BOSTON RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Spiritual Ecology: Forging an Environmental Ethic for Our Endangered Planet

1997 Spring Conference Series

Statement of Purpose

There are three ways in which we may relate ourselves to the world: We may exploit it; we may enjoy it; we may accept it in awe.[1]

-- *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

The environmental crisis is of such enormous scale and complexity, writes Chinese Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming, that "we ourselves now belong to the category of an endangered species."[2] From vastly depleted forests and eroded soil to polluted water and air, from global warming to stratospheric ozone layer thinning, "we are facing a crisis," observes Professor of Religion Mary Evelyn Tucker, "that endangers species and ecosystems on a scale hardly imaginable 100 years ago"[3]—and that is already reflected, perhaps, in declining fertility rates, the increase of respiratory diseases, and the rise of various types of cancer.

"The diminishment of biodiversity alone," writes Tucker, "represents a shift in earth's history comparable to the change of a major geological age."[4] "By poisoning the air we breathe and the water we drink," warns Professor Tu, "by degrading our environment, we are recklessly reducing the livability of our habitat to a point of no return."[5]

Yet, we have perhaps been most bracingly awakened to the perilous state of our planet by the journeys *away* from it by astronauts of many nationalities, who have come to see the earth as what Mary Evelyn Tucker calls "a luminous icon of life" and who have shared with us on their return a sense of earth's vulnerability—and of their awe at the beauty and fragility of our planet amidst the vastness of the universe.

It is this sense of awe, so often evoked by traditional religious cosmologies, that environmentalists hope religions can nurture today, as a starting point for the development of a communitarian environmental ethics grounded in a more comprehensive ecological theology and worldview.

Indeed, as a monograph from a 1991 Middlebury College conference on "Spirit and Nature" put it, "the global environmental crisis which threatens not only the future of human civilization but all life on earth is fundamentally a moral and religious problem."[6] And the role of the world's religions may be crucial in stimulating a rethinking and reshaping of the relationship of humans to their natural world. "Religion has frequently played a prophetic role," Tucker writes, "in evoking new visions of social justice; now the challenge for religion is to expand our worldview and ethics to include the rights not only of the human community but of the biotic community as well"[7]—to articulate new visions of what has come to be called "eco-justice."

Fundamental to this new, more inclusive ecological ethics might be the notion of *stewardship*—of caring for the earth as the source of life. "May we protect the earth that it may sustain us," reads a piece of new Jewish liturgy, "and let us seek sustenance for all who inhabit the world."[8] Indeed, for many Biblical scholars, the imperative of careful, responsible stewardship is implicit—or explicit—in traditional Jewish interpretations of the Creation story in Genesis. However, some environmentalists, beginning with Lynn White in his 1967 *Science* magazine article,[9] see certain verses in Genesis as appearing to sanction "dominion" over nature and subsequent exploitation of its resources.

For Tu Wei-ming, it is "the dark side of the West"—and, in particular, of the Enlightenment—that has so endangered our life-support systems: the Enlightenment's faith in knowledge as power licensing us to conquer and subdue the natural world; its belief in progress unleashing a runaway engine of technological destructiveness; its enthronement of the individual promoting unbridled aggressiveness toward nature. We need "a basic reorientation of our thought," posits Tu, "with a view toward a fundamental

restructuring of our style of life"[10] The spiritual resources of Eastern, Western, and indigenous religious traditions will be indispensable, Tu believes, in helping us in the work of "enriching, transforming, and restructuring" our Enlightenment heritage. At the same time, he notes, we need to hold fast to the Enlightenment values we cherish: freedom and equality, human rights, and the dignity of the individual.

Those resources will reflect the variant perspectives and values, rituals and institutions, and patterns of relatedness imparted by different religious traditions: for example, the limits and restraints contained in the Jewish concepts of the Sabbath and the (agricultural) Sabbatical year—and more generally, Judaism's characteristic translation of its ecological worldview into specific rules of behavior; the Buddhist intuition of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all beings—with an ecological spirituality as its natural outgrowth; the valuation in Taoism of nature for its own sake, and the emphasis in Confucianism on harmony with nature rather than manipulation or control; and the "eco-consciousness" ingrained in many indigenous religious traditions, exemplified in their profound sense of rootedness and correspondingly intimate and detailed knowledge and appreciation of their environment.

In fact, many religious denominations, in this country and around the world, have already begun to answer the call for religion to help rethink our relationship to and responsibility for our world. Environmental sermons and lectures—and the largest recycling center in Manhattan—at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine (Episcopal) in New York; the efforts by various schools of theology (such as New York's Union Theological Seminary) to "green" their curricula, often under the guidance of TEMEC (Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge); and conferences and symposia (like the Global Forums of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders held in Oxford, Moscow, Rio, and Kyoto; and the conferences on Buddhism and Ecology and Confucianism and Ecology convened by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard; the international planning to bring an Earth Charter to the UN for adoption; and the efforts at international cooperation around the environmental crisis such as the National Religious Partnership for the Environment and the UN Sabbath Program.) All of these voices have been

raised in response to our earth's urgent need for a scientifically informed, spiritually enlightened, globally inclusive environmental ethic.

It is in the hope of achieving some orchestration of these voices—thereby to help craft a harmonious environmental ethic worthy of the harmony we seek with nature—that the Boston Research Center has convened this Spring 1997 Spiritual Ecology conference series. In bringing together environmentalists and diverse religionists, we seek to deepen and broaden the emerging alliance between religion and ecology. We offer a forum for exploring how the worldviews of various religious paths—Eastern, Western, and indigenous—can in their own distinctive ways strengthen and enrich the underlying principles of the environmental movement and, perhaps, suggest appropriate possibilities for environmental activism embodying their respective outlooks. In joining in what Tu Wei-ming calls a "spiritual joint venture to make our habitat safe for generations to come,"[11] we invite our participants to engage in what Tu calls "disciplined reflection—a communal act rather than an isolated struggle."[12]

In particular, we encourage our panelists to address such questions as:

- Some of our most vivid and striking perspectives on the vulnerability of our planet have come from astronauts viewing earth from space. Have any particular experiences awakened you to the environmental crisis and spurred your interest in ecological thought or activism?

- The Appeal for Joint Commitment in Religion and Science, issued by the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York and issued at the Global Forum Conference in Moscow in 1990, argued that "the environmental crisis requires radical changes not only in public policy, but also in individual behavior."[13] (Religious teaching and example, it goes on to say, "are powerfully able to influence personal conduct and commitment.") What imperatives on these two levels—of public policy and individual behavior or life-style—best embody the distinctive insights and ecological understanding of your religious tradition?

- Would you argue for changes or innovations in your tradition's ritual, worship praxis, or liturgy—or even in the tradition's interpretation of sacred texts—to reflect global consciousness of planetary destruction, planetary responsibility, and planetary fate?

- Tu Wei-ming argues that there is a "conspicuous absence of the idea of community, let alone global community"[14] in the Western (Enlightenment) model of aggressive individualism. What does your religious tradition suggest as a basis for a sense of global community that might encourage the growth of a communitarian environmental ethics—and of a sense of shared destiny—without doing violence to human rights and the freedom and dignity of the individual?

In her poem "Natural Resources," the poet Adrienne Rich laments: "My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed."[15] But the Psalmist responds: "Those who sow in tears will reap in joyous song."[16] For those of us sowing the seeds of a religion and ecology movement, the reward will be nothing less than reclaiming our earth—and bringing all human beings to the realization of the Tao Te Ching, that "the sky is clear and spacious; the earth is solid and full; all creatures flourish together, content with the way they are."[17]

-- statement of purpose written by Robert Cohen for the Boston Research Center, November 1996

NOTES

1. *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), pp. 33-34.
2. "Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality," in Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, *Worldviews and Ecology* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 1994), p. 19.
3. Mary Evelyn Tucker,"The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion (Spring 1997) p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
5. *Op. cit.*, "Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality," p. 20.
6. *Op. cit.*, "The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," p. 22.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
8. Marcia Falk, "Blessing After the Meal," in *The Book of Blessings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 20.

9. White, Lynn, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, no. 155 (1967): 1203-7.
10. *Op. cit.*, "Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality," p. 20.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
13. *Op. cit.*, "The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," p. 15.
14. *Op. cit.*, "Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality," p. 25.
15. "Natural Resources 14," in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-1977* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 264.
16. Ps. 126:5.
17. Tao Te Ching, Chapter 39