

RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY:

A JEWISH-CATHOLIC CONVERSATION

Remarks by Rabbi Arthur Green

As a person privileged to be living in the middle of his eighth decade on this beloved planet, I am able to take a somewhat long view of contemporary history. I was raised in the mid-twentieth century, the child of a fully secularized and rather militantly atheist household, like those of many American Jews in that era. Of course, my atheist father was himself the grandchild of Hasidic Jews, but that belonged to the distant and mostly forgotten past. Religion itself, as a force in human affairs, was seen as a thing of another era. Jews coming out of eastern Europe thought of religion as an ultra-conservative force on the world stage; its image was that of the Russian church in the latter days of the Czar, or of the hapless rabbis who stayed behind in old-world small-towns and with their values, as thousands of Jewish young people moved off to the cities and to new continents, engaging the bold new world of the twentieth century. Secularization was seen as a constant and unstoppable process.

No one, looking ahead from the mid-twentieth century, would have predicted the tremendous role that religion would play in the twenty-first. No one, that is, except the embattled people of faith. To everyone's surprise but their own, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and others fill the front pages of contemporary newspapers, which document us as a tremendous – and sometimes indeed frightening – force in world affairs. The question before us is whether we can

make this be good news, even redemptive news, for the history of human civilization. As one who does not anticipate the direct interference of a divine hand in history to save us from ourselves, I have come to ask the question of such salvation differently. Will the resurgence of faith in God, or a rebirth of religion, bring about the deliverance of our so urgently threatened planet? Needless to say, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. Buddhists slaughter Muslims, Muslims slaughter Christians, Christians ignore the plight of suffering refugees, Jews avoid confronting the humanity of Palestinian Muslims, etc. etc. That keeps them all too busy to confront the most serious challenge of our age, that which we are here to discuss today. But is there also a good, possibly even salvific, side to this new power of religion? How do we bring that to birth? That is the challenge we face.

Let me propose another way of asking the question. Is it coincidence that the first species to have the ability to destroy our biosphere as a fit habitat for higher forms of life is also the first to be equipped with the moral conscience and perspective that might prevent us from doing so? Religions, despite all their limitations and narrowness of vision, serve humanity us as the great vehicle for that moral conscience. Might you say, in classical western theological language, that the rebirth of religion emerges from a divine call, welling up within us, to repent of our collective abuse of this planet, and of one another, before it is too late? Is God seeking to protect that last shred of moral conscience in humanity, and are we His vessels for doing that? Is religion itself being given the gift of this power by the One it worships in order to awaken humanity from its dangerous self-serving slumber, as the earth is pillaged? Or, if you are more comfortable with Gaian than with Biblical language, might you say that mother earth is offering all of us renewed access to the sacred – viewable from the Sierra Club poster, audible in the

silence of the meditation retreat – to arouse even the most avowedly secular among us to come to her defense?

Our presence here today, joined together, is evidence that such an awakening is happening within both Judaism and Christianity. The pope's leadership in this cause, expressed in his remarkable document of moral courage entitled *Laudato Si*, to which I will return later, is a clarion call to all people who call themselves religious. It is taking place in Buddhism as well, especially due to the commitment of the Dalai Lama and the growing influence of Buddhists of the western world. And even in such an unexpected place as a rural mountaintop Taoist temple in China. I read from a remarkable interview of the abbot in the New York Times of 7-13-17: "China doesn't lack money; it lacks reverence for the environment... We all live on the earth together – we are not isolated," he said from his remote monastery. "As Taoists, we have to work to influence people in China and overseas to take part in ecological protection." Is there a universal process of teshuvah, of return to awareness of the One, happening here?

We Jews and Christians have a shared language for stirring environmental awareness. That is the language of Creation. We are religious communities based on our shared faith in this being a created universe, emerging from the word of God. This means that our world, including all that has happened in the several billion years of its existence, is attributable to God, however we may understand that. While far from being a literalist or fundamentalist in my reading of Genesis or the Psalmist's magnificent hymns to Creation, these remain essential to my spiritual life, binding it inexorably to my loving concern for the fate of this planet and those who dwell upon it, and hence calling me to environmental activism.

In placing the weekly Sabbath at the center of our devotional lives, we Jews have always lived in awareness of Creation. Our Friday evening ritual calls for three readings of Genesis 2: “Heaven and earth were completed, they and all their hosts.” Before we recite the shema’ each morning, we bless God who “renews each day the work of Creation.” When we put on our tallit in the morning, we call out the verse from Psalm 104, the greatest of the Creation psalms, “He spreads forth light like a garment, stretching out the heavens like a curtain,” as though repeating or taking part in the very first act of Creation. In the last several years, I have been urging Jews everywhere to take up our ancient but long-neglected tradition called *ma’amadot*, concluding each morning’s prayer service with the appropriate day of the Creation narrative in Genesis 1, on Sunday saying: “In the beginning;” on Monday “God said: ‘Let there be a firmament,’” and so forth through the week, thus completing the cycle every week. This serves as a daily reminder that we live in God’s world, and thus we bear responsibility for working to maintain it. I invite Christians, as fellow-bearers of the same sacred story, to join in this practice as well. The divine voice of Creation is an unceasing one, and so it should be in our lives. That voice calls out to us (*keri’at ha-Torah*, by one Hasidic reading), and we are obliged to respond to it. To **respond** to the divine call means to take **responsibility**. God’s first word to humans “*Ayekah, Where are you?*” echoes through the universe and demands our reply.

This call to moral responsibility is all the more vital in the specific times in which we live. We are Christians and Jews, but we are also citizens of the country in which some of the gravest threats to the future of this planet are taking place. Forgive me for what some might call the politicizing of a religious dialogue, but the prophetic legacy – including that of my teacher Heschel – does not allow me to do otherwise. According to the *Times* of 11/1/17, Mr. Pruitt, head of something

called the **Environmental Protection Agency**, is dismissing qualified scientists from decision-making positions and replacing them with representatives of the petrochemical industry. Can we think of a more blatant example of choosing foxes to guard the henhouse? And the eggs to be produced in that henhouse – to extend the metaphor – represent our children, the birth of all future generations. How can we not be called upon to speak out in such a moment?

Let me return to our shared faith in Creation. We proclaim that the world was created by the word of God. The original witness to this faith is the narrative of Genesis 1, but it is repeatedly invoked in the prophets and psalms as well. “By the word of God were the heavens created, and by the breath of His mouth, all their hosts.” It is a formula widely attested in the rabbinic sources, as well as in the famous opening of the Gospel of John.

What do we mean when we evoke such language today? “Word,” for us, does not refer to language in any conventional sense, but to a deeper sense of what language is. Language is a system of sounds that convey meaning to fellow-speakers of a particular tongue. The relationship between the specific sound-combination or, in writing, group of letters, and the thing intended is mostly arbitrary, the very beginning of symbolism in the development of humanity, repeated in the life of each verbal individual, no matter what the language that will emerge. In saying that all of Creation is by the divine word, we are saying that all existence is potentially meaningful. The Word, the great conveyer of meaning, lies within it, waiting to be discovered. Bringing ever more dimensions of existence into God’s presence, or discovering that presence within them, is, from our point of view, the human quest for meaning, for turning phenomena into language. It is from the articulation of our encounter with the world that meaning arises. Turning this process around to

see it from God's point of view, however, our discovery of meaning is the ongoing, ceaseless process of divine self-revelation, the speaking of the divine Word. We discover, God reveals; God reveals, we discover. We listen, God speaks; God speaks, we listen. *Shema 'Yisra 'el*: "Listen, strugglers!" It's all about listening.

I engage us in this little exercise of what you might call mystical theology because I want to make a point. *Laudato Si* has rendered a great service by its author's insistence that concerns for our environmental future and the relief of poverty are not to be separated from one another. The ongoing concern of the Church for the poor of this world, both Christian and not, is one of the great moral beacons shining forth in these dark times. The focusing of concern upon the people of the southern hemisphere – Africa, Latin America, and South Asia – and the dangers to them of rising tides and progressive drought and desertification, is all terribly important and too much ignored by the temporal powers that be. But this linkage between preserving our resources and serving the poor also contains another message, the reason that some political figures have denounced the pope's good words. Their concern with what they call "the bottom line" – "How much will it cost?" – blinds them from seeing the real bottom line that God and nature have placed before us. We cannot allow economic interests to be juxtaposed to environmental concerns. A dead planet, one without pure food to eat, water to drink, or air to breathe, a thousand Mara-Lagos overwhelmed by rising tides, will not be much of a reward for the wealthy elites who hold onto power and flee from responsibility. What will happen to all those fortunes once the Cayman Islands are submerged? With so many sophisticated tools of planning and prediction in our hands, we need to think of a future that at once protects the natural world and relieves the suffering of impoverished humanity.

To this exemplary concern for economic justice in the papal document, I want to add another dimension, emerging from the Jewish experience. I speak of the concern for freedom and liberation. God speaks to us through all the wonders of Creation, but we only hear that voice when we are ready. God is *revealed* to us only when we are ready to *discover*, and only then can we *respond*. “Every day,” we are told, “a voice goes forth from Mount Sinai...” In the language of our sacred story, you can only come to Sinai when you are freed from Egyptian bondage. A thousand comments on the word *mitsrayim*, “Egypt” in Hebrew – especially those of the Hasidic masters – tell us that this bondage means constriction or narrowness of vision. Only when that constriction is removed, can we hear the divine voice – the same voice that speaks through Creation – saying: “I am Y-H-W-H your God who brings you forth from the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage.”

What is that house of bondage, that place of inner constriction, that keeps us from hearing and responding to the word of God? Pope Francis is certainly right in saying that it can take the form of poverty. I’m sure the Israelites in Egypt were all living on less than a dollar a day, like so many of the poor throughout our world today. How can you respond to the call of God to save the earth when you are struggling in each moment for your own food and shelter? But this “Egypt” also means political oppression, enslavement to the whim of the powerful and mighty, thus having no control over your own fate, no sense of fairness in human affairs. “Let them go make their own straw! Let them go find their own health insurance!” are kinds of things that Pharaoh and his like enjoy tweeting out.

But there are other forms of Egyptian bondage as well, things that constrict us from responding freely to the divine call. Addiction is such a prison of the mind and spirit, not leaving us free enough to hear God’s word. It is a terrible plague in

today's world, adding another level of bondage to so many already caught up in the chains of poverty. So too is sexual obsession, the inability to control one's passions, distorting God's greatest gift, the ability to love. But so too are subtler addictions, including the endless drive for high achievement and success, seemingly the drug of choice for too much of our middle and upper class Jewish community. Are you free to respond to the divine call to save our world when you are wholly given to climbing the corporate ladder, or making quick millions from your latest app? Will you teach your child to listen and respond to God's voice in the wonders of nature, if it will distract her from the getting the grades it takes to make it into the Ivy League? Or will you quickly figure out how to turn that love of nature into a summer seminar in Costa Rica, something that will surely look good on that young person's growing CV?

We need each other, my friends, and the world needs us to realize that we need each other. We people of faith need to stand together for our awareness of the miraculous nature of our existence, for a sense of divinity that penetrates every moment of our existence, enlightening even the darkest corners. We need together to form the core of a new resistance to the brutalization of life in our era, the disregard for the sacred quality of each human life, and of the created world of which we are a part. In the growing strength of religion as a factor in human affairs, we have been given a great gift, a salvific opportunity that we cannot allow to slip between our fingers.

All of us who are people of faith today are survivors, having weathered the multiple attacks on religion over the course of the past two centuries. Many of us are returnees, people who rediscovered the sacred and our traditional languages for accessing it, in response to the spiritual vacuity of secular and materialistic western

culture. But in order for this re-creation of religion emerging in the post-modern context to have both intellectual and moral integrity, we will need to be clear about several matters, all of which have everything to do with our ability to reach out to a new generation, one very much concerned with the environmental challenge, and to make common cause.

First, we will have to put a final end to the zero-sum game that existed among the world's religions in pre-modern times, and that is still rampant in some parts of our world today. The most dangerous face of religion emerges when one fights and decries another; the best face of religion is that seen when we work together for goals and values we all share. We Jews and Christians have come very far in this regard, especially thanks to the changes of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Dabru Emet*. But we should acknowledge that the work of reconciliation between us is not complete, and note with concern the resurgence of groups within both of our communities that deny the spiritual validity of all traditions but their own. That kind of oneupsmanship will keep us from the work we really need to do.

Second, religion will have to embrace the scientific paradigm for our understanding of the natural world. This includes an unambiguous embrace of contemporary astrophysics as well as biological evolution. Judaism and Catholicism have long had non-fundamentalist ways of understanding Scripture. The work of seeking out theological language for the integration of spiritual and biological perspectives on evolution is a work-in-progress, based on the early attempts of such figures as Teilhard de Chardin and Abraham Isaac Kook. But the religion-versus-science battles of the late 19th and twentieth centuries are over, and we cannot pretend otherwise. Getting caught up in such rear-guard actions as

denying or refusing to teach evolution will prevent us from looking forward and taking on the real battle that needs our full attention.

Third, religion in the post-modern world will need to decouple itself from the oppressive class systems with which it has been linked. This is the case economically, racially, and in terms of gender. As the pope has said so clearly, its spiritual message will have to address the rising poor as well as the alienated children of the privileged. For you Catholics, that may come with a revival of the Franciscan spirit, so much embodied by this pope. For us Jews, especially in North America, it means decoupling Judaism from the value system of the upper middle class, including addressing the prohibitively high costs of synagogue membership, Jewish education, and full participation in our communal life. On the racial question, you are far ahead of us, with so much of the church's growth among darker-skinned populations. For us, the link between religion and ethnicity significantly complicates that question, but greater openness to racial diversity in our community is an important cutting-edge issue for us. This includes fuller acceptance of our Ethiopian brothers and sisters, as well as openness to various other claims of Israelite ancestry in diverse parts of the world. Regarding gender, we still have differences concerning women in positions of spiritual leadership, but we must all work in an ongoing way, and hopefully together, to oppose oppressive sexism and fully recognize the spiritual equality of women and their great potential for enriching all of our spiritual lives. Today we sadly have to add that this includes vigilance regarding sexual abuse – of all genders - a problem that continues to rear its head in both of our communities.

Fourth and finally, contemporary religion will need to be based upon a fully nature-embracing spirituality, one that sees the divine presence as embodied within

the physical world. The separation of the elevated and vaunted spiritual realm from the lowly and even sullied physical, a legacy of Platonism, will have to be left behind. Only in doing so will we be able to become fully committed to the most urgent religious task of our era. When, back in the 1980's, I was invited, originally by Catholic editors, to edit volumes on Jewish spirituality, I encountered considerable resistance among would-be contributors. The very notion of "spirituality," they said, was alien to the Jewish worldview, because it entailed a rejection of the physical world. "Stay away from those Catholics and Buddhists," I was told, because their faith is too much based on otherworldliness. All of us have moved on this question over the last several decades. We no longer think that embracing the spiritual life demands the denigration of concrete life on earth. On the contrary, a sense of spirituality is precisely that which brings us closer to an appreciation of nature and a sense of awe before its wonders. Yes, we are still wary of hedonism and believe in modesty in partaking of earthly pleasures, especially those that involve consumption. But we are in quest of what my friend and mentor the late Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi called "heavenly days right here on earth."

That sense of wonder and its renewal is the most important message that we religious folk – all of us – have to bring to the post-modern world. I am one who believes that religious truth belongs to the language of poetry, not discursive prose. I recognize fully and without regret that theology is an art, not a science. We people of faith have nothing we can prove; attempts to do so only diminish what we have to offer. We can only testify, never prove. Our strength lies in grandeur of vision, in an ability to transport the conversation about existence and origins to a deeper plane of thinking and conversation. My faith, but also my human experience, tells me that this shift profoundly enhances our understanding of our

own lives and of the world in which we live. Opening our minds, and ultimately the mind of our society, to the truth accessible from that inner “place” constitutes our best hope for inspiring change in the way we live on this earth.

A religious person is one who perceives or experiences holiness in the encounter with existence; the forms of religious life are intended to evoke this sense of the holy. In a mental state that cannot be fully described in words, such a person hears Being (the word “Being” here, written with a capital B, renders the unpronounceable Hebrew Y-H-W-H) say: “I am.” All of our personifications of the One are in response to that inner “hearing.” In biblical language, the “I am” of Sinai is thus already there behind the first “Let there be” of Genesis. The *aleph* of *anokhi* comes before the *bet* of *bereshit*, meaning the oneness of Being precedes the duality of creation: heaven and earth, day and night, and all the rest that follows. Creation *is* revelation, as the Kabbalists understood so well. To say it in more neutral terms, we religious types personify Being because we see ourselves as living in *relationship* to the underlying One. I seek to respond to the “I am” that I have been privileged to hear, to place myself at its service in carrying forth this great mission of the evolving life process. To do so, I choose to personify, to call Being by this ancient name “Lord (here I translate *adonay*).” In doing this, I am proclaiming my love and devotion to Being, my readiness to live a life of seeking and responding to its truth. But implied here is also a faith that in some mysterious way Being loves me, that it rejoices for a fleeting instant in dwelling within me, delighting in this unique form that constitutes my existence, as it delights in each of its endlessly diverse manifestations.

There is indeed something “supernatural” about existence, something entirely out of the ordinary, beyond any easy expectation. But I understand the “supernatural”

to reside wholly *within* the “natural.” I am conscious that I speak these words here in the synagogue of Mordecai Kaplan, who stood so firmly for “religious naturalism” within Judaism. The step I take beyond him, in some ways drawing together his insights and those of Heschel, is to say that the natural and the supernatural are one. The difference between them is one of perception, the degree to which our “inner eye” is open. But opening that inner eye is precisely our task as religious teachers.

My other great mentor in recent years is the Rabbi of Chernobyl, who died in 1797. I have just completed a translation of his great book of homilies, *The Light of the Eyes*. In speaking of the Exodus from Egypt, he says that *our* Exodus has already taken place. Unlike the enslaved Israelites of old, we have our faith; we are aware of the divine presence that fills all the world. The challenge, he says, is how to make our actions, our moral selves, live up to our spiritual awareness. The same challenge is ours today.