Environment

Géraldine Chatelard

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The environment, understood as ecosystems, does not only consist of physical attributes; it is subjected to and influenced by cultural and hence spiritual perceptions. The engagement of religious traditions with the modern concept of environment was triggered by what has been called the 'spoliation of nature debate' initiated by American historian Lynn White. In a 1967 article, White argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which God created nature for man's benefit, establishes the dualism of man and nature. Since then, in a context where the 'environmental crisis' has gradually become a central theme in Western societies and a foremost issue in national and international public policies, all major religions have taken up the controversy by reexamining the relationship of man and nature in their respective traditions and by questioning the utilitarian paradigm. In parallel, religious ecology has emerged as a new trend in environmental policy and as a field of academic scholarship.

The dualist paradigm

Even before the emergence of modern environmentalism as a mainstream movement in the West, late 19th Century American naturalists, such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold, challenged the notion prevailing in Western culture that man was apart, and not part, of nature. Leopold claimed that certain biblical passages had a negative impact on the environment because conservation was incompatible with the Abrahamic concept of land regarded as a commodity belonging to man. One biblical text he quoted to support this view is Genesis 1:28: “God blessed them and God said to them: 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living creatures that creep on earth.'” American poet Gary Snyder followed this stream of though in the 1950s and was inspirational to the founders of the Deep Ecology movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly Professor Arne Naess of the University of Oslo. Naess criticized Cartesian or scientific rational philosophy and the Judeao-Christian tradition that he saw as justifying the subsuming of nature to man's destructive aims. Subsequent proponents of this approach, including New-Age, Neo-Pagan or Neo-Shamanist movements, have argued that perception of nature as sacred is central to non-Western and non-Abrahamic traditions especially indigenous cultures where people perceive themselves as part of nature and adhere to cosmovisions where this split does not exist. According to this argument, traditional ways of living, including those that practice custodianship of the natural world, have been subjugated to a dualistic approach that in many cases accompanied colonialism. To replace the lack of critical spiritual connectivity between people, nature and landscapes, radical ecology calls for a 'new environmental paradigm' or an ecosophy, i.e. a philosophical/ecological total view inspired by naturalism, Buddhism and other non-dualistic philosophies.

Alliance between World Religions and Environmentalists

In the context of the dualist controversy some Christian churches began to address growing environmental and social challenges. They also responded to a pressing call for involvement from the part of less radical environmentalists who sought to gain the support of moral institutional authorities in view of grounding environmental issues in ethics. As of the mid-1970s, the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.) was the first religious organisation to articulate a theological reflexion on environmental destruction and social inequities around the centrality of the notion of

creation and life. In 1992, at the time of the U.N. Earth Summit in Rio, the W.C.C. facilitated a gathering of Christian leaders that issued a 'Letter to the Churches,' calling for attention to pressing eco-justice concerns. In addition to major conferences held by Christian churches, several interreligious meetings have been held, and various religious movements have engaged with the issue of environment. Some of these include the interreligious gatherings on the environment in Assisi in 1984 under the sponsorship of the World Wildlife Fund (W.W.F.) and in 1986 under the auspices of the Vatican. For its part, the United Nations Environment Programme (U.N.E.P.) has established an Interfaith Partnership for the Environment. Since 1995 an Alliance of Religion and Conservation (A.R.C.) has been active in England, while the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (N.R.P.E.) has organized Jewish and Christian groups around this issue in the United States. Religious groups have also contributed to the drafting of the Earth Charter. This new alliance of world religions and environmental conservation has resulted in culture-specific religious concepts of ecology and nature being increasingly mainstreamed in national and international environmental policies, particularly in the field of biodiversity conservation.

Religious leaders and laypersons have been increasingly speaking out for protection of the environment. Environmental activism is an important emphasis of the major new movements of engaged Buddhism of recent decades particularly in Korea and Japan. In 1989, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama proposed in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech that Tibet should become an 'international ecological reserve'. Rabbi Ishmar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York has frequently spoken on the critical state of the environment. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew has sponsored several seminars to highlight environmental destruction in the Black Sea and along the Danube River, calling such examples of negligence 'ecological sin.' From the Islamic perspective, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written and spoken widely on the sacred nature of the environment since the 1970s. In the Christian world, along with the efforts of the Protestant community, the Catholic Church has issued several pastoral letters since the 1990s. Pope John Paul II wrote a message for the World Day of Peace, on January 1, 1990, entitled “The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility.” In August of 2000, at a historic gathering of more than one thousand religious leaders at the United Nations for the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, the environment was a major topic of discussion.

Revisiting traditions

With the aim to ground environmental ethics in their respective faith and tradition, institutions or individuals in various Christian Churches and several trends of Judaism and Islam have undertaken to reexamine sacred texts, classical sources, normative legal traditions, historical precedents, and the writings of past religious thinkers. The concept of man's 'stewardship' over natural resources has commonly emerged from these undertakings. However, various currents amongst each of the three Abrahamic faiths have expressed contrasted positions vis-à-vis the issue. In the Islamic world, Shi'ite scholarship on the environment developed as early as the 1970s based on reinterpretation and adaptation of traditions. Inspired by these precursors, Sunni scholarship on religion and environment took up in the 1990s in opposition to trends of political Islam that reject the environmentalist approach as Western-inspired. In Judaism debates are on-going about the compatibility of the position of classical thought with recent international or interfaith texts that refer to nature as sacred. Some scholars of Judaism and environment argue that there is an irreconcilable difference in the environmental outlook of Hasidism, based on a view of God as immanent, and that of Mitnagdim who are dualistic. Christian Creationists and other literalists, for their part, have refused to engage with the issue.

Academic scholarship has followed and accompanied religious scholarship. The most noted initiative has been a three-year intensive conference series, entitled 'Religions of the World and

Ecology,' organized at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School to examine the varied ways in which human-Earth relations have been conceived in the world's religious traditions. From 1996–1998 the series of ten conferences examined the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and indigenous religions. It brought together over seven hundred international scholars of the world's religions as well as environmental activists and grassroot leaders. Since 1998, an ongoing Forum on Religion and Ecology has been organized to continue the research, education, and outreach begun at these earlier conferences.

Finally, grassroots environmental movements have developed in many Third World nations, some inspired by deep ecology others by mainstream environmentalism. They have often stated that their claims for social and environmental justice necessitates a domestic and international recognition of their non-dualistic cosmovisions and non-utilitarian views of the relationship between man and nature.

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See also Christianity, Engaged Buddhist Groups, Indigenous Religions, Islam, Judaism, Neo-Pagan Movements, Neo-Shamanism, New Age Movements.

Further readings:

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Oelschlaeger, M. (1994). *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

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