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The Greening of the Papacy

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Nine Guidelines for the Greening of Religion

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Introduction

There lives deep down the freshness deep down things (Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty").

Can the religions of the world serve as sources of wisdom for an ecological age? The answer is "yes," and the best way to learn about how they might do this is to turn to the website of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale (Tucker and Grim). It offers an online source that will provide you with myriad articles, bibliographies, and examples of practical action – all of which make the case that the world's religions can indeed be of service. The greening of the papacy, to which this supplement of the *Journal of Religion & Society* is devoted, is part of a larger process of the greening of religions. Indeed, and happily, they already have a bit of green in them.

Consider Catholic Christianity. It can inspire respect for the web of life by generalizing the sacramental sensibility to include a sense that animals and plants are sacraments, too. It can inspire delight in diversity by encouraging people to recognize that the divine Mystery

within whose presence life unfolds, namely God, is enriched by the sheer plurality of creation. It can inspire concern for the vulnerable by extending its already existing emphasis on the preciousness of each human life to include the preciousness of each living being. It can inspire cosmic awe by encouraging people to see the starry sky above, as understood with help from science and poetry, as an intimation of divine transcendence. And it can inspire a respect for locality by extending the principle of subsidiarity to include local respect for the integrity of local bioregions, whose non-human inhabitants need to be represented in local decision-making.

Moreover, Catholic Christianity can do all this by using responsible and creative interpretations of biblical materials (such as exemplified in this volume); by creating imaginative rituals which are earth-aware and earth-celebratory; by providing people with experiences of beauty in the natural world itself, considering these experiences are part of religious education; by designing sanctuaries which exemplify the spirit of biomimicry (innovative designs modeled on the natural forms of order); by making sure that shared meals support local farmers and include food grown sustainably.

Catholic Christianity has many tools at its disposal, as do all religious traditions, but the development of these tools needs to be complemented (1) by a recognition of the ways that Catholic Christianity can be enriched by a dialogue with other world religions, (2) by a realistic appraisal of the role that religion can play in helping elicit sustainable communities, and (3) by a relativizing of religion itself, realizing that its value lies in its service to life.

These are tall orders. My aim in the remainder of this paper is to offer nine guidelines that might help the Pope take these three steps:

1. Recognize that the well-being of life on earth is more important than religion.
2. Know that the well-being of life on earth requires the building of sustainable communities.
3. Be willing to learn from many religions in the interests of building sustainable communities.
4. Do not overestimate or underestimate the role that religion plays in helping build such communities.
5. Do not confuse religion with belief.
6. Do not reify the world's religions as if they were homogenous, self-contained, and fixed.
7. Recognize that religions can improve over time, becoming greener than they are and were.
8. Recognize that religion is not necessarily about God.
9. Be a creative participant in the greening of religion, adding ideas of your own.

Of course people of other religions must take these steps, too. The purpose of a fruitful dialogue among people of different religions is not simply mutual understanding; it is mutual transformation, in the context of which individuals and communities learn from one another

in ways that deepen and widen, but do not replace, what is most important to them. As Catholic Christians engage in dialogue with people of other faiths, they can be transformed in ways that make them more Catholic, not less Catholic.

I realize that these guidelines, stated in such simple terms require much imagination and interpretation on the part of the reader. The genre of this essay is *ecopoetics*. Or, to be more precise, comparative, transdisciplinary, informal, theologically nourished *ecopoetics*. By *poetics* I do not mean what Aristotle meant: the act of theorizing about literary forms. Instead I mean theorizing about the poetics of ordinary life as lived on a small, beautiful, and crowded planet in light of current needs for sustainable communities. By *ecopoetics* I mean theorizing about the poetry of ordinary life in ways that are mindful of the larger ecology of life, with its terror and beauty. By *comparative* *ecopoetics* I mean theorizing in a way that attempts to be mindful of the many cultures of the world and the larger context of globalization in which we live. By *transdisciplinary* *ecopoetics* I mean theorizing in a way that eludes easy categorization in terms of recognized scholarly disciplines, because the subject matter at hand – lived experience in life on earth – eludes such categorization. By *informal* *ecopoetics* I mean theorizing in a way that draws impressions from experience, in my case thirty years of teaching world religions to college undergraduates. And by *theologically-nourished* *ecopoetics* I mean theorizing in a way that is guided by a theological perspective of one sort or another.

In my case the worldview is that of process theology, which is influenced by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (see also Cobb and Griffin; Epperly; McDaniel and Bowman). Under the influence of John B. Cobb, Jr., my own early theological trajectory was to try to develop process theologies of ecology for the religiously interested general reader (Cobb; McDaniel: 1989). I then turned briefly to inter-religious dialogue in a short book called *Gandhi's Hope* (McDaniel: 2005). But all the while the dominant aim was to focus on life as a subject of theological inquiry in its own right. It is from Whitehead, more than almost any other thinker, that I have learned to believe that life is more important than the very world religions I have had the privilege of teaching for thirty years. One feature of Whitehead's thought is that he thinks that all language functions as a lure for reflection and feeling, and that includes even language that aims for exactness and precision. This is why I stated the nine guidelines so succinctly at the outset. I hope that they might inspire imaginative exercise, even if in the form of rebuttal, on the part of interested readers. Sometimes, as Whitehead recognized, it is more important that ideas be interesting than that they be true (Whitehead, Griffin, and Sherburne: 259). But I also know that an article in this journal requires more commentary than I have given so far, so I will add commentary on some of the nine guidelines by offering short reflections on some additional terms: religion, sustainability, green sensibility, green religion, the primacy of life, the greenness of God, inter-ecological dialog, the qualified relevance of religion, the occasional irrelevance of God, and hope.

Religion

Five days a week, thirty weeks of the year, I teach the world's religions to college undergraduates. I am well aware that there is no agreed-upon definition of religion, and I myself am not comfortable with definitions that link religion with ideas such as the sacred or

the holy. This is because I am influenced by Zen Buddhism, and in Zen an important feature of healthy living – healthy religion, if you will – is to avoid dichotomies between sacred and profane. I was once an English teacher for a Zen Master from Japan who told me that religion lay in being fully awake to washing dishes. I asked: Is it because in Zen everything is sacred, even washing dishes? He responded: No, it is because washing dishes is washing dishes. I got the point. It seems to me that in some traditions that we call religions, being mindful in the present moment, without being preoccupied with extraordinary experiences or with sacred realities, is the heart of religion. Religion is not always about the holy.

So what is religion? In this essay I simply mean the historical traditions that are dealt with in textbooks used in the West in colleges and universities. A typical example might be Michael Molloy's *Experiencing the World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge, and Change*. As I write this essay I have numerous books like his on my shelf and some of them right in front of me: Huston Smith's *The World's Religions*, William Young's *The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues*; Gary Kessler's *Ways of Being Religious*; Oxtoby and Segal's *A Concise Introduction to the World's Religions*. I will choose Molloy's book as a guide for identifying the religions.

For Molloy the world's religions include Oral Religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Baha'i. They also include alternate paths such as Scientology, Theosophy, Cao Dai, Rastafarianism, and Falun Gong. And they include contemporary paths such as Naturalism, Paganism, and Eclectic Spirituality.

For my part I teach at a small, liberal arts college in the United States. Typically my own students fall into three groups. About a third of them are religiously affiliated, about a third define themselves as spiritually interested but not religiously affiliated, and about a third are anti-religion and not too sure about spirituality either. Among the religiously-affiliated some are Christian, some Jewish, some Muslim, some Buddhist, and some Hindu. A few self-identify as Neo-Pagans and some among my East Asian students identify themselves as Taoist. For most of them these identifications and affiliations are not rigid or exclusive. When we get to the section of the course on eclectic spirituality they are drawn to the eclecticism and find themselves wanting to learn from different traditions, even as they might be rooted in one or another. Even the students who are anti-religion are drawn to eclecticism.

The path of eclecticism may seem strange and problematic for those who see "loyalty to a single tradition" as a defining feature of healthy religion. This kind of loyalty has been especially important in Abrahamic faiths. But in the broader view of history, eclectic spirituality is a spiritual cousin to other ways of being religious that have flourished in so many parts of the world. In traditional China, for example, many people were and still are shaped by Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist, and folk ideal: a phenomenon which scholars call diffuse religion. I suspect that, in the coming decades of the 21st century, increasing numbers of Jews, Christians, and Muslims will become diffuse in their own ways. And perhaps, so I hope, they will become more aware of the many dimensions of religion from which they can learn.

Many of the textbooks I use have an opening chapter introducing the idea of religion to students, and often, in this context, the texts borrow from Ninian Smart's adumbration of seven dimensions of religion. For my part I find Smart's scheme a helpful reminder that religion, whatever it is, is more than belief, more than intellectual assent to ideas (104). Here are the seven dimension of religion:

1. Experiential: the particular experiences, attitudes, and moods highlighted in a given tradition
2. Philosophical: the ideas that individuals and groups find truthful
3. Narrative: the stories that individuals and groups find truthful
4. Ethical: the guidelines that a people seek to follow, enabling them live responsibly with one another and the surrounding world.
5. Ritual: the ritual practices that are important to a people.
6. Communal: the communities in which people to which people belong.
7. Material: the tangible structures that represent and embody the ideals of a religion.

Smart's scheme is helpful because there is a tendency among some of my Christian students to enter class thinking that the philosophical dimension is most important, perhaps because they have been influenced by Protestant Christianity with its emphasis on belief. I work hard at trying to get my students to think of religion as more than a system of beliefs, albeit with varying degrees of success.

As I introduce the world's religions to my students, I also explain to them that, from the point of view of some scholars today, the whole idea of *world's religions* is contested. I introduce them to the idea, developed by some scholars, that the idea is a social construction invented by western elites, foisted upon the rest of the world, in order to map the world and perhaps control the world for imperialistic ends (Masuzawa). I tell them that I will continue to use the phrase, but that we should be careful not to assume that western understandings of religion are appropriate to all societies. I explain that, for purposes of talking about traditions such as Confucianism and Taoism and Buddhism, it might simply be better to speak of *life-guiding cultural traditions*. The difference between religion and culture is in some ways a western idea, too, and for many purposes *cultural traditions* is perhaps better than *religion* as a comprehensive term.

At the end of many of these textbooks there is also a chapter on the future of religion and emerging trends in religious life. In these texts the authors indicate challenges faced by participants in the world's religions as they enter the 21st century. These challenges typically include modernity, modern science, women's rights, sexuality, globalization, and, of course, the environment.

Sometimes my students and I focus on globalization and the environment. We do this because we recognize many environmental issues transcend national boundaries and are indeed global in their horizons. Global climate change is an obvious example. But I want my students to understand how a certain kind of globalization influences how religiously-influenced people can, or will, engage environmental issues.

Globalization

By cultural globalization I mean the global process amid which (1) ideas, images, and practices originating in one land or community are abstracted or de-territorialized from their local contexts, (2) such that they *circulate* within and across many other lands and cultures by means of migrations, the internet, films, books, television, radio, and education, and are then (3) replanted in other lands, cultures, and contexts often in quite surprising ways, where they are combined with cultural traditions with which they were previously dissociated. When the ideas are combined in fresh ways in other settings, a kind of hybridity becomes inescapable. The hybridity can be conflicted or harmonious, constructive or destructive, unhealthy or healthy. But the blending is unavoidable.

Sometimes hybridity can be psychologically or socially damaging. To my mind, hybridity is unhealthy (1) when it robs local traditions from their last vestiges of self-identity; (2) when it is expressed as a false and shallow cosmopolitanism which is aloof from the poor and powerless of our world, as occurs when urbane “world citizens” with privilege and class celebrate their own width of perspective by staying in five-star hotels while others live in poverty; and (3) when it results in people becoming too wide and porous in their own perspectives, but somehow losing a sense of personal moorings, as seen when people are open-minded but lack any kind of personal center for their lives. Additionally and importantly, the very word “hybridity” is misleading if it suggests the impure product of two formerly pure ingredients. All cultural traditions have emerged as combinations of insights and practices which were once separated but then combined (Vasquez and Marquardt: 58-64; Glissant and Wing: 32).

Still, the word “hybridity” is helpful if it suggests a healthy, creative, and respectful blending of ideas, images, and practices from different cultural traditions that helps individuals and communities flourish in ways that are important to them. Indeed, hybridity is an especially important option for people who might otherwise be enclosed and perhaps even trapped within rigid self-identities that lead them to create unnecessary boundaries between themselves and others: religious fundamentalists, political fundamentalists, ethnic fundamentalists, and scientific fundamentalists, for example. In our globalizing world, the insulation is not itself sustainable.

Sustainability

In the contemporary context, healthy hybridity is quite desirable if we are interested in the greening of religion. This is because, in point of fact, no single religious or cultural tradition has all the ecological wisdom needed for the emergence of sustainable communities. A corollary to this is that there is more ecological wisdom in all the religions combined than in any considered alone. The upshot of this is simple. Insofar as we are interested in sustainable communities, those among us with religious affiliations have much to learn from one another, and those among us who are “spiritual but not religious” have much to learn from all the traditions, too.

Sustainable communities are humanity’s best hope and perhaps their – our – only real hope for the long-term future of human life on earth. The communities at issue can be villages, cities, workplaces, universities, counties, provinces, or nations. They are

communities which are creative, compassionate, participatory, respectful of diversity, humane in their treatment of animals, ecologically wise, and spiritually satisfying, with no one left behind. To the degree that they embody these traits, the communities are sustainable in two senses. They can be sustained into the indefinite future given the limits of the earth to absorb waste and supply resources, and they provide sustenance, spiritual and material, for human and non-human life.

The greening of religion emerges when religiously-minded people begin to acquire sensibilities which are conducive to the emergence of sustainable communities. The candidates for greening include all of those mentioned by Molloy above: Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and others. But two among the traditions are especially important since their members constitute such a large portion of the world's population. Together, Christians and Muslims form about half the world's population.

Green Sensibilities

What, then, are the sensibilities which need to be acquired if sustainable communities are to emerge? Of course there are many of them, but I will highlight five, all of which I try to amplify in the "Planet Beauty" section of an international website I edit, *Jesus, Jaẓẓ, and Buddhism*.

The first sensibility is what we might call *respect for the web of life*. This involves recognizing that the environment is not simply an issue among issues but rather a context for all issues, because it is the web of life. This larger web of life is a context in many ways. It is a historical context inasmuch as it forms the deeper history of which human history is a part. It is an aesthetic context inasmuch as its landscapes, waterways, and diverse forms of life provide nourishment for the human imagination and models for human design. It is a sacramental context inasmuch as it is a window through which divine light shines, finding its way into the human heart. It is a social context inasmuch as its many living creatures form a larger society of shared joy and suffering. And it is a moral context inasmuch as its other livings, especially highly sentient animals, demand respect and care in their own right, even apart from their usefulness to human beings.

The second sensibility is consonant with this sense of the planet, and we might call it *delight in diversity* or the *enjoyment of multiplicity*. Human beings have evolved over time in ways that lead them – us – to take special care of our own kind, however understood, but to be fearful of strangers who seem different from us. But the needs for sustainable community today require that we expand the circles of empathy beyond similarity to difference and, still further, that we learn to appreciate different kinds of difference. For example, people with different personalities are different from other people in certain ways, whereas they are different from other animals in still other ways, and different from plants in still other ways. If sustainable communities in which people live with respect for diversity, both human and ecological, are to emerge, then they – we – must be able to take delight in diversity and enjoy the multiple kinds of difference that present themselves to human life. This delight and enjoyment can be encouraged by the natural and social sciences.

The third sensibility is more focused on particularity than the first two. I will call it *care for the vulnerable*. By this I mean the capacity of individuals and communities to take special

heed of those who have aims and purposes of their own as individuals, who seek to be happy and avoid suffering. The living beings at issue can be human beings or other animals. They are beings whose points of view can be imagined by human beings and whose subjective states of joy and suffering, boredom and excitement, can be shared. In more anthropocentric societies these qualities of consciousness, perspective-taking, and state-sharing have often been restricted to human beings, with the result that compassion has been restricted to compassion for human beings. But in a sustainable community the capacities for compassion are widened to include any living being who might otherwise suffer at human hands.

The fourth sensibility moves from the local to the cosmic; we might call it *cosmic awe*. By cosmic awe I mean the sense of being small but included in larger wholes that transcend the earth and provide human beings with perspective. These wholes include the solar system with the sun at its center; the Milky Way galaxy; the wider universe with its billions of galaxies and galactic systems; and, for people like me, the still wider and more inclusive environment of a Life in whom all universes unfold: that divine milieu who can be addressed as “God.” The value of this fourth sensibility is not that it necessarily highlights the moral urgency of environmental issues on Earth, but rather that it provides a sense of wonder which, if understood poetically as well as scientifically, can nourish the soul and inspire local action. One of the best examples of how cosmic awe provides such context with help from science and poetry is the *Journey of the Universe* by Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, both of whom stand in the tradition of Thomas Berry, who stands in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin.

The fifth and final sensibility might be called *respect for local community*. By this I have in mind local communities of people, to be sure, but also the larger biotic communities in which people live. I mean eco-communities. In urban settings, replete with environments that are humanly-constructed, it is sometimes difficult for people to remember that their communities include more-than-human worlds: worlds of birds, trees, waterways, plants, animals, soil. Their closest contact with the more than human world is through domesticated animals and the rhythms of the weather. But these points of contact are indeed points of entry into an appreciation of the depths of local settings, both human and ecological. Gradually even people in urban settings can develop a sense of place and loyalty to place. Such loyalty rightly translates into a desire to build communities – local habitats – that are conducive to sustainable living in *this* place, with *these* people, with *these* animals and plants. When it comes to a greening of consciousness, a sense of planetarity and cosmic awe are by no means enough. There needs to be a celebration of the local and the particular and a willingness to live in one place, loyal to its needs.

The Primacy of Life

Let us say that we – you and I – are spiritually-interested and religiously-affiliated. We think of ourselves as Christian or Jewish, Muslim or Hindu, Buddhist or Baha’i. But let us add we do not want to make gods of our religions and institutions because, deep down, we believe that life is more important than religion. We think the purpose of religion is to serve the well-being of life, not the other way around. And we recognize that the well-being of life

includes more than human life. It includes the lives of other animals, plants, and the biosphere.

If we feel this way, we can find support in the following lines from Whitehead in *Modes of Thought*:

There are perspectives of the universe to which morality is irrelevant, to which logic is irrelevant, to which religion is irrelevant, to which art is irrelevant . . . The generic aim of process is the attainment of importance, in that species to that extent which in that instance is possible (12).

Whitehead's point is that, amid our experiencing of and responding to the world, we are always aiming at something that is very important to us: namely, a satisfying and concrete relation to the world in which we find ourselves. This desire to live with satisfaction relative to the situation at hand is life itself, as lived from the inside, moment by moment. Understood in this way, life is more fundamental than morality, logic, religion, and art. To be sure, morality, logic, religion, and art are means by which we articulate and direct the desire to live with satisfaction, but the desire itself – life itself – transcends whatever wisdom is offered by the four guides. This is one sense in which life has primacy over religion.

Indeed, there is still another way in which life has primacy. It is that, when it comes to ethics, the beneficiaries of ethical treatment are not religions as such, but rather people and other living beings. If we assume that the aim of ethics is to treat others as ends in themselves and not just means to ends, then we best recognize that other living beings are the ends, not religions.

Moreover, there is also a third and more theological way in which life has primacy. At least this is the case given the process perspective that shapes my own approach in this essay. This third way is entailed in the idea that the mystery at the heart of the universe – God – finds life more important than religion.

The Greenness of God

In process theology God is deeply green, not in color but in spirit. Recall the eighth guideline offered earlier: Recognize that God can be understood in deeply green terms. In process theology God is understood as a womb-receptacle, filled with empathy, in which the whole of the universe unfolds, and also as an indwelling lure within each living being which lures that being toward the ideal satisfaction relative to the situation at hand. As a womb-like receptacle filled with empathy, God feels the feelings of everything that happens in the universe as the feelings occur and God is affected by what is felt. God feels and is affected by the joy of the colt at play in the pasture and also the terror of the sheep being taken to slaughter. The joy and the terror become part of God's ongoing life, which is therefore filled with beauty but also with sadness. God then responds to what is felt, moment by moment, by bequeathing fresh possibilities to each and every creature which, if actualized by the creature, offer the best for the situation at hand: that is, the most satisfying possibility for responding to what is occurring, given the needs of all the other creatures. Process theologians speak of this fresh possibility as the initial aim within the creature; in poetic terms, the calling of the moment. For my part I think of it as God's prayer within each creature, a prayer for that creature's happiness, given what is possible.

This indwelling lure is not the creature's own desire for satisfaction but rather a felt goal or aim by which the creature's desire can be guided. Christians might speak of this guiding goal as the calling of the divine spirit within the creature. Humanistic psychologists might speak of it as a lure toward self-actualization of wholeness. But the point here is that this spirit or lure in human life is not identical to the teachings, practices, commandments, or guidelines of religions, which are but earthen vessels by which the spirit or lure can be felt. In theological terms, the calling of God within a person's heart is different from, and sometimes at odds with, the callings of religion. Sometimes people are called to go against their religions in the interests of following the calling of God, which is always toward love.

When we consider the tragedies from which the world has suffered in the name of religion, we may find ourselves wishing that more people knew, as did Whitehead, that life is more fundamental than religion. Not just human life but all life. After all, we are not the only creatures seeking satisfaction in the moment at hand. The dogs and the cats, the minnows and the manatees are seeking satisfaction, too. And they, too, carry within their lives a calling to realize their potential. If the world's religions are to serve the needs of sustainability, their participants, among whom I count myself, must recognize that life is more important than religion.

Inter-Ecological Dialog

The idea that all living beings, minnows and manatees as well as humans, are beckoned by God to realize their potential does not mean that we humans can honor their will to live. As Whitehead recognized, life is robbery. Living beings must kill other living beings in order to live. Every time we wash our faces we kill bacteria, every time we find diseases we kill viruses, and even if we do not eat cows we eat cabbages. The question is not: Can we live without robbery. The question is: Can we rob as lightly and gently as possible, minimizing the harm done and doing the best we can? And here again, the answer is, yes. Can we live as non-violently as possible? And here again, the answer is, yes.

But this points to one among many reasons why, in an age needful of sustainable community, it is important for religiously-minded people to embrace the second guideline noted at the outset: be willing to learn from other religions in the interest of serving life. For the fact is that different religions have different gifts, and compassion for animals has not been the strongest of suits for the Abrahamic religions, at least as compared with Asian traditions such as Jainism, from which the theme of *ahimsa* is most richly expressed among the world's religions. If, as I suggest, concern for the vulnerable is one important dimension of sustainable living, then, in fact, Jainism has more to offer than, say, Christianity.

Similar situations apply in terms of the other four sensibilities identified earlier. Consider the enjoyment of multiplicity. In her marvelous book *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, Diana Eck tells us that one of the most important lessons she learned from Hinduism was not what she expected. She had expected to learn about a deep Oneness of which all things are expressions, otherwise called Brahman. But what she learned when she went to India for the first time was that Indian culture, better than her own American and Christian-influenced culture, embraced plurality and diversity. Whereas the Abrahamic faiths tend to privilege One over Many, Eck proposes that the Indian traditions hold a better balance, reflecting a spirit of One and Many. From Hinduism she learned about

the Manyness of God. If, as I suggest, delight in multiplicity is an important dimension of sustainable living, then Hinduism may have more to offer than, say, Christianity.

Or consider respect for local community. To be sure, no single religion has a monopoly on such respect. Nevertheless, the universalizing traditions, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, have had a tendency to think in terms of global outreach and thereby neglect the importance that local places can have in the human imagination and in social life. Indeed, Christianity and Islam have been entranced by the idea that their religions were a-geographical and thus, by means of a single scripture, portable. If armed with a Bible or a Qur'an, you can be a Christian or Muslim anywhere in the world, even if you do not have a sense of place. If, as I suggest, having a sense of place is an important dimension of sustainable living, then the indigenous or oral traditions, particularly those rooted in place, may have more to offer. The point is obvious. If religiously-minded people are to help bring about sustainable communities, they – we – need to learn from each other.

The Qualified Relevance of Religion

Additionally, religiously minded people – we – need to avoid overestimating or underestimating the role that religion can play in human life. If we consider the fact that human consciousness is but the tip of an experiential iceberg and that much of our lives occur behind our backs in the interstices of our brains, and if we consider the fact that the conscious dimensions of our lives are shaped by many, many factors, only some of which are associated with religion, then it is an exaggeration to say that religion is inordinately determinative of a person's life. Even if a person's religion is primarily a matter of fervent belief and oft-practiced rituals, it remains the case that much of a person's conscious life is shaped by culture, genetic dispositions, historical circumstances, family relations, personality orders and disorders, emotional vicissitudes, degrees of exercise, and diet. Fortunately (at least from a process perspective) the lure of God within a person's life takes into account all of these factors and then provides a person with the best possibility for the moment. But religion plays only a part in this larger whole. This means that, when we consider the five dimensions of green consciousness noted earlier, and consider the hope that religion might help, we ought to recognize that it can be but one factor among many.

On the other hand, we ought to not underestimate the role that religion plays. In fact, religion can play a powerful role in helping guide a person's decisions and emotions, especially in desperate circumstances but also in circumstances of daily life. Consider the role that a daily practice of prayer or meditation can have in grounding a person's life. A daily practice truly can play a role in helping a person become more centered and responsive to circumstances.

The key, then, is to take each situation into account and ask, "To what extent and in what ways is a consideration of religion relevant to the circumstances faced?" Sometimes it is relevant, and sometimes not. The greening of religion can take us only so far if our interests lie in helping build sustainable communities. We need art and engineering, politics and health care, commerce and compassion, too.

The Occasional Irrelevance of God

The question of religion's influence in human life is different from the question of God's influence. Whitehead is distinctive among religious philosophers in proposing that God can function in life quite apart from religion or religious emotions, and indeed that God can function secularly and that the concept of God can be relevant to ways in which the world is explained in secular terms. From the Whiteheadian perspective developed by many process theologians, God can be present in human and non-human life as an ever-adaptive, non-coercive yet guiding presence, quite apart from whether such guidance is recognized (on the part of human beings in whom the presence is effective).

Process theologians such as John B. Cobb, David Ray Griffin, Marjorie Suchocki, and I go further and propose that there are several different ultimate realities around which religious lives can be oriented, among which God is but one. In Zen Buddhism, for example, the ultimate reality is not so much God, understood as a guiding presence, but rather the absolute interconnectedness of all things as awakened to in the immediacy of the enlightenment experience. This interconnectedness is not a guiding presence or even an absolute compassion; it is the sheer suchness of all things in their connections to one another, quite apart from questions of good and evil.

In Advaita Vedanta Hinduism the ultimate reality is not so much the sheer interconnectedness of things, or the guiding presence of a personal God, but rather the unfathomable yet creative abyss of which all things are manifestations, whether peaceful or violent. This abyss, which Whitehead calls Creativity, is not a reality with preferences for one way of living over another, but rather the pure activity of all things as they arise and perish.

These matters are important, not only for speculative reasons, but also for the sake of sustainable living. It is possible that Buddhist sensitivity to the ultimacy of interconnectedness is more relevant in some circumstances than faith in God, even if, as it happens, God is an influential guiding presence that awakens people to the ultimacy of interconnectedness.

The multiplicity of ultimates can be an important feature of that pluralistic consciousness, delighted by diversity, which is important to sustainable community. But it points toward something still more important in an age in which Christians play such a prominent role, and in which the very idea of God is so often used as a bludgeon by which people try to win arguments and souls. There are times at which, as people work together in multi-religious contexts to build sustainable communities, God becomes irrelevant. Not so much the reality of God that works in human hearts, but the idea of God that is entertained in the human mind. Particularly when "God" becomes monarchical in tone, carrying the heavy weight of excessive authority, God becomes a focal object in the imagination and a distraction from the primacy of life itself. Of course there are more than a few biblical traditions which picture God in service to life. These are to be welcomed. This is, to my mind, the very God revealed in Jesus. But the God who is in service to life, the God who is humble rather than vain, the God who is found in compassion not ideology, may not mind being a wallflower at times, appreciating occasions when the very creatures she sorely loves, take heed of one another in kind and caring ways, falling in love with their own beauty. It is from Buddhists that I have learned over the years that "God" can get in the way of God.

Hope

The hope of our time, then, is that people who are animated by one or another of the world's religions can learn from each other, hold onto their own favored concepts with a relaxed grasp, fall in love with the beauty of the earth, accept their occasional irrelevance, repent of the systemic weaknesses of their traditions, and help move their evolving traditions forward into more life-serving ends, before it is too late. Some of the essays in this volume wrestle with the real possibility that it is already too late. As a process theologian with a love of poetry, I cannot quite go there. With Gerard Manley Hopkins I find myself trusting in a "freshness deep down" that is in the natural world itself, and that is animated by a spirit who need not be named to be followed. Sometimes, occasionally, the religions of the world, with all their finitude, are servants of this spirit. Catholic Christianity can be a servant to this spirit. After all, Catholics do not worship Catholicism; they worship God. And God's aim for the world is only secondarily that Catholicism flourish. It is primarily that life flourish. "Choose life," says the Lord in Deuteronomy (30:19). The hope is that Catholics, in dialog with people of other faiths and no faith, can help us make this choice. As this occurs, there is indeed a greening of the papacy.

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