

Are Churches and religions moving towards ecological conversion?

Mary Hirschfeld
Villanova University

Note: Because I travel tomorrow and will be out of the country and away from my computer, I have had to write up these reflections without benefit of having read Dr. Sachs's paper. I hope my remarks will nonetheless be useful.

It is a pleasure to be here, and it was an honor to be invited to participate in this conference. But my initial enthusiasm was a bit dimmed when I learned that I was to speak on the question of whether churches and religions are moving towards ecological conversion. My problem is not with the question – it is a good one. My difficulty, rather, is with my competence to address the question meaningfully. I am not a student of world religions. But I do have something to say about the role religion can and should play as we confront the challenges to the environment, or at least, I have some thoughts about what Christians can and should do. And here, I do think there is room for Christians to do more.

To prepare for my remarks, I did a quick search on Google to see what has been written about religions and climate change. I found two articles surveying the field, both of which ended in conclusions that essentially said that much more research on the subject needed to be done because religions vary so widely. They also (correctly) note that such research needs to engage not only differences in dogmas or teachings, and how that might relate to environmental questions but also questions about how teachings in the various religions are actually lived out.

I have some personal experience about the gap between teaching and practice that is worth sharing as a backdrop to my remarks today. Before my conversion, I was a member of a group of pagans in Los Angeles. We really were practicing a religion. Our group had a set of teachings, and we had a set of rituals, and we had a community life organized around these spiritual beliefs and practices. The leader of our particular community was passionate about environmental concerns. It was central to her work both within our religious community and in her teaching (she was a professor of chemistry). So, our group's religious reflections very frequently centered on healthy engagement with the environment. For all of that, I could not help but notice that many members of our community, including our leader, drove large SUV's, and lived up in the hills around LA at some distance from their places of work. They refused to use Styrofoam, but when it came to questions that might impact their standard of living, somehow it was not important to create a lifestyle less reliant on an automobile, or even just to use an automobile that wasn't so damaging to the environment. I suspect this sort of gap between personal practice and one's beliefs is quite common, and is not limited to religious communities.

We can make some sense of the disconnect by observing that the effort to engage people with the challenges to our environment are often oriented towards producing political outcomes. We want carbon taxes, or international agreements to reduce carbon emissions. It is an understandable approach. The environment will not be much impacted if I get rid of my car. There has to be some collective response. But there are two problems with this. First, it leads to bad witness. If those who are championing environmentalism are driving SUV's or flying frequently, those not yet concerned have less reason to think there is a real problem. If the walk is not being walked, the talk will not be attended to. Second, the collective responses will require widespread change in lifestyles. And that requires that a lot of people begin, on an individual level, to really walk the walk.

So we need churches and religions not merely to talk about the importance of the environment. We need them to facilitate meaningful conversion, changes not just in what we think, but also in what we do, what we live out. And it is on this front that I think the religions could do much more. Since I am a Catholic, let me focus on what the Church can do.

Like many of the world religions and other Christian churches, the Catholic Church has issued strong proclamations about the need for concern for the environment. Most notably, Pope Francis issued his magnificent encyclical, *Laudato Si*. Although *Laudato Si* communicates the urgency of the problems that confronts us, and has energized engagement with the issue, as exemplified in this very conference, its most important contribution is its diagnosis of the spiritual disorder that underlies our problems. Pope Francis calls this the technocratic paradigm, which is a way of engaging the world that is rooted in an inherently sinful orientation towards ourselves, towards others, and towards the planet. In particular it is an orientation that places the self at the center of things – looking at the world (and even other human beings) as so much material out there available to be manipulated towards the service of our own unbounded desires. This orientation which began to develop in early modernity saturates our modern culture. We find it in the commonplace idea that happiness involves getting what we want, with correspondingly little attention to thinking about what we should want. But because our focus is on satisfying our desires, the technocratic paradigm ends up blinding us to the goods that we find around us. We seek to bend the world to meet our will without noticing the gifts in the world, and perhaps letting ourselves be bent to them. There is not space here to unpack this diagnosis of our modern situation. But it is very rich, and should be the subject of much more widespread conversation than is currently the case.

Pope Francis urges us to combat the technocratic paradigm by remembering that we inhabit a world that was created by God and that is a gift. The diverse creatures of the world all sing something of the beauty of God, and in the thick web of relationship those diverse creatures point to the unity and superabundant goodness of our Creator. If we could be restored to this creation “paradigm” we would see more clearly than we do the good that is on offer to us in the world and especially in

other people. Encounter with those created goods would nourish us, and stem the tide of our unbounded desires for more. We would creatively engage the world not in acts of domination and manipulation, but as a dance, one that celebrates ourselves and others, and especially the relationships that bind us together. Humans would still shape the world, but they would do so as partners in the world. It should be easy to see why our environmental disorders would become more tractable if such a paradigm commanded the global culture. We would not think of environmental sustainability as calling us to make sacrifices to save the planet. We would rather find that our desires are more deeply met by living in harmony with nature rather than at odds with her.

Again, I have not space to elaborate on the depth available through this alternative paradigm, or to explain more fully why the adoption of such a paradigm would be of such critical help in addressing our environmental challenges. But let's grant for the moment that this is all right. If so, the key contribution the Church can make to this issue is through a call to conversion. And yes, that includes a call to all to a conversion to a view of the world that includes the transcendent, one way or another.

The modern Church has rightly moved towards engaging the world on its own terms, especially in the wake of Vatican II. This move was, I think, in part a response to a sort of religion that emphasized the transcendent at the expense of concern with this world. There is, then, a fear that calls to remind people of the fact that God created the world and that our own ultimate happiness lies in God and not the world will lead to an abandonment of the world and its urgent concerns. But that all rests on a faulty premise about what conversion to God calls us to. The vision that underlies Pope Francis's description of creation in *Laudato Si* is a sacramental vision; one that invites us to see the world in light of its relationship to God. And it turns out that in order to engage the world well, we need to understand the world as shot through with God's glory. We need that sacramental vision.

So while the Church can and should continue to lead the conversation through conferences such as this, and while it should also lend its support to political movements aimed at collective action to help us deal with the problem, the Church should also return to the pews. A billion Catholics who were more deeply converted to the creation paradigm, who had the habit of seeing the world in light of its relationship to the God who created it would have the power to change the culture. If they could do that, we might start to see that widespread change in lifestyle that is a necessary component of our campaign to save the environment from the current degradation it is subjected to.