

RELIGIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALING—AN OPEN AND URGENT QUESTION

R. George's remarks at the recent forum on Climate Change and Overpopulation at Shomrei Torah

I'd like to address three issues related to our environmental crisis:

First is the notion that western religion, sometimes referred to as “the Judeo-Christian Ethic,” is a root cause of the abuse and degradation of our environment. Second, I'll share a brief overview of Jewish sources of environmental awareness; and third, look at the road blocks to a total mobilization of the Jewish community toward a *tikkun*, a repair of the environment.

From the emergence of the environmental movement to the present, prominent leaders in the movement have asserted that religion, rather than being an ally in the cause of environmental healing and renewal, is in fact part of the problem. The historian Lynn White, Jr., first made this argument in a 1966 lecture before the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. There he contended that “Western Christianity, having de-sacralized and instrumentalized nature to human ends, bears a substantial burden of guilt for the contemporary environmental crisis.” He suggested that “what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things in their environment.” Citing the first Genesis creation story where Adam is given dominion over all the creatures of the earth, he argued that the anthropocentric Judeo-Christian theology that evolved from that world view ultimately led to the exploitation of the natural world.

Is White correct? Is the Judeo-Christian religious ethos part of the problem rather than the solution? Yes and no. Yes, inasmuch as western religion places us earthlings (a nice translation of the Hebrew “Adam” which also means “earth”) as the central and dominating force on earth. Yes also inasmuch as religion has yet to be a strong force in environmental healing. Imagine, for example, if the Catholic and traditional Protestant churches put as much energy into environmental causes as they do in fighting abortion or marriage equality. Imagine what could happen if the organized Jewish community decided that the environment was as important as Jewish continuity or a safe and secure Israel.

But this is where I think White and his ilk falter: like many critics of the faith community, they have a limited understanding of religion and religious life. For example, while they are correct in pointing to the first creation story and God's commandment to Adam to have dominion over earth's creatures, they fail to either realize or take into account that, right after the first creation story in Genesis I, comes another in Genesis II, where the earthling is placed in the midst of Creation and commanded not to have dominion but rather to be its steward. The Hebrew is “*l'avdah ul'shamrah*/To work and to protect.”

The problem of ignorance about religion in the environmental community is exacerbated when it comes to Judaism. The notion of the “Judeo-Christian” ethic may make folks feel warm and fuzzy about what we

have in common, but more often than not it obscures significant differences between the two religions and their followers, as I think is the case when it comes to Judaism and the environment.

While I am aware of at least one great Jewish thinker, Maimonides, who saw humanity as one species among many in a way that echoes a kind of Gaia-like view of radical ecology, in general Judaism shares Christianity's anthropocentric view of Creation; but from there Judaism's ecological world view diverges from Christianity in a number of ways. For example, while the thrust of much of Christian theology focuses on the Kingdom of Heaven – life after death – the goal of Judaism is to make heaven on earth. This world is not a world we are to transcend. Rather, our charge is, ultimately, *Tikkun Olam*, repair of the world. This Jewish environmental ethos is expressed beautifully in a sacred Jewish legend, a *midrash*, that is a compendium to the biblical creation story. It goes like this:

After God created everything and placed Adam in the midst of the garden, God led Adam on a tour of Creation and said, "Look at My works. See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy My world—for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

This 2,000-year-old *midrash* is one of many environmental teachings one can find in Jewish tradition. For example, in answer to the question, why was humanity created last? the *Midrash* responds, "lest humanity think that they are superior to all the other aspects of creation. Even a gnat has its place in Creation!"

In addition to the *Midrash*, the biblical text beyond Genesis offers a number of ecological principles, like the Sabbath and the Sabbatical year. *Halacha*, Jewish law, also includes environmental legislation like the commandment not to waste or wantonly destroy – *Baal Tashkhit* – or the commandment not to cause unnecessary harm to animals – *Tzaar Baalei Chayim*.

If Judaism has such a heightened environmental awareness, why is the Jewish community not at the forefront of environmental action? I can think of at least four possible reasons:

- Urbanization – having been exiled from our land for 2,000 years, we lost our innate connection to the environment;
- Obsession with "Jewish Continuity" – while we obsess over our own survival, the world around us may collapse!
- Idolatry of materialism—we have become enamored with our own material success. We are afraid of our ecological footprint and what it would mean to our lifestyles if we actually made the needed sacrifices;

- Inability (along with the rest of humanity) to see what is right in front of us. (*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, by Jared Diamond)

What's the solution? I wish I knew. Can religion be part of the answer to our environmental crisis? Yes, I believe it can. Will we, the religious community, rise to the challenge before it is too late? I don't have a crystal ball but it is hard to be optimistic; yet to be a religious person is to believe in the promise of the future.

I'd like to conclude with some words from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we remembered this past week. They're from a sermon he gave at the National Cathedral Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, on March 31, 1968. It's called "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution". He is not addressing the subject of the environment directly, but I think you will see how his words connect to our subject:

"I would like to deal with the challenges that we face today as a result of this triple revolution that is taking place in the world today. First, we are challenged to develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a great Revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one.

The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood... through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet... we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood... We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... this is the way God's universe is made, this is the way it is structured."

We are one, whether we realize it or not, and not just as humans. We are one with all creation. I believe the basic charge of religion is to give humans vision where they might otherwise be blind, and to inspire humanity to see the spark of divinity in each other and in the great web of being we share. If we fail at this then we deserve to go down with the human ship. If we have success then we will have fulfilled our mission first laid out in Genesis II, to guard and tend the Garden that is Earth.