



6 Religion and Ecological Sustainability: *Beyond the technical fix*

'Driver of change' is not a values-free concept. It suggests that change is the norm, whereas not all change is desirable. For example, biodiversity is worth preserving, so changes that alter biodiversity may be counterproductive. Where change is needed, its direction should be specified. Change should not be made simply for its own sake, but rather for deeper reasons, such as justice. Ideas like 'universal relevance' and 'applicability' are often connected with change, but these concepts should not be taken for granted. Like earlier western concepts of 'social engineering' and 'change agents', these concepts fit within varieties of socio-cultural settings that should be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Religion as a Driver of Change in Ugandan Education. By Wim Westerman and Laurus van Essen, for the ICCO Alliance, 2007

1 Introduction

The way human beings relate to the nonhuman natural world is strongly influenced by religion. All religions, whether global or indigenous, include narratives and practices that shape their followers' attitudes towards the plant and animal kingdoms, the earth and its cycles, the moon and the planets, the stars and the cosmos. Given the widespread influence of religions in the modern world, their significance for environmental sustainability can hardly be overrated.

The seventh Millennium Development Goal (MDG) focuses on environmental sustainability. Participating nations have chosen to strive for three related targets:

- 1) To integrate the principles of sustainable development into national policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources
- 2) To reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water
- 3) To achieve significant improvements in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020

The first target denotes broad concern for the sustainability of ecosystems. The second and third targets focus more narrowly on the sustainability of human communities within these environmental systems. In each case, the effectiveness of national policies in reaching these targets will depend on the degree to which they incorporate the factor of religion.

Other MDGs also affect and are affected by environmental sustainability, albeit indirectly. The first goal, the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, provides a case in point. On the one hand, poverty and hunger tend to increase stresses on ecosystems. For example, the deforestation of Haiti will continue as long as the poor must cut trees to produce charcoal for a bit of cash. On the other hand, stressed ecosystems tend to increase the likelihood of poverty and hunger. In Haiti and many other deforested regions, flash floods from eroded hillsides destroy the fields and villages of the same poor who are forced to cut down the trees. Achievement of the first MDG is therefore intertwined with achievement of the sustainability goal. There are similar relationships between other MDGs.¹ By implication, the significance of religion for environmental sustainability extends beyond the seventh MDG.

2 How religion affects environmental sustainability

Religion affects how people relate to nonhuman nature – for better or for worse. The ambiguity of this relationship has stirred debate ever since the 1967 publication of a controversial article by UCLA historian Lynn White, entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.”² White traces modern environmental problems to Christian attitudes towards nature. By rejecting pantheism and focusing believers on otherworldly salvation, argues White, Christianity set the stage for an attitude of exploitation that spread around the world with the spread of Western technology. In order to reverse the environmental crisis, he suggests that we cultivate instead an attitude of humility towards the natural world. This attitude is found particularly in Eastern religious traditions, although the Christian St Francis of Assisi also provides a counter-cultural example.

Two lasting and more nuanced insights have emerged from the heated debates sparked by Lynn White’s article.³ Effective national policies in support of the seventh MDG should take both into account.

First, religion particularly affects environmental sustainability by shaping human *attitudes* towards nonhuman nature. This process is currently snowballing. As Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, leading scholars on the topic, observe in the Spring 2007 issue of the journal of the Yale Divinity School:

[A] many-faceted alliance of religion and ecology along with a new global ethics is awakening around the planet. Attitudes are being reexamined with alertness to the future of the whole community of life, not just humans. This is a new moment for the world’s religions, and they have a vital role to play in the emergence of a more comprehensive environmental ethics. The urgency cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the flourishing of the Earth community may depend on it.⁴

Attitudes tend to produce enduring patterns of thought and action, often lasting a lifetime. For example, people who genuinely care about forests and rivers are likely to engage in lifelong study of these natural communities, to notice harmful changes, and to take protective and restorative measures when necessary. Thus, some of the first warnings about climate change came from the Inuit, whose deep respect for their Arctic regions – to them respect for the *inuait* or spiritual owners of the universe – enabled them to notice and warn of a warming trend well before it was confirmed by mainstream climatologists. Religious involvement in nurturing such environmental attitudes significantly increases the chances of achieving the seventh MDG.

Religious *beliefs* as well as *practices* shape human attitudes towards nonhuman nature. Beliefs, often embedded in narratives, give people an interpretive framework that provides them with purpose and direction as they relate to the natural world. Religious *practices*, such as rituals, role-fulfillment, and community structures, offer matching guidelines, models, and support systems for relating to the nonhuman world. Together, religious beliefs and practices help to foster a wide range of attitudes that can be characterized as environmental virtues: wonder, respect, sensitivity, attentiveness, care, gratitude, patience, courage, self-discipline, and the list goes on (there are at least 189⁵).

Second, the debates generated by Lynn White's article have yielded the nuanced insight that all religions have the potential to foster both helpful and harmful attitudes. For example, Chinese Buddhism encourages an attitude of humility towards the nonhuman world, as expressed in the preference for a vegetarian diet. However, in the past Chinese Buddhism also contributed to the deforestation of China, through widespread construction of wooden temples. Achievement of the seventh MDG will significantly depend on cautious realism regarding the involvement of religious traditions in policy development.

Fortuitously, many religious practitioners are already engaged in critical reflection on the ambiguous environmental records of their traditions. They have moved from defensiveness to constructive activism, characterized by interreligious cooperation. For example, the language of the Earth Charter (a global consensus document in support of a sustainable future, endorsed by 2,400 organizations including UNESCO) carries the mark of extensive and self-critical interreligious dialogue.⁶ National development policies and programs in support of the seventh MDG will be significantly enriched by incorporating the results of these advanced efforts.

Initiatives, movements and organizations

Religious beliefs and practices currently inspire a plethora of initiatives, movements and organizations in support of a sustainable environment. Development agencies seeking to orient themselves in the burgeoning field of green religion will benefit from two seminal reference works:

- Religions of the World and Ecology Series:⁷ the most comprehensive resource available, this series includes ten volumes with contributions from religious and environmental leaders. The Forum of Religion and Ecology continues to organize conferences and issue publications.⁸
- The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature:⁹ the seminal encyclopedia for the field. The website presents sample articles, associated activities, and links to related professional organizations.¹⁰

These core reference works also contain details and background information about many of the initiatives, movements, and organizations listed below, each of which offers distinct opportunities for development agencies working to achieve the seventh MDG.

World religions

Mainstream religious organizations and their leaders regularly issue statements that explicitly delineate their environmental beliefs and practical commitments. The website of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation provides an overview.¹¹ Such statements can

have considerable influence. For example, when United Methodist women worked with Greenpeace to persuade their Christian denomination to accept a resolution in favor of 'sunsetting' the use of chlorine in the manufacturing of paper and plastics, they jolted the US chemical industry into a seven-year stakeholder dialogue that significantly shaped its sustainability policies.¹² Development agencies seeking to raise public support for the seventh MDG, both at home and abroad, could significantly enhance their efforts by partnering with mainstream religious organizations that are demonstrating ecological leadership.

Grassroots movements

At grassroots level, religious attitudes can significantly contribute to environmental sustainability. In India, for example, the Hindu attitude of respect for life, expressed in the practice of seed-keeping, has inspired the 'seed satyagraha' movement, a successful grassroots resistance effort against Monsanto's patented 'suicide' seeds (genetically engineered to be sterile after the first planting). Similarly, many participants in the 'other globalization' movement are guided by indigenous spiritual attitudes towards nature. Some new and newly revived religious movements, such as Gaia, Wicca, desert spirituality, and many New Age groups, even encourage holistic attitudes to the point of erasing the distinction between human and nonhuman nature. Development agencies can benefit significantly from listening to the people involved in such religious grassroots movements, for example through stakeholder dialogues and expert panels. Here beats the pulse of green religion, and those open enough to hear it will get a jump start in finding out-of-the-box and politically savvy ways to approach the seventh MDG.

Natural scientists

While the mainstream natural sciences thrive by avoiding undue influence from biases, moral values and religious beliefs, a growing number of natural scientists now publicly discuss how their personal faith does in fact provide inspiration and perseverance for their scientific work. A field biologist, for example, may report a deep sense of awe as she explores the complex relationships of a wetland ecosystem. Several religious scientists have become international leaders in the environmental movement, exactly because the connection between their faith and their scientific knowledge led them to understand the need for environmental action (e.g. Hindu physicist Vandana Shiva, who focuses on the role of women in building sustainable communities¹³). Development agencies working towards the seventh MDG would benefit from consulting with religious scientists in the environmental movement. They tend to be well attuned to local ecological and cultural conditions, which allows them to know much about locally appropriate technologies.

Business and finance initiatives

Religious attitudes towards nonhuman nature also increasingly inspire commercial initiatives. Many sustainable farms are run by people whose respect for the soil and the weather, whose care for crops and livestock, and whose understanding of the natural roles of 'pests' and 'weeds' have a distinctly religious dimension. Similarly, today's manufacturers include deeply spiritual visionaries who dedicate their lives to producing solar panels, low-budget water purification systems, and organic clothing. Some initiatives to green the financial branch, such as the Triodos Bank, can also be traced to a religious vision. Development agencies working towards the seventh MDG can multiply the effect of their efforts by leveraging their resources with the considerable expertise and funds of the religion-inspired, green private sector.

Politics

Today's politicians, too, include a growing number whose dedication to sustainable development is rooted in religious attitudes. For example, behind the vision of the Earth Charter lies the pantheistic spirituality of Mikhail Gorbachev. And while many members of today's green parties have moved away from the religious traditions of their upbringing, a good number carry out their environmental mission with overtones of religious zeal. In secularized societies, such as the Netherlands, the religious dimension of green politics may not (yet) be prevalent in official public discourse. However, it does flourish in networks and virtual platforms (such as 'De Linker Wang', loosely affiliated with GroenLinks, the Dutch green left alliance party¹⁴). In working towards the seventh MDG, development agencies sail on a political wind with increasingly religious overtones. By staying attuned, they will also increase the *political* sustainability of their programs.

The creative arts

In the creative arts we also see the confluence of religious attitudes and commitment to environmental sustainability. Examples abound, involving all art forms. In Nigeria, for instance, Susan Wenger's sculptures have helped to protect the Osun groves at Oshogbo, sacred in Yoruba religion. The site has become a symbol for the intertwining of ritual and art with flora and fauna.¹⁵ Development agencies would do well to respect and learn from such intertwining. It suggests that hitting the mark of ecological sustainability requires more than a technocratic fix. In order to respond adequately in each unique natural location, people need attentiveness, inspiration, and creativity. This exactly occurs where religion and art enter the picture.

Non-governmental organizations

Finally, the environmental activism of an increasing number of NGOs and ENGOs has roots in religious traditions as well as less conventional spiritual practices. In the Netherlands, for example, the Encounter of Worldviews Foundation seeks to support sustainable development through the spiritual transformation of world leaders.¹⁶ This trend has significant potential for creating the catalysts needed to speed up the process of reaching the seventh MDG. Development agencies interested in staying current, rather than clinging to dated sustainable development policies (read: anxiously secular and technocratic policies), should keep a finger on the pulse of this trend. They could engage the new spiritual leaders of civil society at a strategic level (for example, on advisory boards), looking to leverage agency expertise with the advantage of vision rooted in spiritual wisdom.

4 Tensions and challenges

Policy makers new to the possibility of engaging religion in working towards environmental sustainability will quickly notice a familiar pattern: the tensions that mark green activism in general also permeate green religion. Religious organizations and individuals may diverge significantly in the following areas affecting sustainable development policy:

- a) attitudes towards nonhuman nature;
- b) attitudes towards modern science;
- c) attitudes towards wealth, consumerism, and free trade;
- d) the question of how to balance human and ecological sustainability.

Development agencies can use their experience in dealing with the diversity of secular green activism to navigate these tensions of green religion as well.

a) Attitudes towards nonhuman nature

While most religions today profess the importance of respect for nonhuman nature, they may diverge significantly on how this attitude is best expressed. Advocates of environmental *stewardship* seek to express respect through responsible management of natural resources. Guided by a theology of divine providence and task delegation, stewardship advocates assume that people can and must acquire the necessary knowledge and technology to manage the environment. They are hopeful and confident. Consequently, they tend to look favorably upon development efforts. By contrast, advocates of ecological *attunement* seek to express respect through harmonization with nature. Guided by holistic teachings, attunement advocates assume that people can never know enough about the complexities of the natural world to manage it well. They try to be humble and accept their vulnerability as human animals. Consequently, they tend to favor a hands-off, precautionary approach, which puts them at odds with more aggressive development efforts. Despite this tension, development agencies can expect to learn from both sides.

b) Attitudes towards modern science

Significant diversity also exists in religious attitudes towards mainstream modern science. Some see a fruitful continuum between science and religion, allowing the results of ecology, toxicology, epidemiology and risk assessment to inform their attitudes and environmental actions. Trusting mainstream risk-benefit analysis, for example, religious organizations may favor limited use of DDT for mosquito abatement in the fight against malaria. Others see a paradigm clash between modern science and religion. Inferentially distrusting scientific findings, they tend to follow intuitive, holistic, often indigenous ways of knowing that fit more naturally with their religious beliefs. Religious groups following this paradigm are likely to oppose use of DDT for mosquito abatement. Governmental development agencies should prepare to interact with both sides in the field, because each is widely represented and crosses regional and religious boundaries.

c) Attitudes towards wealth, consumerism, and free trade

A third tension involves diverging religious attitudes towards wealth, consumerism, and free trade. This tension has significant implications for environmental sustainability, because economic systems affect ecological systems. A good number of religious people interpret personal wealth as a sign of divine reward. Consumerism is their divinely given right. Trusting divine justice, they welcome free trade as its economic mechanism. Many Pentecostals in developing countries, for example, affirm such a 'Gospel of Wealth' theology, at the risk of ignoring its environmental impact. By contrast, other religious people cultivate attitudes of simplicity and gratitude, interpreting consumerism as the worldly vice of greed. They warn that free trade may be an ideology serving corporate greed, hurting both the poor and the natural environment. Their loosely networked movement, represented by a large diversity of religious communities, has significant potential for helping to achieve the goal of environmental sustainability.

d) Balancing human and ecological sustainability

Finally, religious people diverge in their assessment of the appropriate balance between human and ecological sustainability. Although many relegate the issue to divine responsibility,

in practice most religious people do prioritize and favor either human or environmental interests. *Anthropocentric* choices tend to be inspired by religious narratives teaching hierarchical cosmic dualism. Humans are put at the top of an earthly ladder of creatures. Their interests may trump nonhuman interests; to think otherwise would be misanthropy.¹⁷ For example, in this view the development of new housing for slum dwellers should override the habitat need of an endangered species of butterfly. By contrast, religious narratives teaching cosmic holism tend to inspire *biocentric* choices. Humans are one life form among others and will have to make sacrifices when their actions (or even their mere existence) threaten general conditions for life on Earth. To think otherwise would be speciesism.¹⁸ Development agencies should be prepared to encounter both sides in the field, often embroiled in controversies with very practical implications for environmental sustainability.

Although significant, these four tensions do not warrant the conclusion that development agencies would be better advised to steer clear of the religion factor. That would be a naive mistake. Each of these tensions has its parallel in secular discussions and communities. The complexities involved in dealing with them cannot be avoided by excluding religious communities from development efforts.

Instead, development agencies will be *more attuned to the field and therefore work more effectively* if they ‘grab the bull by the horns’ and learn how the familiar diversity that characterizes environmental activism in general also plays out in religious circles. This should not prove too difficult. It may also help those policy makers who are new to the religion factor to orient themselves in the field by means of familiar political coordinates. As they will soon discover, much that goes by the name religion is, above all, ‘human, all too human’.

5 Recommendations

The transformation of human attitudes from ecologically harmful to ecologically fitting is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for environmental sustainability. In most regions of the world (secularized pockets being the exception), religious involvement is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for such attitudinal changes. Although religions have historically not always fostered environmentally constructive attitudes, nowadays most aim to do so. Where they succeed, they provide the world with essential human preconditions for environmental sustainability. Achievement of the seventh MDG depends on this contribution from the world’s religions.

Development agencies can benefit in multiple ways from paying attention to religious initiatives, movements and organizations. The recommendations discussed above are summarized below:

- Raise public support for the seventh MDG, both at home and abroad, by partnering with mainstream religious organizations that are demonstrating ecological leadership.
- Identify out-of-the-box and politically savvy ways to approach the seventh MDG by listening to the grassroots movements of green religion (for example, through stakeholder dialogues and expert panels).
- Learn about locally appropriate technologies by consulting with religious scientists in the environmental movement. For they tend to be well attuned to local ecological *and* cultural conditions.

- Multiply the effects of sustainable development programs by leveraging agency resources with the considerable funds and expertise of the religion-inspired, green private sector.
- Increase the ‘political sustainability’ of agency policies and programs by staying attuned to the increasingly religious overtones of green politics.
- Hit the mark of ecological sustainability by looking beyond a technocratic fix: learn about the indispensable value of attentiveness, inspiration, and creativity from locations where natural flora and fauna intertwine with human ritual and art.
- Avoid the risks of clinging to dated sustainable development policies by strategically engaging the new spiritual leaders of civil society (for example, on advisory boards). Look to leverage agency expertise with the advantage of vision rooted in spiritual wisdom.

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- 1 For a concise overview of the relationship between all MDGs and environmental sustainability, see the ‘climate special’ published by the Dutch ‘Een’ and ‘Hier’ campaigns: <http://www2.ph8.nl/upload/news/141/11/onzeweerd.pdf>.
 - 2 *Science* 155: 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203-1207.
 - 3 For a summary of White’s thesis and the ensuing debates, see Bron R. Taylor and Jeffrey Kaplan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005): 1735-1736.
 - 4 Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “Daring to Dream: Religion and the Future of the Earth,” *Reflections: A Magazine of Theological and Ethical Inquiry* (Spring 2007): 9. Available online at: <http://www.yale.edu/reflections/leadstory.pdf>.
 - 5 For an overview of environmental virtues, see Louke van Wensveen, *Dirty Virtues: The Emergence of an Ecological Virtue Ethics* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2000).
 - 6 The Earth Charter can be downloaded in various languages from the web site: <http://www.earthcharter.org>.
 - 7 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997-2004.
 - 8 See <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/main.html>.
 - 9 Bron R. Taylor and Jeffrey Kaplan, ed. (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005).
 - 10 See <http://www.religionandnature.com>.
 - 11 See <http://www.arcworld.org/faiths.asp?pageID=99>.
 - 12 Called the Ethics and Sustainability Dialogue Group, this stakeholder dialogue involved leading Christian environmental ethicists as well as members of the Chlorine Chemistry Council, the branch organization of the industry.
 - 13 For an interview with Vandana Shiva on the intersection between religion, ecology, and development, see the Church World Service web site: http://www.churchworldservice.org/Educ_Advo/partners/2006/vshiva.html.
 - 14 See <http://www.linkerwang.nl/index.html>.
 - 15 The site has also been placed on the Unesco World Heritage list. See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1118>.
 - 16 See <http://www.encounterofworldviews.org/index2.php>.
 - 17 See, for example, Thomas Sieger Derr, “Human Rights and the Rights of Nature,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 3.2 (Fall 2000): 173-89.
 - 18 See, for example, Richard Ryder, “All beings that feel pain deserve human rights”, *The Guardian* (August 6, 2005).

Colophon

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Chapter 3: A close up of a bronze Buddha's face (Thaddeus Robertson)

Chapter 4: Stained glass window detail from the St. Nicolas church in Amsterdam showing the birth of Jesus (Ictor)

Chapter 5: Totem for village protection in streets of Possotome, Benin (Peeter Viisimaa)

Chapter 6: A chanukia in the interior of synagogue (Artem Efimov)

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