

EDITOR'S NOTE

Religion's Role in the Environmental Movement

The religions must become involved in the environmental movement. For many reasons, a couple of which we will mention below, deforestation, soil decline, water management, over fishing, over hunting, invasive species, population growth/decline, human-caused climate change, toxic chemicals, energy shortages, and loss of photosynthetic capacity are problems that will not be solved unless the religions endorse their solution. There will be no progress on environmental issues until religions become part of the cipher.

The good news is that the religions are increasingly becoming involved in the environmental movement. In this issue of *The Asbury Journal*, we feature several Wesleyan voices who give biblical, theological, and historical rationales on why being a good Christian means being a good environmentalist. Not only is the case self-evident and ironclad, Christians are beginning to hear and act on the issues. Yes, the religions are involved in the environmental movement.

The bad news is that some scientists continue to be wary about religion's involvement. Some have been downright hostile. Evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould thought religions and science should be kept totally distinct. Richard Dawkins thinks that God is a faulty, even bad hypothesis when measured by scientific standards. Philosopher of science Daniel Dennett has attempted to reduce what we call revelational religion to a naturalistic phenomenon, a product of our genes and our social environment. And Sam Harris — well, arguing that all religion is bad because of a few bad religious people is raising the *ad hominem* argument to a new level of absurdity.

This despite all evidence to the contrary about religion's value. Indeed, if the above mentioned scientists handle their experimental data the same way they handle the historical and empirical data about religion, then we have cause to worry about the scientific endeavor in general. Two facts seem clear: the ubiquity of religion, and its positive value.

As to the ubiquity of religion, it does not take a computer-generated model to look at the history of the human race and see the ubiquitous presence of religion in human affairs. People, all people, everywhere, anywhere, have been religious. Whenever attempts have been made to eliminate religion from human life—one thinks, for example, of twentieth century Marxist movements—utter failure results.

As to religion's positive value, we don't have space to list all the contributions to human flourishing religion has made—in education, social services, medical care, mental health, happiness, and on and on. But let's focus on just one, the environment. One of the most disheartening revelations of the effects of Leninism on the Soviet Union, was the utter disregard for the care of their natural resources. Post-Soviet revelations showed that when you remove the rationale for creation care—that the world is created by God for human stewardship—creation care seems to disappear along with it.

What is it about religion that makes it an indispensable part of the success of the environmental movement? Consider two of the more obvious factors:

The fact that the physical world exists and that it hosts a marvelous, even mysterious, network of living things, cannot be explained by big bangs, infinite computer regressions, or chance, the staple scientific attempts at explanation. Only the religions satisfactorily explain the fact of the world. It is true that the language of their explanation can seem esoteric; but no more esoteric than scientific jargon used for the same purpose.

Why should science consider the religions' explanations to be true? Set aside for a moment the religions' own warrants for truth. Consider only scientific ones. The religious explanations are the best theories going. Science always accepts the best theories on the field until better ones are provided. At the moment, at least, the religions have the best theories. Or simplicity. When compared with the murky explanations one gets when scientists begin to grope with beginnings, the religious explanations are crystal clear. Until something much better comes along, science needs the religions' explanations of why the world is. For religious people (over 90 percent of the world's population by the way), the world becomes sacred precisely because of its mode of creation.

And that sacredness leads to a second contribution of religion to environmentalism. Because the world is sacred, we are motivated to care for it in a way that pure utilitarian motivational attempts cannot begin to approach. Human beings are notorious for engaging in behaviors that they find pleasurable but are proven to be bad for them. Smoking. Speeding. Overeating. Littering. Not flossing one's teeth. The list is dishearteningly long.

It does no good to point this out to people. They persist even when they know—are convinced—that what they are doing is bad for them. And it certainly does not do any good to chastise people for this negative behavior. People do not become smarter just because someone tells them they are dumb. It is most often not a case of people's ignorance. Instead of berating people for their behavior, a more powerful, more positive motivation is needed.

Enter religion. Religion is, by definition, an individual's most powerful motivator. A person's religion is what he or she considers the final court of appeal, the last in a chain of considerations for deciding whether a thought, feeling, or action is good or not. If a person's religion says that the environmental movement is a good thing, something to pay attention to, then a person is most likely to decide to support it.

That's why the environmental movement needs religion to succeed.

— *Terry C. Muck*