

Creativity, Not Sacrifice

Bernadette J. Brooten

In *Portfolios of the Poor: How the World's Poor Live on \$2 a Day*, Daryl Collins, Jonathan Morduch, Stuart Rutherford, and Orlanda Ruthven chronicle how extremely impoverished persons in Bangladesh, India, and South Africa strategize to save and borrow the money and other resources that enable them to survive.¹ The savvy of such persons challenges anyone who cannot imagine how one could live on such a small income. These research subjects exemplify the creativity and ingenuity that can inspire a shift in the framework for thinking about individual human responsibility for the environment. Far from romanticizing these persons' lives, the authors seek to understand them so as to develop international policies to reduce their poverty. But impoverished persons' resilience and intelligence demonstrate to the world that one can save far more than most people in the United States would ever think possible. For me, they exemplify the nearly limitless possibilities of human creativity. Rather than starting with the affluent and asking what sacrifices one can reasonably ask the affluent to make, if we start with the poor, our own imagination about what is possible is expanded.

Although nearly not as challenging as envisioning ourselves living on \$2 per day, imagining how each of us can live within a sustainable Ecological Footprint is daunting. For example, I live in a house of 1500 square feet, but if I were to live so that everyone on the planet could live sustainably, fourteen people should be living in my house with me. Against the backdrop of 1500 square feet, my many efforts at recycling and conservation are clearly inadequate, but calculating my Ecological Footprint gave me a realistic sense of where I should aim to be.²

Religious communities have begun to take on climate change, biodiversity, and care for the planet as religious and ethical issues. Jews and Christians have worked at rethinking how they have interpreted the verse in Genesis 1:28: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" They have recognized the harm in viewing humans as masters of the earth and have sought to reconceptualize the relationship as one of caring for God's creation. Indeed, non-religious biologist E. O. Wilson sought to find

¹ Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

² Bill Rees and Matthis Wackernagel first developed the methods for measuring an Ecological Footprint. Jim Merkel, *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 2003), provides detailed instructions on how to calculate one. On the method, see Matthis Wackernagel, "Ecological Footprint," *The Encyclopedia of Earth*, http://www.eoearth.org/article/Ecological_footprint (accessed February 26, 2010); and Bonneville Environmental Foundation's instructions for calculating a carbon footprint, <http://www.b-e-f.org/carbon/> (accessed February 26, 2010).

common ground with religious people in his book, *Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*.³

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation includes eleven religions (Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Shintoism and Sikhism), leaders of which met on the eve of the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen to make religious communities themselves more sustainable. What is most striking about this initiative is that, rather than calling upon state actors to make changes in line with religious values, these religious communities are transforming themselves. In other words, they are starting from a standpoint of abundance, offering to give what they can, rather than calling upon others to sacrifice. In China, Daoists are installing solar panels on their temples. Muslims have committed to transform ten Muslim cities, including Medina, into green city models. Churches in South India, Cameroon, Ghana, and Tanzania are planting millions of trees. Jewish synagogues are partnering with organic farmers to support the farmers who supply fresh organic produce to synagogue members.⁴ Internal change can have a significant impact, because religious communities worldwide own seven or eight percent of the world's habitable land surface, as well as over five percent of the forests.⁵ The call to manage the investments held by religious communities in ways that benefit the environment also promises to effect change. Living sustainably accords with such spiritual traditions as respect for sacred spaces, fasting in solidarity with those who do not have enough to eat, and pursuing values other than those of the market.

Perhaps the most significant deleterious impact that religious communities have had on the environment results from religious opposition to reproductive freedom. The single largest religious organization worldwide is the Catholic Church, which officially prohibits —as contrary to natural and divine law--all birth control methods except the rhythm method, as well as abortion.⁶ Furthermore, the Catholic hierarchy has made birth control and abortion cornerstones of its efforts to shape public policy. Thus, in 1968, when the Vatican took a public stance on this issue, it explicitly appealed to public authorities:

For there are other ways by which a government can and should solve the population problem—that is to say by enacting laws which will assist families and by educating the people wisely so that the moral law and the freedom of the

³ New York: Norton, 2006.

⁴ *Many Heavens, One Earth* (Bath: The Alliance of Religions and Conservation, 2009), at: <http://www.windsor2009.org/Windsorcommitmentslayoutfinal.pdf.pdf>.

⁵ *Many Heavens, One Earth*, 18.

⁶ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968), at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html.

citizens are both safeguarded.⁷

The Vatican continues to deny that overpopulation is in itself a problem. Instead, in the context of discussing population growth, it points to “the signs of crisis observable in societies that are registering an alarming decline in their birth rate.”⁸ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops abides strictly by Vatican teachings on birth control in its interventions on climate change.⁹ To be sure, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, which includes the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Catholic Charities USA, and others, participates in the Alliance of Religions and Conservation and has pledged to tailor Catholic investment portfolios in line with environmental standards and to reduce the carbon footprint of Catholic institutions, among other things.¹⁰

Ultimately, individuals cannot live sustainably without changes in governmental and institutional policies, but governments and institutions will not change until we, as individuals, come to a deeper meaning of what it means to be alive. Religious and spiritual traditions provide many people with the best alternative to a market-driven life. For example, on the Sabbath, observant Jews stop shopping and working and instead walk and rest. Religious communities provide a connection across time and space, a bigger picture of the whole that gives a framework and a reason to care for the earth, its resources, and the future generations that will live here.

In closing, I want to speak about what I learn from my garden about the environment. Over the years, I have realized that I think of my garden in three ways: in a mystical-spiritual way, as a farm, and as a flower factory. I am not necessarily proud of this, but it is true. I began to grasp how far non-sustainable industrialization had extended into my garden when I realized that I was thinking of my Dutch tulip bulbs as little tulip factories geared to give me picture-perfect tulips. In contrast, I love the thought of my garden as an urban farm. Through composting, deep digging, and re-mineralization, I have

⁷ *Humanae Vitae*, 23. This is not to deny that Catholic practice has been much more varied. See, e.g., Raúl Necochea López, “Priests and Pills: Catholic Family Planning in Peru, 1967–1976,” *Latin American Research Review* 43 (2008) 34–56, who points out that the Peruvian Catholic hierarchy supported the use of oral contraceptives even after *Humanae Vitae*.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009) 44, at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html.

⁹ “We should promote a respect for nature that encourages policies fostering natural family planning and the education of women and men rather than coercive measures of population control or government incentives for birth control that violate local cultural and religious norms.” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good” (2001), at: <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/globalclimate.shtml>.

¹⁰ *Many Heavens, One Earth*, 87–91.

improved the soil over the years. By carefully researching which are the best quality plants suited for this climate and by siting them well, I have a considerable yield of delicious fruits and vegetables, some of which I preserve for the winter. Over time, I have increased the yields through more intensive planting. The spiritual sense of my garden comes through restoring native habitat in the remaining areas. As a member of the New England Wildflower Society, I have obtained sustainably grown native plants that attract native pollinators. Far from being an innocuous activity, gardening has the potential either to displace native plants and animals or to provide them with one of the few remaining places to thrive. I have learned just how difficult it is to restore native habitat. Native plants, many of which are specialists, would rather die than live in the wrong place. Each plant teaches me about the many microclimates of my small urban yard.

The ingenuity of the research subjects portrayed in *Portfolios of the Poor*, most of whom are actually not living hand to mouth, shows the extent of human creativity in solving problems. Those religious communities who are serious about transforming themselves and who address the full range of causes of stress to the environment can succeed in effecting change, because they are working with communities that already exist, they are drawing upon ancient practices and values, and they are not working with a scarcity model (that focuses on sacrifice), but rather with an abundance model. Learning from one's garden, from one's own back yard, can help individuals to see what is stake, which plants and animals are being lost, and that everyone can contribute in myriad ways.