

Sanctity and stewardship: judaism, hinduism and the catechism of ecological prese...

[Religion](#), [God](#)



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Organized religion and environmental/ecological consciousness are not always mutually inclusive, despite the belief among religions that the earth and its bounty are gifts from God. While some Christian denominations believe action should be taken on global warming, there is a lack of consensus concerning the severity of the threat it poses, reflecting a subjectivity that prevails among Protestant faiths. For some, the declining state of the environment is simply a manifestation of God’s will, an inexorable and predestined chain of events. Other religious traditions take a more anthropomorphic view of the environmental crisis, which is seen as a genuine man-made threat to the earthly paradise that God intended. This perspective can be found in religions throughout the world. Judaism and Hinduism are two geographically disparate faiths that share a belief that Nature, man and God are inextricably linked, comprising a divine unity.

Judaism

The Torah makes it clear that Nature is God's creation and that the relationship between God and his earth is sacred. "The formation of the Earth is a matter of Divine concern, and therefore the preservation of that Earth must also be a matter of Divine concern" (Eco Faith, 2013).

Stewardship is man's responsibility, a lesson taught in the story of Noah, surely the greatest steward of Nature in any faith tradition. The ancient books of Hebrew scripture make it clear that a reverence for the environment is as much a matter of philosophical introspection as of direct ecological involvement. As such, Judaism demands that its adherents exhibit "an ethos of reverence for the earth" (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 44). Stewardship, however, does not imply ownership according to the teachings of the Jewish faith. The environment is set above man, who is a part of God's natural order. "The world was not created for humanity. The events of the natural world - rain, for example - do not take place for the benefit of humanity. Rain falls on the wilderness where no man is; it is thus a mistake to see the rain as God's contribution to human agriculture and livestock" (154). Part of humanity's education, then, is to understand and come to terms with its role within the natural order.

In the Torah and the Bible, Nature has a complex relationship with humanity. As God's creation, it functions to protect and guide, as in "Exodus," when the Red Sea parts to allow the Hebrews passage to safety, then envelops Pharaoh's doomed army. Nature can also be a force that punishes and obliterates, as in the story of Noah and the Flood. God reminds Job that

mankind had no part in the creation of the world, that the earth was here before man and God seems to infer that Nature can survive without man's intervention. In other words, the earth and everything in it belongs to God, not man (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 164). Eric Katz writes about the wisdom of such a philosophy, which teaches that Nature is an integrative, holistic concept as well as a very real, physical presence which man must respect. "The value of natural processes lies not in their usefulness for humanity but in their existence as part of the divine plan. This is the message of Job: do not believe that the rain falls for you" (164).

Clearly, American rabbis have taken this lesson to heart. While the George W. Bush administration chose to ignore warnings about the dangers of global warming and the Kyoto Protocol, Jewish leaders in the U. S. came out with a very strong position on this rapidly worsening ecological crisis. In 1997, more than 600 rabbis signed a position paper that made reference to humanity's responsibility to care for Creation and to evidence that man is failing in this charge:

" These concerns have entirely unprecedented moral urgency in the twenty-first century. In its reliance on fossil fuels, American energy policy is a cause of global climate change. We must join in binding international agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol, which set energy conservation targets and timetables. Preventing climate change is a preeminent expression of faithfulness to our Creator God. Energy conservation is global leadership and solidarity" (Schwartz, 142).

it is no small thing for prominent members of America's Jewish community to take such a firm stance on environmental policy.

As mentioned previously, some branches of Protestantism in America, particularly the right-wing, fundamentalist factions, have continued to support the conservative position that global warming is either a Left-wing conspiracy or a phenomenon produced by irreligious elements determined to move America away from righteousness. When a small group of evangelical leaders issued a statement recognizing global warming as a viable environmental threat, it met with a considerable backlash. “ Some of the most prominent televangelists preached against it – Jerry Falwell, a few months before his death, said global warming activism was a trick of Satan designed to move the focus away from issues like gay marriage” (McKibben, 86). But thanks to organizations like the Committee on the Environment and Jewish Life, the Jewish community in the United States has pressed members of the Jewish faith to urge Washington to take more concerted action on global warming (87).

In 2010, the Jewish community took its pro-environment activism to the Internet, launching a site called Jewcology. com, an international collaboration conceived by 19 Jewish environmentalists (Greenberg, 2010). Jewcology. com can be accessed in Hebrew and Spanish as well as English. It offers a wide range of tools aimed at imparting information that visitors can apply in their daily lives. It also helps members of the Jewish faith practice environmental stewardship in ways that do not violate Jewish law. Canfei Nesharim, a young student at a branch of New York’s Yeshiva University, used Jewcology. com to help marry her activism with her faith. “ The difficulty is that with the rise of new technology and development, many different solar heating systems have been designed, and each has its own

unique halachic issues,” (Greenberg, 2010). There is a listing of environmental blogs, activist communities and a page where visitors can list events and “ green” initiatives. One such listing discusses the success of a Maryland Jewish group in promoting wind power to the state legislature, which passed the Maryland House of Delegates (Jewcology. com, 2013). There is a remarkable continuity in the Jewish community’s championing of environmental responsibility. Judaism itself is tied, through many centuries, to a past in which early Jewish societies were heavily agrarian, relying for their survival on a close relationship with Nature. In the modern era, this tradition has translated into a progressive, liberal orientation toward environmental activism. Jewish stewardship of the environment spans millennia, and represents a foundational aspect of the religion (Pluralism. org, 2013). With most of the world having signed on to the Kyoto Protocol, Jewish leaders appear to have an important role to play in pushing the United States toward a more environmentally responsible position on global warming and other pressing ecological issues.

Hinduism

Hindus hold a view of Nature that approximates that of Judaism. In the Hindu tradition, man and the natural world are bound together, forming one continuous whole. It is a credo reminiscent of American Indian spiritualism, which is deeply rooted in man’s relationship with the world around him. “ In the traditional Hindu view, the world exists as an extension of the body and mind; the body and mind reflect and contain the world” (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 62). Whereas Judaism specifies that though man is part of Nature,

he does not own it, Hinduism

teaches that man and all things that are part of the natural world form one continuous whole, with all life forms forming a great, integrated cycle. This ancient belief system has been articulated elegantly many times in the great books of Hindu spirituality, such as the Mahabharata:

“ The Lord, the sustainer all beings, revealed the sky.

Mountains are his bones, earth his flesh, the ocean his blood.

The sky is his abdomen, air his breath, fire his heat, rivers his nerves.

the sun and moon, which are called Agni and Soma, are the eyes of Brahman.

The upper part of the sky is his head. The earth is his feet and the directions are his hands” (Barnhill and Gottlieb, 61-62).

The Bhagavad Gita is rich with references to elements of the natural world, using language that beautifully elicits a love of Creation. The most striking elements of these manifestations of Hindu spirituality evince a seamless connection between the human and spiritual planes, with Nature running through it all like a river. Hindu texts treat seemingly mundane elements of the natural world as living, breathing and, above all, indispensable links in the great chain of Being. One becomes aware of trees, for instance, as objects of both utility and

wonder. “ The birth of trees is truly the most blessed in the world, for they contribute to the well-being of all other creatures. Just as no one needy returns disappointed from generous persons, so too one who approaches trees for shelter. They need the needs of others with their leaves, flowers,

fruits, shade, roots, bark, wood, fragrance, sap, ashes, and charcoal” (Sponsel, 2012). In Hindu tradition, trees perform their role in the chain of life, providing sustenance and shelter for both man and animals during the day. At night, they come alive as the abodes of spirits. The bodhi tree has a special place in Hindu spirituality. It is home to the great deities of Hinduism, including Krishna, Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu. Hindus also revere the banyan tree, a massive species that creates its own ecosystem, supporting the cycle of life, a microcosm of the universe itself.

In “ Ethics and Nature in the World’s Religions,” Harold Coward writes that global warming, with all of its causes, is abhorrent to the spiritual in man and Nature, representing an affront to the universe’s Creator. “ Since the atmosphere is also seen as a valuable part of God’s body, pollution of it in ways that lead to global warming are not acceptable to Hindu ethics. Avoidance rather than adaptation is clearly the counsel of Hindu teachings” (Ehlers and Gethmann, 93). Coward notes that India is as culpable as the United States in not following its own religious ethos, having failed to “ practice what it preaches,” as India’s greatest cities have for decades produced tremendous amounts of greenhouse gases. However, Indians have in recent years re-emphasized Hindu teaching and worked to preserve those natural elements that combat air pollution and global warming, namely trees. Hindu temples in the southern regions of India have for many years stressed the spiritual and temporal importance of planting new trees, a practice that can bestow a measure of grace upon the pilgrim (Ehlers and Gethmann, 93).

Care for cows, the most sacred of all animals in Hinduism, is another example of the merging of sanctity and practicality. Preservation of the cow serves agricultural purposes as it does the spiritual integrity of the penitent Hindu (Crawford, 187). In a sense, the mitigation of global warming combines the Hindu's reverence for the natural world, which is part and parcel of God's body, and the very practical need to reverse a destructive process that threatens all human beings. Tree planting, then, becomes an act of veneration as well as a contribution to a specific, results-oriented ecological strategy. "The Hindu tradition venerates flora with the similar blend of utility and sanctity it expresses for fauna, and both flora and fauna, along with humans, are seen as existing in a state of mutual connections and dependencies" (Crawford, 189). In this sense, Hinduism and Judaism find a parallel in this idea of stewardship and sanctity.

Environmental preservation is remarkably well suited to core beliefs and practices of the Hindu religion. The management of waste is a good example of this remarkable symbiosis. Waste management is a troublesome matter in India as in the West, where recycling has long been practiced but with spotty results given the "disposability" mindset of Western nations, particularly the United States. However, the concept of recycling speaks directly to the most fundamental precepts of Hinduism, such as the concept of reincarnation and the cycle of life. Thus, when Hindus recycle, they are fulfilling both spiritual and logistical needs. Balance is the key. "Hinduism's balanced scale of values (purusarthas) counsels neither rape nor retreat. Instead, the strategy

of Hindu ethics to control the volume of waste produced involves recycling, renewal, and restraint" (Crawford, 192).

Conclusion

Judaism and Hinduism both teach a respect for Nature, and exhort their members to take an active role in caring for and renewing the environment. Jewish scripture stresses the eminence of the natural world, in which man is only one element. Hinduism teaches that man is part of a never-ending cycle that connects all living things. As such, both reflect a dedication to confronting and overcoming man's wasteful irresponsibility, which has done so much to send the environment spiraling into decline.

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