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Witness for Justice #487

August 2, 2010

The “Sustainability” of Spiritual Renewal

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The environmental crisis of our day has been well documented. In 1987 and 2007 The United Church of Christ Toxic Waste and Race Reports exposed the various interlocking manifestations of industrial pollution, environmental racism and resource depletion. Human survival, water supplies and agricultural lands are being threatened across the planet by consumption pressures. Climate change threatens to undermine efforts to reverse these trends and to move toward a sustainable future for humans and nature.

Clearly religions need to be involved with the development of a more comprehensive approach toward sustainability. One of the greatest challenges to contemporary religions is how to respond to our environmental crisis. This is critical because the attitudes and values that shape people's concepts of nature come primarily from religious worldviews and ethical practices. Medieval historian Lynn Whiteⁱ suggested that the emphasis in Judaism and Christianity on the transcendence of God above nature and the dominion of humans over nature has led to a devaluing of the natural world and a subsequent destruction of its resources for utilitarian ends.

Christianity struggles to show how living on earth matters for living with God. While people of faith from so many other religions backgrounds have been aware for centuries about the interconnectedness that exist between us and the planet, in the Christian faith we still increasingly seek for practical ways to respond to the call of our environment. Our theology has had many difficulties contextualizing the crisis and interpreting the responses.

In order to be faithful to the undeniable reality that the earth is us and we are the earth, I would like to suggest the idea of reexamining our environmental ethics as a way for renewing our spirituality. Our daily practices often draw on concepts of grace as our environmental strategies seem to draw from our religious traditions

that speak to us of a comprehensive “salvation”. Religion should help us engage the environmental-ethical challenges of our days while providing us with opportunities to develop an ecological dimension of our spirituality.

The ethics that frame environmental issues also challenge and re-inhabit our religious traditions. Our challenge is to identify ways that will make environmental problems intelligible to the religious-spiritual-moral experience while adapting the message to the environmental challenges we face nowadays. The strategies of environmental justice as well as of the eco-justice movement; our innate sense of stewardship, and of ecological spirituality can easily transform environmental matters into an important part of our spiritual experience.

By observing the historical relationship between indigenous communities and the environment we can see, even at a distance, the rising of a sense of interconnectedness that can be easily understood within the framework of our theologies. What the Kayapó people from the Amazon in Brazil; the Tainos from the Caribbean; the Aztecs from México and the Native American from the United States have shown us is the communal ways of building and maintaining strategies, through critical reappraisals, that clearly represent a tradition of an ecology of grace. They did so by letting nature itself guide us into how the environment around us can become a significant element of who we are within, our spiritual experiences and toward a fuller understanding of spirituality and ecology are constantly preparing fertile grounds for an eco-spiritual renewal.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.

ⁱ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” *Science* (March 1967):1204.