

Nature gets religion

Monday, September 03, 2001

By Gretel H. Schueller

Protecting the environment involves connecting the sides of a triangle, says Calvin Dewitt, director of the University of Wisconsin's Au Sable Institute in Madison. In Dewitt's conception, the three corners of the triangle are science, ethics and praxis.

The problem, says Dewitt, is that the "ligaments connecting these corners have been torn. And one gets done without regard to the others."

But if a conference held last year at Yale University is any indication, that triangle is becoming whole again. At the meeting, scientists, environmentalists and scholars of religion came together for "The Good in Nature and Humanity," a conference that examined the connections between science, religion and nature.

"The faith community was somewhat slow to come to the engagement of environmental issues," says Paul Gorman, executive director of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment.

After all, Gorman says, the church traditionally has been involved with human improvement. And the scientific community has hardly seen eye-to-eye with the church on many issues.

But in 1991, 32 Nobel laureate and other eminent scientists circulated an "Open Letter to the American Religious Community." The scientists, including E.O. Wilson and Stephen Jay Gould, expressed deep doubts about the adequacy of humanity's response to the planet's environmental problems.

Scientific data, laws and economic incentives are not enough, they wrote. Protecting habitat is inescapably a moral issue. "We scientists ... urgently appeal to the world religious community to commit to preserve the environment of the Earth."

Two years later the National Religious Partnership for the Environment was formed. Member groups, which reach more than 100 million Americans, include the U.S. Catholic Conference, the National Council of Churches of Christ, the Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life and the Evangelical Environmental Network.

The result, says Gorman, "is a distinct religious response to the issues. We're not just a green party in clerical garb," he points out. "The mission of caring for God's creation is the heart of religious life itself."

For the people in the pews, that mission is becoming a priority. In Columbia, Mississippi, Jesus People Against Pollution surveyed 20,000 citizens affected by chemical dioxins, built a coalition of 165 community organizations and forced government Superfund cleanups. In upstate New

York, the Hamburg Presbyterian Church adopted a nearby creek, monitored it and won state designation as a protected habitat.

The Redwood Rabbis lobbied for the protection of old-growth trees in northern California. Mainline Protestants provided action alerts for 50,000 congregations to pressure the Clinton administration to sign a strong climate treaty. The Grinnel First Friends Church in Newton, Iowa, is restoring local prairies.

The efforts don't stop there. Catholic bishops have testified against "Takings" legislation in the U.S. Senate. And last June, nearly 400 religious community leaders across the country signed a petition to President Clinton, urging him to adopt policies that protect roadless areas. "The Scriptures," they wrote, "make clear that protecting God's forests ... is not merely sound policy but holy obligation."

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a professor of physics and religion at Georgetown University supports this view. "If the world is just a bowl of molecules banging against each other, then where is the sacredness of nature," he asked the audience gathered at Yale.

What scientists need to do, says Nasr, is bring back that sacredness to science — a process that is, in fact, beginning.

The shift in ecology is one such example, says Gary Paul Nabhan, an ecologist at the Sonoran Desert Museum in Arizona. More and more, he says, ecologists are finding and appreciating evidence of the cohesiveness of communities. Soil, plants, microbes, animals and humans all have to coexist, he says. An individual organism is not the sole object affected by an event.

"This take on ecology is fairly new," says Nabhan.

Science, like religion, is humbling, he adds. "Science is the human endeavor in which we are frequently reminded how wrong we can be."

If scientists stick to reason alone, Nabhan says, then "our work has no meaning. It needs to be placed in some spiritual context."

For scientists and clergy alike, the recognition of spirituality in nature is developing at a crucial time. "This is a pivotal point in our history," oceanographer Sylvia Earle told conference participants. "If we pose the beginning of an ethic with our knowledge, we'll be able to make a difference. We'll be able to create the understanding that it's the right thing to do."

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