

GLOBAL WARMING AND THE COMMUNITIES OF FAITH: A PROPHETIC APPEAL

He said his true name was “Uncle,” that he was a medicine man from the Inuit people of the Great North. There, he said, the ice was melting. The hunting and the ancient village sites were being destroyed. Even the great polar bears were struggling for survival. Now he had been sent to the South as a messenger and healer – as our uncle – “to melt the ice in the heart of man.” The indigenous elder was addressing a religious gathering at the United Nations Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002.

His simple words sum up the prophetic task of the communities of faith during this critical moment of human and planetary history. Not only are the polar ice caps melting; so are the Siberian permafrost and all the planet’s glaciers, from those in the Himalayas, which feed the great rivers of China and the mystical Ganges, to the Alps, to the Andes. Even the magnificent and hallowed snows of Mt. Kilimanjaro are disappearing. The warming North Sea no longer teems with sandeel; and the kittiwakes, puffins and other sea birds are unable to feed their young. As if in tragic silent protest, they are not reproducing and are abandoning their nesting sites for the first time in recorded history.

Another spiritual teacher, the “geologist” Father Thomas Berry wrote:

“The issue is of a much greater order of magnitude [than previous historical crises] for we have changed in a deleterious manner not simply the structure and functioning of human society: we have changed the very chemistry of the planet, we have altered the biosystems, we have changed the topography and even the geological structures of the planet, structures and functions that have taken hundreds of millions and even billions of years to bring into existence. Such an order of change in its nature and in its order of magnitude has never before entered into earth history or into human consciousness” (*Dream of the Earth: Introduction*)

Uncle and Father Berry and other spiritual teachers may help us find the words of comfort, transformation and wisdom that the peoples of the world need to hear at this dangerous moment in human history. This is not just another “social” issue to be addressed by one more committee, one more web site, one more pastoral letter, or one more Environmental Sunday.

A moderate response will no longer serve to confront a crisis that is anything but moderate – the collapse of the life support systems of the planet demands a response that raises a cry, sounds the alarm, tells unvarnished truths and makes demands that may at first seem unreasonable. From the religious perspective this is to assume a prophetic stance. It is inspired by those fierce desert visionaries like Mohammed, Jesus, Jeremiah and Gandhi who were often judged to be mad by their critics. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel wrote in “The Prophets”:

“The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man’s fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet’s words.”

It is rapidly becoming apparent that the issue of climate change overshadows all the other great problems facing humanity: war and peace, poverty, hunger, disease. In fact, it is inextricably intertwined with all of these, as can be seen, for example, in the mad military scrambling for the diminishing oil supplies of the Middle East. The killer hurricanes fueled by global warming are not only devastating cities, tropical islands and whole sub-continental areas, but in New Orleans they also revealed as rarely before the blatant neglect of the poor and of communities of color in particular.

In fact, the impact of global climate change is especially cruel to God’s poor. The earth’s most vulnerable humans are already suffering disproportionately from the scarcity of potable drinking water, from hunger caused by crop disruption and by new diseases, all being spawned or exacerbated by global warming. The predicted worldwide phenomenon of the creation of tens of millions of environmental refugees was seen in microcosm in the impact of Katrina on the New Orleans population, just one of many similar disasters around the world such as the cruel drought and famine in Kenya. These point to the climate change crisis as a necessary issue of justice.

Although all of the great social problems of our times can be said to have a spiritual character, there is something uniquely spiritual about the crisis of the earth – a reality understood by the First Nations – the world’s indigenous people.

Most of the great spiritual traditions teach that the Earth and all its beings are sacred as reflections, or even as bearers, of the Divine Creator Spirit. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” wrote the British Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins as the Industrial Revolution was gearing up. The Psalmist sings that “The Lord’s is the earth and its fullness” (Psalm 24). The Holy Quran admonishes: “Do not kill women, elders, children, civilians and trees.”

This vision of the sacred is communicated most powerfully in the understanding of the earth as a living organism – even as Mother – rather than as an inanimate piece of real estate to be exploited, bartered, even killed for. This is a vision shared by both space scientists and indigenous people who see the earth as a unified living system. It also leads to an experience of the delicate interrelationship of all living beings and ecosystems, as various modes of the divine presence. Indigenous people describe this as the sacred web of life.

Because of this inherent sacredness of the earth reality, faith communities are able – and indeed obligated – in a new way to address the earth crisis from this perspective. It is a sacred perspective that can be understood and implemented by believers and

nonbelievers alike. This vision of the natural world not only transcends religious differences but even the traditional understanding of religion itself.

How can the human family best be reminded of its distinctive role as those beings in whom the earth – and even the universe – becomes conscious of itself? The self-consciousness of our species gives humans both the ability and responsibility to find the way out of the extreme crisis in which we find ourselves today and which we humans have ourselves created.

The severity of this crisis, which many knowledgeable people deem to be drawing ever closer to the brink of irreversibility, requires a religious response of extraordinary wisdom and audacity. The God of history is calling on us to launch a mobilization of the communities of faith, of the human conscience, and of the moral imagination – with unprecedented seriousness.

The time has come for a Global Interfaith Convocation for the Earth, called by the leaders of the world's great religious traditions. Such a gathering would issue an inspired prophetic appeal to the planet announcing the extremity of the crisis of global warming and a call for a worldwide mobilization to reverse this danger while there is still time. This would be a message of hope, but not of easy optimism. Its hope would lie in a concrete plan of action based on the best scientific economic information and would include the input of the poor, of indigenous, young people and of women. This message would state the dangerous consequences of non-action or of inadequate measures in a clear and honest way.

At its core there would be spiritual call for climate justice based on a demand for equity between the developing and the developed worlds. This would include an equitable assignment of carbon reduction between the North and the South. Such a strategy must also provide the tools to the developing world to achieve these goals

This vision of hope must be based in large part on the clean energy path, including solar and wind power, environmentally benign vehicles, an intensive campaign of conservation, and a plan of necessary environmental restoration – such as reforestation – for the troubled economies of both the developed and developing world. It would also have a major impact on creating jobs for the growing unemployed masses and would jump-start the troubled economies of both the poor and the rich worlds.

This prophetic call of the communities of the Spirit should be especially clear and courageous in calling for a radical transformation in life style, especially in the Western world. Inherent in this message is confronting its societal addiction to the fossil fuel economy. Such a change in life style needs to include, but should go far beyond the issue of a transformation in the choice of the vehicles that people drive. Installing solar panels in the Vatican or appropriate light bulbs in local congregations are praiseworthy and necessary but we are speaking of a frontal attack. “Consumerism can't exist with planetary survival” are prophetic words that could have come from the Pope or the Dalai Lama. In fact, they were spoken by Fidel Castro.

Jesus was once asked about how to drive out a particularly recalcitrant evil spirit. He replied, “This kind are only cast out by prayer and fasting.” It is the fast from the seductive demon of consumerism he may have been speaking of. We must be ready to declare from a clear spiritual perspective that the consumer society is based, consciously or unconsciously, on waste, greed and selfishness. The sacred call for the earth would lay out concrete steps on how individuals, families and communities, and especially corporations and governments can implement such a transformation.

Sooner or later under the present escalating crisis, our consumer life style may be forcibly taken from us or at least severely diminished. Here the most profound teachings of our respective traditions can teach us, as St. Francis of Assisi and Mahatma Gandhi demonstrated, that a simple life can lead to greater freedom and even to joy.

Can we collectively, through deep prayer and meditation, through community consultation, and through our love for the earth, for each other, for our children and for all beings, rise to this challenge, perhaps one of the greatest in human history? Can we hear the teaching of our Inuit Uncle saying that there may still be time to melt the ice in our own hearts and in the hearts of humankind?

As we accept this challenge and do our daily work for the earth, if we sometimes experience discouragement or even feel the icy breath of despair upon us, may the fire of divine grace warm our hearts. May we never forget that our God is a God of wonders and of surprise. Finally, may we take comfort in the wisdom of the holy Rabbi Hillel: “Even if I knew that I would die tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today.”

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