

**WORLDVIEWS ON FIRE:**

## Understanding the Inspiration for Congregational Religious Environmentalism

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Addressing participants at an Alliance of Religions and Conservation conference in Nairobi during the fall of 2012, Mr. Mounkaila Goumandakoye, the African Regional Director of the United Nations' Environment Programme's Office for Africa, acknowledged that the commitment of faith groups to heal the earth is one of the "driving forces for positive change as humanity is grappling with challenges of colossal consequences."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Goumandakoye is not the first global leader to place hope in faith groups. Ban Ki Moon, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, made a similar plea before the Copenhagen climate summit of 2009, noting that religious groups "can have the largest, widest and deepest reach" on the summit's impact.<sup>2</sup>

Faith-based environmentalists indeed can be a powerful force for environmental leadership. But what are the driving forces that spark their own commitments and actions? Why do some commit their hearts and energies to the earth, while others remain unconcerned, or devote their time to more traditional religious causes? Understanding the beliefs and motivations of faith-based environmentalists is critical to leverage this important global movement. As Jeffrey Sachs, economist, United Nations advisor, and author of *The End of Poverty*, acknowledged, "scientific, engineering, and organizational solutions are not enough. Societies must be motivated and empowered to adopt the needed changes."<sup>3</sup> Religious energy supplies some of those motivations. Those motivations deserve more detailed explanations.

In recent decades, scholarship within the field of religion and ecology has explored the textual and symbolic foundations of religious reverence and concern for the environment, and studied religiously grounded sustainable practices. Religiously inspired environmental action has grown nationally and internationally.<sup>4</sup> Still, while bishops, imams, rabbis, and ministers have issued scores of official environmental statements, and theologians have written volumes of essays, religious teachings do not necessarily translate into action. Environmentalists share the pew or the prayer mat with people for whom climate change is not a burning issue. This gap in the often presumed link between beliefs and behavior demands a more critical, empirically rooted understanding of how religious ideals translate into behavior change.<sup>5</sup> Following in the spirit of an emerging, pragmatic line of inquiry, I conducted twenty-nine focus groups with sustainability committees and some individuals at American faith congregations of varying traditions to examine the core factors driving their activism.

My research shows that scientific literacy is an essential part of the consciousness of active faith-based environmentalists. Their worldviews are marked by awareness of the multiple interdependencies in which we live. These deeply interdependent and scientifically literate worldviews engage a strength of religious traditions: in particular, strong commitments to social justice and the moral energy to work toward it. Their interdependent worldviews and commitments to social justice together spark a potent motivator—the consciousness of participating in a world in which all actions affect others. In other words, they are galvanized by what I am calling moral globalization.

The practical power of moral globalization goes along with new doctrinal syntheses of traditional beliefs and environmental concerns. But the faith-based environmentalists with whom I spoke do not feel they are leaving their traditional religions behind to institute new forms of “dark green,” post-modern, post-theistic religion. This is partly a result of my research design, which largely, but not exclusively, targeted mainstream congregations. While I recognize that emerging forms of nature religion are also significant loci of cultural reinterpretation and environmental action, I chose mainstream congregations precisely to explore how established religious views adapted to new ecological realities.<sup>6</sup>

The fascinating religious phenomenon that emerged from this research is novelty as loyalty: loyalty to a tradition that insists the tradition *change* in response to ecological awareness. Participants felt that the core values of their tradition *demand*ed a new green mission and new doctrinal syntheses. They insisted on reinterpreting core values to express the tradition's longstanding values appropriately in a changing world. Convinced that their traditions require concern for the neighbor who is recognized certainly in the suffering human, but also in manifold ecologies and beings, they perceived a new moral obligation to take environmental action.

In this essay, I will explore the core features of environmental spirituality observed in focus groups with Americans of diverse faith traditions. Across groups, green consciousness seems to be transforming different traditions in similar ways. Scientific literacy, combined with a passion for social justice, led to intensified appreciation for the multiple dimensions of interdependence in which we live and through which our actions affect all life. In short, spiritual and religious worldviews are expanding, and an environmentally conscious process of moral globalization is underway.

### **Design and methods**

Participants were chosen from mainstream congregational sustainability committees and included some individual interviews.<sup>7</sup> Leaders of regional and national faith-based environmental coalitions (such as GreenFaith and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment) identified local leaders or congregations. Twenty-nine focus groups were held with over 130 participants. These included Baptists (WA), Buddhists (NJ), Catholics (suburban NJ, urban NY, rural WA), Conservative Jews (NY), Episcopalians (suburban and urban NJ), megachurch Christian Evangelicals (FL), Hindus (NJ), Jains (NJ), Muslims (DC), Native Americans (Navajo and Gwich'in- AZ), Reconstructionist Jews (IL), Reformed Christians (NJ), Reform Jews (AZ), Presbyterians/PCUSA (MD), Unitarian-Universalists (NJ), migrant workers (WA), southern pastors (NC), urban environmental justice advocates (NY), and self-identified agnostics and atheists (NY).

Attempting to limit my susceptibility to theoretical presuppositions, I chose an inductive method using focus groups.<sup>8</sup> That is, participant statements provided the primary data as the starting point for analysis. I asked questions about congregational activity, personal motivations,

how beliefs developed, and behavior change, and employed semi-structured questions to permit systematic comparison and analysis.

In focus groups, participants reacted to each other and examined issues in depth. As a result, this methodology surfaced the full range of personalized religious beliefs that exist even within the same faith tradition. I transcribed all discussions and coded transcripts both inductively (assigning a code to every statement to capture all themes) and deductively (looking for particular themes associated with religious environmentalism). I used NVivo 8 content analysis software (QSR Software, Melbourne) to sort, compare, and rank the responses. This essay represents analysis of a small portion of the data collected.

Next I will discuss four major motivators toward moral globalization.

### **1. Scientific literacy: seeing the light**

Scientific literacy is essential to the success of religious environmentalism. Without it, concern is non-existent, motivation is impossible, and behavioral change is unreasonable.

Scientific literacy was an outstanding shared concern of religious environmentalists. Statements about scientific knowledge comprised the largest category by far, and occurred independently more than any other single topic. Scientific literacy was discussed in virtually every conversation. It is an inescapable foundation of active concern for the environment.<sup>9</sup>

#### *High literacy*

Most of the participants were highly scientifically literate. They are deeply mindful of the diversity of life and the complexities of ecosystems, and have some scientific understanding of what climate change means. This was especially true at one of the most radically sustainable congregations, the Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of Monmouth County in New Jersey. One congregant estimated that a third of the congregation was once employed at Bell Labs. Many members were engineers and scientists, including a Nobel Laureate. A participant's spouse had worked on an early mathematical climate modeling project involving raw climate data, which contributed to the unusually high level of awareness of the empirical reality of climate change. As a member of the Green Sanctuary team noted, this was a unique situation.

Jim: We have had the benefit of a scientific elite here, which has been really extraordinary and which has lived my consciousness of what it means to a community to have so many people who are scientists.

That high level of sophistication prepared the community to understand the reality of global environmental changes, incorporate that awareness into their spiritual worldviews, and draw moral connections.

Such extraordinary literacy was not necessary, however. Other participants were much less immersed in a rigorous scientific culture, but were nonetheless predisposed and willing to accept the authority of science and registered the information they received from books, films, news stories, and lectures. For example, Charlie was an energetic lay leader in his Maryland Presbyterian church. Charlie's comments appear throughout given his gift for expressing the paradigmatic spirit of many other participants.

Charlie: I come to this environmental effort because I appreciate, based on what I've been told by people who I respect, scientists and things like that, that what I do impacts those that can't take care of themselves.

### *The knowledge gap*

Participants also specifically discussed how they perceived a widespread lack of scientific literacy to be a major obstacle in motivating others in society to take climate change seriously and act accordingly. I am calling this extremely important concept the "knowledge gap." When asked to describe what they felt prevented greater action, participants felt that scientific illiteracy and denial about climate change played a major role.<sup>10</sup> Ralph, a Baptist geologist, succinctly connected scientific awareness, moral honesty, and responsible action by pointing to the impact of ignorance, willful or not.

Ralph: I think we need a change of perspective, which I think is happening. The person who drives the Hummer at 8 miles per gallon, and those who see that person, understand that that person isn't being greedy, that person isn't being wealthy, that person is dirtying our swimming pool, all of ours, his too. And, I'd say we have a great ability to be willfully blind to the consequence of our actions, to externalize costs, and now we see that we are affecting

ourselves. I think the ability to change that is one of our great hopes.

Many participants agree that basic information is still needed by many in their congregations, neighborhoods, and society as a whole. This need was made clear when one participant (not a regular member of the ecological committee) offered that she had just learned “how we get light.” Charlie had been leading a river cleanup with a local Muslim girls’ club, and took the opportunity to educate them. In the process, he enlightened a middle-aged deacon as well.

Charlie: I was trying to tell the students about the impacts of their work and I said, “Now just think now. We have electricity. Where does electricity come from?” Some of them said, “It just comes from a plug in a wall.” I said, “It doesn’t. It comes from a man shoveling coal into a furnace. All that coal’s burning up. How many of you use a hair dryer every day?” Of course all the girls raise their hands. “Just remember now when you plug it into the wall what happens to that and they are people who live in that community, and what happens to the pollution that that causes.

Beth: I would just say, Charlie, you just simplified how we get light for me. I never really thought about it. Okay, it’s somebody shoveling coal into... Then I know the coal dust and all the people getting killed in the mines and all of that... So if you depress a few people, you probably enlightened a lot more.

Others in the group had developed their earth literacy through multiple routes: bird watching, gardening, and conservation advocacy for the Chesapeake. Across groups, participants came by their knowledge through means as simple as having a frugal respect for produce in season, or as dramatic as volunteering for dolphin rescue squads. All had some level of environmental literacy which enabled them to make connections and commitments.

## **2. Global interdependence: sensing the links**

The multiple interdependent dimensions of life were absolutely foremost in the minds of the research participants. After scientific literacy, awareness of interdependence was the second most compelling motivating factor for faith-based environmentalists.<sup>11</sup> Engaged religious

environmentalists are strongly aware of how people affect one another globally through both institutional and personal choices. Practical inter-faith collaborations, which are common among faith-based activists, further expanded the experience of interdependence and the range of personal affiliations. The common practice of sharing wisdoms and teachings underscored their sense of planetary links. In other words, participants were clearly aware that the world is “flat.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, global interdependence comprised four sub-themes: awareness of economic interdependence, social interdependence, ecological interdependence, and spiritual interdependence.

### *Social and economic interdependence*

Charlie explained that he became involved in environmental work when a stream on his property was destroyed by a development without storm water controls.

Charlie: I worked at a polluting industry, a steel industry, for thirty years. We would do things at night that we wouldn't do during the day because at night nobody would see it. I never had thought about it as an ethical situation... What I did in my property wasn't going to affect Mary at all. But what I'm finding out is that that's not the case, that what I do on my property affects the downstream person.

Recognizing the impacts of pollution transformed the act of draining industrial chemicals into the river by night from one which merited no second thought, to one which provoked a religious revelation of responsibility for the neighbor.

Sarah, a young Evangelical Christian, explained how her view of individual sin was influenced by her study of sustainability and social theory. For her, “almost any sin is both personal and social and having social repercussions.” Sin meant not being in the right relationship with God or with each other. The social repercussions of injustice meant that “it might not be as simple as to point a finger at one individual person and say I think this is your sin.” But despite the complexity of moral accountability in an interdependent world, she felt strongly that the responsibility to wrestle with her actions and their impacts remained.

*Ecological interdependence*

In sensing ecological interdependence, people were rethinking their relationship with ecosystems, plants and animals, the water and air. Some participants were just becoming aware of the interlinkages between chemical and physical systems; others had more sophisticated knowledge. Donna experienced a conceptual breakthrough: all the elements of the earth are the same throughout earth's history. There is no place to find new clean earth if we pollute what we have. Her new mental model of the interconnection of earth's very matter led to a new appreciation for preserving it.

Donna: Two or three years ago, it had never really occurred to me that the earth is here, the air is here, and somehow we breathe this air, and the Egyptians breathed it in the past, and the dust moves around. That this is what we have, and we use it well or we don't; this is what we're given.

A Catholic woman from New Jersey, Judy, already recognized the chemical links of toxins in her water systems and was already angry about their impact. "It kills me when I see the stuff people put on their lawns. Or when they dump stuff down the storm drains, thinking it's a sewer. But it's not. Eventually it's affecting all of us somehow."

During our discussion, the Evangelical Christian group shared an insightful and humorous discussion of air pollution. Paul, the president of an environmentally friendly cremation business, noted how molecules moved around in a physical system, regulative legislation moved incentives around in an economic system, jobs moved around in the globalized industrial system—and the final health impacts moved...nowhere.

Paul: The government is going to impose regulations on U.S. businesses so that a lot of them shifted offshore to countries that have less environmental controls. There was a recent study outside of San Francisco, and they can actually take air samples and coal actually has a signature to it, and air pollution developed from coal has a signature. They're collecting air pollution samples and 20% of the air pollution in that part of California, comes from China. So here we are, we shipped it all to China, and it comes right back.

Q. And it all comes back! What does that tell us?

Dan: Is that why we live on the East Coast?

Allison: Wait ten years; it will blow over. (Laughter)



Paul's sophisticated knowledge of carbon chemistry undergirded a cynical, but accurate, recognition of pollution's permeability. Like original sin, it affects everyone, no matter where one might think it originated.

### *Spiritual interdependence*

Participants sensed the moral rightness of respecting the order of the universe. Members of a regional Chesapeake-area Presbyterian council (PCUSA) were developing a conscious awareness of their spiritual relationship with the cosmos as part of their uniquely theological commitment to the environment. They explored a spiritual understanding of an identity linked with the cosmos, with God and creation, being not "apart *from* Creation, but a part *of* Creation." While acknowledging that these ideas were still being worked out, one member began to clarify the distinct contribution of his faith-based environmentalism and what he called "earth spirituality."

Bill: Our understanding of the nature of God and the nature of the cosmos ... that is what the church can speak about. We don't have any special expertise in energy generation or in water conservation or things like that but we do have a special way of speaking about the moral and spiritual issues.

Another member of the discussion expressed that spiritual connection through a concrete example of the personal bonds created by knowing a creature's name.

Branch: We were at a meeting in our church where somebody suggested that we ought to get to know the names of the plants in your woods and their individual characteristics, and I was reminded of another meeting where four homeless people were at that same room and they started by saying "My name is...my name is... So we're not homeless. We have names." And then this justice stuff came into play for me again. That you treat plants that you know with care and justice, just like you do a person whose name you know.

Complete silence followed Branch's comment as people digested what resonated as a profound and simple truth: plants are fundamental to our ecologies and well-being. They must be protected to survive; they have needs, and indeed, have names. They are deeply valuable; they are family.

Place also has significance. Madeleine, raised Catholic, now Presbyterian, commented, “The God that I believe in is with us here and I’m connected to it. And that means the place that I’m in as well. I’m not Buddhist, but I think my connection to the environment is sort of Buddhist-like with the Incarnation added.” For her, this entailed clear obligation to work for environmental healing and justice. Her incarnational sense of the divine in the world did not “let her off the hook” as an activist, but provided her with a sustaining sense of God’s immanence. Many participants were enriched in this way by a cross-fertilization of spiritual meditations and teachings on nature and environmental care from other traditions, gained from reading or from interfaith collaboration. As a young Muslim activist told me, “Any good teaching is the lost camel of the Prophet!”

Acknowledging the multiple levels of interdependence expressed the faith-based environmentalists’ perception of unity. For some, this unity is shaped and experienced institutionally. For Rafael, a pesticide educator working with immigrant apple pickers in rural Yakima County of eastern Washington, the Catholic Church is a source and expression of that unity.

Rafael (Catholic): For me the most important thing is the unity that it inculcates in us, and that Catholicism teaches that all are equals. So we are like that in our house, with any person, because we have that teaching inside us. As it is in the church, it starts at home, and it will go on to change the world.

### **3. Common commitments: the moral heat of social justice**

Recognizing these multiple links, participants understood that each of their actions affected the whole. The consciousness of radical ecological interdependence transformed the immediacy of religious commitment. For Ellen, concern for social justice flowed naturally from a sense of interconnection and compassion, terms characteristic of her Buddhist tradition.

Ellen (Buddhist): Compassion, certainly it’s a huge word in Buddhist practice. But the word for me is reverence; I feel a real reverence in interconnectedness. Towns disappearing in Alaska, there is tremendous suffering with this change in the environment. The more

aware you are, the more I read or meditate, the ways I feed my consciousness, you know what comes around goes around, it's a cycle. What I take in is given out for sure, one way or another.

Social justice was a deep, central, and expanding core value for most participants. Participants related environmental issues to many doctrines: stewardship, care for the poor, political voice, charity, prayer, mission, the authority of science, simplicity. Some quoted stewardship theologies in anthropocentric ways; others spoke of deliberately revising such views. But most identified doctrines regarding social justice as most influential. Aware that a degraded environment harms the poor, faith-based environmentalists interpreted teachings about caring for the poor as mandating ecological responsibility.

Wendy (Reform Christian): There are a few things in the Bible that talk about how to care for the earth but so little. What we do have in the Bible is a whole bunch of times when Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself. And here's where I think the church can get on board. If we love our neighbor as ourselves, and if we see our neighbor as that third world community that doesn't have access to water, or the people in our town who don't have enough food, then there's no end to what we can do.

Social justice, often expressed by Christians as "love of neighbor," remained absolutely central, but its compass widened. Now the earth community belonged to a larger definition of the neighbor. In the emerging doctrinal syntheses of environmental concern and traditional faith, social justice served the entire ecological community, seeing the "earth as the new poor."<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. "A Bigger God": The Expanding Moral Universe**

To give voice to the environmental concerns and sense of planetary citizenship that inspired them, Ted, and others, came to view classic concepts in new ways. Expanding religious visions of God, neighbor, and self were expressed by many. Roshan shared how his developing sense of interdependence was growing to encompass even the inanimate world of rocks and stones.

Roshan (Unitarian, raised Hindu): I think when I was growing up I treated inanimate things differently from animate things. And I

don't now. I think that that definition has enlarged for me. It isn't just human beings don't have any special privilege on this earth, that was okay, that's how I grew up. But I don't now regard the inanimate piece as to be left out; that is part of the totality of my cosmology.

Similarly, Ted found that his understanding of God's sphere of concern expanded. Always all-powerful and supreme, God's concern expanded to include the land.

Ted (Evangelical Christian): Your last question is how your view changed. That was a fascinating question because I think my God has gotten bigger since I've embraced this effort. Even just thinking, in 2 Chronicles 14, if my people will hear my voice and turn from their wicked ways, and call upon the Lord, I will heal their land. What does that mean? You know, could that be an environmental answer that revival could bring about the cleansing of the land. It's land, it's not just people. I've read that verse for 30 years and I've never seen that verse that way. And so my view of God is getting much bigger since I've started thinking about the stewardship aspect of this environmental concern.

Q. I am assuming God was almighty before you...well, how much bigger can he get?

Ted: Well, He was almighty, He's pretty consistent. I'm the inconsistent factor!

These statements from two persons generally held to have quite distinct worldviews testify to a strikingly similar dynamic pattern of spiritual expansion, centrifugal yet earth-centered. A separate discussion would be needed to enumerate the varieties of spiritual connection expressed by participants: reverence for nature as a way of encountering God's love, reverence for the beauty of creation, love of nature more simply, experiences in nature, etc.

The centrality of social justice beliefs, the recurrent expression of the neighbor as the "global neighbor," and a reverent relationship to the earth community suggest that these core religious passions do increase the energy of green spirituality. The energy of green spirituality adds fuel to the fire of environmental concern. As Paul Gorman, a co-founder of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, stated, the

organization was not “the environmental movement at prayer.” Their work was “not about providing more shock troops for the embattled American greens. We have to see the inescapable, thrilling, renewing religious dimension of this challenge.”<sup>14</sup>

For faith-based environmentalists, a coherent worldview required environmental awareness. Thus, maintaining affiliation with their faith in a relevant and authentic way required the incorporation of green consciousness. But precisely because their traditions proposed the values of social justice, reverence for life, honoring creation, and spiritual unity, that faith itself was a powerful source of energy and motivation for the conceivably narrow problem of ecological degradation, if viewed purely as a pollution or wildlife or energy crisis. That is exactly why they engaged in congregational activity rather than seek an exclusive outlet for their environmental concern in a local chapter of the Sierra Club or another conservation society.

Many did belong to such organizations. Many showed strains of “dark green” religion. More than one acknowledged an agnostic, even atheistic outlook, yet found meaning in the congregation’s sustainability committee nonetheless. Certainly this ethnographic project confirms the vast diversity and complexity of spiritual beliefs, even while identifying recognizable categories of spiritual motivation.

But along with thousands, perhaps millions, of other faith-based environmentalists, the research participants also felt empowered and obligated to bring that green consciousness back to their faith traditions.<sup>15</sup> As loyal pioneers, they developed ways to express the spirit of their tradition in an age of ecological crisis. To affirm the moral claim of environmental risks, they renegotiated the meaning of faith life in a morally globalized world, and inhabited the religious paradox of loyalty as novelty.

### **Conclusion**

The driving forces that spark faith-based environmentalism are an adequate level of scientific literacy, a sense of self linked profoundly to life around the earth, a radically inclusive understanding of the neighbor, and a larger view of the divine. These core factors reflecting an expanding moral universe were the most widespread and significant factors driving action, according to the participants’ statements. These critical factors

fuse in a dynamic and motivating conviction—the consciousness of participating in the reality of moral globalization.

### *Religious resources for negotiating the “Green Blues”*

That strong sense of interconnection is also a powerful emotional reality. Participants spoke of deep love for earth’s beauty, pain at its loss, pessimism about the future, consciousness of the fight, and resolve for action. They drew on faith resources to negotiate the hope and despair evoked by the environmental crisis. Charlie and others shared their moral grief for the almost unavoidable complicity they share in destructive systems simply by participating in society.

Charlie (Presbyterian): What I’m finding out is that yes, what I do on my property affects the downstream person and unfortunately it affects those—what did Jesus say about the least? It affects the least. From my perspective, I’m suffering from mass depression sometimes, thinking that what I do is going to touch somebody negatively, and that upsets me.

Charlie expressed a sadness that lies below the common feeling of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of climate change. His awareness of total connection and thus total responsibility in an interdependent worldview contributed to what I call the “green blues”—a *mélange* of love, conviction, discouragement, and persistence. The green blues includes a religious dimension of grief for the environment that experienced the diminution of creation’s beauty as a spiritual loss. An evangelical scuba diver and filmmaker said, “I’ve been all around the world and how creation cries out invisible attributes of God and I’ve seen it firsthand. And so to see that diminished because of the environment is a scar on our faith.”

Faith-based groups do tend to promote hope, a resource that strengthens the moral commitment to act. Kathleen, an environmental leader and organizer in her Catholic parish for over twenty years, said, “I think the one element in all of us is hope. Whatever we do is done with hope.” Shonto, a Navajo artist and activist, drew on his traditional symbols for strength in the ongoing fight. “We always have to be ready to re-arm ourselves with the prayers and chants, and the stories, and the strength of hero twins. The young people today, the legacy of re-arming

themselves to fight the latter-day Ye'is, the monsters, in the form of drag lines and things eating the earth.”

### *Keeping the flame*

Interestingly, hope was not a universally driving factor. Religious values motivated many to keep working despite a sense that “the system” and the tides of time were against them.

Jim: And it doesn't matter to me whether I am optimistic or pessimistic. My values are robust enough so that it's important to keep working even though actually, I'm very pessimistic about the overall situation in the next probably hundred years.

It may seem surprising that this obligation motivated many even in the absence of hope. But the sense of obligation to act regardless of hope was a topic that arose as many times as did the sense of hopefulness. Maintaining their religious identity and personal peace compelled a virtue ethic of environmental justice, despite the green blues. Furthermore, commitment to personal action was not simply about private “environmental sainthood.”<sup>16</sup> If many felt integrity required personal lifestyle change, that personal action in turn supported broader systemic change. Making their own changes, large or small, allowed the participants to encourage others without feeling hypocritical, and take broader leadership for community action.

Collaboration then generated further “renewable” energy. The companionship of others enabled them to persist in hard choices and counter-cultural commitments. Discussing shared religious norms helped counteract the “background values” of consumption, convenience, and endless distraction, all challenges strongly identified by research participants as barriers to making sustainable changes.<sup>17</sup> The ability to discuss unfamiliar science and disconcerting climate realities with trusted friends made it much easier to grasp challenging or conflicting information.<sup>18</sup> Social affiliations and institutional dynamics—coffee hours, Earth Sundays, clean-up days—were natural sources of warmth, enthusiasm, and positive energy.

This may be one of the most important contributions of religious environmentalists to an often cynical society that easily takes refuge in denial and distraction: the willingness to keep holding the flame even when realistic about the depth of the darkness.

Garrett (Reform Judaism): But I believe the world is moving in the right direction. I believe you will know your home when you find it and that you will engage in a very different and new reciprocal relationship. I remember going to High Holy Days and there were Navajo prayers and Hopi symbols in the Seder that was produced for the event. I started to read the Torah with people [here in Arizona] and the combination of the word and this world produced in me a substantive change that has fundamentally altered the way in which I live and look at the world.

For faith-based environmentalists, the congregation served as a place of both pilgrimage and homecoming, as they sought to inhabit their community visions in new ways. Knowing the science, sensing the links, responding to suffering, developing expanding views of the holy: all these factors catalyzed active commitments to care for their common ground, the Earth's sacred space.

## Notes

1. Henry Neondo, "Spirituality Holds the Key to Climate Change, Says UNEP-ROA Director," *Africa Science News* (2012). Africa Science News Service [http://www.africasciencenews.org/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=606:african-faiths-commit-to-serve-the-environment&catid=52:environment&Itemid=115](http://www.africasciencenews.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=606:african-faiths-commit-to-serve-the-environment&catid=52:environment&Itemid=115)
2. Brian Winter, "Religious Groups Active in Climate Debate," *USA Today*, 15 December 2009.
3. Center for Research on Environmental Decisions CRED, *The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public* (New York: 2009), 48.
4. For more on the growing movement of faith-based environmentalism, see The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale at <http://fore.research.yale.edu>, the Alliance of Religion and Conservation at <http://www.arcworld.org/>, GreenFaith at <http://greenfaith.org>, and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment at <http://www.nrpe.org/>. See also Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2003); Roger Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (New York: Oxford University Press 2006); Gary Gardner, *Inspiring Progress: Religions' Contributions to Sustainable Development* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). Regarding non-congregational leadership, see Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
5. Bron Taylor, "Toward a Robust Scientific Investigation of the 'Religion' Variable in the Quest for Sustainability," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2011); Anna L. Peterson, "Talking the Walk: A Practice-Based Environmental Ethic as Grounds for Hope," in *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*, ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); Paul A. Djupe and Patrick Kieran Hunt,



- “Beyond the Lynn White Thesis: Congregational Effects on Environmental Concern,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 4 (2009).
6. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
  7. The research took place during a 2007–2009 Earth Institute fellowship at the Center for the Study of Science and Religion, Columbia University, approved by the Columbia Institutional Review Board. All participants agreed to be identified by name and tradition or authorized a pseudonym.
  8. Richard A. Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (London: Sage Publications, 1994); David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).
  9. Though such qualitative data do not carry independent weight, I provide them for internal comparison. Scientific literacy was mentioned in seventy-nine statements, in twenty-three out of twenty-nine conversations. The “knowledge gap” was mentioned fifty times in sixteen conversations.
  10. For a detailed study of multiple configurations of denial, see Mary-Elena and Madeleine Rubenstein Carr, “Challenges to Authority; Understanding Critiques of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 63, no. 1-2 (2011).
  11. Awareness of spiritual interdependence was most frequent (seventy-five references), with related subgroups: social (forty-seven), ecological (thirty-four), and economic interdependence (eleven). If taken as a single set, awareness of global interdependence is the largest set, with 167 total references.
  12. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005).
  13. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990).
  14. Bill McKibben, “The Gospel of Green: Will Evangelicals Help Save the Earth?,” *onearth*, Fall (2006). <http://www.nrdc.org/onearth/06fall/greener1.asp>
  15. Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming* (New York: Viking Press, 2007).
  16. Gernot Wagner, *But Will the Planet Notice? How Smart Economics Can Save the Planet* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).
  17. Peterson, op. cit.
  18. Religious members of secular environmental groups (like the Sierra Club) are more likely to consider environmental issues important than their co-religionists who are not Sierra Club members. However, congregational discussion adds to motivation beyond previous environmental affiliation effect. “Church effects are found amid strong personal predispositions and secular sources of information . . . the effects due to the congregational context are real and not proxies for preexisting attitudes and affiliations” (Djupe and Hunt, op. cit., 680).