

Religions Join the Crusade to Save Earth From Pollution

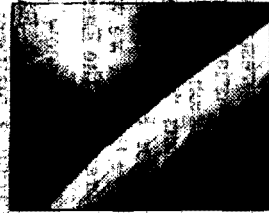
By RUSSELL CHANDLER
TIMES RELIGION WRITER

Organized religion has joined the front lines of the environmental movement, providing a potential army of hundreds of thousands of activists for the fight to save the Earth.

Until recently, most religious groups had concentrated more on social issues such as racial discrimination and poverty than on the deteriorating environment. But that has changed with the growing realization that the environmental crisis has put human survival on the line and that ecology is a spiritual issue.

One measure of how deep the commitment by religious groups will be evident on Sunday, when Earth Day 1990 is observed in churches and synagogues throughout the world.

Beginning at dawn, church bells will



EARTH DAY
1970-1990

*The Environmental
Movement Comes
of Age*

■ One in a series

peal for the health of the planet. Sermons will stress the urgency of responsible environmental practices and the faithful will be asked to sign conservation declarations, pledging to recycle products, save energy and vote for ecology-minded public officials.

Yet even more dramatic than the greening of religion is the way conservationists and environmentally conscious politicians have embraced the spiritual side of ecology. A vision of the sacred is critical to

safeguarding the planet, many of them say, sounding more like preachers and theologians than conservationists or legislators.

"There's something different going on," said Jan Hartke, religious liaison for Earth Day '90. "Corporate, scientific and political leadership is feeling that the faith communities are needed very badly in this awakening of the spiritual and sacred dimension of environmental concern."

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency chief William K. Reilly recently declared that "natural systems have an intrinsic value—a spiritual worth—that must be respected for its own sake." A new "spiritual vision" of conservation and "an ethic of environmental stewardship grounded in religious faith . . . could be a powerful force," he told a gathering of Catholic leaders in Washington.

Meeting this January in Moscow, the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamen-

tary Leaders on Human Survival issued a declaration that called for a "spiritually wise, technologically sound, ethical and far-sighted stewardship of the planet." The appeal for joint efforts between religious leaders and scientists came from a group of international scientists invited by the event's organizer, U.S. astrophysicist Carl Sagan.

The scientists implored religious leaders to promote the idea of Earth as "sacred," asserting that "what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect."

Or, as Noel Brown, director of the United Nations environment program, put it: "You cannot serve God and mangle his creation."

Paying tribute to Earth Day, the Rev. Jesse Jackson preached this month to a black congregation in Richmond, Calif.,



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which is fighting toxic air emissions from a nearby hazardous-waste incinerator.

"To destroy the Earth is not just illegal," Jackson fumed. "It's immoral, a sin, a transgression against the creator."

That desecrating the environment is "a sin against nature herself" is a concept that "people across the board are beginning to realize," noted Hartke, who is also a leader of a newly formed, Washington-based interfaith organization called the North American Conference on Religion and Ecology. The group is planning an international conference next month designed to link environmentalists in the religious community with activist scientists, union members, business leaders and government agencies.

Meanwhile, "religious resource packets," designed to help churches hold special Earth Day services and incorporate an environmental message into their programs, are "catching on like wildfire," said Diane E. Sherwood, communications director for the conference on religion and ecology. More than 5,000 packets, at a cost of \$15 each, had been sent out by Wednesday, she said.

Many requests come from individuals, rather than church officials, according to conference staffer Laura Green.

"A woman called the other day from Huntington Beach," she said. "The recent oil spill had sickened her and she wanted to get involved and get her church involved, too."

The theme of environmental quality is being talked about everywhere from church socials to the highest levels of church leadership.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will vote in June, for instance, on a major report that addresses the dual questions of the abuse of nature and injustice to people. The 37-page paper, "Restoring Creation," will ask members to incorporate eco-justice concerns into their worship, education programs and community outreach.

United Methodist bishops have been asked to issue pastoral letters seeking the commitment of their constituents for "study and action regarding the stewardship of God's creation." And the Eastern Orthodox churches have established a new feast, Environmental Protection Day, to be celebrated every

Sept. 1.

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America has produced a television program on faith and the environment to be aired April 29 on NBC. In addition, the Reconstructionist and Reform wings of Judaism have jointly developed environmental resources including a "Greening the Holydays" packet, children's programs, liturgical materials and tree-planting ceremonies.

One of the most visible expressions of grass-roots religious interest in ecology occurred on Ash Wednesday when 4,000 Roman Catholics published a "pastoral letter" in the New York Times. Calling for church reforms, the advertisement cited the "threatened environment" as the leading topic for discussion.

Pope John Paul II himself had opened up the subject when he departed from his usual New Year's Day peace message. In a ringing call for greater awareness of environmental concerns, he equated ecological destruction with a "genuine contempt" for humanity.

The Dalai Lama, the Nobel Prize-winning Tibetan Buddhist leader, said in an Earth Day statement that "even with the selfish motive of our own survival . . . we have the responsibility, as well as the capability, to protect the Earth."

And, gathering last month in Seoul, South Korea, hundreds of church delegates from around the world attended a World Council of Churches consultation which concluded that churches should recognize creation as a sacrament and question excessive consumption. The delegates added that, in an effort to reduce the greenhouse effect, a levy should be imposed on the use of fossil energies in industrial countries.

But it was not long ago that environmentalists and religious leaders tended to look upon one another with antagonism. Hints of suspicion still linger.

In 1967, three years before the first Earth Day, historian Lynn White wrote a well-publicized article in *Science* magazine attacking the religious community for an interpretation of the Bible that seemed to give humans license to exploit nature. That view is based on the passage in Genesis 1:28 that speaks of man's superiority and gives a mandate to subdue and

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control nature.

But in recent years, theologians as well as parishioners have reassessed this "dominion theology." The passage emphasized now is Genesis 2:15, which says that God put humans in the garden to cultivate and care for it.

"I think there is a broad consensus in American Christianity that stewardship for the Earth is one of our Christian values," noted James M. Cubie, chief counsel to the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry.

"While the environment is not to be worshiped, nor environmentalism to be made into a religion," Los Angeles Episcopal Bishop Frederick Borsch noted, "the created world is a source of revelation to be revered, respected and fiercely protected."

Still, some religious activists fear that a major emphasis on the environment will shift attention away from crucial social justice issues such as homelessness, health care and racism.

On the opposite end, some conservative Christians are afraid that Earth Day has been co-opted by New Age environmentalists who worship the Earth instead of its creator and de-emphasize the issues of redemption from sin and the need for personal salvation.

These New Age ecologists, warns Berit Kjos in the April issue of *Focus on the Family*, a magazine published by Christian psychologist James Dobson, "believe in the living, evolving, self-regulating Earth. Some call her 'Gaia,' after the Greek earth goddess. Gaia can only be healed if humans will listen to her 'voice' and connect with her spirit."

But Dean Ohlman, president of the newly formed Christian Nature Foundation in Fullerton, tells conservative Christians "to be there with bells on" for Earth Day. "If we truly believe the God we worship was the creator of the Earth,"

he said, "we need to show our concern . . . even though Earth Day will provide a platform for [those] who hold beliefs contrary to ours."

In any case, environmentalism—with religious overtones—will likely remain a major trend of the decade.

"The religious communities will take on their own environmental causes during the 1990s," predicts Christina L. Desser, executive director of Earth Day 1990. "But we think that [because of the Earth Day campaign] social institutions like the churches and synagogues will have integrated conservation tenets into their day-to-day activities as well as their leadership style."