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Can the World's Religions Help Save Us from Ecological Peril?

Scholars and religious leaders argue that a spiritual connection to nature is essential for environmental recovery.

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On the morning that Hurricane Ian approached southwest Florida with 155-mile-per-hour winds and a twelve-foot storm surge, Karenna Gore '00LAW, '13UTS stood at a lectern in Brooklyn Borough Hall and invoked the divine. Addressing a local interfaith conference on preparing for climate emergencies, Gore said, "When I was a child, my own faith tradition taught me that God looks directly at us through the eyes of someone who is in need: someone who is hungry, thirsty, needs clothes — much like someone affected by a disaster."

She acknowledged recent flooding in Pakistan and Puerto Rico, noting that "those who suffer the most from this crisis have done the least to cause it." She equated climate action with social justice and summoned the civil-rights movement, which inspired people of all religions to transcend their differences and answer a call of conscience. "*This*," Gore told the assembled, "is what must happen today around the climate crisis."

Gore is the director of the Center for Earth Ethics (CEE), which she founded in 2015 at the Columbia-affiliated Union Theological Seminary (UTS). Its purpose, she says, is to "draw on the world's faith and wisdom traditions to confront the ecological crisis." Poised at the crossroads of spirituality, social justice, and environmentalism, CEE is part of a movement known as "religion and ecology," a new academic field — and a

growing moral force in society — that brings people into closer communion with the planet and focuses on honoring and protecting the earth's life systems. The center grew out of a conference called Religions for the Earth, which Gore and one of her mentors, Kusumita Pedersen '76GSAS, who is co-chair of the Interfaith Center of New York, organized in conjunction with the 2014 UN Climate Summit. Gore, who had just gotten her master's from UTS, was interested in the root causes of the climate problem. She identified two: the widespread belief that humans are separate from, and superior to, all other beings; and a value system that favors profit over environmental health. Wanting to elevate voices outside this worldview, Gore, for CEE's first academic course, invited a range of Indigenous speakers, including Betty Lyons (Onondaga Nation), the president of the American Indian Law Alliance and co-chair of the CEE advisory board; and Tiokasin Ghosthorse (Cheyenne River Lakota Nation), founder and host of *First Voices Radio*, who spoke eloquently of the earth as something alive, energy-filled, and communicative.

"We are nature. The air in our lungs, the water we drink, the soil, the sunshine that nourishes the life forms that comprise the food that we eat."

"Throughout human history," Gore told the clergy in Brooklyn, "people have understood their relationship with water, wind, fire, and land in the context of their relationship with God or some divine being or beings. This is deep, it's ancient, sometimes it is unnamed, but it is not to be underestimated." She echoed UN Secretary General António Guterres, who days earlier had called the climate crisis "a case study in moral and economic injustice" caused by "a suicidal war on nature." "We *are* nature," Gore said. "The air in our lungs, the water we drink, the soil, the sunshine that nourishes the life forms that comprise the food that we eat. We all depend on the health of the biosphere."

As climate-linked weather events intensify and carbon emissions continue to rise globally, faith-based communities and institutions are emerging as pivotal players in the bid for environmental salvation. In 2019, CEE became an affiliate center of the Earth Institute, which is now part of the Columbia Climate School, and brings a moral and spiritual angle to discussions conducted largely among scientists, engineers, businesspeople, lawyers, and policy wonks. In November 2021, the Biden administration formally recognized "Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge" — ways of life that foster respect and care for the environment — as vital to federal science policymaking. This past August, the National Association of Evangelicals, representing a religious group traditionally opposed to climate action, released a

hundred-page report laying out the biblical basis for ecological protection, stating, “We worship God by caring for creation.” And a wave of legislation worldwide has granted legal personhood to entities like the Whanganui River in New Zealand, seen by Indigenous Whanganui Maori tribes as a living being. Such laws allow human advocates for these ecological systems to sue for protection on their behalf.

Inside Borough Hall, Gore emphasized the need to consider all the planet’s inhabitants in any climate discussion. “A friend of mine from the Church of Sweden, Reverend Henrik Grape, said once that in any room where decisions are being made about climate policy there should be three empty chairs, representing those who are most impacted and least likely to have a voice: the poor, future generations, and all nonhuman life,” Gore said. “If we had been making decisions with those three perspectives in mind, we would not be in this perilous situation.

“Realizing this, we can see the connection between Dr. King’s famous statement that ‘injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere’ and the words of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh when he said that ‘we are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.’”

By the end of the conference, at around 3:15 p.m., a thousand miles away, Hurricane Ian made landfall on the barrier island of Cayo Costa, Florida, as one of the strongest storms ever to strike the United States.



Christina Prinn

“The ecological situation requires the moral force of all the world’s religions,” says Mary Evelyn Tucker ’85GSAS, a historian of religion who holds a dual appointment at the Yale School of the Environment and the Yale Divinity School. She and her husband, John Grim, lead the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology and are recognized as the founders of the field, which began as a series of conferences at Harvard in the late 1990s and today includes sixteen graduate programs nationwide. “We all understand that the awe and wonder of the natural world is something that captivates every human — we see it expressed in art, music, poetry — and if we leave that aside, we lose a sense of motivation, joy, engagement, and all the dynamizing energy that’s needed for ecological movements,” Tucker says. “The energy must come from a love of the earth community in all its complexity and beauty.”

There’s no shortage of energy to be tapped. Of the world’s eight billion people, some 85 percent claim religious affiliation. According to the Pew Research Center, Christians are the largest group (2.3 billion), followed by Muslims (1.8 billion), Hindus (more than a billion, around the same number as Confucians, who, says Tucker, are often not counted as a religious group), and Buddhists (500 million). Another 400 million practice traditional folk religions. There are fourteen million Jews, and

millions of others follow such faiths as Sikhism, Bahaism, and Jainism.

Tucker notes that all the world's religions have ecological components, from Hindu principles of asceticism and loving devotion toward nature to Buddhist concepts of interconnection and compassion to Jainism's emphasis on nonviolence to Western traditions valuing creation. And she observes that all religions are broadening their teachings and practices in order to meet the ecological challenge. "Their theologies need to be expanded," she says. "We call it retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. All religions have something to offer, and that's really the foundation for this new and emerging field."

The field, like Tucker, has deep Columbia roots. Tucker was raised on Claremont Avenue, in the shadow of Riverside Church. Her grandfather, the historian Carlton Hayes 1904CC, 1909GSAS, 1929HON, taught at Columbia from 1907 to 1950 and was ambassador to Spain during World War II. She lived steps from UTS, at 121st and Broadway, where Reinhold Niebuhr '54HON preached a gospel of social justice. And across Broadway stood Corpus Christi Church, where Father George Barry Ford counseled Thomas Merton '38CC, '39GSAS and Wm. Theodore "Ted" de Bary '41CC, '53GSAS, '94HON when they considered becoming Catholics.

Tucker came of age during the civil-rights movement and the war in Vietnam, and after graduating from Trinity College (now Trinity Washington University) in 1971, she set out for East Asia, starting with teaching in Japan. "My disillusionment with Western assumptions was so great that my attraction to a culture that was so different was very strong, and it absolutely transformed my life," Tucker says. "Buddhism has this tremendous sense of the interdependence of all life, and that's where I started."

She returned two years later and got her master's in world religions at Fordham under Thomas Berry, a Catholic monk, cultural historian, and scholar of Eastern and Indigenous religions whose passionate, prophetic writings on what he termed "human-earth relations" inspired a generation of environmentalists. For her doctorate at Columbia, Tucker studied Confucianism with de Bary. "To me, Confucianism has an even more comprehensive philosophy," she says. "The human is not an isolated individual but is embedded within concentric circles of family, friends, school, society, politics, nature, earth, and the cosmos itself. The most important thing is the triad: cosmos, earth, and human. The human completes this trinity of universe processes, earth fecundity, and human creativity."

Tucker's two mentors, de Bary and Berry, met on a ship to China in the late 1940s — de Bary was starting a Fulbright scholarship at Beijing University, Berry was a teacher at Fu Jen Catholic University in Beijing — and both were attracted to Chinese religious traditions, especially Confucianism. De Bary went on to pioneer the field of Asian studies in the West, while Berry preached an ethics based on a deep regard for the natural world. In the 1960s, they started the Oriental Thought and Religion Seminar (later the Asian Thought and Religion Seminar) at Columbia. For both scholars, as for Tucker, Confucianism was central. "We were all looking for something beyond the West — a sense of how culture engages people in a feeling of meaning and purpose," Tucker says.

In the late 1970s, de Bary arranged for Berry to teach one of the country's first courses in Native American religion at Barnard. Tucker eagerly attended those classes, and she and Grim (who were married by Berry in 1978) became Berry's editors and continued to promote his work after his death in 2009 at age ninety-four, including the book and Emmy-winning PBS film *Journey of the Universe*. They also coauthored *Thomas Berry: A Biography*, published by Columbia University Press in 2019.

"Berry saw how the destruction of the environment for massive materialism had spread around the world, and how our institutions — politics, education, economics, and religion — are invested in this economic system and therefore inadequate to address the problem," Tucker says. As Berry wrote, "The reenchantment with the earth as a living reality is the condition for our rescue of the earth from the impending destruction that we are imposing upon it … Our sense of reality and of value must consciously shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric norm of reference."

If Berry helped plant the seeds of the movement that Tucker and Grim brought forth, it was Martin S. Kaplan '61CC who delivered the rain. In 1996, Kaplan, a Boston-based lawyer and partner at the firm of Hale and Dorr, was thumbing through the *Harvard Gazette* when he saw an announcement for a series of three conferences being held at Harvard Divinity School on world religions and ecology, organized by Tucker and Grim. Speakers would discuss Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. Intrigued, Kaplan decided to attend.

One of the speakers was Thomas Berry. "His entire philosophy just blew me away," Kaplan says. "I was especially taken with his quiet passion for considering the entire

earth as a living organism. He was gentle and compelling; you felt his presence. You sensed this was a person of great moral power."

At the conference, Kaplan, exhilarated by what he'd heard, introduced himself to Tucker and told her he was the managing trustee of the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation, a philanthropic fund with an environmental bent. He invited Tucker to a grant-making meeting, and the trustees were so impressed with her pitch that they provided money to increase the number of conferences on religion and ecology from three to ten. Those conferences marked the birth of the field.

"*To make progress on climate you need more than policy and science — you need a commitment to human life and all the life on the planet.*"

Kaplan, who received the Columbia Alumni Medal in 1992 and the John Jay Award in 2000, has directed support to a host of Columbia initiatives, including the Center for Environmental Research and Conservation (known today as the Earth Institute Center for Environmental Sustainability), which led to the creation of Columbia's Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Environmental Biology. But when it came to dealing with climate change, Kaplan, like Tucker and Gore, felt that something was missing from the conversation.

"To make progress on climate you need more than policy and science — you need a commitment to human life and all the life on the planet," Kaplan says. "That's essential. We want this idea to be accessible to the people I call the ministering class — current and future clergy — so that they speak of these issues in their religious events and not just on Earth Day. They need to do this in a meaningful fashion and on a continuing basis."

On September 26, 2009, three months after Berry's death, a memorial service for the self-described "geologian" was held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The service featured readings from Thomas Aquinas, who wrote that "the whole universe together participates in and manifests the divine more than any single being whatsoever," a key idea for Berry. Toward the end of the service, Kaplan ascended to the high pulpit. The Thomas Berry Foundation, founded in 1998 by Berry, Tucker, Grim, Kaplan, and Berry's sister, Margaret Berry, had honored Kaplan with the 2009 Thomas Berry Award, and now Kaplan offered an address on the "Great Work," as Berry called it, of reestablishing our connection with nature.

“Berry believed that we must expand the scope of religious and humanist concerns to embrace the larger life systems and all species of the planet,” Kaplan told the gathering. “As a lawyer, I am intrigued by Berry’s call for a broader vision of rights.” Kaplan then quoted Berry’s statement that there can be no sustainable future “unless these inherent rights of the natural world are recognized as having legal status.”

For the past twenty-five years, Kaplan has been trumpeting Berry’s message. At a UN panel on religion and the environment held in 2000, Kaplan examined the crucial passage in the book of Genesis in which God tells humans to “have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” The King James Version translates the Hebrew word *radah* as “have dominion,” implying domination — resulting, as Berry saw it, in our indifference to nonhuman life, since it has no inherent rights. “Only in this detached situation,” Berry wrote, “could we have felt so free to intrude upon the forces of the natural world.”

As Kaplan told the UN panel, “dominion” is just one translation. “Another is ‘stewardship,’ which is very different,” he says. “Stewardship means that, given our power, we humans have a responsibility to *take care of* God’s creation.”



Alena Paulus

This idea, radical in its implications, has reached the highest echelons of organized religion. In 2015, Pope Francis published *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home* , a 184-page encyclical that blends science and spirituality and warns of "desolation" if humanity does not change its ways. Says Gore, "One of the main contributions of *Laudato si'* — although not explicit — was to unravel that toxic theology of seeing dominion as this domination. Pope Francis says there has been a mistake in interpretation."

The encyclical, which environmentalist Bill McKibben called "probably the most important document yet of this millennium," was extolled in eco-spiritual circles. Through CEE, Gore convened an interfaith working group around *Laudato si'* with Rabbi Burton Visotzky, a professor of interreligious studies at Jewish Theological Seminary, also a Columbia affiliate. Visotzky brought in theologian Hussein Rashid '96CC, who was exploring similar questions from a Muslim ethical standpoint. The scholars, who had spun off from a larger interfaith study group at Fordham Law School, decided to examine the issue of water as a way to focus their work, and for World Water Day 2017 they published a series of tracts around water-related themes. That got them invited to the Vatican to meet with the pope about *Laudato si'*.

"For me, reading the encyclical made me think of an eighth-century figure named Ja'far al-Ṣādiq," says Rashid, who teaches at the New School and UTS. "There's a work attributed to him where he says for a believer there are four relationships that keep you in balance: to God, to yourself, to other people, and to the rest of creation. My understanding of what Pope Francis was doing really resonated with that."

It was a far cry from another influential Vatican tract, one that Gore learned about as a student at UTS and which supplied an "aha" moment that reshaped her understanding of current social and environmental iniquities.

On May 4, 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull that was part of a body of papal edicts known as the doctrine of discovery. These statements decreed that the lands encountered by Columbus on his voyages, populated by "Saracens, infidels, or pagans," were Spain's for the taking. "They proclaimed that the original peoples of Africa and the Americas were merely part of the flora and fauna to be 'conquered, vanquished, and subdued,'" says Gore, adding that this was occurring just after the

crusades against Muslims and during the expulsion of Jews from Spain. “Racism, colonization, exploitation — it all ties together. The military forces and economic interests of those European nation-states were being wed to theology that sees certain people as being subhuman, an interpretation that can be heard in the white Christian nationalism of today.”

Gore, who is from Tennessee, grew up immersed in American politics. Her grandfather, Albert Gore, was a US senator, and her father, Albert Gore Jr., was a US senator (1985–1993), vice president (1993–2001), and author of the 1992 book *Earth in the Balance*, which warned of the global-warming catastrophe (the 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* chronicled his campaign to educate people about climate change). Raised in the Baptist tradition, Gore is a remarkably selfless, compassionate advocate who calls her own spirituality “private and ever-unfolding” and whose respect for the power and insights of Indigenous spiritual beliefs is a guiding force in her faith-based environmental work.

At Columbia Law School, Gore took a course in copyright law and was absorbed by the concept of intellectual property and, ultimately, she says, of property itself. Being in Manhattan, she thought about the “sale” of the island by the Lenape people to the Dutch colonizers and how the two sides had very different notions of what that transaction meant. And she thought about how we treat the land, and how social norms have blinded us to the environmental impacts of our consumer lifestyle. “We get confused,” she says, “because much of what’s driving ecological destruction is perfectly legal and socially encouraged.”

Gore graduated from law school in 2000, which was also the year her father ran for president on a strong environmental platform, winning the popular vote but conceding the race to George W. Bush after the Supreme Court denied a manual recount in Florida. In 2002, President Bush opened previously off-limits federal lands near national parks to oil and gas development, initiating a push for energy independence that has since triggered numerous conflicts over land, water, and air as woods are cleared, roads are built, pipes are laid, and animals are driven from their homes.

“We see nature as property rather than as a commonly held or even inhabited community of life,” Gore says. “That we recognize a cathedral as a sacred site but not a rainforest reveals a lot about our thinking.”

James Hansen could not have picked a better day to make his point to Congress. It was June 23, 1988, and the temperature in Washington was ninety-eight degrees. As director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, which is housed at Columbia, Hansen, now an adjunct professor at the Columbia Climate School, had come to address the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on the topic of "global warming," a term popularized by Columbia geochemist Wallace Broecker '53CC, '58GSAS in his 1975 paper "Climatic Change: Are We on the Brink of a Pronounced Global Warming?" "The global warming is now large enough," Hansen told the senators, "that we can ascribe with a high degree of confidence a cause-and-effect relationship to the greenhouse effect" — the process by which carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels collects in the atmosphere, trapping heat. "The first five months of 1988 are so warm globally that we conclude that 1988 will be the warmest year on record."

As if on cue, that summer was unlike any other in living memory. The US saw long, intense heat waves, drought, wildfires, and hundreds of human deaths, even as humans were pumping billions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere annually, with no end in sight.

That same year, Thomas Berry published *The Dream of the Earth*, a seminal meditation on human–earth relations. Guided by a profound reverence for the beauty and genius of nature, the book articulates a vision of a living earth whose complex life systems, developed over billions of years, are being severely altered, degraded, and extinguished through deforestation, extraction, contamination, and plunder. "If the earth does grow inhospitable toward human presence," Berry wrote, "it is primarily because we have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of every earthly reality."

Thirty-five years later, with global carbon emissions near record highs, the earth does seem to be growing inhospitable. The effects are spiritual as well as physical. Ecological anxiety is deepening, especially for children and teenagers, and faith communities have had to find new strategies to address an existential dilemma without precedent.

"The psychological breakdown and despair around climate change is so strong that young people are studying for eco-anxiety ministry," says Tucker. "The next

generation gets that climate change is real and caused by human activity. They don’t have to be convinced. Along with religious communities, they are advocating for eco-justice — a concern for the most vulnerable being affected by climate change.”

At CEE, Gore teaches that faith leaders can approach the climate crisis in three main ways: prophetic, pastoral, and practical. “Prophetic means telling the truth about real value versus GDP-measured value, and about costs that aren’t being counted. Pastoral deals with issues of grief and anxiety as climate impacts — floods, fires — increase. The practical can be things like faith communities greening their land, buildings, and schools and pressuring banks to stop financing fossil fuels.”

Polls show that most religious Americans see climate justice as a political priority, and new expressions of eco-spirituality have appeared, such as the Wild Church movement, in which congregants meet in natural settings, where a pastor might cite the book of Job (“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you, or speak to the earth, and it will teach you”) or repeat a quote attributed to the conservationist John Muir, who fought for the creation of national parks (“I’d rather be in the mountains thinking of God than in church thinking about the mountains”).

“Churches are looking to new ways of being both relevant and in their best forms spiritually,” says Tucker. “The hope is that that ecological anxiety is going to put us back in touch with awe, wonder, and beauty.”



Dieter Meyrl

A month after Hurricane Ian, as scientists tested the sewage-choked waters of southwest Florida and determined that waterways would be polluted for months, the Center for Earth Ethics hosted a forum at UTS on religious freedom for Indigenous people.

Karenna Gore, standing in James Memorial Chapel in front of the copse of tall pipes of the Holtkamp organ, opened her remarks by reading the text of a plaque that was to be installed on the seminary grounds, honoring the surroundings as “the homeland and territory of the Lenape people as well as the habitat and dwelling place of the many beings they have been in relationship with.” She then introduced Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, who spoke about his report to the UN General Assembly describing how the nature-based ways of life of Indigenous peoples had been violated by forced displacement, intrusion of industry, and disregard for their spiritual practices.

This message was made emotionally palpable by the speakers that followed.

Betty Lyons, the CEE advisory board co-chair from the Onondaga Nation, spoke of “our sacred relationships to the natural world” and argued that the Indigenous value

system — a sense of responsibility, respect, and reciprocity with nature — holds the key to survival for everyone. “We see all living beings as relatives and not merely resources,” she said. “The Creator exists in all living beings.”

Bernadette Demientieff of Gwich’in Nation, who calls herself a “land, water, and animal protector,” appeared via video from her home in Fort Yukon, Alaska, and expressed anguish over the vote of the US Congress, in 2017, to lease land in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) for oil exploration to feed the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. ANWR is one of the last unspoiled areas on the planet, a critical habitat for many animal species, including caribou, waterfowl, and polar bears. Its coastal plains are so hallowed to the Gwich’in that they won’t even set foot on them.

“When we were being told we were going to be rich if we opened up our sacred land to oil and gas development,” Demientieff said, “our elders told us we are already rich: rich in our culture, rich in our way of life. And all we have to do is protect it.”

Though the Biden administration has suspended the leases, the threat of future development remains, and the pain was audible in Demientieff’s voice. “Our land that we consider extremely sacred is being turned into an oil field,” she said. “Can you imagine a church that you attend, a place that you hold very sacred, being bulldozed over? That is how we feel about this area. This is not a place we built. This is a place we were blessed with. We hold this place to the highest standard. Our connection to the land, water, and animals — it’s all interconnected. There is no one or the other. This is our survival. This is our entire way of life.”

Mona Polacca, a spiritual elder of Hopi, Havasupai, and Tewa lineage, spoke of the “original instructions” — the ancient teachings of spiritual interconnectivity with creation that have sustained Indigenous people in the Americas for thousands of years — and stated her purpose: “It’s our responsibility as Indigenous people to be gentle reminders to all people about these basic original instructions,” she said. “We made a covenant with the Creator when we first came into this world to live here. We made a promise that we would take care of it. So that’s what we’re doing. We’re making every effort to now be that gentle reminder about that instruction that all people were given — that we are all related, and that our basic survival needs are not any different from each other’s. It’s all the same.”

When the program ended, Gore, the speakers, and the audience members exchanged greetings and chatted. Then they made their way down the halls and

went outside, where, in the night sky, a waxing crescent moon hung over the spired city, over the churches, mosques, and synagogues, the temples and shrines, and the ancestral land of the Lenape, where bears and wolves once roamed; and for a moment it was possible to believe that it *was* all the same, that all religions had something to contribute, and that a re-enchantment with creation was within reach, the one humanity needed in order to tackle the great work ahead.

For further resources, see:

Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*

Kimberley Patton and Paul Waldau, *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science and Ethics*

Online Courses in Religion and Ecology

This article appears in the Winter 2022-23 print edition of Columbia Magazine *with the title "Sacred Trees, Holy Waters."*

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