The roles of religions in activating an ecological consciousness

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The variety of religious ideas and rituals around the planet is such that it is difficult to comprehend religion from a single conceptual framework. Rather than attempting to define religion here, the task is to show how traditional connections into the natural world of the religions have changed. These ancient connections provide insight into ways in which the world religions can play a role in responding to our contemporary environmental crises. That is, the world religions can assist in activating an ecological consciousness. Such an ecological consciousness is a new mode of being for the human that retrieves, re-evaluates, and reconstructs older human–nature interactions in the world religions. A few examples from four of the world religions illustrate the richness and diversity of religions as having such a role in bringing about this ecological consciousness.

Examples of religious connections into the natural world

Christianity

In Eastern Orthodox Christianity, theology and liturgy provide orientation for humans to the vastness and beauty of the universe. Through sense engagement with the material world this tradition brings the believer into a cosmic mysticism unfolding in the freshness of the seasons and in the taste of daily bread. Orthodox liturgies arouse the senses with choral music, pungent incense, resplendent vestments, and luminous mosaics suffused with symbolic meaning. Central to Eastern Orthodoxy theology is belief in a personal Creator who orders the world and stands in relation to that creation as present to the practitioner especially in liturgy. One expression of this mysticism of matter in Orthodoxy is the choral recitation of prayers for the preservation of the environment as seen in a vespers liturgy:


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You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains . . .

You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches . . .

You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out . . .

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great . . .
These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.1

These verses convey the celebration and “joyful sorrow” that characterises the Orthodox tradition, namely, a hope in the divine light that suffuses the world even in the midst of darkness and destruction (Bartholomew 2008, p.233). This sense of a “divine light of darkness” is an ancient mystical understanding in Christianity of a sacred presence in the world. This is echoed in the exhortation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky in The Brothers Karamazov, “Love all God’s creatures, the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things” (Bartholomew 2008, p.94) In Eastern Orthodoxy creation is not separated from the identity and destiny of the human. Indeed, this worldview orients humans to a divine mystery within and beyond the natural world. Religion in this tradition can be said to be personal and ineffable, intimate and nameable, as well as beyond words and human understanding.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a religious and ethical tradition where the human is grounded in an expansive sense of community including both humans and nature. The individual is seen as embedded in concentric circles of family, society, politics, nature, and the cosmos itself. The task of cultivation for humans is to continually expand the self so as to participate in these dynamic relationships. By such cultivation one becomes grounded not only in the human order, but in the larger order of nature and cosmos. This was a political philosophy as well as a personal philosophy, whereby order in the state was mirrored by order in the family and in the person.

The result of this is exemplified in the Great Learning:

Those in antiquity who wish to illuminate luminous virtue throughout the world would first govern their states; wishing to govern their states, they would first bring order to their families; wishing to bring order to their families, they would first cultivate their own person; wishing to cultivate their own person, they would first rectify their minds; wishing to rectify their minds, they would first make their thoughts sincere; wishing to make their thoughts sincere, they would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge lies in the investigation of things. (de Bary and Bloom 1999, pp.330–331)

Tu Weiming, a philosopher who has been instrumental in reviving the Confucian tradition, has taught for most of his career in the United States, first at Berkeley, then at Princeton, and finally at Harvard. In 2010 he returned to China to direct the Institute for Higher Learning at Beijing University. As a Confucian scholar and teacher, he exemplifies many of the teachings of this tradition. This is especially evident in his life-long commitment to assist in the emergence of a modern form of Confucianism that is appropriate for contemporary China and for the broader Chinese diaspora. Moreover, in his concern for contemporary issues, such as human rights and the environment, he demonstrates how Confucian self-cultivation is grounded in a desire to transform the larger world.

This desire reflects the ultimate aim of Confucians to contribute to the peace and flourishing of the world. It was the obligation of rulers and ministers to create the conditions for such flourishing and for scholars and teachers to educate people to form a harmonious society. Assisting the long-term common good was considered primary for Confucians. Within such a framework a deep sympathy for those in need is considered indispensable. The human is grounded in the cosmological and natural contexts symbolised by Heaven and Earth. Indeed, an individual, through his or her actions, completed and assisted the natural order of the universe. The Western Inscription written by Chang Tsai (Zhang Zai, 1020–1077) represents this role of the human as an anthropocosmic force rather than simply an anthropocentric presence:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider my nature.

All people are my brother and sister and all things are my companions.

The great ruler [the emperor] is the eldest son of my parents [Heaven and Earth], and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the aged – this is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Show affection toward the elder and weak . . . the sage identifies his virtue with that of Heaven and Earth, and the worthy is the best [among the children of Heaven and Earth]. Even those who are tired and infirm, crippled and sick,
those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, all are my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to. (de Bary and Bloom 1999, p.683)

Tu Weiming comments on this passage:

. . . Chang Tsai reminds us that no matter how small a being we find ourselves to be in the vastness of the cosmos, there is not only a locus but also an intimate place for each of us. For we are all potentially guardians and indeed co-creators of the universe. In this holistic vision of the human, an ontological gap between Creator and creature would seem to be almost inconceivable. It appears that there is no post-lapsarian state to encounter and that alienation as a deep-rooted feeling of estrangement from one’s primordial origins is nonexistent. Furthermore, the idea of the human as a manipulator and conqueror of nature would also seem to be ruled out. (Tu 1985, p.158)

Confucianism thus emphasises the inherent dynamism of all reality manifest in relational rhythms in which humans are grounded.

Indigenous traditions

The term “lifeway” is helpful for suggesting the integrated character of religion and everyday life among indigenous peoples. In this holistic understanding, humans come into reflection and relationship with the sustaining powers of food, water, air, and land. Rituals are a means of expressing and celebrating these relationships. Thus, rituals are not separate acts but distinct pathways into the nurturing quality of the natural world. For example, among Okanagan/Salish peoples located in the Selkirk Mountains of the Colville Reservation in Washington State in the United States the religious practices of the Winter Dance are traditionally woven into everyday life of subsistence practices and kinship relations.

In the Salish lifeway, Winter Dances are known from the earliest ethnography to have been practiced by these peoples along the interior of the Columbia River long before the first contact with outsiders from American culture. Now the ceremony typically extends over four nights, beginning in the late evening and ending at sunrise. It includes the singing of vision songs, giveaways, dancing, feasting, gaming, and healing. The space in which the Winter Dance is held symbolically connects practitioners to the larger cosmos. Various types of lodges were built by the different peoples in this region such as large tule-reed tipis. Nowadays a large hall or special room is darkened and prepared with a lodgepole pine tree that spans from floor to ceiling. The tree is symbolic of a cosmic presence that moves with and through the world. Often peoples come from different tribes and at some distance to attend Winter Dances sponsored by accomplished healers (Grim 1992). Participants prepare for this complex ritual by gathering food, attending purifying sweatlodge rituals, and selecting shawls, shirts, kerciefs, woven belts, blankets, and many other handmade items for giveaways. Those who will sing visionary songs are called into a sacred discomfort, or spirit sickness, by the powers in the natural world.

Central to the ceremonial are individual guardian-spirit relationships manifest in visionary songs sung at the centring pole in the Winter Dance house. According to Salish tradition, the songs come from the animal–plant–mineral beings residing in the local land. The songs are a gift of power for humans. Singers know that their songs are returning to them when they experience a dis-ease, a spiritual discomfort that is relieved by singing their song. Thus, singers announce their personal spirit helpers in the communal setting of the Winter Dance, and dispel personal and communal anxieties through that singing. Singing as a way of knowing builds a deeper knowing of the nurturing capacities of the bioregion. That is, singing reaffirms the old stories that tell how the spiritual beings in the landscape gave of themselves to sustain the human. Singing recalls this sacred exchange of foods. One Salish elder recalled:

This is our belief at the Winter Dance when the singers come together and pray for our coming year. We have confidence at the pole during the Winter Dance ‘cause it’s really the animals, what grows on the ground, the water. They’re all out there in the four directions, all you have to do is go out and get it.2

This elder lays out a religious ecology in which spiritual power, or sumix, resides at the heart of the nurturing world. Visionary songs manifest these presences orienting and grounding the singers and their communities. These relationships recognise and affirm the nurturing and transforming dimensions of food.

Hinduism

Among the many religious expressions in Hinduism is the concept and practice of bhakti, or transforma-
tive devotion to a personal deity. Bhakti brings an individual into experience of the divine as present, visible, and embodied. Clearly, other practices are also transformative, namely, yoga as body meditation and movement, jnana as intellectual discipline and study, karma as performance of action, and dharma as one’s duty in life. These groupings of religious ideas and practices have a rich scriptural history beginning with the Vedic hymns. Vedic religion focused on sacrifice as mediating between humans, nature, and the gods. By the end of the Vedas, or Upanishads, a new religious emphasis emerged, namely, an ultimate monism. That is, the sages posited an undifferentiated unity of the Absolute (Brahman) and the interior self of the human (atman). This Oneness, or identity of all reality, became a seminal religious idea in Hinduism. Gradually, another form of religious expression emerged affirming a difference between self and divine, human and god. Bhakti relates to both forms of religiosity, being more meditational in the monistic expression of the Upanishads, and more impassioned and ecstatic in devotion to a personal deity.

An exemplary form of bhakti can be found in the text of the Bhagavad Gita, the “Song of the Lord”, which also influenced Gandhi. This text presents an extended conversation between the warrior, Arjuna, and the deity, Krishna, who acts as his charioteer. Before the fighting begins Arjuna, seeing his close relatives on the opposing side, is filled with doubt and unable to fight. While urging him to accept his duty (dharma) as a warrior, Krishna also recommends the devotion of bhakti as a meditational concentration upon Ultimate Oneness in the form of himself as a deity.

In the ninth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna first reveals himself as the Absolute and advises Krishna that the simplest act performed without controlling attachment will bring an intimate connection. Krishna says: “If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it.” This simple devotional act blossoms into an extensive bhakti literature in Hinduism. These are the Puranas that narrate the stories of the gods and how to worship them. Among these is the Bhagavata Purana, which details an impassioned love for the deity, Krishna. This love for Krishna extends into the natural world. Thus, the Yamuna River, along which Krishna is said to have walked and played, becomes personified as a goddess and a focus of bhakti. One major poet sings to the Yamuna River:

She came to Earth to purify all beings.
She is assisted by parrots, peacocks, swans, and other birds with loving sounds.
Her waves are her arms, her sands pearl-studded bracelets,
Her banks are her beautiful hips.
She is honored as the highest lover of Krishna.
(Vallabhacarya 2006, p.106)

As seen here, all forms of embodiment within the human and natural worlds are praised in bhakti as manifesting the divine. The transformative power of Hinduism is manifest in joyful celebration of earthly realities through devotional bhakti to a personal deity.

Thus, it can be said that the world religions have diverse connections to the natural world in their rituals and beliefs. These ancient relationships with the rhythms of the seasons, with landscapes, and with sacred places, however, have not prepared them for the depth of environmental challenges human face in the contemporary period. These are unprecedented environmental dilemmas that call for broad cultural changes especially with regard to patterns of human consumption.

Scientists are now reporting that, because of population explosion, our consuming habits, and our market drive for resources we are living in the midst of a massive extinction period. Their conservative estimate of the number of species being lost is now more than 20,000 annually due to cutting of forests, unmonitored development, and destruction of habitat. This period represents the largest loss of species since the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. In other words, we are shutting down life systems on the planet and causing the end of our current geological period, namely, the Cenozoic era. A plaque on the floor of the Hall of Biodiversity at the American Museum of Natural History in New York calls it “the sixth extinction period in Earth’s history”. The plaque also notes that, in contrast to the earlier extinctions, this one is due to the consequences of human activities. Thus, the current activities of the human species are not adequately described as having simply personal, social, or historical implications. Rather, we are acting on geological and biological scales of magnitude with little or no awareness of what we are doing.

As the cultural historian, Thomas Berry, observed some years ago, we are making macrophase
changes on the planet with microphase wisdom (Berry 1999, p.101). Moreover, he noted that religions have developed ethics for homicide, suicide, and even genocide in the twentieth century, but religions have not adequately reflected on, or developed ethics for, biocide and geocide (Berry 2006).

In light of this mass extinction, is it the case that the wisdom traditions of the human community, to some extent embedded in institutional religions, can provide for self and social reflection at the level needed? If the impact of human activity has been global from the Industrial Revolution, can the analysis of our problems be other than global? Can the religions provide leadership into a synergistic era of human–Earth relations characterised by empathy, regeneration, and renewal? Or are religions themselves the wellspring of those exclusivist perspectives in which human societies disconnect themselves from the natural world? Are religions caught in their own meditative promises of transcendent peace, and redemptive bliss in paradisal abandon? Or does their drive for exclusive salvation cause them to seek to destroy the Other, in the material forms of the Earth, lest they themselves be destroyed?

The environmental challenges and consumption

The data keeps pouring in that we are altering the climate and toxifying the air, water, and soil of the planet so that the health of humans and other species are at risk. The explosion of population into the twenty-first century to more than 7 billion people and the subsequent demands on the natural world are on a collision course. As reported in the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment (2005), the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007), and in recent work such as that by James Gustave Speth (2012), we humans are destroying the life-support systems of the Earth at an alarming rate.

Along with this population expansion, consumption appears to have become not simply a means for satisfying the basic needs of life but an ideology or quasi-religion. Faith in economic growth drives both producers and consumers. Their production and consumption are likened to a therapeutic act, or quasi-religious ritual, culminating in the local mall as church. Consequently, we are consuming the resources of the planet – faster than its ability to regenerate – even as we struggle through congested lanes of acquisition and expenditure. This convergence of our unlimited demands with an unquestioned faith in economic progress raises questions about the roles of religions in relation to encouraging, discouraging, or ignoring our dominant drive towards satisfying material needs.

Support for a consumerist ideology depends upon and simultaneously contributes to a worldview based on the instrumental rationality of the human (Brown 2012). In this worldview, rational choice is seen as that realm of commonsense in which both the world and human demands on the world are laid out as commensurate, equal realities that confront decision-makers. That is, in this rational scheme the assumption for decision-making is that all choices are equally clear and measurable. According to that perspective the challenge is to find a common metric for evaluating the quantitative differences among the relevant factors. Different values are integrated into this metric by assuming that all values are relative and that trade-offs are made between these values in order to arrive at a choice. The metrics used may often vary but in the current market-driven worldview such metrics as price, utility, or efficiency are dominant. This can result in such diverse views of a forest, for example, as so much board-feet or as a mechanistic complex of ecological systems that provide previously unmeasured services to the human.

In environmental policy, of late, eco-system services and cost–benefit analysis have been used as metrics to determine how a plant or animal species contributes to human welfare in a quantifiable way. Eco-system services analysis manifests a form of the transformation of consciousness urgently needed at this time. That is, these new measures whereby nature is quantified may provide invaluable bridges for bringing environmental issues into serious consideration in economic communities. However, it is also important to ask if such rational perspectives that transform reality into information – namely, manageable, quantifiable data – eliminate other significant ways of knowing reality in relation to decision-making. Have techniques for transforming nature simply into quantifiable entities caused humans to lose meaningful connections with nature?
Commodity and identity

One long-term effect is that major human decisions are made with little or no consideration of nature as a living reality. Rather, nature is largely reduced to measurable commodities. From this perspective, humans become isolated as something apart from the biological web of life. In this context humans do not seek identity and meaning in the numinous beauty of the world, or experience themselves as dependent on complex life-supporting interactions of air, water, and soil. Rather, this logic sees humans as independent, rational decision-makers who manage air, water, and soil.

This modern, mechanistic worldview sees matter as utilitarian grist for human use. Its basis rests in a dualistic Western philosophical view of mind and matter. Adapted into Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious perspectives, this dualism associates mind with soul as a transcendent spiritual entity given sovereignty and absolute control over wild matter. By means of a rational, values-oriented metric, the measure of the world was taken at the same time as we ensured our radical discontinuity from it. Modern humans enshrine this linear, cause-and-effect logic for affirming economic growth at any cost. This instrumental worldview justifies rapacious demands as coming from a supremely rational creature created in the image and likeness of its maker.

Interestingly, views of the uniqueness of the human bring many traditional religious perspectives into sync with scientific rationalism. In the Western religious traditions, for example, the human is seen as an exclusively gifted creation with a transcendent soul in a religious framework. From an Enlightenment scientific perspective, the human is the pinnacle of evolution with a rational mind. Ironically, religions emphasising the uniqueness of the human as the image of God meet market-driven applied science and technology precisely at this point of the special nature of the human to justify dominance of the natural world.

Yet, this conjunction of religion and science has not caused science generally to accept religious perspectives. From the standpoint of rational analysis many traditional values embedded in religions, such as a view of the sacred in the living Earth, the moral dimension of the human, or concerns for ancestors are incommensurate with an objectified reality that can be quantified. Religious values can be ignored as externalities, or overridden by more pragmatic profit-driven bottom line considerations. Contemporary nation-states in league with transnational corporations have promoted values of national sovereignty, security, and development exclusively for humans. More palpable than transcendent religious orientations are individualism, a monetised work ethic, and use-analysis as the sole determinations of value. The concept of national sovereignty, for example, is asserted as the superior argument for the dominion of the human community over creation. In this view all reality can be measured out in metes and bounds. Similarly, transferring our rational relationships with mechanistic matter and space onto paper in informational symbolic modes allows urbanised global societies to further analyse, separate, and divide objectified realities.

Science that sees a whole

Yet, even within the realm of scientific, rational thought there is not a uniform approach. Some resistance to the easy union of applied science and instrumental rationality comes from what we might call science that sees a whole or an integrating science. By this we refer to a lineage in the world of empirical, experimental science of valuing wonder, beauty, elegance, and imagination as crucial components of knowing the world. Knowing within these perspectives continues to stress both analysis and synthesis. This science also undertakes the reductive act of empirical observation, but it frames analysis in the context of a larger whole. Science that sees an integrated whole resists the temptation to take the reductive act as the complete story of a thing. Rather, this science opens analysis to the history of a large interactive web of life. This is the realm of sustainable sciences (Kates 2010).

Within this framework scientists are moving beyond exclusive reliance upon distanced observations to more engaged ways of knowing. Thus, for example, scientists are stepping forward to speak out about environmental problems and destructive trends along with religious leaders. In 1990 there was a “Warning to Humanity” from the Union of Concerned Scientists stressing the insurmountable pressures increasingly placed upon our fragile planet. In 1992 a “Joint Appeal by Religion and
Science for the Environment” brought together scientists with religionists “in a common endeavour to preserve the home we share”. In the last several years, scientists and Evangelical Christian leaders have joined forces to draw attention to the insurmountable burdens placed upon the poor by climate change (Wilkinson 2012). In addition, conservation groups are increasingly coming together with indigenous elders to report that climate change is fundamentally altering the habitat and interactions of species in the last undeveloped regions of the planet. Moreover the work of the largest international, global consortium of scientists, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, carries its analysis into broad areas of human–Earth considerations.

In light of these calls from the science community, questions are arising within the religious communities regarding the appropriate responses of the human to this destruction and diminishment of life. What form of symbolic visioning and ethical imagining can call forth a transformation of consciousness and behaviour before it is too late? Can religions provide vision and inspiration for grounding and guiding new human–Earth relations? Have we arrived at a point where we realise that more scientific statistics on environmental problems, more legislated policy about behaviour, and more economic analysis ignoring externalities are no longer of benefit to the continuity of life? What, then, can “stem the tide of destruction” as the Hall of Biodiversity at the Museum of Natural History spells out with its display of examples of efforts to preserve the amazing variety and interconnectedness of life?

Historical transformations in the West

The human capacity to imagine and implement a utilitarian-based worldview regarding nature undermined many of the ethical insights of the world religions. Typically meaningful religious values were simply explained away or pigeon-holed as psychological choices or subjective fancies. More insidiously, some religions allured by the individualistic orientations of market rationalism and short-term benefits of social improvement seized upon wealth and material accumulation as containing divine approval. Thus, early in the twentieth century, Max Weber identified the rise of Protestant Christianity in Northern Europe with an ethos of inspired work and accumulated capital (Weber 1958). Interestingly, Weber also recognised a disenchantment from the world as this rational, analytical, profit-driven worldview became dominant with global capitalism. The prior enchantment of the old creation stories was burned away in the critical fires of rationality.

Wonder, beauty, and imagination as ways of knowing were gradually superseded in a turn from the organic wisdom of traditional worldviews to the analytical reductionism of modernity. A mercantile mindset sought to shift the play and sport of the world in ways that accorded with modern industrial productivity as the epitome of progress. Contemplation of the garden, so rich a concept in Abrahamic religious thought and architecture, gradually became a suggestive symbol for human advertisement and a mode of design for human enjoyment. The imagined experience of being at play in the garden replaced both the ancient mystery of actual encounter with wild, divine creation, as well as the contemplation of the garden as a place of creative origins.

As traditional creation stories of the emergence of the world faded in their explanatory power, cosmology became the exclusive domain of science. In different historical and cultural contexts a scientific, objectivist cosmology has overwhelmed all other stories of nature. Material reality became intimately related to Faustian drives for manipulation and control.

Such distancing from the beauty and wonder of creation has allowed technology to grow almost beyond our ability to control its effects (Illich 1995). Applied science as a way of learning has not only accomplished technical wonders, but has itself become subservient to the ongoing production of those wonders. As Jacques Ellul observed, technology has become an end in itself (Ellul 1967). This dehumanised technology cannot be a standpoint from which to undertake critical review of human engagement with the natural world. The whole drive of technology is for an ongoing replacement of itself as limitless progress and improvement. Thus, technology cannot adequately provide an ethical field for response to concerns of control, manipulation, and utilitarian decision-making regarding the world. Yet, our technological entrancement stands as the inspiration for progress for many and underlies our mechanistic, modern cosmological
worldview of physical laws that govern a universe of dead, inanimate matter.

Ways of knowing the world

Certainly the insights of scientific, analytical, and rational modes of knowing are indispensable for understanding and responding to our contemporary environmental crisis. So also, we will not bring ourselves out of our current impasse without the technologies that brought us into it. Moreover, it may be that they can be reshaped in more ecological directions as witnessed in such developments as industrial ecology, green chemistry, and biomimicry. But it seems important also to recall that other ways of knowing are manifest in culturally diverse cognitive pathways that treasure emotional intelligence and affective insight. These are evident in the arts, music, painting, and literature, which celebrate human experience in a more than rational mode.

What is especially interesting, however, are the ways of empirical observation that have survived centuries of oppression and eradication in various indigenous cultural settings. These include traditional environmental knowledge of plants and trees, of animals and fish, of land and sea. These many ways of knowing appear in an amazing variety of indigenous societies’ interactions with the natural world. These include the development of traditional herbal knowledge, subsistence and healing practices, and agricultural cultivation. These include practices upon which so much of modern science was built. These diverse ways of knowing are evident in the domestication of various crops such as rice, millet, wheat, corn, potatoes, and tobacco. Such understandings must have come through a wide range of careful observation, attention to animal interactions, trial and error in experimental use over time, and inspired reflection on the beauty of the world. Similar observational knowledge of the migratory patterns of plants, animals, birds, and fish is evident among many different indigenous cultures. This is not to suggest simplistically that indigenous knowledge is available for transplanting into modern societies. Diverse indigenous societies are distant from our own, yet they also interact with the natural world based on values shared by urban cultures. These values and practices often emerge from a shared geography despite different histories (Diamond 2012).

Navigational knowledge was developed in the Pacific Ocean by Polynesian peoples who undertook remarkable transoceanic voyages of exploration and settlement. We now have some initial understanding of their observations of large-scale ocean currents as these patterns extend for thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean. We only begin to understand how these wave patterns are formed by interactions with islands and undersea land formations. What we do not yet understand are the ways in which this knowledge was instilled in the youth of indigenous cultures by means of religious lifeways. That is, a complex and integrated mix of rituals, symbols, and subsistence practices that could inscribe cultural ways of knowing reality-as-a-whole.

One insight that we do have is that many indigenous peoples often refer to these forms of knowledge as kin relationships. The current National Indigenous Anglican Bishop in Canada, Mark McDonald, has described the differences with dominant worldviews in this manner:

Over time, it has become clear that many people in the West cannot understand the living relationship that is involved in the ecological community of life. In aboriginal societies, this relationship is often spoken of in family terms, underlining its importance and intimacy. In contrast, though the environment may have a high value for the West, it appears that humanity can exist apart from it or that science can create a substitute for it. The destruction of the environment, however tragic, is not the end of human life, in this view. The relationship between humanity and eco-system is a mechanical or chemical exchange, not a reciprocal one. (McDonald 2007)

Science that sees a whole is beginning to appreciate these ways of knowing without having to set aside analytical, empirical method. New ways of understanding reality have moved from the horizon of our knowledge into accepted usage that increasingly tip us towards more creative engagement with material reality. Ways of seeing, for example, the simultaneity of particle and wave, of the universe as multi-centred, and of quantum particles as foaming into and out of existence are beginning to challenge creatively our articulation of everyday life. Interestingly, forward-thinking religionists welcome with confidence respectful scientific investigation of spirituality. Thus, creative investigation motivated by wonder remains an area in which religion and science connect. What might a turn towards this mutually-enhancing creativity mean?
Embodied religious knowledge and transformed consciousness

Increasingly, there is a growing awareness that utterly new questions of meaning, purpose, and orientation loom on our collective human future. The move from environmental crises into more sustainable human–Earth relationships calls for a change of consciousness. In what way is this different from simply experiencing a new political or historical period? Are we called to spiritual and material understandings that signal a creativity emerging from the very challenges our environmental crises present to us? Is it possible that a new cosmology, new ways of knowing the world, are emerging from this science-that-sees-the-whole? Karl Jaspers coined the term “axial age” to identify cultural and cosmological insights that emerged in the sixth to second centuries BCE. From these transformations from Greece to East Asia, Jaspers believed that they shaped many of the scriptural and institutional expressions of the world’s religions (Jaspers 1953). The question arises: Are we a similar period?

There is certainly a transformation of consciousness occurring in the face of global climate change, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, toxic pollution, and the pervasive genetic changes of life forms resulting from their mix. Those transformations cannot simply be another form of the mentalities that has led to this impasse. No legal doctrine, national fiat, technological know-how, or rational explanation can address the questions that challenge our mode of creativity more significantly than we can know. It is now widely observed that we cannot solve a problem with the same mentality that created the problem.

True, we cannot go forward without the Enlightenment spheres of objective knowing. As the Confucian philosopher Tu Weiming observed, “as both beneficiaries and victims of the Enlightenment mentality, we show our fidelity to our common heritage by enriching it, transforming it, and restructuring it” (Tu 2006). Thus, we need new and ancient ways of being that allow for sense-embodied knowing that recognises the creativity of interdependent life. We need new words – even new dictionaries – that express our embodied knowing as it arises from places other than a transcendent, rational mind.

We need languages that re-embed cultural knowledge in place and relationships with the non-human world. We need symbolic expressions that lead us beyond our circumscribed spirit to reconnect with bioregions of the Earth as a whole sphere of interdependence. There is a need for grammars of meaning, purpose, and orientation that elevates our local differences, as well as our planetary aspirations amidst ongoing political fragmentation. In this regard, the political machinations of a nation-state are no longer sufficient to circumscribe the yearnings of the human community for new ways of acknowledging unity and difference. The planetary community in all its difference provides a context for re-imaging who we are as reflective symbol-making mammals amidst the vast community of life.

Embodied knowledge as biophilia

In this search for a broader and more inclusive consciousness we attend to the values that motivated earlier environmental efforts. Are we not troubled, as was John Muir, by the “greedy gobblers” driven only by economic profit? (Muir 1916). Are we not still motivated by the call of Aldo Leopold for a land ethic that includes the whole biotic community? (Leopold 1949). Are we not concerned, as was Rachel Carson, with the environmental health of our children? (Carson 1962). Can we in honesty and in humility revisit the wisdom of native peoples such as the Iroquois/Haudenosaunee whose governance was based on concern for the effects of actions upon seven generations into the future? (Akwesasne Notes 1978). Or are we captive to a truncated vision of the nation-state as an isolated entity whose sovereignty resides solely in the force of its human-centred, market-driven dominance?

We need to recapture the moral force of the preservationist ethos that launched the conservation movement around the globe. That orientation to conserve, strikingly different from the plunder mentality of current market politics, often had elite or aristocratic leadership that needs to be broadened. In some instances, the religions were vehicles of these alternative visions of land and human relationships. While this awareness of place is especially clear in the close subsistence and religious practices of indigenous peoples, it is also
evident in a sense of sacred place among the Abra-
hamic traditions in valuing Jerusalem, Rome, and
Mecca. So also, within the South Asian traditions,
regard for the Ganges, the Yamuna, and other rivers
of India, and pilgrimage sites such as Varanasi
relate to Southeast and East Asian affection for
sacred mountains, and sacred capitals such as
Kandy, Angkor Wat, Xian, and Kyoto.

We now seek broader democratic participa-
tion in a new conservationist creativity even as we
try to examine the consumer ethos and the under-
lying plunder of matter that erodes planetary integ-
rity. We need to understand the ways our pervasive
drives for national sovereignty and economic
security disassemble the interdependence of the
community of life, piece-by-piece, resource-by-
resource, life-by-life. Why has the “good life” been
so thoroughly attached to the acquisition of things?
What causes us to exclude the concept of limits
from our aspirations? What does accumulation
mean in the finality of death, or is that the point,
namely, a staving off of our mortality in the piling
up of “goods”? Is being more simply having more?

Embodied knowledge gives us cause for
pause in the impossibly heated discussions regard-
ing human population control, reproductive life,
and gender identity. Is it possible we can learn to
broaden our instinct to nurture life so as to embrace
the larger community of life? In what ways does
our human quest for offspring drive our under-
standing of the “good”, the “beautiful”, and the
“true”? Is it possible that we can find again such
values in local forms of life, in the place that we
call home? Moreover, it is clear that the religious
traditions have not yet adequately presented the
full range of views in their diverse traditions about
human interactions with the beauty of the natural
world. In addition, we only recently have begun to
explore “biophilia” in the depth and range of its
expressions by which humans nourish, enrich, and
re-create themselves in close relationship with
more-than-human life. There is work to be done
here in partnership with the next generation.

Religion and an ethics
of place

A broader populist, embodied, and place-based
knowledge will not emerge from wishful thinking,
laboratory analysis, or legislative coercion. It calls
for a creative commitment. This is similar to the
faith found in a life devoted to meditation, to
prayer, as well as the drive of science exploration,
or economic exchange. The historical stories of
such creative commitments realised in close rela-
tionship with nature in the religious traditions are
numerous. Many indigenous traditions still trans-
mit ancient shamanistic vocations based on a “call”
from the natural world to a healing vocation. Many
Jews reflect upon the voice that spoke to Moses
from the burning bush as an affirmation of the
world created by God. Some Christians understand
the forty days that Jesus went into the desert as a
meditative exercise on the challenges of an arid life
to nurture fecundity. Increasingly, Muslims ponder
the contemporary implications of the Qur’anic
verses in which humans accepted the “trust” to care
for Allah’s creation. Even in the market agran-
disement that grips East Asia, there are calls for
Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ethics as ways to
rethink the co-creative presence of Heaven, Earth,
and human (Tucker and Berthrong 1998). And in
India, there are efforts to clean up rivers and
protect forests based on Hindu, Islamic, and
Jain religious principles (Chapple and Tucker

We also know that religions focused on the
values of a particular cosmology can go astray just
as a secular faith settled exclusively on human
liberty, equality, and fraternity can be used to
oppress others. What guides and grounds a vision
so that it prospers life? What is the form of reli-
gious experience evoked by creativity that might
redirect the single-minded drive of the rational
human to recognise kinship with the larger com-
community of life? Several observations seem relevant
here. In the framework of science that sees a
whole, creativity is in the cosmos itself. This is
manifest in the fact that increased complexity and
consciousness arises within the emergent, self-
organising evolutionary processes of the universe
and the Earth. Moreover, such creativity is accom-
panied with loss and destruction. Yet, we are chal-
lenged to distinguish what Buddhists call
\textit{dukha}, the suffering, clinging, and destruction we bring on
ourselves from the dissolution and fragmentation
in the emergent process of evolution itself. Finally,
the changes of consciousness needed are radical
and transformative for religions themselves.

By responding to the wonder, intricacy, and
beauty of life itself religious leaders strike a
hopeful chord. However, there is a largely unspo-
ken concern arising in both religious and environ-
mental circles about whether humans, within the fixation of our destructive habits, are indeed a viable species. We question whether our present form of modern consumptive life on the planet is sustainable.

As a Greek Orthodox theologian has observed, what is required is not simply creating a stewardship ethic where humans are “managing” the Earth (Zizoulas 2009). Rather, he suggests the current environmental crisis challenges us to reformulate our very nature as humans, our ontology. This is what we have called here an ecological consciousness. That is, a new consciousness of ourselves and a language that attends to our place in the community of life before we rush to redeem ourselves from it. If we are willing to stand by and merely witness the withering of the Earth, has not something of our religious sensibilities and our biophilia, or love of life, become deadened or at best severely reduced? (Kellert and Wilson 1995).

Religion and the intelligence of the world

This, in turn, raises questions about the obstacles in the religions to their full participation in such a transformation given their dubious commitments to material embodiment. Have concerns for personal salvation or the exclusive welfare of our human offspring, or the redemption out of this world become an obstacle to caring for creation? Why has apocalyptic thinking regarding the end time surfaced as an interpretation for ecological collapse?

We need not deny the intolerant dimensions of religions as expressed in sectarian violence, claims to exclusive authority, and blind obedience. However, many recognise that religions, as ancient shapers of culture and values, can make seminal contributions to rethinking our current environmental impasse. There is in all religions an awareness that the special reflective intelligence of the human stands in direct relation to the created world. Religions may go immediately from existence to the creative intelligence, or creator, that brought the world into being. But when religious thinkers reflect on human intelligence they describe that intelligence in analogies and metaphors drawn from the natural world. Thus, the preacher in Ecclesiastes observed: “And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind” (1:17). Mencius remarked that: “Since all men have these four principles in themselves [benevolence, rightousness, propriety, and knowledge], let them know to give them all their development and completion, and the issue will be like that of fire which has begun to burn, or that of a spring which has begun to vent” (Mencius 1970). The seers of the Brihaddaranyaka Upanishad surmised that: “The intelligent, immortal being, the soul of the earth, and the intelligent, immortal being, the soul in the individual being – each is honey to the other” (Olivelle 1998).

Embedded within all the religions, then, are these diverse reflections on the formative and intentional character of human intelligence as something akin to the natural world. It is as if throughout the diverse modes of human ways of knowing there has been a sense that reflection on knowing itself leads to awareness of the deeper sources of intelligence in the world. These ways in the religions of valuing mind as in-the-world leads to an intimation of that which sustains life. The world religions realise that finding sustaining ways of being in the world led to creating vibrant communities. The fragmentation of this continuity appears to be linked to the dissolution of these ethical links that connected community life to bioregions.

An ethics of interdependence

In the modern period, ethical thought in the religious and local communities separated itself from these modes of relatedness to Earth as the forces of market driven rationality articulated orientations for extraction and commodification. The ecological devastation caused by our fragmented industrial and commercial drives led the biologist, Peter Raven, to write an essay entitled “We are killing our world” (Raven 1987). From their traditional orientations, the religions developed ethics for homicide, suicide, and genocide; now they are challenged to respond to biocide, ecocide, and even the imponderable thought of geocide (Berry 2006).

The common ground among the world’s religions is the Earth itself and a shared sense of the interrelatedness of all life. This shared religious sensibility is evident in the different stories that attempt to account for the interrelationship of life. These creation narratives of the interdependence of life often transmitted ecological spiritualities.
Now, the extent of the environmental crisis presents itself as a moment of enormous opportunity for cooperation around a common cause – the continuity of flourishing life as at the heart of all human–Earth relations. This calls for a declaration of our interdependence, much more than our independence from one another, such as is expressed in the Earth Charter. Moreover, the environment presents itself as one of the most compelling concerns for robust inter-religious dialogue. Yet these are but dimensions of that changed consciousness towards which we move. Dialogue, ethics, and environmental activism are all folded into a deeper creativity that the religions hold sacred.

A planetary phase of religions

Scientists certainly question the capacity of the religious mentality to know material reality in ways as insightful as empirical science. Yet, many of those scientists who sense the larger whole also mark the significance of this moral endeavour by the religions. E.O. Wilson, in his new book *The Creation*, urges cooperation between religion and science on environmental issues (Wilson 2007). The Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies has initiated an interdisciplinary project on climate change that includes the roles of religion and values (see www.environment.yale.edu/climate). Many environmental studies programmes are now seeking to incorporate this broader ethical approach into the curriculum. For example, the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and Yale Divinity School have developed a joint Masters programme. In all these instances, the possibility of an interdisciplinary way forward needs to be constantly challenged to attend to fundamental questions that arise when a transformation of consciousness is posed. Thus, when we ask, “What is consciousness?” and “What constitutes transformation?”, these questions require a broader range of voices than we have often acknowledged.

Indeed, only transformations of consciousness that lead directly to changes in the ways we interact with the world will enable our species to endure. How we act in our bodies as beings interrelated with the community of life is crucial. Human activity as planetary creativity may now become salvific, not simply for the autonomous individual or the exclusively chosen community, but in relation to larger communities of life. Such transformations, it would seem, are at the heart of all the religions. But the paths that connect to the Other seem to have been covered at times by a misplaced concreteness in which words as symbols were taken as the realities towards which they pointed.

Religious environmentalism

Scholars and theologians from diverse religions now begin to explore culturally diverse environmental ethics shaped by their confrontation with environmental degradation. This has given rise to a new academic field of religion and ecology as well as the force of religious environmentalism. Many in the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam formulate eco-theologies and green practices that engage environmental issues, but they are ahead of the commitment of their institutions and of the mass of their believers. Hinduism and Jainism in South Asia and Buddhism in both Asia and the West have undertaken projects of ecological restoration, but their capacity to affect the market drive of Asian countries is strikingly limited. Moreover, informed voices from these regions wonder about the relationships of large, low-consuming populations in the developing world to small populations in more developed countries with exceedingly high consumption rates.

Confucianism and Daoism in China have contributed mightily to social formation in this regions but their capacity to address environmental issues is muted by the rapid industrialised frenzy of Chinese society. Indigenous traditions of Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas contribute their traditional environmental knowledge to the emerging discussions. Yet, the consumerist mentality continues to usurp their cultures and ways of knowing, thus prohibiting their full and informed participation in sustainable development discussions. There is a realisation that mapping this field of religion and ecology, which is still necessary as initiatory work, is no longer sufficient in itself. Flowing from this earlier work some deeper creativity and consciousness are needed to understand the multiple modernities, the diverse globalisations, and the varied ways of knowing that will shape our way forward.

All of these religious traditions are groping to find the language, symbols, rituals, and ethics for altering our life-threatening behaviour, for conservation, and for encouraging biodiversity protection.
They are themselves challenged by their own bilingual languages, namely, their characteristically strong language of transcendence and relatively weak language of immanence. Not only do they puzzle over the meaning of matter, they often turn towards applied science and market rationality for language to express utilitarian relationships to the world. For example, only recently has the motto of Nehru that “Dams are the new temples of India” been sharply questioned by religious leaders as the negative consequences of mega-dams on the human and natural communities become more visible. The creative strength of many of the religions of late has been their ability to bridge the gap between those concerned with socio-economic justice and those working for a healthy environment.

For example, in many settings around the world religious practitioners are drawing together traditional religious ways of respecting place, land, and life with understanding of environmental science and the needs of local communities. In the United States, the greening of churches and synagogues leads religious communities to search out sustainable building materials and renewable energy sources through InterFaith Power and Light. Groups of evangelical Christian leaders are focusing on climate change as a moral issue that will adversely and disproportionately affect the poor around the world (New York Times, 2 August 2006). Green Yoga is exploring ways in which yoga practitioners can bring their meditative focus to greater awareness of environmental concern. The “Green Nuns”, a group of Roman Catholic religious women in North America, sponsor a variety of environmental programmes drawing on the ecological vision of Thomas Berry. In Canada, the Indigenous Environmental Network is speaking out regarding Tar Sands resource extraction in Alberta and unmonitored military dumping on First Peoples’ Reserves and its negative impact on sacred sites and biodiversity.

One of the earliest spokespersons for religion and ecology is the Iranian scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, now at George Washington University in Washington DC. Islamic thought suffuses the environmental work of Fazlun Khalid, who founded and runs the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science (IFEES). In Indonesia, grassroots projects of tree planting and restoration work draw on Islamic principles, encouraging students in Islamic boarding schools to practice careful stewardship of the environment.

The religious environmentalism in these examples follows from a sense of the created world as at the heart of all the religions. They illustrate ways in which an emerging alliance of religion and ecology is occurring around the planet. Religions foster an inherent diversity that results wherever their cosmologies creatively function to connect the human to the community of life. These traditional values within the religions may cause them to respond to environmental crises in ways that are strikingly different from industrial ecology, for example, but they may find interdisciplinary ground for dialogue in eco-justice concerns. The difficulty, of course, is that the moral force of humility required of the religions may have been squandered by the religions in promoting their more narrow institutional concerns.

The challenge of our contemporary call for a transformation of consciousness cannot be ignored by the religions. Nor can it be answered simply on the basis of doctrine, dogma, scripture, devotion, ritual, belief, or prayer. It cannot be addressed by any of these well-trod paths of religious expression. Religions are necessary for the transformative turn that we need to make, but they are not sufficient in themselves. The individual religions must explain, acknowledge, and undertake massive institutional and spiritual examination to enter into this age of environmental engagement. Religions as cultural expressions must attend not simply to human needs but to the needs of the community of life. If the religions can participate in this ecological creativity, they may again empower humans to realise that their ways of knowing lead to values that sustain life and create anew the vibrant whole Earth community.

Notes

* This article is reworked from an article in Kellert, S. and Speth, J.G., eds, 2009. This coming transformation: values to sustain human and natural communities. New Haven, CT: Yale School of
Forestry and Environmental Studies, 2009.

1. For this Vesper liturgy, see http://www.goarch.org/chapel/liturgical_texts/vespers_creation/


3. The Vedas were initially transmitted orally in northwestern India from at least 1500 BCE and later written in Sanskrit from approximately 900 BCE.

4. The Sanskrit term for this difference is bheda as in bheda-abedha, “difference in nondifference”. Among bhakti religious thinkers, the use of “dualism” to describe this difference is viewed negatively.

5. This major text of Hinduism is generally dated to the last centuries BCE and placed in the Gangetic River plain of northern India. It is set in the struggles of the Bharata family narrated by the sage Vyasa in the epic, Mahabharata.

6. The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most widely recited texts in Hinduism and had a profound influence on many thinkers into the present, including Mahatma Gandhi who drew on it to develop his ideas of non-violence.

7. See especially the work of the Indigenous Environmental Network: http://www.ienearth.org/

8. See http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/

9. An effort to identify and to map religiously diverse attitudes and practices towards nature was the focus of a major international conference series on world religions and ecology. Held at the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School in 1996–1998, it resulted in a ten-volume series of books. Over 800 scholars of religion and environmentalists participated, and a Forum on Religion and Ecology resulted which has grown to over 5,000 participants with a densely packed website (http://fore.research.yale.edu/)


References


The roles of religions in activating an ecological consciousness


