People of Faith Unite: The Moral Imperative of the Environmental Crisis

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I: The Environmental Crisis

Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng opens his 1993 book, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic,* with some sobering statistics:

- Every *minute,* the nations of the world spend 1.8 millions of US dollars on military armaments.
- Every *hour,* 1500 children die of hunger related causes.
- Every *day,* a species becomes extinct.
- Every *week* during the 1980s, more people were detained, tortured, assassinated, made refugee, or in other ways violated by acts of regressive regimes than at any other time in history.
- Every *month,* the world's economic system adds over 7.5 billions of US dollars to the catastrophically unbearable debt burden of more than 1.5 trillion dollars now resting on the shoulders of Third World peoples.
- Every *year,* an area of tropical rainforest three-quarters the size of Korea is destroyed and lost.
- Every *decade,* if the present global warming trends continue, the temperature of the earth's atmosphere could rise dramatically (between 1.5 and 4.5 degrees Celsius) with a resultant rise in sea levels that would have disastrous consequences, particularly for costal areas of all [the] earth's land masses.

These claims by Küng affirm what Lester Brown (the Former President of the environmental group Worldwatch Institute and winner of the United Nations' 1989 environment prize) Küng's points affirm what Brown said a few years beforehand:

> There are a half-dozen issues that loom large on our list of environmental threats. One is deforestation; another is soil erosion; a third is the build-up of greenhouse gases. The depletion of the ozone layer is a major problem. So is the loss of biological diversity, a loss of plant and animal species, that is; and finally, desertification, land degradation, broadly, has increased.

And still, history has taught us nothing. The situation is worse than what Küng and Brown described a decade ago. The environmental crisis still looms large as one of the greatest threats that all creation faces — it is a time-bomb waiting to detonate, its fuse burning shorter and shorter each day.

I believe that the root of this crisis lies in the loss of a covenantal ethic that honors the earth as a covenantal partner. Let me repeat that: *the root of this crisis lies in the loss of a covenantal ethic that honors the earth as a covenantal partner.* Since the Industrial Revolution, when Western Civilization went from being an agrarian culture to a mechanized one, we lost our reverence for the sanctity of the earth. In other words, modern industrialization and globalization are void of an ecological conscience and a covenantal respect for the earth. As a result, our planet is on the brink of an environmental catastrophe, because we have abused it. We have seen the earth (and we continue to see the earth) as a God-given resource that is meant to serve us.

Is there any hope? Can the doomsday clock be reversed? Hans Küng has argued that if we hope to survive, then the religions of the world need to search for viable solutions together. This can only be achieved through the practice of healthy and constructive, interfaith dialogue. Küng maintains that,

> …at the present moment the world religions have a quite special responsibility for world peace. And the credibility of all religions, including the smaller ones, will in future depend on their

> putting more stress on what unites them and less on what divides them. For humankind can less and less afford religions stirring up wars on this earth instead of making peace; making people fanatical instead of seeking reconciliation; practicing superiority instead of engaging in dialogue.

Therefore, we need to borrow the words of the great social reformed, Karl Marx: the religions of the world need to unite and produce an ethic that honors the earth. The current ecological crisis calls for a new moral imperative. How the religions of the world respond will be a test to their faithfulness and a witness to their credibility. Let's begin by looking at this word *covenant* that I have been using and how it is used in The Bible.

II: The Biblical Understanding of Covenant

Before we look at what a covenant is, though, we need to look at what it is not. A covenant is not a contract. A contract is a fundamental part of business law and, according to *Black's Law Dictionary,* a contract is "An agreement between two or more persons which creates an obligation to do or not to do a particular thing. Its essentials are competent parties, subject matter, a legal consideration, mutuality of agreement, and mutuality of obligation." A contract is usually established at the outset of a business agreement to ensure that the parties involved abide by the promises set within the parameters of the contract. If one (or more) of the parties defaults on his/her end of the agreement, then the contract establishes the grounds by which legal recourse — to provide some form of compensation or justice to the other party — can be sought. Contracts are egocentric: they are utilized to protect the interests (usually financial) of the parties involved. For example, when party A enters into a contract with party Z, party A has his/her best interests in mind. Party A is usually only concerned with the interests of party Z as long as party Z's interests directly (or indirectly) benefit party A.

A covenant is different. A covenant describes a relationship of mutual love, support, and care, and covenants lie at the heart of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition. The problem, however, is that religions do not see themselves in covenant with one another nor do they see themselves in covenant with the land. For Christians and Jews, this is a blatant contradiction of what a covenant is.

The concept of covenant, and its ecological implications, has its roots in Judaism. The Hebrew understanding of covenant involves three parties: God, people, and the land. All three parties are active participants in a covenant. My ethics professor from seminary, renowned scholar William Johnson Everett, once wrote that, "The land, like the people, shared in a common holiness arising from its consecration to God." Everett also reminds us that in the Hebrew tradition, Yahweh gives the Promised Land to Israel not as a gift, but as a trust. "God…took the land from the Canaanites," he writes, "and gave it to Israel in the conquest. God gave it in trust and remained the owner." Israel's inheritance of the land, however, is conditional. In Genesis, Yahweh promises to Abraham and his descendants that they will receive the Promised Land as a perpetual inheritance *as long as they obey the Lord's commandments and keep the Lord's statutes.* Everett also maintains that, "This is why the first fruits of the land were to be offered to [God]. The tithe symbolized Israel's recognition of God's sovereignty and His laws for Israel's life." Israel's recognition of God's sovereignty and laws is also evident in their adherence to the Sabbath commandment: a "conviction that the whole Creation — and the Creator as well — needs rest, relief, from all labor."

The other theological word that comes into play here is *stewardship.* In the biblical narrative, God does not give his/her people the land to do with as they please. They are called to be stewards of the land, to care for and honor it as a living, covenantal partner. This idea, however, needs to be unpacked carefully. From the Judeo-Christian perspective, stewardship is a relational trust with roots in the Creation story. Both before and after the Fall, Adam and Eve are called to be keepers of the land. This charge has often been misinterpreted: Adam and Eve are *not* called to hold the land in subjugation, nor is this command a license to abuse God's good Creation. As Ernest Fortin writes, "As stewards or custodians rather than the owners of creation, [Adam and Eve] are to care for it and 'guard' it." Indeed, after he is created, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it," according to Genesis 2:15. Later, God provided Adam with "a helper as his partner." After Adam and Eve's disobedience is discovered, God punishes Adam by stating:

> cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Throughout the history of Western culture, though, the consequence of Adam's sin has been interpreted as divine punishment. This is somewhat of a misinterpretation. Adam, as stated above, is to be a keeper of the land *before and after* his sin. After he sins, his work becomes laborious, but his vocation does not change. It is interesting to note that one of Adam and Eve's first descendants, Cain, is also called to be "a tiller of the ground" both before and after he kills his brother, Abel. As with his father, Cain's work becomes more difficult as a result of his disobedience: "'When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength," Yahweh tells Cain.

And still there are a host of other biblical examples from both the Old and the New Testaments. The point is simply that to be a religious person (whether one is Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, or an adherent of any number of other faiths) to be a religious person means that one is to be a steward of God's good earth.

Also, people of faith need to start recognizing that the covenants that bind us to one another go beyond the bounds of human relationships. A covenantal paradigm that involves God, people, and the land *must also include the entire ecosystem:* all species of animals, fish, micro-organisms, and vegetation. The earth is not just the theatre of our existence, but a complex, living biosphere which hosts a myriad of intricate and interdependent life forms. Human beings are just one in a myriad of species. The fact that we are the most advanced and intelligent places the burden of responsibility (for lack of a better phrase) on us all the more. As Nancy Wright and Donald Kill state, "To be a steward is to be a servant."

III: The Necessity for Interfaith Dialogue

As Hans Küng mentioned in the quote I shared with you earlier, "humankind can less and less afford religions stirring up wars on this earth instead of making peace; making people fanatical instead of seeking reconciliation; practicing superiority instead of engaging in dialogue." How true! There is a sense in which people of faith feel that in order to be "faithful," they need to prove that their religion is the only road to God and that all other faiths are false, if not heretical. Now aside from the fact that this reveals a great deal of insecurity, it also creates an atmosphere that is combative and competitive. Such an environment breeds intolerance and hatred. It does not lead religions to do what they are called to do: to make God's message of love, understanding, and cooperation a reality. In terms of the environmental crisis, interfaith dialogue and collaboration is not only a theological ideal; it is absolutely *essential* if the religions of the world want to really save the world — if they want to rescue it from ecological collapse.

When it comes to interfaith dialogue, people usually subscribe to one of three categories. (Now I am going to discuss these categories from a Christian perspective, but one could view any religion through these categories.) The first is <u>exclusivism</u>. A Christian exclusivist believes that only Christians are saved. Everyone else is doomed to the fires of hell. Either you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior (to quote the common catch phrase) or you will not be saved. <u>Inclusivism</u> is the second category. An inclusivist believes that other religions are legitimate paths to God: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, and Taoism, among other faiths, are all viable means of salvation. An inclusivist, however, believes that these roads are valid because, somehow, Jesus Christ is at work in these religions. In other words, to use the words of another Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, people of other faiths are anonymous Christians. They are saved through Christ whether they realize it or not. The third category is <u>pluralism</u>. A pluralist believes that all religions (in and of themselves) are legitimate ways to God. A Muslim is a Muslim, not an anonymous Christian. Ramon Panikkar explains this by employing a popular metaphor: each religion is a separate path up a mountain. All paths lead to the summit, where they find God. And still there are others, like John Cobb, John Hick, and Mark Heim, who describe the diverse roads that separate religions follow in different ways. Suffice it to say, a pluralist sees and honors the legitimacy of all faiths.

Now, I can see that many of you are sitting there wondering, "Am I a pluralist? Yeah, that sounds right. No, maybe I'm an inclusivist. Actually, I'm an exclusivist! Does that make me a bad person." View your own faith whichever way you want. That's fine. In a sense, I don't care. But even if you are an exclusivist, you must, for the sake of the environment and the integrity of your own religion, you must approach interfaith dialogue as a pluralist if we have any hope of resuscitating this fragile planet. Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and followers of various Native American Nature Religions (Native Americans have a great deal to teach us about having a genuine reverence for the earth, by the way), people of different faiths need to see each other as covenantal partners called to dialogue with one another to find viable solutions to the ecological crisis.

A paradigm shift needs to take place: a shift in which all the parties to dialogue see one another, and especially the earth, as inextricably bound together in the entire ecological drama. If this does not happen, then we risk succumbing to a more quarrelsome approach to interfaith relationships. Actually, we risk far, far more.

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