Thirty Years of Religion and Ecology

By Mary Evelyn Tucker

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Organized by the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology
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It is a joy to welcome you to this conference celebrating 30 years of religion and ecology. I want to begin by acknowledging our partners in this conference, Yale Divinity School and the Yale Center for Environmental Justice at the School of the Environment. Bringing these two schools together was the vision of Gus Speth who invited us to Yale 20 years ago for this purpose. It has been a long and ongoing journey with lots of help along the way!

John and I are especially grateful to Tara Trapani for her months of work on this conference and the Living Earth Community one tomorrow as well. We thank our Forum team for their dedication to so many aspects of the conferences and beyond: Elizabeth McAnally, Sam King, Anna Thurston, Hayden Shaw, Sam Mickey, Nikki Woods, Katie Grose, Zu Yan, Andrew MacIver, and Meiqi He.

All of this would not be possible without the decades of commitment of our funders and supporters some of whom are with us today. Martin Kaplan deserves special mention for his 30 years of work with us to help birth this new academic field and a moral force in society.

This conference will alternate with panels on the academic field and the moral force. This engagement of transformative ideas and action has been essential to religion and ecology from the beginning.

And in our present challenging planetary climate we need to acknowledge, as we have for decades, that religions have their problems, as is evident historically and at present. But religions also have shown their promise in contributing to the moral force of change in issues such as the abolition of slavery and the extension of civil rights.

In the early 1990s, when John and I first began to think of what we as historians of religions might contribute to our environmental challenges, it was becoming clear that the spiritual depth and moral force of religions could facilitate long term changes. As students of Indigenous religions (John) and East Asian religions (Mary Evelyn) we saw great potential in these traditions for promoting broadened ecological sensibilities due to our teacher Thomas Berry.

We were not scientists or policy experts, lawyers or economists who were already working on environmental problems and shaping environmental studies departments. We knew that raising the question of the environmental roles of religions in these departments would be difficult, but we did not realize the full dimensions of this. Nor did we realize how challenging this ecological perspective was for many religions. This is when we began the Harvard conference series on World Religions and Ecology in 1996 which consisted of 10 conferences and 10 edited volumes completed over a decade.

Now, some thirty years later, environmentalists and policy makers are acknowledging that religions can indeed contribute values necessary to shifting our destructive USE attitudes toward both nature and people. And religions are responding with theological perspectives and ethical practices to assist.

For many people, the environmental crisis is fundamentally an ethical and spiritual crisis. How are the religions responding? This is an important question as some eighty-five per cent of the world's people identify as religious. Their influence as leaders and members of communities is substantial. They have significant educational, financial, social, and political influence that can be used for transformation toward the wellbeing of the Earth community

Moreover, change is happening as the next generation of students and faculty understands that religion, ethics, and spirituality need to be included in solutions to environmental problems. Indeed, they have helped to create a new field of study in academia and a moral force for change in society has emerged. While there was no academic field of study in 1996, there are now more than thirty graduate programs in religion and ecology in North America, and three of them are PhD programs.

Moreover, there are hundreds of religious grassroots engaged projects and interfaith efforts that embody the moral force of religion and ecology. Examples represented here are Connecticut's Interreligious Ecojustice Network and the midwestern Faith in Place. GreenFaith is a leading international organization fostering a moral response to the climate emergency. On a worldwide level there is now $40 trillion in the divestment movement from oil and gas and 40% of that is from religious communities.

Moreover, environmental justice, which arose out of religious communities in the 1980s, is now integrated into academic programs as well as grassroots environmental movements. This is illustrated by Karenna Gore's Center for Earth Ethics at Union Seminary.

And we are fortunate to have Rev William Barber here at YDS who is the co-founder of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for a Moral Revival.

This is also emerging in publications such as our series in Ecology and Justice at Orbis Books, which has more than two dozen books, including the latest one by Jim Robinson, Beyond Factory Farming.

The 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis, Laudato Si', is a comprehensive religious statement integrating "Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor." This phrase is the title of a book by the liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, published in 1997 in the Ecology and Justice Series.

Building on this perspective the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) was formed in 2017 with United Nations Environmental Program, the Norwegian government and interreligious groups such as the Forum. It brings together Indigenous peoples with other religious communities, especially Christian and Muslims, for protection of rainforests in Latin America, Africa, and Indonesia.

Now we are beginning to see openings in which scientists understand there are multiple ways of caring for ecosystems that include traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) for forest management.

This is being implemented here at our School of Forestry with courses online where lectures and discussions have drawn in 1000s of participants.

Conclusion

Religion and ecology has made significant progress as an academic field and a moral force over the last three decades. There is much more to be done as the Earth gets hotter and drier, as well as wetter and more unpredictable. Indeed, as these problems grow, there is emerging attention in psychological and chaplaincy work to address eco-anxiety and climate grief. LOKA Moreover, diverse expressions of eco-spirituality are appearing that acknowledge the therapeutic character of human-Earth interactions with forests, landscapes, and biodiversity.

Novel theories of "differentiated sentience" and a "living cosmos" bridge scientific research with attention to plant and animal signaling, consciousness, and agency. These explorations of realities, understood as sacred, take place in the context of diverse "spiritualities," often apart from the institutionalized space of organized religions. This is what we will be exploring tomorrow in the Living Earth Community conference.

In the 1980s Thomas Berry's, prophetic voice lamented the loss of land and biodiversity as "revelatory voices of the Earth." Yet he could still envision an "Ecozoic Era" in which mutually enhancing human Earth relations would emerge. No doubt the growth of religion and ecology arises out of both the realization of our problematic devastation of the Earth, as well as the promise of more restorative and nourishing ways of human becoming. This is our hope in one of the most challenging moments of human history. Let us offer again and again an intergenerational handshake to foster this promise!