



(Web Bryant / USA TODAY)

Green, meet God

The secular environmental movement sees an opportunity in the world of religion. Is this a marriage made in heaven?

By Henry G. Brinton

The greening of religion, although long overdue, is really a quite natural phenomenon. The texts of many faiths, indeed most, at some point reference the stewardship of this earth. More surprising is that today, secular environmental groups are seizing the opportunity to reach out to faith communities.

A Sierra Club [report](#) highlights faith-based environmental initiatives in all 50 states "spiritually motivated grassroots efforts to protect the planet." One line leaps off the page: "Lasting social change rarely takes place without the active engagement of communities of faith." Indeed. Think of the U.S. civil rights movement, Solidarity in Poland and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Social change does not stick without the glue of religion.

But as these two movements one based on the love of God, the other on the love of the earth intersect, we should celebrate the initiative while remaining aware of the challenges and inevitable spats that await this quite remarkable marriage.

All on board

For centuries, the biblical command to "[have dominion](#)" over the earth was seen as a divine endorsement of environmental exploitation. But a radical shift has occurred, and most people of faith now support efforts to be good stewards of natural resources.

The Pew Forum's [Religious Landscape Survey](#), released earlier this year, revealed [widespread support](#) for stricter environmental laws and regulations among Jews (77%), Buddhists (75%), Muslims (69%) and Hindus (67%), as well as members of mainline Protestant churches (64%), Catholic churches (60%) and evangelical ones (54%).

"[Creation care](#)" is the growing movement that has become a rallying cry among religious people who are concerned about the earth. In just the past few years, this nation has witnessed an explosion of environmental activity at the grass-roots level.

"We now have 5,000 congregations that are responding to climate change by cutting carbon emissions," says Gretchen Killion of [Interfaith Power and Light](#), a San Francisco-based group active in 28 states. It helps churches and religious organizations lower their energy consumption. "Many of our members have installed solar panels, and three or four even have geothermal," Killion says.

The world needs this broad-based, interfaith movement one that offers practical environmental benefits and draws together people of diverse theologies. Catholics are working with Native Americans to preserve land and water; Muslims are making links between urban communities and sustainable farms; and Protestant churches are joining interfaith coalitions and "greening" their congregations by modifying buildings, installing compact fluorescent lamps, using conservation landscaping and purchasing organic, fair-trade coffee.

Though religions are sometimes scorned for dividing people and illuminating differences, the unifying goal of preserving the planet could do just the opposite: bring people of faiths together. Creation care can be "a great bridge-builder between evangelicals and mainline Christians," says [Richard Cizik](#) of the National Association of Evangelicals. Although evangelicals have traditionally distrusted environmentalists, who tend to be political liberals, stewardship of the earth is not a left-wing concept. After all, observes Cizik, "Aren't conservatives supposed to be conservers?"

But is the marriage of the secular environmental movement and the faith-based one even necessary? Actually, it's essential. The international community has settled on the dangers of global warming and has decided to act to literally change the world. We've reached a critical point at which unity is required if this movement is to succeed. Just as in any successful political campaign, you need a good ground game. There is no better ground game in the USA than the thousands of churches, synagogues and mosques that dot our landscape from coast to coast. But are religious people ready to walk down this aisle?

Lyndsay Moseley of the Sierra Club believes so. She has been working for several years to develop partnerships with people who have faith-based, moral or spiritual reasons for protecting the planet. Raised in a deeply religious and politically conservative home in eastern Tennessee, Moseley encountered a low-income community outside Knoxville where the water supply had been contaminated by the illegal dumping of lead, arsenic, diesel fuel and [PCBs](#). She joined a coalition that demanded clean water for the neighborhood, and in the course of that successful effort, Moseley "began to understand that God's call to care for creation is the same as God's call to love our neighbors."

Diverse faiths, converging interests

Trust, intersecting values and a willingness to work together. These are the key ingredients that Moseley believes are necessary to build a meaningful alliance between the Sierra Club and people of faith. But even supporters urge caution.

Cizik tells me that "evangelicals need to find their own voice before partnerships are established," because they don't want to be seen as "an appendage of the environmental movement." Though this suspicion and distrust among evangelicals is clearly a hurdle, it is one that can be cleared, as megachurch pastor and author Rick Warren has plainly illustrated.

One doesn't even have to be a global warming doomsday prophet to see the wisdom of greening the planet. [Jack Graham](#), a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, says he is unsure about the main causes of global warming, but he strongly believes that Christians should not abuse the earth. He recently led his 27,000-member Texas church through an energy audit that led to changes in consumption, resulting in savings of \$1.1 million in one year not to mention the environmental benefits achieved through the members' efforts.

Other faith groups want to make sure that their distinctive mission is not diluted by environmental partnerships. Green mustn't overshadow God.

"We hear regularly from secular groups who want to partner with us," says Killion of Interfaith Power and Light. "These groups have important information to share, and we need it to do our work. However, we strive to be theologically based and not to be an environmental organization." Killion wants the message of her organization to remain faith-based, rooted in the mandate to care for creation that is found in most mainstream religions. "We want to engage communities of faith who traditionally don't like the environmental community," she says.

So the environmentalists of the world want to save the planet, and the various faiths that share this planet want the same thing. Good. Yet in reaching out to those of us rooted in faith, the Sierra Clubs of the world must work within our religious traditions to ensure that these efforts enrich, rather than undermine, religion.

Patience will be the friend of these environmental groups as they court the affections of the large and politically powerful community of believers now committed to caring for God's creation. Our planet wasn't polluted in a day, and it won't be cleaned up that quickly either.

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