

Abstract

Religious Faith in Pursuit of Environmental Justice

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In recent years, the world's religions have been increasingly turning their ethical gaze toward the intersection of social, economic and ecological justice issues. For example, there are now many interfaith organizations that have been engaging in efforts to combat environmental injustices, including the National Religious Partnership for the Environment,¹ GreenFaith,² and the environmental arm of Religions for Peace,³ among others. When discussing the intersection of issues of ecological and socio-economic justice, both secular and religious environmentalists have called attention to the need for global society to reform our socially and ecologically unjust global economic system rooted within the neoliberal paradigm, with many arguing for forms of localism as a solution. They do so because in addition to ecological and health benefits, enacting forms of economic localism may also help empower regional communities by fostering local entrepreneurial endeavors as well as collaborations amongst local businesses,

¹ <http://www.nrpe.org>

² <https://greenfaith.org>

³ <https://rfp.org/category/thematic-areas/environment/>

which would help prevent the extraction of wealth from smaller locales by transnational corporate conglomerates and contribute to the local retention of wealth creation. While these ideas have been promoted by ecological economists and social justice advocates, they may also find support in traditional religious principles and practices as well.

For example, the principle of subsidiarity found within Catholic social teaching maintains that local communities ought to be afforded the power and authority to manage their own affairs when they are capable of doing so, rather than have a centralized governing body attempt to manage the affairs of distant regions. And, although distinct, Islamic ideas pertaining to the distribution of zakat, or charitable taxation, also endorse a form of localism, insofar as it is taught that such monies ought to remain within the local communities from which they are taken as a means of increasing local solidarity and preventing exploitative extraction of wealth from a local community. The idea here is that when zakat monies were not used locally, transparency and accountability diminished and hence, the chances for corruption increased, which has certainly been true in the case with government subsidies for corporately owned industrial methods of farming, for instance, that harm the earth and oppress laborers as they extract resources from local communities.

Despite the fact that some environmentalists, following Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,"⁴ have accused the Judeo-Christian tradition, for promoting the exploitative domination of nature, many Christian eco-theologians have noted that the term "dominion,"⁵ found in Hebrew and Christian scriptures, is more accurately translated as

⁴ White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155.3767 (1967): 1203-207. <http://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>

⁵ The term "radah" in Hebrew

“stewardship” and have argued that care for the poor and for the earth are interrelated.⁶

Further, the concept of “environmental sin,” first expressed in 1997⁷ by Patriarch Bartholomew of the Orthodox Christian tradition, was recently adopted by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’*, where Francis promotes an integral ecology in which the social, economic, cultural and ecological dimensions of reality are understood holistically as inter-related aspects of life on planet earth.⁸

Furthermore, reflecting on these social and ecological issues in the 1970s, the Buddhist economist E.F. Schumacher had argued that a good economy ought to be designed in such a way as to provide all members of society with a sufficient degree of well-being and livelihoods that do not cause harm to others, and which promote service to the public good of the communities in which they live. Schumacher’s Buddhist economics shares much in common with Catholic Social Teaching and many of the ideas he espoused foreshadow those expressed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*. For instance, Schumacher argued that work should not be conceived of solely as a means to acquire wealth but should also serve the common good, promote communal solidarity and help cultivate virtue as he critiqued excessive consumerism, promoted moderate consumption practices, argued for sustainably produced and locally sourced products and endorsed renewable resources;⁹ all views that have been endorsed by

⁶ Boff, Leonardo. 1995. *Liberation Theology & Ecology in: Ecology & Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Orbis Books.

⁷ Address of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California. November 8, 1997.

⁸ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home (official English- language text of encyclical)". June 2015.

⁹ E. F. Schumacher. 1973. *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*. Blond & Briggs

other religious traditions, including the Abrahamic faiths as well as Hinduism, Taoism and various indigenous forms of spirituality.

I believe environmental injustices persist because the values of the neoliberal ethos have become so ingrained in our system over the course of the past few generations that for most people today, it is the values of this economic paradigm, rather than the values of their faith traditions, that are predominant in governing their social lives and molding their daily lifestyles.¹⁰ Yet, many of the world's faiths denounce the vices of gluttony and greed that drive this socio-economic system and uphold the view that persons flourish when they live in community with other persons and hold a proper degree of respect, if not reverence, for the natural world. Ultimately, I will argue that there is much ethical wisdom that global civilization can learn from the world's religions in regard to adopting socio-economic systems that promote rather than stifle environmental justice.

¹⁰ Sallie McFague. *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, Minn: 2001) p. 84; Philip Cafaro. 2011. *Taming Growth and Articulating a Sustainable Future: The Way Forward for Environmental Ethics*. *Ethics & the Environment*, 16(1): 10