

**A Greener Faith**  
by  
**The Reverend Dr. Paul G. Hull**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

Late in the month of June, I was Minister of the Week at Star Island's Natural History Conference. For those who may not be familiar with Star Island, it is a 40-acre island over 5 miles off the coast of Maine and New Hampshire in the Gulf of Maine, Star Island is a conference center managed by a non-profit corporation owned by the Unitarian Universalists and the United Church of Christ. As minister of the week, I led morning chapel services in the historic stone chapel on the highest point of the island.

The theme for the week was the history of cod fishing in the Gulf of Maine. If you are not a fisherman or fisherwoman, that theme may not grab you. A hobby of mine has been fishing, but my reaction, at first to the theme, was sort of ho-hum. But was I wrong! It turned out to be a fascinating theme considering, not only chronicle of human abuse of natural resources in the Gulf of Maine, but with some surprises as well. For example, I found out that our Puritan and colonial forebears used good fishing practices including putting fish ladders around dams and weirs in streams feeding into the Gulf of Maine and passing laws and ordinances that limited access to fishing grounds. Only beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and finally culminating in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the fishery in the Gulf became depleted. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the average cod caught in the Gulf of Maine was 80 to 100 pounds, now the size of the average cod caught there is around 12 pounds.

This condition of the fishery in the Gulf of Maine, in being overused, is repeated across the globe when human overuse of natural systems exceeds the ability of those natural systems to recover. That overuse occurs with over cutting of forests, poor agriculture practices, use of rivers and lakes to receive un-treated or poorly treated wastes, the pollution of land and groundwater from disposal of solid wastes, and degradation of the air. But this need not be if we use resources wisely in a way that the environment is sustainable and where those resources are not degraded. This concern about degradation of the environment is not just an environmental or political concern; it is a religious concern as well—maybe more so—a religious concern.

As I was preparing for the series of chapel services on Star Island, I delved deeply into a world wide religious movement that is occurring in virtually all religions. This movement is called religious environmentalism. This movement has religious leaders rethinking their respective religions to move away from religious ideas that justify overuse and exploitation of the Earth. This religious environmental movement is articulating religious ideas and inspirations that encourage human use of the Earth's resources in ways that are sustainable and that honor the sacred nature of the Earth itself.

In this process of delving into this movement, I was impressed by a book by Roger Gottlieb who is a professor of philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and a religious person as well—a practicing Jew. I borrowed the title for this sermon from his book *A Greener Faith* with the subtitle *Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*. The quote on the cover of the order of service is from that book. It mentions a “profound shift in religion’s understanding of human existence.” So what is that shift?

### **The Shift from Justification**

What are we shifting from? Religious environmentalists recognize that certain religious ideas have justified environmental derogation.

Many religions, they observe, have this notion that the world is devoid of spirit or a place of suffering to be left or transcended. For example, an other-worldly view of God and the human place in the cosmos has dominated Western civilization for at least the last thousand years. This world view goes something like this: God is completely transcendent—beyond the Earth. Although God created the world, God is not of this world. God is removed from the earth in Heaven. Humans contain a spark of the divine but this spark was covered by the original sin of disobedience to God. Jesus came to earth as God to redeem human sin, but after the sacrifice of a painful death, he returned to Heaven and is no longer of this earth, but he will return to judge the living and the dead. The true home of humans is not this earth but in heaven. If you accept Jesus as your true savior, you will go to your true home for eternity which is in Heaven. If you are an unbeliever, your unbelief condemns you to everlasting punishment, not on the earth, but in hell. The purpose of the earth is as a testing ground to test your faith to see if you are worthy of Heaven. The earth is a fallen place in this theology. It is to be used and then left behind. In this theology, humans were placed on the Earth, but are not of the Earth.

It is not just traditional Christianity that reserves a higher unearthly state for human beings; it’s in other faiths as well. Fundamentalist Islam believes that actions of mass destruction are warranted in a holy war, and the perpetrators will receive great rewards in paradise. Buddhism, in some forms, promotes a detachment from earthly existence. To be in this world is to suffer. Suffering is caused by desire and attachment. One strives to relinquish desire through the spiritual practices so one can detach from one’s desires and achieve a state of enlightenment—where one is in the world but not of it.

Hinduism holds a similar belief in achieving mahasamadhi through spiritual disciplines that allow one to detach from the worldly suffering into a state of bliss. In Hinduism, the truly enlightened being no longer reincarnates into an earthly life but remains in a state of bliss at one with the Godhead.

These religious views all have a characteristic that the truly desired spiritual state of humans is to be not of this world and one relieves one’s personal suffering ultimately through spiritual practice to pierce the vale of tears that is this world.

In these views of the purpose of nature and the human place in it, the Divine has been removed from the Earth. The Earth is an object to be used and discarded or ignored. To extend the ideas of Jewish theologian Martin Buber, the natural world is an “it,” not a “thou.” <4.5, =10->

### **The Shift to Sustainability**

Recognizing these religious ideas that justify exploitation of the Earth, religious environmentalists are looking to their respective traditions for ideas that encourage environmentally sensitive action. Professor Gottlieb observes that these religious environmentalists are articulating two core ideas about their religions. The first idea is that nature has intrinsic value in and of itself, and the second idea is that nature is closer to us than we have realized. Nature is as close to us and as integral to us as the beating of our hearts. (Gottlieb 22). Let's look to the great world religions for examples of these core ideas:

In Judaism, for example, there is this sense of the intrinsic value in nature reflected in the ancient Hebrew injunction not to cut down trees without good reason—even in war. In Deuteronomy (20:19), it says:

*When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. . . .*

Jewish theologians observe that even during war humans are to control their destruction of the environment. If this is so, even during war, then prevention of destruction of nature during peaceful times is even more important. Jewish scholars warn that those who waste thoughtlessly are on their way to idol worship because of loss of self-control. (Gottlieb 23)

In the reading from Genesis 9, this morning, we heard that God's covenant was not with just humans but also with “all living creatures.” It is not just humans who possess intrinsic value but all creatures and Nature itself. And then there is this wonderful statement in the first chapter of Genesis, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good..” (Genesis 1:31 ) And the human place in all of this goodness according to Genesis is to be tenders of the garden.

Turning from Judaism to Christianity, Christian theologian Sallie McFague says that Christians must realize that Christianity is primarily an incarnational religion—meaning that God is incarnate and present on Earth—not just in Heaven. Professor McFague observes that a new incarnational Christian theology must see the entire Earth and cosmos as part of God's physical, incarnate body. Julian of Norwich, in one of our readings for today, in a tiny hazelnut found God's presence as “the Maker, the Keeper, the Lover.” And poet and Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. . . .”

This same process of reconstructing religious ideas that Judaism and Christianity are doing is being done in Buddhism. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh has promoted the idea that everything in the cosmos inter-be's with everything else. He speaks of the path to true peace on Earth as realizing our connection with all living and no-living things and seeing everything as one spiritual community—one sangha of interconnectedness and compassion.

Similarly the religious environmental movement in Hinduism emphasizes that all living things have an atman or soul—including plants.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many progressives from all the world religions, while retaining the uniqueness and appeals of their religions, are digging deeply to find sources of praise, appreciation, and hope for renewed inspirations that show that Nature has intrinsic value and that nature is no foreigner to our true natures but is as close to us as our beating hearts.

The great American transcendentalist and Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson, over a century and a half ago, observed this about the other-worldly religion of his time: “But the word Miracle, as pronounced by . . . [the] churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.” Today religious environmentalists across the globe are saying that the world is miracle enough. The world, ourselves, and the entire starry, creative cosmos is God’s body—our body—a holy, sacred miracle!

So here we are—part of a great shift in the world religions—that holds at their core—the sacred oneness of life. We are truly one with “the blowing clover and the falling rain.” May we hold this knowledge in our hearts and minds as we go from here. In a world without end. Amen.