

Finding Common Ground:

How Interfaith Collaboration Can Be a Powerful Force for Protecting the Environment and Promoting Universal Human Rights in the 21st Century

Hope exists in the world. Above all, the events that have taken place during the last few months in the Middle East may be interpreted as nothing less than a grand manifestation of hope by millions of oppressed people living under military dictatorships. There is hope that the latest oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico will not contaminate our environment for generations. There is hope that Kennecott will change their mind. Yet, where is the religious community during these struggles? Are they fighting on the front lines of the environmental movement, for universal social justice—or has religion lost relevance in the modern world? Has it ceased to be a source of inspiration and spiritual fulfillment?

Human beings, like all other forms of life on this planet, are inseparable from the natural environment. The reverential treatment of nature is a common theme of many religions, especially among the indigenous. In a sense, religion has, from the earliest times, been created to provide a framework for understanding natural phenomena and psychological anxieties about the meaning of one's existence. Despite the apocalyptic events of our historical geology, life, it seems, dares to persist even among the most foreboding environments. Humankind, graced with the gift of sentience, and a larger, more advanced brain than other animals, formulated sophisticated new conceptions of the universe as our ancestors achieved increasing levels of social development and technological innovation. The condition of the Earth, with the adoption of agriculture and animal husbandry, became increasingly important for the survival of human communities whose populations began to outstrip the carrying capacity of the surrounding area. Urbanization brought together great densities of people in ancient cities,

while trade encouraged the interchange of foreign goods, services, and ideas. Within this environment, the earliest modern religions began to take shape. Their evolution, the product of a burgeoning relationship between man and his environment, commenced a new age of moral discovery and cultural enrichment. The great civilizations of the distant past were among the followers of the dynamic new creeds blossoming in the post-glacial world, and their exclamations of divinity have roused not only the construction of magnificent architectural wonders, famed loci for spiritual and historic investigation for millennia, but also the rise of a swelling number of followers. Among the billions of the world's spiritual adherents, religion's role is to promote mutual respect among people of different faiths and viewpoints by celebrating the commonalities and universal values we can all agree on. Yet, some religious movements will continue to foment discord and intolerance in this century, because they focus only on the spiritual elements and beliefs which divide us.

Today, it may appear that organized religion has lost some of its prominence in modern society. Even though by number there may be more religious followers than ever before, it can sometimes seem as if the great days of religion are of a bygone era. But to make that assumption would be a mistake. In fact, new age movements, along with the major religions, are undergoing a profound transformation in the wake of modernity. Some are adapting slowly, refusing to accept the pressing challenges and changing worldviews of the modern era, while others are essentially being born from the controversy in their aspiration to provide common ground between secular and religious ideologies. The religious communities which accept change, and embrace cultural evolution, will necessarily promote sustainable environmental policies, provide traditional and innovative ways for followers to articulate and fulfill their

deepest spiritual needs, and endorse new mediatory mechanisms, in government and religious organization, to advance peaceful conflict resolution. Those religious movements which shutter themselves from the modern world in rigid and antiquated vessels based on dogmatic assumptions of inequality and the infliction of injustice will continue to condemn progressive thinking and desperately lash out at the modern world as their influence dwindles.

With a spiritual foundation rooted in the interconnectivity of all reality, Hinduism provides an interesting framework for the promotion of environmental sustainability, social justice, meaningful existence, and the elimination of violence in the 21st century. Their sense of oneness among all things speaks to the underlying relationship we share with the environment and all living things around us. In this most basic manifestation of the golden rule, one would never hurt another, because it would essentially mean hurting oneself. The strong tradition of nonviolence among many Hindus promises to aid in the pursuit of peace and nonviolent conflict resolution, but, of course, this belief is only as powerful as the individual who is supposed to abide by it. Hinduism, the third largest religion in the world with over one billion adherents, will continue to shape current discussions on the relevancy of faith in the modern world as India's importance in the global economy increases. Perhaps this ancient religion will provide modern Indians, and the world, with the philosophical insight to achieve *moksha*, the ultimate human goal within the Upanishads, and be liberated from our reckless consumption. If we aim to strike a balance between mysticism and the practical needs of everyday life, like using spiritual principles to address climate change or the availability of fresh, clean water, perhaps we should take the advice of the Bhagavad Gita when it says, "the wise see knowledge and action as one" (Malloy, 87).

Shinto, “the way of the Gods,” is a religion, of indigenous origin, as old as the Japanese people themselves. From its mysterious origins, Shinto has remained a persistent force in Japanese culture and society, and the belief in ever-present *kami*, or spirits, continues to affect belief and everyday behavior. Shinto’s creation myth, the *Kojicki*, makes startling allusions to the importance of water: “When chaos had begun to condense...the washing of his eyes revealed the Sun and the Moon” (Van Voorst, 183). The Shinto view the islands of Japan as a kind of “worldly heaven” where human beings coexist with divine beings, the *kami*. This interpretation contrasts with many other major religions which view the physical world “not as an earthly paradise but rather as a place of suffering” (Malloy, 269). Among the core of Shinto belief, “there is no moralistic God who gives commands or judges a person, nor is there a sense of original sin or of any basic sinful tendency. Instead, human beings are fundamentally good, the body is good, and this earthly life is good” (Malloy, 274). There are four enduring elements of Shintoism which make it especially relevant to the challenges of the modern world: esteem for nature, the stance of benevolent silence on most moral and doctrinal questions, aesthetically pleasing ritual, and eclecticism (Malloy, 288). Respect for nature, and providing protection from the forces which threaten it, is an intrinsic part of Shinto belief, which makes this religion well equipped to promote environmental sustainability in one of the largest economies in the world. Its stance of benevolent silence, along with its eclecticism and inclusiveness towards outsiders, makes Shinto a prime example for promoting non-violent conflict resolution in the modern world. And its aesthetically pleasing rituals, a way to interact with the sacred, are also a potent source of meaning and fulfillment in a devotee’s life. Even though Shinto is a small religion, geographically isolated and culturally unique, it highlights the

important role of the indigenous religions of all nations and their ability to provide us with keen ethical insights needed to tackle many of today's pressing issues.

When exploring the potential for Christianity to promote greater fellowship and respect for the natural world, it is important to address a certain interpretation which leads some Christians away from the true message of an important passage in the Old Testament. In Genesis, 1:28, God's instructions, if taken literally, imply man's unconditional dominion over nature: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." Yet, if there is any hope to promote environmental sustainability among Christians, then it is important to dispel this dogmatic understanding of the relationship between man and his environment and instead highlight the great responsibility that "dominion" implies. Otherwise, some individuals will continue to use this perspective as a means to justify ongoing environmental degradation and abuse in the claim they are developing their endowed creation. The environment is also a rallying point for Christians to deepen their relationship with God and seek fulfillment in everyday life. Reconnecting with nature is an effective way to cement a person's faith and promote tranquility. The majesty of the natural environment often invokes a spiritual response from those numbed by the emptiness and artificiality of urban life. Yet, if some conservative Christians continue to lambast environmental issues, like climate change and the problems facing the world's water supplies, then they will increasingly alienate themselves from mainstream society.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount gives credence to the idea that Christianity can foster nonviolence in the modern world: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive

mercy...Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Van Voorst, 271). Like Gandhi would much later express, nonviolence is the most effective way to address confrontation: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Van Voorst, 272). As Christianity struggles to redefine itself for a new century of followers, it will find it beneficial to establish common ground with other faith communities. Its appeal, has proved to be near universal, and since “[Christianity] places some emphasis on improving the human condition in the world...the concern of Christians for the poor, [and] the willingness to battle against injustice...give Christianity an enduring relevance” (Malloy 426). The challenges Christian belief faces from secularism should not cause the church to pander to its baser instincts and cave in to pseudoscience and the teaching of “intelligent design” in public schools. If Christianity embraces science, and comes to a common understanding that the Bible, or at least cosmological information gleaned from it, should not necessarily always be taken literally, then there will be room for the important relationship between the scientific and religious communities to blossom. It seems science gives us a lot of practical answers, but religion asks the best questions. Darwin may have given us evolution, but God fills us with wonder for the miracle of its inception. We are not talking about survival of the fittest *individual*, but rather, survival of the fittest *community*—co-evolution: the strongest promoter of the proliferation of species. It seems like sometimes we lose sight of these more benign interpretations of the scientific world.

Despite the many injustices and acts of violent militarism which have accompanied the spread of the monotheistic religions, there is one unifying element in particular, the belief in a

single God, shared by all the Abrahamic religions, which promises the opportunity to enhance understanding and peace among the three. As the Christian Existentialist Paul Tillich wrote, “The fundamental symbol of our ultimate concern is God” (Tillich, 52). All people, regardless of their faith, share the same ultimate concern. Although discrepancies exist among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the focus on these differences themselves becomes idolatrous and distracts believers from what they all have in common. The indefatigable belief in God, although it has been used to justify atrocious acts against humanity, is also a unifying aspect which acknowledges fundamental commonalities among all the world’s monotheistic religions and promotes peace. In Tillich’s unifying perspective, he contends that all spiritual practices, even if they involve the worship of different gods and beliefs, are essentially using symbols pointing to the same ultimate concern. The notion of a multicultural world in which all peoples are free to practice their own religion is not an impossible fiction. Despite the fundamental differences which may exist among religions and among secular society in general, the laws which dictate the contradicting perspectives on such aspects as the role and behavior of women, usury, gambling, dietary restrictions, punishment, and ritual, must be fundamentally viewed as symbols of their various faiths, not unequivocal characteristics. From this premise, we see that the hope of all religious followers for a peaceful and diverse society is not predicated on the notion of adherence to blind and uncompromising orthodoxy, but rather on the righteousness of intention and *the courage to be*.

Is there hope for a world in which humans behave justly towards one another, civilization lives in harmony with nature, and people find meaning and purpose despite the alienating forces of the modern urban landscape? There is hope, but it is not confined to the

sayings of the prophets, nor the written words found in scripture—hope lives in the believer. It is an unspoken force which binds together the world into a rich fabric of sympathetic response. It is the practical application of the famous and universal golden rule which fundamentally unites all religions of the world, and brings to light the hope that all people, regardless of their faith and ethnical background, can, at the very least, agree that “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Van Voorst 274). In what ways would the religions of the world work against such a vision? They would succumb to the same forces which their prophets were trying to overcome. They would shrink back into the depths of tradition, refusing to adapt to a changing social environment. They would strike out at innocent people and entire nations for embracing such a notion that we may all someday coexist peacefully. They would stop at nothing to preserve their own power and influence, to perpetuate sectarian conflict, and to blind themselves from the truth which they claim to espouse. In what ways would religions of the world support a better future for humanity and the environment? Well, they would heed the warnings of history, and commit themselves to finding new ways to evolve to meet today’s spiritual requirements. They would work together in interfaith cooperation to secure common goals shared by all people, and they would make sure to forgive those longstanding grudges which tend to hamper diplomacy and perpetuate violence. But you know what the most important thing that religion can do to usher in a new world order in which spirituality and secularism coexist to support universal human rights and environmental stewardship? To not forget that we are all in this together...and we all share the same ultimate concern.

Works Cited

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