An Interfaith Dialogue on a Shared Response to the Environmental Crisis

Video Conference organized by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, the United States Embassy to the Holy See, and the World Faiths Development Dialogue

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Context

Preservation and care for the natural environment hold high significance for the world’s major faith traditions. Both through theological teachings and service, faith communities play important roles in shaping attitudes and action towards environmental protection and policy. An understanding of the theological underpinnings inspiring and driving care for the environment, and of how, in practice, faith communities mobilize around sustainable development, can help inform effective environmental policies, at the local, national, and international levels.

On Wednesday, November 16, at the initiative of the United States Embassy to the Holy See, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and World Faiths Development Dialogue, and the Embassy met via live video feed for a conference that explored the intersections of religion and the environment, with a focus on implications for policy. The event falls under a broader State Department initiative to engage religion in policy dialogue. It brought together a group of environmental experts representing the Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim faith traditions, and representatives from the US government and the World Bank, along with international and inter-religious graduate students from three Pontifical universities in Rome, and Georgetown and other universities in the United States. Five panel presentations and a student led dialogue explored how different faith traditions view the environment, help to shape social action, and engage in the policy process more broadly.

The exchanges highlighted how much is at stake, for young and old alike, on environment and climate change issues. Spiritual wisdom is a rich source to draw on, as is the mobilizing power of communities. Participants came to the discussion with this understanding but came away in some awe of the richness of ideas that could emerge in two short hours and a gnawing sense that there is far more to do, together.

Panel Presentations

Ambassador Ertharin Cousin opened the discussion, highlighting the numerous efforts by various United Nations agencies aimed at reducing food insecurity. Food insecurity is tied to environmental sustainability through
connections to water shortages and land use. Efforts to ensure sustainable reforms require strategic partnerships, engaging government agencies, international agreements, and faith communities. Faith-inspired organizations play critical roles in mobilizing people at the local level and creating linkages between the “grassroots” (local communities) and the “grass tops” (policymakers/scholars).

Population growth will increase pressure on the international community to address proactively the environmental triggers of food insecurity. By 2050, estimates forecast a global population of 9 billion, up from 7 billion today. With nearly 925 million people categorized as “food insecure” today, the challenges can only increase as time progresses. It is essential that we begin concerted efforts to ensure changes now.

There are complex tensions between developed and developing countries in addressing environmental priorities and concerns, and these demand multilateral negotiation and response. Unfortunately, most efforts spearheaded by international organizations have resulted in statements and legislation that lack the “teeth” to enforce change. Faith leadership is crucial, therefore, to help to reinforce the public will, to ensure governmental accountability and meaningful action. The critics of change, unfortunately, have voices that are often much louder than those of the advocates. As a product of the Civil Rights Movement, I understand that the challenges can seem impenetrable but we also know that change can come. We can all agree here that faith leadership has an important role to play. The United States is committed to working with different faiths. The task set before us is how to translate these commitments into action.

Kanta K. Rigaud spoke to the technical and political dimensions of action on climate change and environmental protection, highlighting the experience and role of the World Bank. Climate change will affect the entire global population, but it is the poorest citizens who are most vulnerable; they lack the capacity and resources to cope with environmental changes. Echoing Ambassador Cousin, she stressed that international organizations need to work as partners with grassroots organizations; neglecting this dimension will undermine present and future efforts. The hope comes from increasing awareness that the common ground to build upon is substantial.

Specifically, there are three main pillars of congruence on environmental issues:

1. The environment as the foundation upon which all people rely (it is relevant for all policies and institutions).
2. The importance of economic aspects of environmental issues (use the tools of economic understanding and policy wisely).
3. The concept of environmental stewardship, and the social component of the environmental challenge (highlighting accountability and responsibility).

The vulnerability of the poor is what demands above all stronger partnerships. The World Bank works both as an “idea bank,” and as a development bank, to create partnerships with grassroots actors. The World Bank stresses “Ecosystem Adaptation” – working with communities to harness resources for societal good. Faith-inspired organizations play particularly important roles in the “social dimension of climate resilience,” through social safety nets and protection measures to mitigate the impact of climate change on poor communities. Development agencies like the World Bank are looking for ways to make such approaches autonomous and scalable. Faith-inspired organizations and their networks offer tremendous opportunities. They offer an entry point to mobilize public support on environmental issues.

Rabbi Warren Stone came with a shofar and some beads from Kiribati, and spoke to many years of engagement with international institutions, including the World Bank. Faith worlds must, he argued, be at the center of environmental policy and action. He framed his presentation through three main themes: (1) Jewish religious roots of environmental activism; (2) The moral basis for activism; (3) Faith-based advocacy.

1. The Jewish religious roots of environmental activism: Environmentalism is deeply enshrined in Jewish teachings and thought. People and their environments both form part of the divine creation. The world is calling us to do our part to protect God’s creation. Jewish Holy Scripture tells is that “God created the heavens and the earth and saw that it was good.” In talking to Adam, God says, “This is yours. If you ruin it, there is no one else after you.” The concept of the Sabbath encourages moderation in consumption, teaching that all in the environment are connected to the earth, and as people have rights, so does the earth as God’s creation. The book of Deuteronomy tells us that in times of war, one
shall not destroy the fruit trees, as they represent future generations; in the book of Genesis, there is debate over water supplies, and the consequences of causing them harm. Neglecting God’s teaching will cause the land to suffer, and we already see the results of that today. Faith traditions provide a scriptural foundation to act on behalf of the earth.

(2) The moral basis for activism: Rates of global consumption are inequitable. Developed nations account for 85 percent of the world’s consumption, and as is suggested by Jared Diamond - we have reached a point beyond the “consumption tipping point”; we can already see the effects of overfishing, water and food shortages, and unsustainable oil consumption, particularly evident amongst in the most vulnerable communities.

To survive as a people, and as a planet, we must change our behaviors, attitudes, and action; these changes can divided into two categories: (1) Mitigation (curbing CO₂ emissions) (2) Adaptation (preparing to mitigate the impending effects of climate change). One example of mitigation is in Kirabati, an island nation already witnessing the effects of climate change through the salination of its ground water, resulting in the death of its fruit trees. The Kirabatan government was among the most active in advocating for legislation to prevent and reverse climate change at the global meetings in Copenhagen. The beads he carries everywhere were given to him with the message: “don’t forget us”, as the islands struggle to survive in the face of the challenge to its very water sources. The government of Bangladesh, another country predicted to be among the first to see the impact of climate change, is also active in lobbying the international community for action. However, today’s global conversations are more in the realm of adaptation, less on mitigation.

(3) Faith-based advocacy: Religious communities know no national boundaries and see all people as God’s children. In a world where matters of faith frequently divide us, we can unite in our shared dependence on and responsibility for protecting the earth. A collective awakening is needed; treaties without social activism are not enough. In the case of civil rights, for example, legislation only happened following a cultural shift. Similarly, a grassroots cultural shift toward economic sustainability is required to address environmental challenges. The ideas of consumerism and commercialism are beginning to be challenged, and the faith-inspired community has wisdom to share in its calls for social justice, altruism, respect for creation, and protection of the most vulnerable.

To increase their effectiveness, faith-based advocacy needs to: (1) connect teachings to action (2) start locally and extend globally (3) start now. Practical steps at the local level include: “greening” religious institutions, schools, and communities with solar panels, gardens, and sustainable building materials; prayers for the earth; learning about environmental actions of local faith institutions; and lobbying local universities to “go green” on their campuses. Nationally and internationally, individuals can engage religious and non-religious groups to lobby governing institutions to act, and environmental activists to connect faith to advocacy. Using commonly understood language that encourages broad based environmental advocacy is essential.

Sister Ilia Delio highlighted the powerful Christian witness to the imperative for care of the earth, drawing on the example of St. Francis. Care for the poor and for nature are so closely linked that solutions to the challenges facing both are inseparable. She sees it as amazing, and tragic, that so much is known about the environmental challenges we face, yet so little progress has been made on the issues. Lynn White’s famous 1967 paper entitled, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” argues that the source of our environmental problems is religious in nature. What is needed is a reorientation of our religious core to move us towards a sustainable future. White places blame on the Christian community in particular, for emphasizing the “other-worldly” dimension of faith through concepts of personal salvation and sin at the expense of the world we currently inhabit.

The Christian tradition contains teachings and principles to support the environmentalist cause. Christianity is a creation-centered religion - God is love, and from Him flows creation. The earth is holy, and there is a holiness and dignity to everything that exists; there is a unity in love through Christ, which implies a kinship in creation. Humans are not asked simply to have dominion over creation, but to care for the earth as family.

Francis of Assisi was a strong advocate for protection of the environment, encouraging a turning of spiritual attention toward “this world.” Francis emphasized God’s becoming of flesh in the leper; we must thus conclude that there can be no care for the earth without care for the poor. Unless we can meet God through the poorest of persons, we cannot care for creation. The reality of sin is a disconnect with God, and with the Earth. Francis became a “bio-centric
person,” building a close relationship with God’s creations through self-knowledge, attained by solitude, prayer, and poverty of being, bringing him to see the world as imbued with God.

Today we are losing sight of the big picture, of the relationship between environment preservation and God. Greater self-knowledge leads to an understanding of ourselves as one with God’s creation. As Thomas Berry stated: “The earth is primary, and we are from the earth.” Human beings are not as self-sufficient as we would like to imagine. We are far more dependent on the earth than the earth is dependent on us. Poverty of being means that we are to live in the world without possessing material things. The attitude of possession and consumption will lead us to an unsustainable future.

The Christian tradition, and in particular the life of Francis, tell us that we will not change without the will to change. Today’s society lacks both a personal and a corporate will to change. It will take extreme circumstances to move into a new stance of existence. We need a new “will to love” — one of sacrifice for the common good. The technological age presents a competing myth to ecology, promising us a better, post-biological world. Unless there is a radical choice for a religious centeredness in our lives, future prospects for our environment are not promising.

**Imam Yahya Hendi** stated boldly that one cannot be a Muslim without being fundamentally an environmentalist, and at that, a fundamentalist environmentalist. One must live in constant awareness that he or she is a part of God’s creation — the environment. When one does not act for, and with the environment, one is not a Muslim. “I challenge Muslims everywhere to become aware of the needs of their environment, and of the earth, of which they are a part.”

Islam teaches that we are created from the earth, and this is very similar to the teachings of Judaism and Christianity. It says that we are created from dust, and that we will return to dust upon our death. “When I am asked about my citizenship, I reply that I am ‘dustonian,’ as a reminder of my theology, politics, sociology, morality, and ethics. We are all part of the same environment; there is not ‘another’ - the tree is our brother, and the water and cat are our sisters. Dust,” as a part of God’s creation, is as important in the eyes of the divine as are human beings.”

The Koran declares that everything in the universe prays in a different way; even if one does not understand how they pray, they do pray. On the morning of the 27th night of Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to look at the sun, the horizon, the moon, and the stars, and to remember how they all share with us in prayer.

Muslims are told that on the Day of Judgment, we will be assembled with those that we love; the cat you cared for, and the tree you watered, will both be with you in Heaven. Everything in creation that witnessed your worship will be your witness in the divine court. We are living a day-to-day and minute-to-minute exchange of experiences with the environment. It may in fact be that we are more dependent on the earth and the earth is on us.

The Koran tells us three times, that we are to maintain, protect, and cater to the needs of the earth. Five times a day when Muslims pray, they put their foreheads on the floor, linking them with the earth. In the Shia tradition, disciples rest their head on a stone as they pray, as a reminder that they come from dust, and to dust they shall be returned.

Turning to the fast of the month of Ramadan, “if only 1 billion Muslims were to fast every day during the month, and use only one gallon of water a day, we would save 1.5 billion gallons of water daily. Imagine how much water we can save during the entire month of Ramadan!” During Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca), Muslims are told that for nine days they cannot do harm to any animal around them, even a snake that is about to bite, or the mosquito on your skin; you let the snake pass, and let the mosquito fly away. You must learn to make peace with your enemy. Muslims must not forget these lessons, living sustainably, and educating others.

In Islamic legal ethics, there are three important principles regarding the environment:

1. **Moderation in production**
2. **Moderation in distribution and marketing**
3. **Conservation in consumption.**
The Prophet Mohamed teaches us to fill our stomachs with 1/3 food, 1/3 water and 1/3 air; in other words, to think twice about what we eat and what we consume.

The solutions to preserving our environment are threefold: First, we must engage people with our theology to preserve our environment; the clergy (women and men) should be at the forefront, leading with a moral voice. Second, we must teach ethics in our schools (public and private schools, and colleges as well). Third, we need to harness a general political will. In the Koran, there is a verse that God does not change what is within the people, unless they are willing to change what is within themselves. We are thus the solution. God is not going to send agents to the earth to help us, we need to have the will to change and to move forward.

**Key Themes of Discussion**

A student-led discussion followed, focusing on: the strengths and weaknesses of faith-inspired environmental action, the importance of grassroots action, the state of faith-inspired environmentalism, the roles of technology and education, the role of youth, and improved coordination and cooperation between faith-inspired groups and the environmentalist community at large. Themes and areas of debate centered on six points and sets of questions:

**Social Justice versus Environmentalism:** Are the two concepts at odds? Does an environmentalist agenda mean that economic growth in developing regions must be slowed? There is a moral imperative in the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths to protect the earth, but there is also the argument that a certain amount of exploitation is necessary for economic development, especially in the developing world. Is our duty to the poor, or to the earth, or are they fulfilling one also fulfilling the other?

Sister Delio stressed that the tension between social justice and environmentalism is not an either/or decision. She suggested that we must reframe the issue, focusing on self-perceptions of our relationship to the human community at large, and the economic choices to enable that community to grow sustainably. Money and resources are often at the heart of the debate; there is a need for increased dialogue on morals and ethics in the policy making process. Students agreed that feeding the poor and protecting the environment are not mutually exclusive, and that by taking care of the environment we are also taking care of people; there will not be future generations of people if the environment is too degraded to sustain them. Imam Hendi emphasized that we can indeed accomplish both goals simultaneously; “If we act with moderation and do not consume more than we need, we both reduce our environmental impact, and have more resources to give to the poor.”

Ms. Rigaud spoke of a Muslim community in the highlands of Yemen, particularly susceptible to variable rainfall. Traditional agricultural practice there is centered on qat trees (to produce the leaves which are chewed). Qat cultivation is debilitating in both the environmental and the social sense (creating dependency on the leaves). Recently, the community decided to uproot the qat trees in favor of coffee and honeybees, both more sustainable for local development, and for the environment. The faith community led in that decision to change.

A student in Rome stressed that to enact real change on the individual and global levels, there must a fundamental respect for the preciousness and sanctity of life itself, and thus of all creation. One cannot give what one does not have, so without a grounding in love and respect, and thus in God, our actions and words will have no meaning. “We need the audacity to grow closer to God in a secular world that promises comfort in consumption.”

**Environmentalism in Different Faith Traditions:** A student emphasized the dearth in understanding about common faith callings for environmentalism across traditions; within the Catholic Church, the student saw a cultural shift towards environmentalism, citing organic/sustainable farming as an example.

Rabbi Stone described how within his local faith community, and the larger Jewish community as a whole, congregations have been ‘greening’ for nearly 20 years; programs include environmental sermons, installing solar panels on synagogue roofs, and planting community gardens. Attitude change begins by fostering attitudes of environmental awareness at the community level. On a larger scale, he cited national resolutions on climate to energy to water and food issues; there is a need now to work with other faith communities locally, nationally, and internationally.
One participant described the work of “Green Muslims,” a group that focuses on promoting environmental stewardship among the Muslim community. The group is new, and has thus far focused on a “no waste “campaign, and reduced consumption, along with volunteerism at urban farms. They are exploring avenues to expand into interfaith collaborations. Imam Hendi noted that the Muslim community has only begun its active engagement with environmental activism in the last ten years; mosques are now constructed with the environment in mind, and international movements such as the “The Green Hajj.” are gaining traction.

A student in Rome emphasized Benedictine (Catholic) values as the foundation for an environmental ethic based on moderation. Community actions, he noted, have lead to practical steps at the individual level, such as stewardship at the family table through sustainable food sources, and sustainable community gardening initiatives. The benefit is not only for the Benedictines, but for the community as a whole.

**Role of Technology:** Student participants observed that technology had both positive and negative potential. On the positive side are efforts to empower the poor, promote economic development, and provide access to information. On the negative sides, technology can foster escapism among youth, causing people to disconnect from their surroundings.

Ms. Rigaud emphasized that from the view of the World Bank, technology can be used to “better understand and communicate the future impact of climate change.” Acknowledging limits and constraints, technology can be an important tool to in promoting awareness; “people have to understand the whole pattern of climate change if they are going to build their resilience.”

Rabbi Stone emphasized that we are experiencing a paradigm shift,” and that starting with ourselves, technology can be an instrument for change. Blogs are one tool, and he urged faith communities to be more public with their views on the environment.

**Secular/Faith-Inspired Cooperation, Realities, and Challenges:** Lack of a common language and vocabulary was cited as a barrier to effective cooperation. Do terms like “creation care” (commonly used within faith communities) serve to separate faith-inspired environmental activists from secular ones? Rabbi Stone noted that creation care came into usage for its preference among the fast growing American evangelical Christian community. Some separation of the faith/secular realms may be useful or necessary in advocacy; many people have written off environmentalists, but they have not written off people of faith.

Katherine Marshall noted a concern that some agencies view or are seen to perceive faith-inspired organizations through an “instrumentalist” lens: “how can we use them to do what we want?”. This raises hackles, understandably. What is needed is a focus on more genuine partnerships, that draw on the deep wisdom within faith traditions to strengthen collaborations. Imam Hendi described his position as president of Clergy Beyond Borders, a traveling caravan of rabbis, priests, ministers, and imams that tours the United States encouraging a common environmentalism.

**Increased Understanding through Dialogue:** More dialogue is needed: there is never enough. It was striking that the at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Melbourne Australia in 2009 there were three program streams; (1) Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals; (2) the Environment; (3) Conflict and Peace. Yet, Katherine Marshall stressed, they rarely met. The three groups shared similar values, but underneath were some real tensions that were not addressed. We need to build more platforms for dialogue to help bridge that divide.

One student, who identified as not religious, argued that unless we change our model of consumption, we will be unable to fully address environmental concerns for global warming. Religious communities have much to offer in this regard, as nearly all teach that true happiness and purpose do not come from accumulating material wealth. How do we promote sustainable development in the ‘East,’ when development in the ‘West’ was possible because of access to cheap fuel and poor labor practices?” Faith-communities can be instrumental to in forging constructive dialogue, overcoming sensitivities and perceptions of “western” double standards towards the developing world.

**Education and Youth:** Dr. Marian Díaz spoke as a theologian but even more as a parent. Seven years ago, she described the environment to her children as “the issue of your generation;” a few short months later, she corrected herself. As a parent and a teacher, she must act as if the environment “is the issue for our generation.” Education and information give us the tools to act holistically and not to isolate ourselves from those that have different approaches.
Rabbi Stone has hope in the next generation. He sees a “transformation” in attitudes regarding environmental sustainability in today’s youth, demonstrated on many college campuses throughout the country. “The reason we have not seen a larger legislative and policy-centered effort is because the older generation doesn’t get it.” With patience, we will see change, starting from the community level upward.

Sister Delio argued that we need a holistic approach to environmentalism, but our education system does not foster connectivity; rather it divides the world into distinct disciplines. From a young age, children are taught to pursue a specific field for work, and tend not to venture far outside of that field. “We do not educate in an integrative way, and so we are not taught to think integratively. Unless we change the way we think, we will not be able to change the way we act.”

A student in Rome suggested a five-point strategy to preserve the environment, asking which approach is the most appropriate? (1) Innovation: alternative energy sources; (2) Legislation: changing government policies; (3) Persuasion: ability to create cultural change; (4) Direct action: cleaning up beaches and planting trees; (5) Education: going to schools and educating students. Each option has shortcomings and challenges, and that change is a gradual process. Innovation is a slow process; there is little political will to enact meaningful legislation; direct action must be on a massive scale to engender meaningful change; and education campaigns are not always successful, noting the ‘war on drugs’ as one example.

Next steps: The richness of insights emerging from the discussion prompted calls for follow up. What we need to progress is engagement and action, and the moral and spiritual dimensions of challenges that emerged have a largely untapped power to move and to inspire. An online network, all agreed, can help to spread the message and mobilize support, particularly on university campuses. A Facebook group beginning among meeting participants to sustain the network is a concrete starting point. Further meetings and similar interreligious engagements are both needed, the group agreed, to harness the momentum of present initiatives.