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Home > Can Religion Save the Planet?

Can Religion Save the Planet?

Unleashing the power of their faith on tough environmental problems, today's "ecovangelists" ask: Can religion save the planet, or will the planet save religion?

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In one day, Alexis Williams made two men cry.

It was the autumn of 2010, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was considering new regulations for coal ash—a toxic waste produced by coal-burning plants. Williams, a

poised and passionate 26-year-old, and the campaign organizer for the faith-based environmental group Restoring Eden, had spent the summer canvassing the Midwest's coal belt in support of regulations.

On the morning of the EPA hearings in Chicago, Restoring Eden co-hosted a prayer breakfast. As the faithful sipped their coffee, Williams reminded them that it was OK to hate the sin of coal ash pollution, but not the polluters. "They aren't our enemies," she said. "We need to remember to love them throughout the day."

Later, a conservative-looking gentleman approached Williams. His wife had dragged him down from Wisconsin, he said. She was the tree-hugger—not him. But Williams's rallying cry brought tears to his eyes. He'd never heard an environmentalist talk about love before.

That evening, Williams discussed coal ash pollution at a press conference organized by the Sierra Club. She was the last speaker—and the only one to invoke God as a motivating force. Afterward, scores thanked her, including an elderly man in a faded jean jacket and a trucker hat who broke down in tears. Between sobs he confessed, "You've just said what I've been waiting all my life to hear."

Her message? That saving the earth is divine work, an expression of Christian values of mercy, hope, and humility.

Across the nation—and the globe—religious communities are awakening to their responsibility to tend the earth as carefully as they tend their souls. And as thousand-year-old spiritual traditions swing their weight behind the modern environmental movement, a door opens for redemption: the salvation of both broken souls and broken landscapes.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Love and humility aren't exactly scientific buzzwords. But they may be crucial to the conversation of how to regulate toxic waste, rehabilitate Superfund sites, and reduce humanity's heavy footprint. While the modern environmental movement has made strides since emerging in the 1950s and '60s, it simply hasn't kept pace with the earth's destruction. Species are going extinct at a rate unmatched since the disappearance of the dinosaurs. Polar ice is melting. Hazardous chemicals persist in drinking water and mothers' milk. These are anthropogenic problems; human actions caused them, and radical shifts in human behavior are needed to solve them.

The kind of self-sacrifice and personal transformation necessary now is the very wellspring for the world's great spiritual traditions. But thus far, organized religion has remained largely silent on environmental issues. An ideological rift—real or imagined—has grown to the extent that "Christian environmentalist" is considered an oxymoron by both camps.

"There's been some mutual suspicion between organized religion and environmental groups," says the Rev. Fletcher Harper, an Episcopal priest and the executive director of GreenFaith.

He says environmentalists have blamed Christians for trashing natural resources under the aegis of scriptures that give man dominion over earth and promise eternal refuge in heaven. They assume that people of faith reject science, or that they obsess over their inner lives to the detriment of their surroundings.

Christians, in turn, accuse environmentalists of valuing endangered species over human life, and some view land conservation as a tool to protect the recreational dabblings of the wealthy or to extend the reach of government.

So it's no wonder that Alexis Williams has often been the lone believer among her environmentalist friends, or the sole tree-hugger in prayer circles. But that's changing, as Restoring Eden and other eco-conscious religious groups grow in scope and influence.

Williams follows in the footsteps of her father, Peter Illyn, an Evangelical pastor with a deep reverence for the wilderness surrounding his Washington state home. In 1989, on a four-month solo trek through the Cascade Mountains, he witnessed hillsides shorn of their trees and logging towns fighting for permission to remove the last stands of old-growth forest—even if it meant the extermination of the spotted owl.

Illyn was appalled. "How can you believe that God created, blessed, and made a covenant with the plants and animals and still drive them to extinction?" he asks. The preacher, reborn as an environmentalist, returned to launch an outdoor ministry. What began as backpacking trips with fellow Christians evolved into Restoring Eden, a nationwide network with the mission of rediscovering the biblical call to love, serve, and protect God's creation.

Rooted in scripture, its fresh take on Christianity seems to have touched a nerve, especially among young people. At Christian festivals and gatherings, they snap up Restoring Eden's cheeky bumper stickers ("God's original plan was to hang out in a garden with some naked vegetarians"), then they sign on as volunteers.

"I KNOW WE HELPED"

Williams was just 17 when she first traveled to Washington, D.C., with Restoring Eden. It was 2002, and the U.S. Senate was on the verge of passing a bill that would allow oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Illyn mustered a group of Christians to testify against the bill, alongside members of the Gwich'in tribe, the indigenous inhabitants of the refuge. "I went because of the free trip," says Williams, laughing. "I didn't know anything about the Arctic.

But it was one of those decisions that changed my path completely."

For two days, Williams listened to Gwich'in families tearfully describe the ancient landscapes traversed by vast herds of caribou that would be ravaged for as little as a 10-year supply of oil. Profoundly moved, she and four others from Restoring Eden made one last push to change the mind of a moderate Republican expected to vote in favor of the bill. Williams says they left his office wondering, What difference can we really make? But the bill didn't pass —thanks to two Republican swing voters, including the man they lobbied.

"I don't know if it was because of us," says Williams, "but I know we helped."

Williams went on to study environmental policy at Western Washington University and now oversees Restoring Eden's Midwest campaigns from her home in Minnesota.

Today Williams draws on both sides of her education—as an evangelist and as an environmentalist—to serve as a translator between worlds. When she receives news

releases from partner environmental agencies, she rewrites them before forwarding them to her audience. "I feel like our language is so different," she says. "I start over from scratch."

"That's where Restoring Eden has a really valuable role to play," says Williams. "We communicate in a way that connects to people's core values and beliefs."

In addition to defending endangered species and wilderness areas, Restoring Eden tackles energy use, food production, and climate change. It's been especially active in opposing mountaintop removal—a devastating mining practice in which coal companies detonate summits in order to access underlying seams of coal. To ignite interest among the faithful, Restoring Eden staff and volunteers visit university campuses and host "Go Tell It on the Mountain" music festivals.

They've also helped by gathering data to support policy changes. Restoring Eden has partnered with West Virginia University to research the cancer rates of coal miners, sending volunteers door-to-door in Kentucky mining towns to collect family health histories.

The results of the March 2011 survey, published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Community Health*, revealed that mountaintop removal coal mining is likely responsible for more than 87,000 cases of cancer in central Appalachia.

VOICES FOR THE VOICELESS

"Though they haven't been the traditional allies of the environmental movement, the religious groups represent a really sizable social network that, when mobilized, can make a big difference," says Rev. Harper.

Harper's New Jersey–based GreenFaith was formed in 1992 by Christian and Jewish clergy after they attended the Rio Earth Summit. Today, its diverse membership includes Christians of every stripe, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists—all of whom have declared environmental stewardship a moral duty in alignment with their spiritual doctrines.

One of the group's first initiatives was to pioneer an alternative energy program, partnering with solar power companies and financiers to install solar arrays in households that wouldn't otherwise be able to afford them.

"Religious communities for thousands of years have worked to protect those who are vulnerable in society," says Harper. "Since pollution disproportionately and unfairly affects people in poor areas, it was clear from the start that we'd focus our energy in that direction."

GreenFaith has found plenty of work in its own neighborhood. Newark, N.J., is among the country's most densely populated urban areas and has long been a dumping ground for hazardous waste. GreenFaith successfully plugged two sources of pollution in court: It sued Covanta, a waste-to-energy plant, over toxins streaming out of the company's garbage incinerator. The court ordered Covanta to install tougher pollution-control equipment and commit $875,000 to public parks. A second lawsuit blocked the Army Corps of Engineers from dredging Newark Bay in a way that would distribute poisonous dioxin throughout the marine and urban environment.

Education is the second branch of GreenFaith's work. Its 18-month fellowship programs turn clergy members into environmental leaders, with retreats that explore outdoor worship opportunities and rediscover how to integrate the natural world into services and religious rituals; and teach stewardship and sustainability on household and institutional levels. A tour of contaminated sites around Newark focuses on justice.

"We find that when people walk up to the chain-link fence and hear the story of what's been buried here, and then turn around and see the school or church across the street, it takes these issues from being abstract to being very real," says Harper.

"THESE ISSUES ARE THEIR FUTURE"

As much as religious groups have to offer the environmental movement, they might stand to gain even more. Aside from the opportunity to be good neighbors, or to fulfill God's commandments, engaging environmental issues allows ancient religious traditions to remain relevant.

"People under the age of 35 or 40 understand that these issues are their future," says Harper. "Young people going into seminary care about the environment, and they want their education to address that meaningfully because it's an enormous issue for their generation and their children's generation."

On a spiritual level, organized religion's most powerful rituals are nature-based. What would a baptism in polluted water signify? Or a Eucharist with pesticide-laced wine? By maintaining an intimate connection with nature, and defending its integrity, spiritual aspirants ensure that their sacred acts still have meaning.

Above all, the natural world offers a stage for daily miracles. When Peter Illyn describes the caribou migration in the Arctic, his voice betrays a measure of awe. "In the same week, all of the caribou stop eating," he says. "They turn, like iron shavings to a magnet, in groups of five, 10, to 200,000. They cross mountains to their mating ground. How is this possible? They are called by God." Witnessing a monumental migration or seeing dust blow off the surface of Mars through a telescope's lens is a powerful reminder of each person's minute role in the theater of life. Illyn often evokes the "thin places" of early Celtic Christians: those spots in nature where, for a moment, the separation between God and self grows thin, permeable. Time slows. A sense of connectedness to all of creation materializes. To encourage more Christians to discover this for themselves, Restoring Eden has shifted its focus back to backpacking, prayer hikes, and stargazing trips.

"Getting outside hasn't necessarily been the kind of religious therapy that's prescribed," says Harper. "Usually, it's 'read this sacred text more,' or 'say more of these kinds of prayers.' But the truth of the matter is, we know that getting outside heals people's souls."

The reverse is also true: turning inward to harness the hidden powers of the soul just might restore God's wild creation.

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