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Religion: A Dialogue

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Religion

A dialogue

Rebecca Gould and Mark I. Wallace

Mark Wallace:

I have been captivated by the question of religion since childhood, and ever since then I have been fascinated with the possibility of a reality alternative to the everyday that I could inhabit.

My first encounter with the sacred occurred along the banks of the Singing River in Pascagoula, Mississippi. As a boy I spent summers in coastal Mississippi, where I heard stories about how the indigenous people in this area, generations ago, made a pact not to fight one another as long as there was no intermarriage between neighboring communities. But a young man from the Biloxi people and a young woman from the Pascagoula clan fell in love. In order to avoid conflict, according to the legend, the Pascagoula walked down into the river and perished singing their tribal anthem. I was told that when you sit nearby or swim in the river you can hear the voices of the lost people—and so the name of the river, the Singing River. I spent a lot of time in and around this body of water and often heard, as was my experience at that time, the haunting and beautiful lament of the river's original human inhabitants. This was my first and most enduring meeting with something outside normal life which I was drawn to experience again, understand better, and somehow explain to others.

At Swarthmore College I often teach introductory courses about the study of religion. In this context many thinkers have been major influences on my thinking, but I will mention just one: Paul Tillich, a twentieth-century German émigré to the United States during World War II, defines religion as orienting one's life toward whatever one regards as her "ultimate concern" (1957: 1).

Whether we acknowledge this fact or not, we all have basic loyalties toward those ideas, relationships, or activities in our lives that we find to be fundamentally fulfilling and worthwhile. These realities, imaginary or real, are the objects of our ultimate concern. For Tillich, this means that any idea or activity, in principle, is a type of religious (or, as I would say, spiritual) enterprise insofar as any such idea or activity serves a grounding or

purposeful role in our lives. This means, then, that the study of religion is not primarily about doctrines or rituals *per se*, but about whatever a person or a community considers to be her tacit or explicit ultimate concern. In this vein, for example, saving Earth from environmental degradation can be a spiritual act even when the actors themselves do not think of themselves as conventionally religious. Tillich continues to open up to my students the possibility of uncovering the profoundly spiritual and moral dimensions of their commitments to social and political change.

Rebecca Gould:

Like Mark, some of my earliest memories of what might be called a “spiritual experience” were always deeply connected to the natural world. Because I left California before I turned seven, my memories of the many places we lived are patchwork at best: the announcement of Martin Luther King’s assassination over the radio, a few peace marches in Berkeley—complete with teargas—and the makeshift Starship Enterprise that my siblings created in the woods near our house and never, ever let me enter! But the memories that stick with me the most, in near-tangible form, are memories of the natural world: starlit campfires on the beaches of Rio Del Mar, playing in the field of sunflowers that my grandfather had planted in Woodside, watching my grandmother—a biologist—lovingly tend her snapdragons. From where I am now, a remembered place in nature isn’t so much “called to mind” as it is called to body and spirit. I can smell pine sap and feel it stick to my fingers; I can hear the suck and tumble of the Pacific surf on giant cliffs.

So what do these personal memories and reflections have to do with religion? In comparing, Mark, your reflections with my own, it is interesting—and not surprising—to find the common theme of early childhood experiences in the natural world that were profound, sacred occasions. As I discussed in my book *At Home in Nature* (2005), experiencing the sacredness of nature does not require formal religiosity at all, and if one’s reverence for nature *is* grounded in religion, elevating one particular religious orientation over others is inaccurate and unwise.

Mark and I share childhood experiences of reverence for nature that have shaped our contemporary ecological concerns as well as our religious identities. That Mark is a Christian and I am a Jew (from a multi-religious, sometimes agnostic, family) makes little difference in the grand scale of nature’s sacredness. Both of these traditions—as well as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—have sacred texts, rituals, and social structures that emphasize the sacrality of the human–nature relationship. At the same time, each of these traditions certainly contains “nature-denying” strands, and at certain points in history (more often than not) these strands have been the dominant ones.

It is not surprising, then, that many who feel a strong connection to the natural world—and who have grown up in religious contexts where the “nature-denying” aspects of a tradition were prominent—have turned to nature as part of a “spiritual, but not religious” orientation. Given that spirituality is itself a part of religious practice (as in prayer, chant, and Bible study), this distinction between spiritual and religious is not always useful. Rather, I think it is helpful to see these categories placed on a continuum, with institutional religion on one pole and private forms of spirituality on the other. As I think about religion and nature and religion in general, my tendency is to pitch a large tent and to welcome many forms of religiosity and spirituality under it. At the same time, I recognize that the five great “world religions”—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—occupy a special place in that tent.

With these caveats and approaches in mind, how do I, how do we, think about religion in general? The word “religion” scarcely seems big enough to hold the myriad worldviews, histories, geographies, charismatic figures, teachers and devotees, artistic expressions, social structures, economic shifts, and countless narratives of personal experience, all of which may invite, or even demand, our attention. In the largest sense, *one* meaning of the word “religion” rests on the meanings of the Latin term *ligare*, to bind. Even if we can be fairly certain that the word “religion” is rooted in this Latin verb—and that certainty is still up for grabs—we must ask: “What *kind* of binding are we talking about?” Some have suggested that “binding” refers particularly to the *Akedah*, the story in the Hebrew Bible of Abraham’s binding of Issac to the sacrificial altar—the ultimate test of faith, and one that resonates with and in all traditions. Others suggest a broader set of meanings, focusing on the function of religion as one of *connectivity*, but also of *obligation*. To be bound to God (or, say, to the foundational Four Noble Truths of Buddhism) is, in a profound way, to be no longer alone in the world. At the same time, however, such commitments are also commitments to a certain set of *constraints*; for instance observing the Ten Commandments, carrying out the duty of all Muslims to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, or taking the Five Precepts which guide Buddhist lay people through the requirements of daily living. These are all practices that “constrain” religious practitioners, but such constraints are in the service of a larger freedom that comes with knowing who one is spiritually and what practices are demanded of one as a serious practitioner.

When we take such a broad view of religion, we cannot help but notice the many ways that “binding” comes to the fore in religious practice: animal sacrifice, covenantal circumcision, coming of age rituals partaking of the Eucharist, the list is endless. Sometimes this binding is tight, as we see in various forms of Orthodoxy. At other times, the “binding” is noticeably more elastic, expressive of another aspect of the term *ligare*, which is etymologically related to *ligaments*, the connective tissues in our bodies that

keep our bones firmly aligned, but loose enough for freedom of movement. But whether we are speaking of strict Orthodox Jews or liberal, experimental Unitarian Universalists it is important to recognize that all religious institutions and movements contain both “strict” and “loose” approaches to religious practice and religious identity. Furthermore, to “bind” also means “to bind back” to one’s truest, highest self, from which we all tend to stray.

Keeping these meditations on binding in mind, I want to offer a working *characterization* (as opposed to a static definition) of religion as (1) a culturally constructed conceptual framework (or “worldview”) (2) for understanding and interpreting (not only in a scientific way) the most significant aspects of nature, life, and the human condition (3) that are expressed through a variety of sacred texts and/or practices, and (4) undertaken in community, whether physically present or not (as in rituals for/with the ancestors). Such a characterization is necessarily broad in order to make room for Lutherans, Zen Buddhists, Reconstructionist Jews, members of a Wiccan coven, and “spiritual, but not religious” people who look to nature as the primary source of meaning and authority.

To put this characterization in simpler terms, we might say that religion assumes and nurtures connections to “that which is larger than ourselves” and, in turn, the guiding concepts of a religion (e.g. salvation and resurrection, *moksha* [liberation], living by the Torah, the Holy Eight Fold Path) are expressed, preserved, and given form by sacred texts and practices that enable us to shape our lives around—as the old Protestant hymn goes—“the ties that bind.” “That which is larger than ourselves” may be very precise or rather ineffable, but what is more important is that these “ties that bind” also include *ties to a community of people* (and sometimes other living beings) who share our conceptual framework and/or our practices.

Even *within* a particular religious tradition, I find myself increasingly encouraging my students to speak of *Buddhisms* and *Christianities* to account for the tremendous variety of religious expression even within a particular religious tradition. Our challenge, then, is to hold an elastic but not “anything goes” approach to religion, to consider the adjectival and adverbial dimensions of the term, rather than to pursue a categorical, nominative *definition*.

Mark and I agree that it is not that all of us *need* a religious tradition in order to lead a meaningful life, and that most religious people actually do not spend much time *defining* religion in their daily lives. Instead, most of us primarily pay attention to our personal psycho-spiritual experiences and what they might mean for our lives. It is no surprise then that when the psychologist William James sought to understand religion he approached it by studying individual narratives of religious life, which he presented and interpreted in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Similarly, Paul Tillich’s definition of religion as “ultimate concern,” which Mark finds compelling, succeeds in pitching a “big tent” for religious life, especially in

terms of avoiding the restriction of “religion” to a Christian deity or to “the supernatural,” terms that we now see as quite limited when, say, Buddhism, Hinduism, aboriginal traditions, or various forms of “nature religion” are considered.

Of course, the danger of Tillich’s approach is the flipside of his success, for upon reading Tillich many enthusiasts for his position are eager to label athletic exertion, landscape painting, or playing French horn concertos as “ultimate concerns.” While there is some truth in interpreting Tillich this way—and the effects of athleticism, artistic expression, and performing great music often feel little different from religious experience—Tillich is careful to make distinctions. “Ultimate concerns” are only religious, he writes, if they are “ultimate concerns about ultimate things.” In other words, Tillich wants to be clear that mastering Pilates or playing the French horn—while each may be significant and may even provide considerable insight beyond the details of the practice itself—is not what he is talking about *per se*. Rather, Tillich is suggesting that an ultimate concern is synonymous with religion when the *direction of that concern* is pointed to that which transcends human culture alone, or, as I put it earlier, “that which is larger” than human experience and the presumed centrality of the ego.

More recent theologians have expanded on James and Tillich, and for this part of our dialogue I will mention only two: the Christian theologian Sallie McFague and the writer and activist Rabbi Arthur Waskow. Over the course of her extensive theological thinking and writing, Sallie McFague has called on her readers to pay attention to the *metaphorical* dimensions of our language about God—language that is sometimes detrimental and sometimes rich with opportunities. To cite only one example, McFague argues that the metaphor of God as Lord, King, and Father is not as effective in our own time as it was in biblical times, when lords, kings, and fathers dominated social life. In our own democratic, post-feminist age, McFague writes, we need new metaphors to guide us to ethical, ecological, and social change-oriented ways of living. She proposes new metaphors—reminding us that these are *metaphors* and not literal *descriptions*—that include the idea of God as mother, lover (i.e. the Beloved), and friend, as well as the notion of the Earth as God’s body. Over several publications McFague (1987, 1993, 1997) works through the significance of the metaphors she is proposing and demonstrates the ways in which particular visions of God—particularly in the Christian context—offer positive encouragement for ecological thinking and action.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow also urges his readers and students to understand the historically conditioned, and therefore limited, interpretations of the Divine that we have inherited. Waskow shows the ways in which the language of God as a revered and feared supreme-royalty emphasized but *one strand* of Judaism that saw nature as the mere stage for human–Divine activity. By contrast, Waskow uncovers the often hidden ecological history of

the Jews' relationship to the land and to nature generally. Among his many contributions, Waskow re-reads the creation story with attention to the role of Adam as earth-keeper. "Adam"—stemming from the Hebrew word *Adamah* (soil)—is placed in the garden to "work" (*avod*, meaning both "to serve" and "to keep," not "to dominate," as so many have assumed). Rabbi Waskow also presents the ecological, agricultural origins of many Jewish holidays that were later constructed as celebrations of primarily historical occasions of God's actions on behalf of the Jews (e.g. the story of the Exodus from Egypt gets grafted on to the older spring barley harvest ritual and eventually the agricultural aspect of the celebration is almost forgotten). Waskow asks us to re-think what concepts of God will serve the challenges of our time while being true to our historical roots. For Waskow, the biggest challenges are promoting interfaith work, protesting war and injustice, and vigorously pursuing ecological health and the threat of global climate change, which he provocatively terms "global scorching."¹

I am ending this first stage of our conversation with these reflections on Waskow's and McFague's theological and social/ecological justice work because they, in some sense, continue the contributions made by William James and Paul Tillich. In certain ways, all of these thinkers contribute to the organizing and stabilizing functions of religion. At the same time, all four of these writers recognize the volatility of religious experience (James), the necessity for a big conceptual tent under which all kinds of religious traditions and practices can be included (Tillich), and the necessary elasticity of "age old" religious histories, guiding concepts, and metaphors (McFague and Waskow). All of these thinkers offer contributions that mirror those of the other three, and in each case they speak to both the costs and the benefits of the "destabilizing" functions of religion which Mark Wallace so rightly urges that we recognize, confront, and interpret, lest our views of religion become all silver lining and no cloud.

Perhaps the ambiguity and potential instability of religion is why, when I look back to my childhood experiences in nature (and even my much more recent ones), I remember sometimes feeling powerfully comforted, inspired, and moved by the grandeur of God's creation and at other times feeling that the word "God"—whoever and whatever that meant—was not large enough to contain the enchanted mystery of the evolutionary process, not big enough to hold the vastness and beauty of the forest cathedral in which I found myself standing.

Wallace:

Rebecca, much of what you wrote resonated with me. In particular, I was struck by your personal comment about our like-minded religious identities. You recognize the common nature-based spirituality that grounds our

different religious heritages, Judaism and Christianity, but also acknowledge their differences and the ways in which they have both been “nature denying.”

To make this point let me begin with a brief aside. I don’t know how to put this without sounding offensive to pious ears, but over the years, in many contexts, I have felt embarrassed about my Christian identity. I find the story of Jesus, church music and liturgy, spiritual and theological writings, and the general symbol system of Christian faith to be continually nurturing and life transforming. And I have many heroes of the faith—from Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and, if I may be so bold, Barak Obama—who inspire and move me to reach toward the common good and try to live a life of integrity and charity towards others. But much of the time the public face of Christianity is troubled. Media preachers like Pat Robertson and James Dobson preach a gospel of division and judgment. Conservative Christian politicians such as James Inhofe and Sarah Palin employ a narrow interpretation of the Bible to rail against sex education in the schools, the separation of church and state, and climate change legislation. And the Catholic Church has been badly damaged by continual revelations of hundreds (or more) of clergy who have sexually abused male children over the course of many decades.

I have been able to reclaim my religious identity through ongoing conversations with friends and colleagues about how to articulate a progressive Christianity that functions as a counterweight to the preachers of exclusion. Some of this impetus comes from conversations with Jewish friends, especially Roger Gottlieb and David Abram, who have labored impressively to recover Judaism’s nature-based identity. Years ago, when David wrote to me that he self-identifies as a “Jewish animist,” I felt a light go off in my thinking because this turn of phrase captured exactly what I sensed about my own Christian love of Earth and its many inhabitants, sentient and non-sentient alike. Likewise, Rebecca, your forest ramblings and playtimes in sunflower fields in the Northern California of your youth evoke a similar sensibility of encountering something numinous and wonderful, perhaps even sacred, within the everyday world of your childhood.

Today, then, the basic orientation that drives my spiritual appreciation of nature is what I call “Christian animism”—the biblically inflected conviction that all creation is infused with or “animated” by God’s presence. The term *animism* has its origins in the early academic studies of the vernacular belief systems of indigenous peoples in Africa and the Americas. It originated with the nineteenth-century British anthropologist E.B. Tylor, who used it to describe how primordial people attributed “life” or “soul” to all things, living and non-living. Sharing resonances with the Latin word *animus*, which means soul or spirit, among other definitions, animism came to stand for the orienting worldview of indigenous communities that nonhuman nature is “ensouled” or “inspired” with sacred presence and power. As religions scholar Graham Harvey writes, animism

is typically applied to religions that engage with a wide community of living beings with whom humans share this world or particular locations within it. It might be summed up by the phrase “all that exists lives” and, sometimes, the additional understanding that “all that lives is holy.” As such the term animism is sometimes applied to particular indigenous religions in comparison to Christianity or Islam, for example. (Harvey 2005: 81)

What intrigues me about Harvey’s definition is his assumption that monotheistic traditions such as Christianity should be regarded as distinct from animism. Initially, this assertion makes sense in light of the historic Christian proclivity to cast aspersions on the material world and the flesh as inferior to the concerns of the soul. Pseudo-Titus, for example, an extra-canonical exhortation to Christian asceticism from late antiquity, urges its readers to cleanse themselves of worldly pollution by overcoming fleshly temptations: “Blessed are those who have not polluted their flesh by craving for this world, but are dead to the world that they may live for God!” (Ehrman 2003: 239). At first glance, Christianity’s emphasis on making room for God by denying the world and the flesh is at odds with the classical animist belief in the living goodness of all inhabitants of sacred Earth.

In the main, however, Christian faith offers its practitioners a profound vision of God’s this-worldly identity. Harvey’s presumption that Christianity and animism are distinct from one another is at odds with the biblical worldview that all things are bearers of divinity—the whole biosphere is filled with God’s animating power—insofar as God signaled God’s love for creation by incarnating Godself in Jesus and giving the Holy Spirit to indwell everything that exists on the planet. The miracle of Jesus as the living enfleshment of God in our midst—a miracle that is alongside the gift of the Spirit to the world since time immemorial—signals the ongoing vitality of God’s sustaining presence within the natural order. God is not a sky-God divorced from the material world. As once God became earthly at the beginning of creation, and as once God became human in the body of Jesus, so now God continually enfleshes Godself through the Spirit in the embodied reality of life on Earth.

Of the current models of the interconnected relation between God and Earth, *pan-en-theism* is closest to Christian animism. Panentheist theologian Sallie McFague, whom Rebecca highlights along with Arthur Waskow, is a foundational eco-theologian who argues for the mutual, internal relatedness of God and creation, but notes that God is not *fully* realized in the material world. God is *in* the world, indeed, but God is not “totally” embodied within everyday existence. McFague writes:

Pantheism says that God is embodied, necessarily and totally; traditional theism claims that God is disembodied, necessarily and totally;

panentheism suggests that God is embodied but not necessarily or totally. Rather, God is sacramentally embodied: God is mediated, expressed, in and through embodiment, but not necessarily or totally.

(McFague 1993: 149–50)

While my sensibility and McFague's are deeply aligned, my Christian animism pushes further by suggesting that God is *fully* and *completely* embodied within the natural world. Here the emphasis does not fall on the limited relatedness of God and world such that God, finally, can escape the world, but rather on the idea that the world *thoroughly embodies* God's presence. Unlike many Christian theologies which emphasize God's *transcendence*, my position, akin to McFague's, champions divine *subscendence*: God flowing out into the Earth; God becoming one of us in Jesus, to use Christian language; God gifting to all of creation the Spirit in order to infuse all things with divine energy and love. Now nothing is held back as God overflows Godself into the bounty of the natural world. Now all things are bearers of the sacred; everything that is, is holy; each and every creature is a portrait of God.

The biblical ideas of creation, incarnation, and Spirit are the fountainhead of the Christian animist vision of the sacred character of the natural order. From this living source, to paraphrase Harvey, all that exists is alive, all that exists is good, all that exists is holy. We will not save what we do not love, and unless, as a culture, we learn to love and care for the gift of the created order again, the prospects for saving the planet, and thereby ourselves as well, are terrifyingly bleak. But insofar as God is in everything and all things are inter-animated by divine power and concern, we can affirm that God is carnal, God is earthen, God is flesh. And with this animist affirmation the will is empowered, and the imagination ignited, to fight against the specters of global warming and the loss of biodiversity as the great threats of our time.

In every respect, therefore, the Earth crisis is a *spiritual* crisis because without a vital, fertile planet it will be difficult to find traces of divine wonder and providence in the everyday order of things. When the final arctic habitat of the polar bear melts into the sea due to human-induced climate change, I will lose something of God's beauty and power in my life. When the teeming swell of equatorial amphibians can no longer adapt to deforestation and rising global temperatures, I fear something of God will disappear as well. I feel a deep sense of kinship with the first peoples of the Americas who experienced the sacred within the Black Hills of what is now South Dakota, or on top of Mount Graham in southern Arizona, and then found that when these places were degraded something of God was missing as well. Without these and other places charged with sacred power, I am lost on the Earth. Without still-preserved landed sites saturated with divine presence, I am a wanderer with no direction, a person without hope, a believer

experiencing the death of God on an erstwhile verdant planet now suffering daily from human greed.

Gould:

Mark, your final sentences evoke both the fear and the despair that come from experiencing what Carolyn Merchant has called “The Death of Nature” (1990), which, from a “Christian animist” point of view such as yours, must also mean the “Death of God.”² The “Death of God” idea is not new, but in our own time, as Mark makes clear, God may be dying in a new way to the extent that the Divine is understood to be present in the natural world. I might add here that this notion of divine presence in nature is a longstanding one—certainly not something that Mark or I have made up! In the early Christian world—and later in Puritan culture—there persists an idea of the “Book of Nature” as a text of sorts to be read alongside the “Book of Scripture” to discern God’s character and desires.³ The act of “reading” Nature in order to discern spiritual messages can be traced from its Calvinist origins in early America (with preludes extending back to the first century of Christianity) to nineteenth-century liberal Christianity, to Thoreau’s “post-Christian” reading of nature, and on into our own time when nature writing becomes an unofficial, spiritual genre akin to the literature of spiritual formation. We need look no further for an example than Mark’s own *Finding God in the Singing River* (2005), which is a wonderful, provocative illustration of this kind of perspective.

Like Mark, I too have wrestled with what I have come to call “environmental despair,” the powerlessness one feels lying awake at two in the morning, wondering if it is possible to have *any* effect on species loss and global warming. Over time, I have found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the central role of religion as a comfort in times of trial (consider, for instance, the crowds of people who flocked to their houses of worship in the wake of 9/11) and the historical complicity (in ecological degradation) of Christianity and Judaism, whose many leaders have portrayed God as being above and beyond nature and have insisted that religious history is strictly about the *history* of God and God’s people, with nature serving merely as the stage for the drama. This perspective, to cite just one representative example, appears in Nahum Sarna’s edited volume (on Genesis) of the widely respected Jewish Publication Society’s commentary on the Torah. In his introduction, Sarna writes: “The God of Genesis is the wholly self-sufficient One, absolutely independent of nature” (1989: xiv). By contrast, one need only study Chapter Two of Genesis to discover a portrait of the human–nature relationship which emphasizes intimacy, kinship, and the mutual interdependence of humanity and the natural world. Or consider the Book of Job, where God asks rhetorically, “Do *you* know the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth their young? ... Did *you* give the beautiful

wings to the peacocks or wings and feathers to the ostrich?" These texts offer a sense of the complex, intimate interweave of nature, humanity, and the Divine that runs throughout both Jewish and Christian sacred texts (Genesis 2:15; Job 39:1 and 13).

But it is in the context of our shared experience of environmental despair that I would like to take Mark's arm, lead him to the quiet teahouse in Middlebury, Vermont, and sit him down for a psychological, spiritual, and theological pep talk. To Mark I would emphasize much of what he already knows, but may have lost track of in the midst of his despair. I would tell him: Judaism and Christianity definitely bear the problematic legacies of transcendence over immanence and we must face countless discussions *ad nauseum* of humanity's God-given "dominion" over the natural world. But these complicated concepts of "transcendence" and "dominion" pale by comparison with the abundant "non-dominion," "immanent in nature" themes and assertions that we find in our sacred texts. The ideas of the Divine in nature course through the Hebrew Bible like a river, appearing in Genesis, Proverbs, Psalms, Job, and beyond, not to mention in the spiritual/agricultural principles that we find in Jewish commentary such as the Talmud (whose first book is entitled "Seeds" and provides instructions on prayer and agricultural practice in the same text!). And in the Christian context, as Mark has mentioned, there is perhaps no more dramatic example of the Divine in nature than the incarnation of God in Jesus. It is true that fears of paganism and pantheism are persistent in our texts, reflecting the cultural politics of the day, but the essential message is this: Our traditions are entirely too complex to be characterized as theologically "anti-nature."

Recently, religious organizations have begun to catch up with the ideas of their theological predecessors, such as Waskow and McFague. While late to join the environmental movement (because of misunderstanding and suspicions on both sides), religious organizations, from interfaith ecological action groups to denomination-based committees focused on policy, have emerged in force. Let me provide a few examples to make more visible this recent turn toward facing environmental problems from a spiritual/religious perspective.⁴ A United Church of Christ (UCC) minister I know once provoked church members by coming before the congregation to deliver her sermon and then suddenly tipping garbage all over the altar. Such a dramatic display might have backfired, but because the congregation had a strong, positive relationship with their minister they interpreted her actions as urgent, prophetic ones and eventually began to invest more time, energy, and money in environmental causes.

Similarly, some Catholic priests have begun to link the offering of the Eucharist—the high point of the Mass—with the health of the planet. How can bread and wine be truly *sacred*, these priests have asked, if the grain comes from pesticide-soaked fields and the grapes are grown in a vineyard

that has a large carbon footprint? For these religious leaders, *ritual sacrality is intimately connected to environmental health*; without this health, they argue, the sacred itself is diminished, as Mark has also pointed out. Progressive rabbis have taken a similar stance, persuading their congregants that the traditional *ner tamid* (eternal light) that shines over the Ark of the Torah should be exchanged in favor of a solar-powered one. How can eternal light be truly *holy*, they have asked, when electric “light” comes from impoverished coal fields and the correspondingly impoverished communities whose citizens are forced to be part of a business that is their only hope of a livelihood, but whose health effects threaten their lives? Far better, these rabbis and congregants argue, to derive “eternal light” from that original, holy renewable source—the sun.

In considering these exempla, some might protest that pouring garbage over the altar or installing a solar *ner tamid* is a “merely symbolic” action that does not have any real significant impact on environmental degradation and climate change. This is true to a certain extent, although less so if many more congregations throughout the land begin making serious, sustainable choices in their houses of worship and in their own daily lives. This is why a campaign such as the Evangelical Environmental Network’s well-publicized challenge to families that asked, “What Would Jesus Drive?” had a noticeable effect on a community that does not historically embrace “liberal” environmental causes. More to the point, we do well to remember that *much* religious practice is *essentially symbolic* (such as wearing a Star of David around one’s neck or kneeling at the Communion rail to express humility and gratitude). These actions convey various attitudes of heart, mind, and spirit, devotion, or exultation, or longing to be closer to God. As so many teachers, theologians, and clergy have pointed out—and Sallie McFague’s work is a wonderful example of this—metaphors and symbols *matter*. In the Jewish world, for instance, we can see that the attempt to bring religion to ecology and vice versa has had the visible effect of actually bringing young people “back to Judaism,” because they have come to see their home tradition as more relevant to their own lives and hopes for the world than they once had assumed.

Furthermore, as we have come to understand the “geography of impact” when it comes to pollution, toxics, and global warming we have become increasingly aware of the social justice dimensions of environmental problems. Environmental work, religious groups have helped us to see, is not simply the work of preserving pristine landscapes (a potentially elitist concern). Environmental work is also very much about preserving equally the health and well-being of *all* human communities. Needless to say, serving the poor, the oppressed, the sick, and the under-educated is the central responsibility of those Christians and Jews who take their spiritual lives seriously and *these social justice concerns are connected to, not separate from, our environmental work*.

As we wrote early on in this dialogue, Mark and I both often experience the sacred through our encounters with the natural world. Like Mark, I often fear that some of these encounters and, by extension, some aspects of God will disappear in the face of the forces of greed, consumption, and unchecked individualism that reign in our society. Like Mark, I know that if the river I sat by so often as a child—the pewter-hued river where I read poetry, thought about my future, delighted in the sprouting spring reeds, and also got engaged—were to die out because of apathy and disregard it would feel like a kind of Deicide, a mortal sin. As McFague has written, sin is living apart from the Source of life, refusing to take responsibility for natural and human communities. It is forgetting to play by the “house rules” of sustainable living on this planet. No doubt, if my dear Concord River—the same river that Thoreau often visited—were polluted beyond recovery I would feel like one of my limbs had been cut off, “the river limb” which in my eco-body is connected to the “mountain meadow limb,” the “favorite old tree limb,” and so on. A piece of myself and a piece of the Divine would have vanished.

And yet (here Mark, I am returning to the pep talk!) it is a central tenet of the Jewish tradition that we must *always affirm life*, even, or especially, in the midst of death, sadness, and loss. This persistent call to affirm life is why, even when sitting *shiva* (the traditional seven-day period of mourning) for a loved one, mourners are required by tradition to take a pause from grieving to celebrate Shabbat with whatever joy and gratefulness they can muster. And because *shiva* is always a seven-day ritual, there is never any escape, for *anyone*, from entering the sacred, joyous “Divine embrace ... of timeless time and placeless place”—the place of Shabbat.⁵ In the midst of *shiva*, Shabbat is a central part of the Plan.

So when I am in the midst of environmental despair, I like to think of eco-religious institutions, thinkers, and practices as if they were so many organic grapes being gently crushed and fermented into a fine Shabbos wine. In such a context, I am fully aware of the extent to which our planet-home is sick and possibly dying. I mourn the death of sacred rivers and of the polar bears Mark mentioned, whose divine light—both fierce and playful—shines like a beacon on human folly. I do not pretend that these things are not happening. I grieve and I mourn. But then I bring the cup of all we have accomplished and of all that is still possible to my lips. I offer some to Mark. And we toast: L’chaim, to Life!

Notes

- 1 One iteration of these interpretations and arguments can be found in Waskow (2000). See also Rabbi Waskow’s website for the Shalom Center (www.theshalomcenter.org), which reprints articles by Waskow and other scholars.
- 2 In the “Death of God” movement of the 1960s, God was said to be “dead” by various intellectuals and theologians who had essentially *thought their way out of* belief in God. The concept (and reality) of God seemed to them to be antithetical

to the central beliefs and values of modern, scientific life. The “Death of God” movement first appeared in the public eye when the April 1966 cover of *Time Magazine* famously asked, “Is God Dead?”

- 3 The idea of “two books,” or the book of nature and book of scripture, goes back at least to St. Augustine in the Christian tradition. For instance, he writes, “It is the divine page that you must listen to; it is the book of the universe that you must observe. The pages of Scripture can only be read by those who know how to read and write, while everyone, even the illiterate, can read the book of the universe” (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, XLV, 7 (PL 36,518)).
- 4 Some of these examples come from research I have conducted jointly with my friend and colleague Laurel Kearns, who wrote the Afterword to this volume.
- 5 The phrase beginning “Divine embrace ... ” comes from music and lyrics composed for Shabbat by Rabbi Shefa Gold. See the website www.rabbishefa.com.

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