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Johnson, William Ted

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The Spiritual Lives of Great Environmentalists

William Ted Johnson

Scottsdale Public Library, Arizona, USA

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Spirituality and the environment are ever in the news and are frequent topics of scholarly research, especially when it comes to how they influence one another. From ancient civilizations to contemporary culture, people have viewed the intersection of the environment with their personal lives in spiritual terms. Environmentally inclined individuals certainly do not have the spiritual market cornered, however. From musicians to machines, the spiritual side of each has been presented (Kavanaugh, 1992; Kurzweil, 1999). Admittedly, both terms, "spiritual" and "environmentalist" are ambiguous. The context in which they are used is quite important.

Purpose, like context, is a critical consideration in the use of these terms. Faith, like fact, has been used to find truth. Science and religion both claim distinct advantages in their respective searches for truth. They have been allied as well as pitted against each other with varying levels of intensity and passion on their truth quests. Friend as well as foe, each frequently calls upon the other to validate their own worth in the search. Since Lynn White's 1967 article in *Science*, which called upon religion to solve environmental problems, scholars have debated the positive and negative impacts of religious views on the environment. Evan Berry (2003) has made a significant contribution to this discussion. His holistic approach strikes a much-needed balance in the debate and he points out the futility of finding fault rather than fostering mutual understanding.

It is hoped that the novel approach taken here to establish a relationship between spirituality and the environment, will make a significant contribution to the literature on the subject. History and opinion surveys, like those used by White (1967) and Berry (2003), respectively, have offered much food for thought on this complex issue. I propose a biographical approach, examining the spiritual underpinnings of those who have made significant contributions to conservation, preservation, or some sort of environmental issue (e.g. air or water quality improvement). The basis for this approach is that religious training, especially in one's youth, plays a vital role in the development of an individual's worldview, including one's attitude toward nature. Books and articles abound on the relationship between science and religion, but very few focus on the specialized matter of environmental issues or environmentalists.

Interestingly, White nominated a Christian historical figure, Saint Francis, as the patron saint of ecologists, in spite of the fact that he blamed historical

Christianity for the environmental ills of the world up to that time. Since the concept of an "environmentalist" or "environmental activist" is rather recent, I will limit this biographical survey to people of the 20 th century. Char Miller's book on Gifford Pinchot is consistent with this time frame. Every attempt will be made to include any and all faith systems. No claim will be made here as to the relative friendship with environmental causes by any religious belief system.

Feel free to suggest the names of individuals to be presented in future essays. Three to five brief biographical sketches will be presented in each issue of the *Electronic Green Journal* beginning with the next issue. In this issue, I will highlight the spiritual life of Saint Francis to set the stage for the significant environmentalists of the 20 th century.

Saint Francis

Fully embracing Catholic dogma, the spiritual basis for Francis (Giovanni di Bernardone) is well expressed in his *Canticle of the Sun* (Canticle of the Creatures) and his hymn, All Creatures of Our God and King. Known for joyful singing, Francis spoke of praising Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He was part of a mighty chorus, including all creation elements - plants, animals, water, fire, stars, earth, and death. None of these elements were worthy of praise as all pointed to the one and only Creator of heaven and earth, who made it possible to be known through His creation and through His word.

Francis was not a gifted student as a child and he received no university or seminary degree. His conversion experience came in the form of dreams where God commissioned him to rebuild His church and care for the poor. He took these "marching orders" seriously, and committed himself to following Christ in reality and truth as revealed in the Scriptures. This involved preaching, sharing the Gospel of repentance, caring for the hurting, and identifying with the lowest layers of society. Consequently, he renounced all earthly ties and possessions, which freed him to fully identify with the sufferings of his Christ. Like Christ, Francis was not aloof from the world, but fully embraced what it meant to be a part of it. This contact with the real world played an instrumental role in his care for all creation, from the worm to the most majestic mountain.

Like most heroes, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction when it comes to fully understanding the many legends permeating their history. It is not my purpose to investigate the veracity of the nature legends surrounding Saint Francis, but it is interesting to consider what influences fostered his love of nature and whether or not his views were an isolated instance or part of a

long standing tradition. Like so many that had gone before him, Francis discovered that knowing God well led to obeying God fully, which, fostered a deep, abiding love for what God had made. This, in turn, fostered an ever deeper relationship with the Creator of the universe. Francis found that being rightly related to God meant he was rightly related to all that God had made. By loving God, Francis found it natural to love those things that God loved, His creation. Living a life unencumbered by material possessions facilitated a consistent and pure walk with God, relatively free from the distractions brought on by possessions.

As made clear by Armstrong (1973), only the weakest scholarship would suggest that Francis was unusual in his care for creation. The exact opposite was the case, involving a well established and broad basis for creation care among those whose Christian faith and practice were closely aligned with the teachings of the Bible. Francis demonstrated that a pure expression of the Christian faith resulted in a high degree of creation care, suggesting that a lack of creation care may be associated with an impure form of Christianity, one influenced more by the cultural practices of the day than the core beliefs of the faith as presented in Scripture.

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William Ted Johnson <TJohnson@ci.scottsdale.az.us>, Senior Coordinator, Scottsdale Public Library - Palomino Branch, 12575 E. Via Linda Suite 102, Scottsdale, AZ 85259-4310 USA. TEL: 1-480-312-6110. Fax: 1-480-312-6120.