

Religion and the Environment

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins

Unlikely Alliances

Notes On A Green Culture of Life

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Introduction

[1] One wintry morning last January while driving to campus, I turned on the radio to discover an interview-in-progress on NPR's *All Things Considered* – a segment of their series “Crossing the Divide,” intriguingly titled “Evangelists and Environmentalists Join Forces.” Eric Chivian, a biochemist at Harvard, and Richard Cizik, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, were describing how they had formed a political alliance to grapple with “so-called life issues.” Their first order of business, they agreed, was to combat global warming. As Cizik’s qualifier “so-called” suggests, not everyone agrees on what a “life issue” is, or should be. Since I had been thinking quite a bit about the idea of a “culture of life” and the possibilities for “greening” this popular rhetoric, I was fascinated by the common ground these groups were finding. Of course, there are some seemingly fundamental differences between the worldviews of “evangelists” and “environmentalists.” In the words of the biochemist Chivian, Cizik might have assumed he and other secular scientists were “latte-sipping, Prius-driving, endive-munching, *New York Times*-reading snobs. And we [scientists] might have seen them as Hummer-driving, bible-thumping, fire-breathing . . . snake-handling fundamentalists.” That these sorts of stereotypes circulate, and that they are troubling, is certainly true. But are they insurmountable obstacles in the way of a shared political vision? Not necessarily.

[2] Lest I replicate such stereotypes, let me say a few words about the categories I am using in this essay. First, I want to acknowledge and engage the simplistic binaries that function so powerfully in our world, even while recognizing that these binaries are never quite so simple. Broadening the categories that Chivian and Cizik represent, I will instead work with “the religious right” and “secular humanists.” Following E. O. Wilson and others, I am employing the phrase “secular humanist” to encompass environmentalists and scientists who do not allow religious doctrine to shape their environmental beliefs.¹ I will consider the religious right as an expansive category including, most prominently, evangelical Christians.² I sometimes revert to “left” and “right,” realizing that these categories, like the others, are murky. In the two case studies that follow this introduction, I will attempt to map these binaries in such a way as to break them down into the more nuanced categories that better reflect the complex belief systems of real people.

[3] The apparent incompatibilities between the religious right and secular humanists often involve oversimplified conceptions of “the other” combined with misunderstandings about environmental issues. Some of the more contentious ideological differences include:

- The belief in creationism versus the belief in evolution;
- The skepticism about, or outright denial of, global warming versus an urgent desire to take action on that issue;
- The belief in dominion over nature versus the belief in responsible stewardship or environmental protectionism;
- The debates over “right to life” issues, primarily abortion and euthanasia, but more recently including stem cell research.

Undergirding these issue-based disagreements are ideological assumptions about how “the other” views morality and lives life. The right often accuses the left of moral relativism, while the left thinks moral absolutism is a form of totalitarianism, especially when morality becomes legislated. Political and scholarly discourse often perpetuates these accusations. For instance, notable scholar and cultural critic Henry Giroux laments the rise of religious fundamentalism in the U.S. for its “rampant anti-intellectualism” and “Taliban-like morality” (313). As such divisive rhetoric indicates, there are clearly very real obstacles to finding common ground on environmental and social issues.

[4] Faced with such binary divisions, the idea of “life” as something we all share, something that could unite rather than alienate people with different beliefs, demands further reflection. Popular usage of the phrase “culture of life” tends to connote two major issues – abortion and euthanasia – especially after the high-profile Terry Schiavo case. Perhaps some readers

¹ See Wilson (3-4) for an outline of the competing worldviews of secular humanists, like himself, and religious figures, like the imaginary pastor to whom his recent book is addressed.

² Again, I acknowledge the oversimplification in doing this. For instance, the religious right sometimes includes Catholics, as in the powerful conservative group Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT). This alliance has produced a series of joint declarations surrounding the issue of life, contributing to the reduction of the idea of life to a handful of issues (primarily abortion) and promoting a binary (good/evil) conception of the world. For a discussion of ECT, see Lauritzen.

will share my surprise, then, at discovering that the best-known recent source of the phrase, Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*EV*), did allude to the environment as one of the major issues such a culture should address. A look at the late Pope's expression of this agenda suggests that bringing the environment to life, so to speak, could be a way to foster both environmental and social justice.

[5] The (binary) formulation of a human struggle between a culture of life and a culture of death – a formulation that seems to reinforce the kinds of left-right divisions I have been discussing – frames *EV*. Even so, a careful reader should perceive a more comprehensive vision for social justice as the major impetus behind the culture of life outlined in this text. Indeed, *The Gospel of Life* mentions a range of issues that are all important to its mission of promoting the common good and protecting the weak, including “opposing poverty, hunger, war, torture, environmental degradation, and the death penalty” (Lauritzen: 16). Specifically, here is some of what the former Pope had to say about the environment in 1995:

As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the ecological question – ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to “human ecology” properly speaking – which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life. In fact, “the dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to ‘use and misuse,’ or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to ‘eat of the fruit of the tree’ (cf. Gen 2:16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity” (42).³

The language here echoes environmental discourse, emphasizing our “responsibility towards the environment” and the “ethical direction” necessary to anticipate the well-being of “future generations.” Challenging the popular criticism that Christianity, especially in its creation story, justifies the exploitation of nature by humans (see White for the oft-cited expression of this criticism), the Pope acknowledges the limitations the Bible places on that purported “dominion,” reminding us that ours is “not an absolute power.” Perhaps most importantly, this encyclical suggests that a sense of environmental ethics should apply to “every life” – a phrase that gestures toward social justice for all people even as it asks to be interpreted more broadly, to include more than just human lives. Unfortunately, the environmental dimensions of this text have fallen away in mainstream discourse. Likewise,

³ The quotation is a reference to his 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December): 34. Notably, Tucker references this quotation along with other Catholic teachings that could be used to help articulate a shared global ethics (101-12). She argues that we must “expand CST to include the environment as a primary context for sustaining life on the planet” (96).

the social agenda outlined in *The Gospel of Life* has been reduced to a few select issues that play out in the political arena.⁴ This reductive politicization of the catch-phrase “culture of life” fuels the left’s urge to pigeonhole the right as morally totalitarian on individual rights but neglectful of broader issues like poverty, war, and the environment.

[6] Environmentalists are pigeonholed in their own ways, as secular humanists with no moral ground to stand on. To echo the Pope’s words, they are accused of ignoring “moral laws” in favor of biological ones. It is partly the eco-centric ideology of environmentalism that has put off the religious right, and many others, who see environmentalism as “a ‘liberal’ cause that prioritize[s] the needs of plants and animals over those of human beings” (Cizik in Martin’s NPR interview). But, more and more environmentalists, most notably those involved with the environmental justice movement, have begun to shift their priorities and recognize that environmental issues *are* social and moral issues – that is, they are integral to human life as well as to the natural world. The evangelical Cizik describes an example of such an issue, asking: “If coal-burning utility plants emit nitrous oxides, mercury, which is then transmitted into our rivers and lakes, ingested by fish eaten by pregnant women who then pass it along to their unborn children and babies, then isn’t that a sanctity-of-life issue?”

[7] Interestingly, the religious right is not alone in strategically deploying the rhetoric of life and death in recent years. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus’s contentious essay, *The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World*, proclaims that environmentalism is effectively “dead,” having become too policy-oriented, too issue-driven, too compartmentalized, and too focused on technical solutions. These authors suggest it is time for a new environmental vision that articulates “a set of core beliefs, principles, or values” (32). According to Shellenberger and Nordhaus, such a vision will only begin to emerge when the environmental movement contends with (and to some extent, emulates) “America’s political turn to the right” (2004: 11; these issues are addressed further in 2007). Their essay points to the pressing need to combine environmental politics with discussions of morality that, to quote Rabbi Michael Lerner, “speak to [our] spiritual consciousness” (17).

[8] Perhaps theorizing environmental life in terms that resonate with already-circulating culture of life rhetoric could be a start toward revitalizing a “dying” movement. My aim in this essay is to begin rethinking culture of life rhetoric by extending it to environmentalism – that is, by imagining what a *green* culture of life would look like. While I am mostly concerned here with what this might mean for environmental politics, I also believe that reinvigorating culture of life discourse and reconsidering what life means – from an environmental perspective – could benefit the religious right as well. I wonder: What new religious and environmental alliances might emerge if life was defined in broader, more inclusive terms – ecological terms, in that they privilege networks and relationships between all living things, and religious terms, in that they privilege community, spirituality, and concern for the Creation? I now turn to two brief case studies that illustrate the complex intersections between religion and environment as they constellate around the idea of life.

⁴ Lauritzen traces some of the ways in which “political expediency” has led to such reductionism (16).

Documenting Life: *March of the Penguins*

[9] My first case study, the documentary *March of the Penguins*, is an example of how lessons about human life can be drawn from our representations of nonhuman nature. While its moralizing is sometimes overbearing, the film also contains the potential for interspecies empathy via a more expansive understanding of what “life” is – an understanding that conjoins environmental and religious values. Since its premiere in the U.S. at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005,⁵ *March of the Penguins* has wowed audiences with its dramatic beauty, light-hearted humor, and spectacular footage of Antarctic scenery. Part of the film’s appeal lies in its implicit claim, which is typical of the wildlife film genre, to educate while entertaining.⁶ *March of the Penguins* combines information on penguin breeding rituals with stunning images: sleek penguins nuzzle one another with exquisitely curved necks; the tips of icebergs etch a rugged skyline as they jut out from strikingly blue water; and brilliant sunsets color vast skies with deep red and orange streaks.

[10] The film also engages audiences through its anthropomorphism of the animals – the way we can see ourselves in them and draw lessons from what we see. For instance, to an American audience, heavily influenced by a Turner-esque notion of national identity, early long shots may recall visions of pioneer ancestors, covered wagons, and westward migration. As they trudge along over seemingly endless ice and snow, heads bowed against the elements, the marching penguins are akin to Westward-bound pioneer settlers in their heartiness and fortitude. The penguins’ survival in an exceptionally harsh environment thus demonstrates the triumph of civilization over nature and allows well-known human narratives to be inscribed on this remote landscape.

[11] Morgan Freeman’s opening voiceover offers clear instructions for understanding these narratives about nature and culture – both human and penguin cultures, which are often conflated. This film, he says, is both “a tale of life over death” and “a story about love.” The film adopts human discourses about love to give it a humorous, light tone – a tone that threatens to foreclose critical engagement with the social and environmental politics of the film. When Freeman announces, for example, that “like most love stories, it begins with an act of utter foolishness,” most audiences are likely to smile and nod knowingly. However, there is only one kind of love portrayed here: heteronormative love. The film’s primary message is that a family is constituted by strong male and female parents who are loving, committed, loyal, and intent on breeding. In the film’s words, penguin mating rituals constitute “an ancient and complicated affair. There will be tenderness; there will be separation; there will be reunion; and if their partnership is successful, there will be new life.” The representation of procreation as a natural urge is overwhelming; it comes second only to eating and basic survival, and even those are presented as necessary mainly to sustain offspring. Like the long march itself, the penguins’ desire to successfully breed a chick seems

⁵ Director Luc Jacquet’s French version premiered first. According to Joe Leydon, the French version of the film is arguably even more anthropomorphic than the American version; it focuses on only one penguin couple and has actors “voice the penguins murmuring sweet nothings to each other” (60).

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the genre’s conventions, see Chris. She also notes that *March of the Penguins* is a “bona-fide hit,” citing the fact that it “earned \$70 million domestically within three months of its U.S. release to become the all-time, second-highest grossing documentary” (205).

to be “guided by some invisible compass within them.” Once the egg is laid, “the couple has but a single goal: keeping their egg alive.” Still, failure is a possibility. In one unfortunate couple’s case, when “the ice claims their egg, and the life within it,” their “partnership” dissolves, “the long march in vain.” When death occurs, the couple has “no reason to stay” and returns, defeated, to the sea.

[12] Culture of life rhetoric resonates even more strongly with other specific lines of narration in the film. For instance, we are told, “the tiny beating heart within the shell cannot survive more than a moment’s exposure to the freezing air.” Late in the film, when a leopard seal kills a female penguin who has returned to the sea to feed, Freeman tells us that this predatory act “actually takes two lives: that of the mother, and that of her unborn chick, who will never be fed.” Politically aware American viewers are likely reminded of the Laci Peterson case and the subsequent Unborn Victims of Violence Act of 2004, which defines violence against a pregnant woman as two separate crimes. The “unborn chick” is distinguished from “unborn child” by a mere two letters; one almost expects to hear Freeman say “child,” given how closely the language echoes contemporary discourse. Such rhetoric bolsters the left’s critique of the religious right for its narrow-minded focus on individual rights (here encapsulated in a “focus on the family”) over broader social issues (in this case, global warming).

[13] It is no surprise, then, that pro-life groups have embraced the film as a sure sign that nature sanctions their political agenda. The film’s success in the U.S. is partly a product of the country’s sociopolitical climate, which Cynthia Chris describes as “a particularly American discursive environment . . . in which evangelical Christianity is staging an escalating attack on established science” (207). She points out that the rhetoric of creationism trumps any mention of evolution; the penguins’ behavior is said to have been “designed” rather than to have evolved. Residents of a god-like environment, the animals themselves become “not only a signpost for the ‘natural,’ but a sign of the holy” (206). It is easy to read the penguins’ march as a metaphor for life more generally – or, for some viewers, “an allegory for the Christian spiritual journey” (Walker: 17).⁷

[14] And yet, the film’s politics are not so clear-cut. There are some ambiguous moments in which inter-species empathy seems to expand the notion of what life means. Seeing ourselves in the penguins allows us to identify with a mother penguin as she mourns the loss of her chick, who has failed to survive the winter’s harsh storm cycles. A similar scene pulls at spectators’ heartstrings as a community of penguin parents tries to protect its young when a bird of prey attacks a group of young chicks. As a hovering, circling camera conspires to make the chicks appear fearful, the camera’s depiction of the penguins *as humans* again works to facilitate empathy. These emotional scenes illustrate that penguins do go through the experience of death that supposedly separates animality from humanity.⁸ During these

⁷ Walker also reminds us that scientific data complicates the film’s celebration of penguin monogamy, since approximately “15 per cent of adult emperors change partners every year. And some penguins engage in homosexual activities” (17).

⁸ See Derrida for a discussion of these allegedly distinguishing features, including “speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institution, technics, clothing, lie, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gifts, laughter, tears, respect, and so on” (137).

attacks it is the *community*, rather than particular family units, who responds to the tragedy. To a degree, then, traditional kinship categories dissolve, allowing some respite from an otherwise dominant metanarrative of heteronormativity.

[15] As the human-animal distinction loosens, we might begin to see nonhuman animals as “not that different from us” in new kinds of ways. For instance, if we can see ourselves in the penguin adults, who are protecting future penguin generations from demise, then perhaps we can also see ourselves in the predators – the threat to the film’s much-heralded “new life.” This predator identification opens up the possibility of a more honest self-reflection, in which emperor penguins are seen as an independently valuable species, and in which we come to terms with our frequent role as the perpetrators of the environmental destruction and social injustices associated with, in this case, in global warming.

[16] Unfortunately, the film never acknowledges global warming directly. The narratives of life in this film are presented as not only natural, but timeless and enduring. Freeman says, in closing: “And they will march, just as they have done for centuries, ever since the emperor penguin decided to stay – to live, and to love, in the harshest place on earth.” Even when the film’s narration could be referencing global warming, such as when we are told that “[t]he ice continues to melt, returning the borrowed water to the sea,” there is no suggestion that this melting is out of the ordinary. Like the penguins’ mating ritual, this phenomenon has occurred, seasonally, for thousands of years. The Antarctic environment, like the penguins themselves, seems hard-wired to persevere.

[17] The two special features that cap off the DVD version of the film generally align themselves with the documentary’s politics. But the second feature, National Geographic’s “Cittercam,” is worth noting. This feature’s narrator wonders whether the penguins “stand a chance” in the face of “a world threatened by climate change.” Even as it suggests that this threat “galvanized” scientists to count the population, the narration perpetuates a sense of Antarctica’s remoteness from everyday life. It is a “land lost to eternal ice” that seems like “the last place on earth.” Such language makes it difficult to connect with this “frozen desert,” and perhaps, difficult to feel responsible for it. Yet, in a dramatic rhetorical reversal, the feature ends by replacing its prior use of the benign phrase “climate change” with the more worrisome and politically charged “global warming.” It also warns that the “balanced” environment of ice that is the penguins’ “foundation of life” is potentially being disrupted. Despite its insistence that “[i]t will take a long term investigation to find definite answers” to whether global warming is actually happening, this feature does remind us that “the future of the world’s emperor penguins, and our own” go hand in hand.

[18] Culminating in this reminder of our interconnectedness as species sharing an environment, the film leaves spectators in an ambivalent place; we see ourselves in the penguins *and* in the filmmakers, in front of the camera as well as behind it. I would like to think that this film, in its fruitful ambiguity and its reverence for life’s mysterious beauty, opens the door for productive engagement between religious and environmental discourse. In the end, the religiously inflected focus on the heteronormative, procreative family that might alienate some secular viewers collapses into a message about species interconnection and the ethical responsibility to value all life forms. The film’s invitation to form an

interspecies culture of life and its implicit plea for protecting the Creation are catalysts for rethinking what “pro-life” means and what constitutes a moral issue.

A Green Culture of Life: Ruth L. Ozeki’s *All Over Creation*

[19] I turn now to my second case study, a lesser-known text: Japanese-American writer Ruth L. Ozeki’s 2003 novel *All Over Creation*. This novel offers a much more explicit example of how life can be understood as environmental, and how a “green” conception of life can unite unlikely allies in confronting social issues. *All Over Creation* raises questions about unexpected political alliances, specifically: What might a coalition of “young radical environmentalists” and “old fundamentalist farmers” have in common? (267). The answer, which plays out in rural Idaho, is: More than you think. Ozeki unites these diverse political factions around a shared ideal of environmental and social justice. In doing so, her novel formulates a fictional “green culture of life,” which combines compassion for others, respect for natural and cultural diversity, and a dedication to rectifying geopolitical inequality.

[20] Set amidst the millennial anxieties of 1999, *All Over Creation* brings its odd cast of characters together in the fictional town of Liberty Falls, Idaho. Lloyd and Momoko Fuller are unable to run their farm; Lloyd is nearing death, after a series of heart attacks, and Momoko is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Cassie Quinn, whose family farm has neighbored the Fullers’ for years, and her husband, Will, have been caring for the aging Fullers. The Quinns are also poised to take over the Fullers’ land. Cass and Yumi Fuller, Lloyd and Momoko’s daughter, were childhood friends until an affair with her high-school history teacher, Elliot Rhodes, led to Yumi’s pregnancy and subsequent abortion. Lloyd’s outrage at her abortion prompted Yumi to run away from Liberty Falls, and she has not been back since – until Cass beckons her home to help sort out the details of the land transfer, make arrangements for Momoko, and bid Lloyd farewell.

[21] When she returns home, Yumi immediately begins to see none other than Elliot Rhodes, who happens to be in town on behalf of his public relations firm, Duncan and Wiley. History repeats itself, yes, but with some crucial differences: Elliot has shed his countercultural beliefs and entered a world of public relations “spin,” and the rules of the farming game have changed to accommodate global agribusiness. Elliot has returned to Liberty Falls to monitor a group called the “Seeds of Resistance,” a gang of environmental activists who drive from town to town in a biodiesel-fueled van spreading information about genetically modified foods to local communities. The Seeds have come to Liberty Falls to learn about *Fullers* Seeds, Lloyd and Momoko’s business, which sells exotic seeds to buyers all over the world.

[22] If *March of the Penguins* points toward species interconnectedness, then *All Over Creation* extends this idea to include not just animals but plant and crop species – especially the food we eat. For example, the Burbank potato’s origin is described as both cultural and natural: “Centuries of cross-pollination, human migration, plant mutation, and a little bit of backyard luck had resulted in the pride of Idaho, the world’s best baker, the Russet Burbank” (4). To a degree, then, humans and nature have always shaped each other. But, “natural life” is also implicitly defined as “pre-market,” as-yet-untouched by socioeconomic forces, even as the possibility of such nature is becoming more and more rare. This concept of life helps denaturalize the primacy of capital and celebrate life’s environmental origins. We are

frequently reminded that life “starts with the earth. How can it not?” As the title promises, “creation” is very much at issue, and the phrase “in the beginning” is repeated throughout the novel (xiii). Thus, religious and environmental rhetoric combine to promote nostalgia for an Eden in which humans live in harmony with each other, and with their environment. The novel deploys this nostalgia to criticize global agribusiness as a destructive force that works, in a sense, against nature.

[23] If the novel’s primary villain is global agribusiness (in particular, genetically engineered crops), then its hero is Lloyd Fuller – one of the “fundamentalist farmers” I mentioned earlier. Despite his religious fundamentalism, which seems out of step with the Seeds’ countercultural lifestyle, he is a “guru” to them – they describe him as: “an icon! Totally salt of the earth. The American farmer making a lonely stand, defending his seed against the hubris and rapacious greed of the new multinational life-sciences cartel” (104, 106-7). Lloyd’s “lonely stand” confronts present-day social inequity through a nostalgic ideal of farming as environmentally and socially just labor.

[24] While this is obviously an idealized notion of the past, it nevertheless functions to unite the various political groups in the novel. Lloyd does not have to take his stand alone. The Seeds, other activists from all over the U.S., and even local Idaho residents join him for the “Idaho Potato Party,” an educational and political event at Fuller Farms in the final section of the novel. An effort to resist global forces by nurturing these “seeds of resistance” in local communities, the Idaho Potato Party is “an educational event, like a teach-in, to wake people up to the magnitude of this hazardous corporate agenda that is being implemented behind our backs” (265). Elliot Rhodes attempts to put his p.r. “spin” on the event: he “can see it playing as a story of domestic terrorism – honest American farmer, salt of the earth, his crops targeted by the antiprogress forces of the Luddite left sort of thing. A vicious attack on the American way of life” (278). He also appeals to the churchgoing Idaho residents on moral grounds, publicizing and decrying a sexually-explicit website that the Seeds run on the side, to help fund their activism.⁹

[25] Although the Fullers do receive one complaint letter calling Lilith a “harlot” and “whoremonger” and invoking religious rhetoric, the majority of Liberty Falls’ fundamentalist farmers are ultimately unconvinced that the questionable morality of Lillith’s virtual nudity outweighs more important issues, like keeping their crops under local control (230). Elliot’s rhetorical ploy fails, and his facile dismissal of environmental activism is called into question. The teach-in at the Fullers’ brings diverse groups together to celebrate life and learn about a range of issues, including “worm composting and gene splicing, the secret to effective protest letters and the ethics of patenting life, the latest in biotech research and European boycotts of American GMOs” (291). Life emerges as an issue capable of uniting seemingly disparate political factions and rallying them in a more or less coherent protest against the harmful effects of global agribusiness.

[26] In this text, then, a “green culture of life” includes diverse people and species. Life is defined as that which is not commodifiable – or should not be. The novel’s critique of

⁹ “Lilith’s Garden of Earthly Delights” features a naked Lilith (one of the Seeds) “as Mother Earth,” performing moderately erotic acts with vegetables (185-86).

genetically modified foods reminds us that food is life, and so are the bodies that eat that food. Women's bodies become especially important, since these are the producers of new life for humanity and often the most affected by environmental toxins. The morality of global agribusiness – and by extension, any other producer of environmental toxins – becomes central. Other moral issues, like Lilith's nudity and Yumi's abortion, are present in the novel but tabled; most of the town's religious residents overlook what they see as Lilith's inappropriate acts, and Yumi and her father put aside their opposing views on abortion so that they may see eye-to-eye on more wide-ranging social issues.¹⁰

[27] In the end, the novel formulates a techno-communal stewardship of nature as Fullers Seeds goes wireless; Yumi operates the website from Hawaii, and Cass distributes the seeds from Idaho. The promotion and sustaining of life is their goal, rather than the patenting, buying, and selling of life to fuel the accumulation of individual wealth. Ultimately, the novel imagines a nonviolent, nonhierarchical community that affirms the value of both human and natural life, yet recognizes the contingency of such life as lived within a global political order. In this sense, Ozeki's novel illustrates Michael Lerner's point that "speaking to spiritual needs actually leads to a more radical critique of the dynamics of corporate capitalism and corporate globalization" (17). What unites the book's disparate characters in this radical critique is not a shared identity – not a religious affiliation, or a racial category, or a national allegiance – but a shared longing, for socially and environmentally just communities that have not yet been realized. Ozeki invites religious groups to bring their numbers, their hopefulness, and their grassroots mobilization tactics to bear on the socio-environmental needs of local communities as well as the global issues that affect us all. In *All Over Creation*, a respectful, sustainable understanding of life provides the basis from which this invitation to find common ground is extended.

Conclusions: Searching for Common Ground

[28] In his recent book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, E. O. Wilson asks for dialogue between secular humanists and religious fundamentalists, despite their differences in worldview. In a letter to an imaginary pastor, he argues that only through an alliance between science's facts and organized religion's political strength can we hope to save the Creation. He defines environmentalism in terms of social justice, claiming that the shared goal of this alliance should be to "raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life as possible" (6). He asserts that religious leaders should be involved with this agenda because of their desire to protect the Creation and their concern for moral issues like global poverty, which are impacted by environmental degradation. Finally, Wilson reminds his imaginary pastor that they "are both humanists in the broadest sense: human welfare is at the center of our thought," and he urges that these groups "forget [their] differences" and "meet on common ground" (167).

¹⁰ I do not mean to imply that abortion is not itself a complex social issue. Indeed, many argue that "abortion is a sign that society has failed to meet the needs of women" and that grappling with broader problems, like poverty and an inadequate educational system, are the best ways to limit the number of abortions (Gragnani: 16-17).

[29] Wilson is not alone in imagining such common ground. Preserving “life” is an issue that has garnered attention from hybrid political groups such as the Green Cross, the Evangelical Environmental Network, the Restoring Eden project, the Evangelical Climate Initiative, and the umbrella group National Religious Partnership for the Environment, among many others. These groups seem to be realizing that environmentalism is a moral, even a religious issue. More than that, they are starting to answer Pope John Paul II’s call for “a serious and in-depth exchange about basic issues of human life with everyone, including non-believers, in intellectual circles, in the various professional spheres and at the level of people’s everyday life” (95). Mary Evelyn Tucker concurs that there is a need to “respond to the critical challenges of the environment in language that is not only steeped in Catholic theology and piety but speaks beyond the boundaries of the Catholic world . . . in language that moves the minds and hearts of those who yearn for guidance and direction on these issues” (98).¹¹ The same need to think, write, and communicate across and beyond ideological boundaries applies not just to the Catholic Church but to all religious and environmental groups.

[30] While it is heartening to see attempts, like those by Wilson and these other organizations, to imagine and create new alliances, achieving common ground will not be easy. We need to tone down our divisive rhetoric and be more generous in our understandings of difference. We need to realize, for instance, that not all environmentalists are moral relativists, and that many members of the religious right are concerned with social justice. We need to be less rigid with boundaries and understand that environmental issues are social and moral ones. There are some issues over which people will have to agree to disagree – like Yumi and Lloyd Fuller do with regard to abortion – in order to form the strategic coalitions necessary to deal effectively with increasingly complex environmental and social problems. We need to be open-minded and recognize that “the other” has something valuable to teach, whether that something is the scientific basis for global warming, or the humility, moral urgency and collective hope required to address these urgent problems (Tucker: 96).

[31] Even Giroux, whose lambasting of fundamentalism I cited earlier, recognizes the “growing need to address the search for community” (a need the church often fills for people) and develop “a language of possibility” in addition to that of critique (314). He acknowledges, “for identity to become meaningful in a democratic society, it must be nourished through a connection to others, a respect for social justice, and a recognition of the need to work with others to experience a sense of collective joy and a measure of social responsibility” (315). To see environmentalism as social responsibility and, perhaps, as a means toward collective joy, requires a shared sense of ethics. Life – broadly understood as the Creation and the many lives, including human ones, that it encompasses – should form the core of such an ethical worldview. To return to Chivian, we might do well to remember that “there is no such thing as a Republican or Democrat, a liberal or conservative, a religious or secular environment. We all breathe the same air and drink the same water.” In a way, a new kind of fundamentalism might emerge from such a recognition, a fundamentalism Chivian describes as “a universal, even divine, truth.” Specifically: “We all

¹¹ Of interest to those at Creighton and other Jesuit universities is Tucker’s challenge: “Who can give better intellectual leadership and moral guidance to this effort than the Jesuits?” (99).

breathe the same air, we all drink the same water . . . And our children, if we leave them in an impoverished world, then we will have committed not only something that's foolish, but it's deeply ignorant and morally inexcusable" (in Martin interview). This lesson about interconnectivity is not the exclusive domain of secular humanists. Rather, Rabbi Lerner reminds us, it "is rooted deeply in the spiritual wisdom of virtually every religion on the planet" (17).

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