

Below is an excerpt from Lesson 10 of a short course of environmental ethics from the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University by Keith Warner to be used in the first class.

FROM: [http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/environmental\\_ethics/short-course.html](http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/environmental_ethics/short-course.html)

-----

### **The religions discover a moral voice on environmental issues**

Pope John Paul II made a significant contribution to the retrieval of stewardship ethics within Christianity. In 1990 he wrote a World Day of Peace message titled "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," and this, combined with efforts in Orthodox and some Protestant denominations brought most branches of Christianity into dialogue with environmental problems. Pope John Paul II had, in fact, acted upon White's suggestion, naming St. Francis the Patron Saint of Ecology in 1979. In "The Ecological Crisis" he asserted that environmental problems are a moral crisis for all humanity, and that the environment is ethically significant in its own right. In other words, nature has **intrinsic value** as God's creation. Its conclusion reads: "Today, the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone. As I have pointed out, its various aspects demonstrate the need for concentrated efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, States, and the international community." Thus, all members and groups in the human family, regardless of their faith or whether they have faith, have responsibilities to the environment. He drew this conclusion in part from his interpretation of the Genesis creation stories.

The Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, have multiple stories that describe the creation of the cosmos and earth, and offer explanations of religious significance of these stories. The best known is that of Genesis 1 which narrates the seven-day process of creation. Much of the debate over stewardship ethics in the Judeo-Christian tradition turns on a single word in Genesis 1:28: man(kind) is to practice "dominion" over the Earth. Some religious and nonreligious persons argue that this verse and word mean that humans should exercise domination over Earth's creatures. But the same Hebrew term is used to describe God's care of the Earth and its peoples, founded on love and compassion. Among Biblical scholars, a consensus interpretation has emerged: humans are to reflect the same care that the Creator has for humans in our own care for creation. Thus, the term "dominion" should be translated as "duty to care," or stewardship. Genesis 2 provides an alternate creation story, one in which man (sic) is created from the dust and placed in "the garden" to "till and to protect (or serve)." Thus, this creation story as well describes human duties toward the Earth. Although these passages

reinforce the assertion of the Judeo-Christian tradition as anthropocentric, they do provide the basis for asserting that humans have moral duties toward the environment.

### **The Earth as sacramental**

Within Christianity, the vision of living within a sacramental universe complements the idea of stewardship ethics. A "sacrament" is a visible expression of divine love, and Christians celebrate certain rituals (e.g., baptism, eucharist) as sacraments. Recent theological thinking has sought to recover the ancient understanding of these rituals within a broader understanding of the entire created world as having religious significance. This approach re-visions the continuity between the formal sacraments and the physicality of our world. Evidence of this shift in thinking can be found in the substitution of "creation" for words "environment" or "nature." Thus, the scope of religious concern is not restricted to humans or their formal houses of worship, but rather extends out to include all life, indeed, all of the created world.

St. Francis of Assisi is an example of someone who understood himself to live in a world charged with divine life, in a sacramental world. He was named Patron Saint of Ecologists because he celebrated the beauty and diversity of creation through his prayer and preaching. His "Canticle of the Creatures" was the first song written in Italian and in it Francis sang of all creation as brother and sister. This song is an expression of his moral imagination, because it reflects how he understood himself to live a life of essential kinship with all creation. He preached to water, rocks, flowers, birds and other animals. He viewed the entire created world as members of the divine family. His intimacy with creation emerged from extended experiences in the wildlands of the Italian Peninsula. He stands out in Western Christianity as one who lived out a **bio-centric** vision of the moral life.

The sacramental understanding of the universe is particularly strong among Eastern Orthodox Christians. Their most notable leader, the "Green Patriarch," Bartholomew I is renowned for declaring that "crime against the natural world is a sin" in 1995. He has organized numerous trips on a ship to convene religious, scientific and political leaders to create environmental protection initiatives. While some may find the language of "sin" troubling, Patriarch Bartholomew has captured great media interest. The so-called "mainline" or socially engaged Protestant denominations have issued numerous statements and resolutions, and conducted outreach, dating back several decades. More recently the politically influential Evangelical denominations have begun to articulate their understanding of environmental ethics, which some of them describe as "creation care."

## The Greening of Religion

This is a global, trans-religious phenomenon. Buddhist philosophy appears particularly amenable to environmental ethics. Many notable Buddhist leaders articulate environmental concerns with moral responsibility and a core concept that can be translated from Sanskrit as "inter-dependent arising." This concept is a fundamental in Buddhist philosophy. Shared across all schools of Buddhism, it states that phenomena arise together in a mutually interdependent web of cause and effect. This concept underlies Buddhist thinking about mutual relationships of cause and effect, and the essential interdependence of all life. Apparently it pre-disposes some Buddhists to recognizing the importance of environmental restraint, or non-harming. It has had a great influence on **Deep ecology**.

The Greening of Religion is taking place in every religious tradition, yet drawing general conclusions is difficult. This is true in part because making broad definitive statements about religious belief is problematic, but also because many of the factors prompting religious environmental teaching and ethical practice are local, even as our environmental problems occur on a global scale. However, in general, religious leaders seek to present religious environmental ethics less as something that is new, but instead as a traditional set of ethical responsibilities that need to be retrieved and re-presented in a new era. Religious environmental ethics arise within the context of an existing moral worldview. Thus, the emergence of religious environmental ethics are not seen as an external concern that must be grafted on to a tradition, but rather an ancient wisdom that has been lost and must be rediscovered. The Greening of Religion may have terrific potential for sparking broad changes in human society, in the thinking and acting of many people. Realizing this potential will require many people living a moral life according to the vision of these new religious environmental ethics.

### Questions:

1. Do you think religions can foster moral thinking and acting about the environment?
2. What kind of contribution might they best make to environmental initiatives?
3. Do you believe you have a religious responsibility to protect the environment? To encourage others to do so?

*Keith Warner, OFM, is the Assistant Director for Education, Center for Science, Technology, and Society at Santa Clara University and*

*David DeCosse is the Director of Campus Ethics Programs at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics; May 2009*