesis to support her claim that Judaism and Christianity had a biblical writ to exploit the earth's resources. Historical and contextual readings by current Christian scholars have turned White's claim on its head, and posited that the God of Genesis tells human beings they must be responsible stewards, or caretakers, of the earth.

Rabbi Daniel Swartz of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life claims that human beings once had an intimate connection to the natural world, principally because of their reliance on subsistence agriculture. Biblical writers, he notes, reflect this connection poetically in Job 12:7-8: "But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the sky, they will tell you; or speak to the earth, it will teach you; the fish of the sea, they will inform you."³

The Hebrew Bible provides numerous admonitions for the care of creation. In the story of the flood and Noah's Arc—a narrative shared by the three Abrahamic traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—God commands Noah to take on board two of every living thing. Scholars have as yet failed to find a biblical footnote excluding the Golden-cheeked Warbler or the Florida Panther, two of the 1,821 species currently listed as threatened or endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.⁴

Organic farmer Daron Joffe contends that three Jewish ethics point to environmental stewardship. *Bal tash'hit* states that when an enemy city is besieged, fruit-bearing trees must not be cut down. This injunction may be irrelevant in its literal form, but for Joffe, the law translates easily into the modern axioms of conservation: reduce, reuse, recycle. A commonly celebrated Jewish ethic, *Tikkun olam*, enjoins Jews to "heal the earth." Finally, Joffe views the ancient practice of Kosher eating as a mandate for supporting "modern issues of sustainability, labor rights, and agricultural integrity."

At the Harvard conferences, Muslim scholar Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti tied passages in the Koran to sustainable development. She quotes Mohammad, the prophet of Islam, as saying, "the whole of the Earth is a mosque that is a place of worship." According to Chishti, the fastidious care of the mosque could reasonably be understood to include the natural world.⁵

At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Baha'i community asserted its concern for environmental sustainability. Forming the groundwork for this assertion is the Baha'u'llah's statement that "the earth is but

one country and mankind its citizens." Baha'is have said that a realization among human beings of their spiritual nature will lead to increased ecological wisdom.⁶

In his book *Living By Surprise: A Christian Response to the Ecological Crisis*, Rev. Woody Bartlett adds his name to a growing movement of Christian environmental advocates, many of whom take inspiration from historian and theologian Thomas Berry. Rev. Bartlett, a native of Atlanta, contends that "we were made to be co-creators with God, not exploiters of God's creation." He finds in Jesus a model for humble living, voluntary simplicity, and profound awe at the intricate beauty of creation. Developed nations' mass consumption of natural resources, Bartlett argues, directly opposes the model of Jesus.⁷

Many environmentalists of faith would agree with Professor White's claim that "more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one." They merely choose the latter. Furthermore, environmentalists of faith like Rev. Bartlett contest the traditional aims of the environmental movement with the claim that true ecological harmony will require not just a shift to less-polluting technologies, but a "rethinking" of humanity's place in the whole of creation.

Links:

1. [Harvard CSWR: Religions of the World and Ecology](#)
2. [Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life](#)
3. [National Religious Partnership for the Environment](#)
4. [Baha'i involvement at Earth Summit](#)

This article is the first in a four-part series on the environmental movement and religious faith.

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

Oliver Ferrari is a senior at Emory University. He is currently working as an intern with Faith And The City. He can be reached at oferran@faithandthecity.org.

1 White, Lynn. "Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis." *Science*, March 10, 1967.

2 Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions: Religions of the World and Ecology <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/ecology>

3 *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

4 [US Fish and Wildlife Service Endangered and Threatened Species List](#)

5 Islam and Ecology. <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/ecology/chishti2.htm>

6 Bahai Involvement at Earth Summit. <http://www.bahai.org/article-1-8-1-20.html>

7 New York: Paulist Press, 2003.