

Preface: Religion, Ecology, and Economics

Over the years, when people have asked me what I do, and when I have answered that I am a theologian who investigates the connections of religion with economics and ecology, they often give me a funny look. What does “religion” have to do with financial and environmental matters? Isn’t religion about God and human sin and salvation, or maybe human peace and comfort? At any rate, money and the earth have not figured largely in many Westerners’ understanding of the role of religion in life and culture.

But times have changed. The 2010 edition of the annual environmental publication *The State of the World*, subtitled “Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability,” contains a lead article by Gary Gardner suggesting that the religions must be major players in the most important two-sided crisis of our time—that of economics and ecology. Gardner applauds the religions for their recent attention to environmental concerns—from “greening” church buildings to reevaluating their Scriptures for ecological friendly doctrines—but bemoans the fact that the religions have not given comparable attention to economics. Somehow they fail to see the intrinsic connection between environmentalism and consumerism. Increasingly, however, we are becoming aware that these apparently disparate fields—economics and ecology—are tightly interlocked, for it is the rampant use of energy that both creates our consumer paradise as well as depletes the planet’s resources and contributes to global warming. To put it as simply as possible: it is not sufficient to consume in a “green” fashion; rather, we must consume *less*, a lot less. Buying a Prius does not permit one to drive *more*, although that is often the underlying rationale of many people. Quantity still matters; in fact, we are at such a level of consumption in relation to the carrying capacity of our planet that reduction must take a major role in sustainability. No one wants to face this fact; changing from an SUV to a Prius is not enough—we may have to reconsider the use of automobiles.

“Thus it becomes clear that while shifting technology and stabilizing population will be essential in creating sustainable societies, neither will succeed without considerable change in consumption patterns, including reducing and even eliminating the use of certain goods, such as cars and airplanes, that have become important parts of life today for many.”¹ This casual statement from the 2010 *State of the World* causes a global gasp—

“reducing and even eliminating” the use of cars and airplanes! Surely not. The shock, however, causes us to realize how far we have to go in both our attitudes and our practices. As the essay points out, we human beings are so embedded in the culture of consumerism that asking us to curb it (let alone eliminate precious forms of it) is like asking us to stop breathing—“they can do it for a moment but then, gasping, they will inhale again.”² It is important to take this seriously: the “culture of consumerism” is not just a form of life that we can accept or reject; it has now become the air we breathe. This is the “nature” of “culture”—culture becomes nature, it becomes “natural.”³ Consumerism is a cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services. Thus the well-known comment that consumerism is the newest and most successful “religion” on the globe is not an overstatement. Consequently, the task of changing culture—from consumerism to sustainability, for instance—is immense. If one accepts the analysis that our planetary society is in serious condition, then one also must accept that “preventing the collapse of civilization requires nothing less than a wholesale transformation of dominant cultural patterns.”⁴

The religions are being handed a challenge here—a significant but difficult one. They are being asked to take on what no other field has been willing to assume, something at the heart of all religions: “a wholesale transformation of dominant cultural patterns,” particularly at the level of consumerism. As the *2010 State of the World* asserts, “Of the three drivers of environmental impact—population, affluence, and technology—affluence, a proxy for consumption, is the arena in which secular institutions have been the least successful in promoting restraint.”⁵ There it is: the most significant challenge the religions could undertake for the well-being of our planet and its inhabitants—but a challenge for which no other field is so well prepared—is “restraint.” Restraint at all levels, summed up in the Golden Rule (a variation of which most religions take as their central practice), is the one thing needed now, and is, I believe, both a gift from the religions and a challenge to them. It could be considered a “coming home” for the religions as well as their greatest contribution to the economic/ecological crisis facing us. As Gardner sums up so well:

Often pointed to as conservative and unchanging institutions, many religions are in fact rapidly embracing the modern cause of environmental protection. Yet consumerism—the opposite side of the environmental coin and traditionally an area of religious strength—has received relatively little attention so far. Ironically, the greatest contribution the world’s religions could make to the sustainability challenge may be to take seriously their own ancient wisdom on materialism. Their special gift—the millennia-old paradoxical insight that happiness is found in self-emptying,

that satisfaction is found more in relationships than in things, and that simplicity can lead to a fuller life—is urgently needed today. Combined with the new found passion of many religions for healing the environment, this ancient wisdom could help create new and sustainable civilizations.⁶

I consider this paragraph, from one of the standard-setting texts of our time—the carefully researched and thoughtful series of annual volumes on the state of the world—to be marching orders for the religions, and to be the central theme of my modest effort in this book. As Gardner points out, “Advocating a mindful approach to consumption could well alienate some of the faithful in many traditions” (probably an understatement!). But such a position would not only serve the planet but would also signal a return of the religions to their own spiritual roots and cause them to recognize how far they have deviated from them.⁷ The insidious message that the purpose of human life is to consume is a heresy, and should be condemned as such. The religious traditions may well find that such a return revitalizes their basic message—restraint, not for the sake of ascetic denial of the world, but in order that the “abundant life” might be possible for all.⁸ My small contribution to condemning the heresy of consumerism is to take up this challenge with an in-depth study of one form of restraint in one religion—“kenosis,” or self-emptying, in Christianity. It is interesting to note that in the 2010 *State of the World*, which contains over twenty-five articles on a huge range of topics—from business and education to health and media—only seven pages are given to the topic of religion’s absolutely critical role in transforming dominant cultural patterns. How can such a critical task be accomplished in a few pages? There is an obvious disconnect here. While study after study points to the “spiritual” nature of our problem—that it is one of changing both minds and behaviors—it is still often neglected or marginalized. It is also marginalized in the 2010 *State of the World*, but what it does is critically important: it calls on the religions to do what they have traditionally and essentially done and should do—present a radical alternative to the good life for both people and planet. If the religions do their own centuries-old job, which no other field can or wants to do, of presenting wholesale alternatives to conventional worldviews of the “abundant life,” they will be neither comforting nor popular. But they might be right.

This particular essay is but one modest attempt to suggest a contribution from the religions, and especially from Christianity. Increasingly, the issue of how to live well has become one of *how to change from how we are living now to a different way*. As our crises worsen, more and more people are questioning the reigning anthropology of insatiable greed, and they are coming to the conclusion that the prospects of the consumer culture have been greatly overrated and that serious change at a fundamental level—of

who we think we are and what we must do—is necessary. Change at this level is incredibly difficult, and many people find it impossible. Yet it is precisely change at this fundamental level that most religions prescribe. Christians call it “conversion,” and it demands thinking and living differently than conventional society recommends.

Hence, my modest contribution to this task as a Christian theologian will be as follows: Some reflections on why I have undertaken to look at conversion (chapter 1); a study of our present context that demonstrates why such radical change is necessary (chapter 2); the stories of some saints—John Woolman, Simone Weil, and Dorothy Day—whose lives express deep change (chapter 3); an analysis of the process of conversion to the kenotic way of life emerging from these stories (chapters 4 and 5); a depiction of kenosis in areas ranging from the arts to parenting, and in most religions (chapter 6); a summary of kenotic theology and how it affects the Christian understanding of God, Christ, and human life (chapter 7); and a consideration of the special role of middle-class, well-off people for deep, kenotic change (chapter 8).

Throughout the entire book, we will follow a central theme: a fourfold process of conversion our saints’ lives and writings express. Succinctly, the argument of the book is as follows.

Given our twin planetary crises of climate change and unjust financial distribution, what is needed is not more information but the will to move from belief to action, from denial to profound change at both personal and public levels. The religions of the world, countercultural in their assumption that “to find one’s life, one must lose it,” are key players in understanding and promoting a movement from a model of God, the world, and the self focused on individualistic, market-oriented accumulation by a few, to a model that sees self and planetary flourishing as interdependent. We live *within* our models and make decisions on the basis of them. “Be careful how you interpret the world. It *is* like that.”⁹ The interdependent model demands self-emptying (Christian kenosis) or “great compassion” (Buddhism) on the part of the well-to-do, so that all human beings and other life-forms may live just, sustainable lives. One small but necessary task is to present an in-depth analysis of the process by which such a change can occur. This essay, then, is addressed to the so-called first world, its values and followers, wherever they might live: The fourfold process from belief to action contains the following steps.

1. *Experiences of “voluntary poverty”* to shock middle-class people out of the conventional model of self-fulfillment through possessions and prestige, and into a model of self-emptying, as a pathway for personal and planetary well-being. It can become a form of “wild space,” a space where one is available for deep change from the conventional model of living to another one.

2. *The focus of one's attention to the needs of others*, especially their most physical, basic needs, such as food. This attention changes one's vision from seeing all others as objects for supporting one's own ego to seeing them as subjects in their own right who deserve the basic necessities for flourishing. We see everything in the world as interdependent.
3. *The gradual development of a "universal self,"* as the line constituting one's concern (compassion or empathy) moves from its narrow focus on the ego (and one's nearest and dearest) to reach out further and further until there is no line left: even a caterpillar counts. This journey, rather than diminishing the self, increases its delight, but at the cost of one's old, egoistic model.
4. *The new model of the universal self operates at both the personal and public levels*, for instance in the planetary house rules: (1) take only your share; (2) clean up after yourself; (3) keep the house in good repair for those who will use it after you.

Thus, while other fields contributing to solving our planetary crises often end their studies with the despairing remark, "Of course, it is a spiritual, an ethical problem," the religions of the world should offer their distinctive answer: "Yes, it is, and let us look at the process of change from belief to action."

This is what we are attempting in the following pages. As we enter this project, I need to set its parameters: what it *does not* plan to cover and what it *does*. First, as the choice of the three saints discussed in chapter 3 shows, I make no attempt to be comprehensive or even representative. One could choose many others, but I have spent a lifetime on these figures. Hence, I have come to know and love them. I have learned much of what I say about them through long reflection. With this limitation in mind, I will focus not on all aspects of their contributions, but specifically on their insights into the process of conversion from belief to action. A second qualification is the limitation of the chosen saints to Western, middle-class people like myself and like the audience addressed in this project. Third, while I make reference to other religions, especially to Buddhism, I have limited this study to Christianity, the tradition from which I come and that I know best. Nevertheless, as will become clear as the argument progresses, the process described here is not "Christian" or even "religious" in the narrow sense. What emerges is an understanding of humanity's place in the scheme of things; therefore, I focus not on "belief in Jesus" or "belief in God" per se so much as the theme, common in most religions, that loving one's neighbor is tantamount to loving God. If the "neighbor" is understood to include all living creatures, and indeed the planet itself, then what matters is not a discrete belief in a God (or "gods") so much as an understanding of the self—its duty and its delight—as radically inclusive love. The implication is that one should focus on what one sees (the visible

neighbor) rather than on what one does not see (the invisible God). Thus, if one understands God to be not a “substance” but the active, creative love at work in the entire universe, then “loving God” is not something in addition to loving the world, but is rather the acknowledgment that in loving the world, one is participating in the planetary process (which some identify as “God”) of self-emptying love at all levels. By understanding both “God” and the world in this way—that is, as radically kenotic—this essay can be read as both Christian *and* interfaith. Thus all can participate in the kenotic paradigm as a way of loving the neighbor, a process in which God’s own self may also be seen at work.

One must not be overly optimistic about such attempts—nothing any one of us does will solve the immense problems we face. But to do nothing is not permitted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the good folks at Fortress Press who have, as with my other books, offered expert advice for its publication. I am deeply grateful to people who have helped me with this book, especially Michael West, Janet Cawley, Janet Gear, Sharon Betcher, Sister Mary Aquin O’Neill, and the many students over the years who have taken my courses covering material in the book. I also wish to thank the Vancouver School of Theology where I wrote this book in my fine office overlooking the ocean and mountains.

NOTES

¹Gary Gardner, “Engaging Religions to Shape Worldviews,” *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability*, ed. Linda Starke and Lisa Mastny (London: Earthscan, 2010), 7.

²*Ibid.*, 3.

³“Cultures arise out of the complex interactions of many different elements of social behaviors and guide humans at an almost invisible level. They are . . . the sum total of all ‘social processes that make the artificial (or human constructed) seem natural” (*Ibid.*, 8).

⁴*Ibid.*, 3.

⁵*Ibid.*, 26.

⁶*Ibid.*, 28–29.

⁷*Ibid.*, 26–27.

⁸In a recent book, Gary Gardner speaks of “Progress as Bounded Creativity,” which commends the energy of the twentieth century that has created genuine progress for many. However, he notes that our human creativity during the last century was “like a river without banks, the flow of innovation impressive but unchanneled. One missing riverbank was ecological wisdom . . . which might have helped rich and poor alike build more dignified and fulfilling lives” (*Inspiring Progress: Religions’ Contributions to Sustainable Development* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2006], 3). In other words, restraint is not the opposite of energy and creativity, but its necessary partner in sustainable progress.

⁹Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (Cleveland: World, 1961), 211.