Churches Engaging the Environment:
An Autoethnography of Obstacles and Opportunities

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Abstract

Drawing on two decades of personal involvement, this autoethnographic analysis highlights a number of obstacles and opportunities for engaging with environmental matters in church-based contexts. Obstacles are summarized in four clusters: paradigmatic (beliefs that disable environmental engagement), applicability (doubt about the appropriate amount of attention to give environmental concerns), critical (inadequate attention to social or cultural factors as they affect faith or environmental matters), and conviction (lifestyle and willingness to act). Opportunities fall into three categories: subcultural (social practices of faith communities that may lead to more effective learning), commitment (sense of responsibility, duty, and desire to follow through on religious commitment), and public theology (facets that aid constructive engagement with the public discourse). The study concludes that there is reason to believe that engagement of environmental topics in church-based contexts can be productive, particularly with attention to such obstacles and opportunities.

Keywords: religion and environment, environmental education, autoethnography

Introduction

The past two decades have seen increasing attention in Christian spirituality and theology to environmental matters. Within the environmental movement, the Christian churches have sometimes been seen as social institutions at odds with social and ecological transformation. However, organized religion may also lead to respect for creation and both personal and collective transformation. There are both obstacles and opportunities to participants in church-based contexts engaging with environmental concerns.[2] Many of these dimensions are rooted in the particularities of religious sub-cultures. This paper explores these obstacles and opportunities through an auto-ethnographic analysis of my involvement in engaging with church groups in North America on environmental concerns. The analysis spans two decades of involvement with environmental concerns among Catholic, Mennonite, Lutheran and other Christian churches.

Most people engaged in the environmental studies field are familiar with the thesis that the Christian religion is one of the root causes of the ecological crisis (e.g., as famously proposed by Lynn White 1967). There is adequate evidence from different fields — e.g., environmental history, cultural geography, biblical hermeneutics, theology — to show that this thesis is an oversimplification at best. In *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, deep ecologist Arne Naess (1989) briefly analyzed relevant biblical passages and historical Christian practices. After this analysis, Naess (1989, 189) concluded,

> *The preceding discussion has essentially tried to undermine the impression that our [human] role has been uniformly interpreted [from the Bible] down through the ages, and that this interpretation has only expressed arrogance, utilitarian thinking, and blind dogmatic faith.* A person's opinion about the ecological movement cannot be derived from the fact that he or she 'believes the Bible' (emphasis added).

This is generally confirmed by numerous sociological studies, which do not show much difference among those who espouse Christian beliefs and those of the secular society in terms of either environmental concern or behaviour. After their review, Proctor and Berry (2005) summarize the primarily survey-based research as "generally...inconclusive." Hitzhusen (2007) provides the most recent assessment of North American research. About the only reasonably clear results appear to be that anti-environmental*ist* attitudes are more closely associated with fundamentalist-style beliefs than Christianity as a whole, political ideology is better related to environmental beliefs than religious variables, and Christian commitment seems in some cases to have a positive influence on stewardship values and behaviours.

Still, the opinion persists that Christian belief and ecological concern are incompatible (e.g., Booth 1999; O'Sullivan 1999). I experienced this at the university where I taught outdoor environmental leadership:

A student told me the other day that "You can't be an environmentalist and go to church." .... The peculiar aspect of this encounter was the person's insistence — learned in an environmental studies course in university — that a person cannot be religiously oriented and concerned about the environment. Unfortunately, this encounter has not been an isolated one (Haluza-DeLay 2000, 143).

Nevertheless, because this thesis has had weak support at best, and because a broad spectrum of Christian denominations have engaged environmental concerns over recent decades,[3] in the remainder of this paper I turn the attention toward assessing the obstacles and opportunities for environmental engagement in Christian churches.

There are many reasons for engaging in the effort to enhance environmental awareness and action within Christian church communities. Within this faith tradition there are considerable resources for a proenvironmental stance. Recent decades have seen an explosion of writings on eco-theology and ecofeminist theology. The depth of these writings were enough to lead Brulle (2000), in his typology of American discourses of environmentalism to list "eco-theology" as one of nine articulations of the human-environment nexus. Furthermore, mainstream Christian religion exerts a significant social influence in North America and in other countries, and is personally meaningful to those individuals who are committed to that faith tradition. In Canada, religiously based charitable groups comprise some 20% of the nonprofit sector (NSNVO 2004); about 29% of Canadians claim weekly or monthly participation (Bibby 2004). This level of participation indicates that Christian institutions have important access to and perhaps influence over Canadians. Around the world, Christianity — the world's largest religion — and other religions continue to grow with influence that crosses national boundaries (Jenkins 2002). Most importantly, understanding how people construct their knowledge is crucial to actively engaging them in transformative changes to that knowledge (Robertson 1994; Mezirow 1997).

The Autoethnographic Method

I have used the term *autoethnography* to describe the methodology of this study wherein I scrutinize my experiences of facilitating engagement with environmental issues with people in church-based settings. This research approach has been contentious and there are several varieties (Anderson 2006; Ellis and Bochner 2000).The root of the term — "ethnography" — evokes a common research method with a history in the social sciences. "Auto"ethnography places the researcher's experience as something to be studied. In other words, an analysis of my own experiential lifeworld can pro-

duce useful results, in this case, that of developing environmental awareness within church-based groups. Consistent with what Anderson called "analytic autoethnography," this study relies on ethnographic techniques rather than the style that Anderson terms "evocative" or "emotional autoethnography" which seeks to express the researchers' personal experiences as illuminatory of broader human meaning (Ellis and Bochner 2000). The data used in this study is drawn from personal experience. Besides reflection upon experience, data is culled from personal journals, lesson plans, and notes scribbled during and after teaching sessions coupled with analysis following grounded theory tenets. Reliance on such materials addresses problems of "defective memory" that may plague retrospective accounts (Hunt and Junco 2006). As with all research, credible "self-study" methods must still maintain rigorous standards and should be assessed by the traditional means of assessing qualitative research (Bullough and Pinneager 2001; Creswell 1999).

In recognizing the utility of knowledge gained in personal experience as reflective of social issues, autoethnographic techniques deemphasize abstract and categorical knowledge in preference to the testimony of narrative (Polkinghorne 1988). This narrative is not simply as an aside (for example, as "researcher tales" [Van Maanen 1988]). Mills (1959, 8) described the sociological imagination as being able to get beyond the "personal troubles" in an individual's biography and into the "issues [which] transcend these local environments of the individual." Bullough and Pinneager (2001) build on Mills in their description of "self-study." They assert, "Articulation of the personal trouble or issue never really becomes research until it is connected through evidence and analysis to the issues and troubles of a time and place" (Bullough and Pinneager 2001, 15). Therefore, this paper is a study of one biography, but the presentation of evidence and analysis drawn from that biography can produce results useful for other efforts to build environmental action in church-based groups in North America.

This account of my observations — critically examined — draws on professional experience in environmental activism and education in the wide variety of contexts in which it has occurred. Such a reflexive approach values the importance of staying close to a practitioner's common-sense knowledge, building upon it rather than supplanting it (Creswell 1999). Materials from the period 1985-2006 form the data source for this analysis. The operative research questions were: What are elements in religious contexts that operated as obstacles to positive engagement with environmental concerns? and, What are factors that facilitated enhanced opportunities for engagement with environmental concerns? Data was reviewed using the conventions of grounded theory adapted to an autoethnographic context (Anderson 2006;

Bullough and Pinneager 2001; Creswell 1999). Specifically, an open coding process identified patterns in the data. These patterns are presented below with examples recorded in the data or drawn from recollection. Still, further research in a variety of religious contexts is recommended to develop a more comprehensive picture of the obstacles and opportunities to developing action for the environment in such settings.

Environmental Engagement in the Church

The present study includes insights drawn from leading several adult Sunday school series on environmental topics, speaking to numerous religious groups, writing a curriculum guide, and dialogue with many people in a church-based context over the years. Granberg-Michaelson (1988) used my experiences and observations in the mid-1980s as a case study to introduce readers to the topic of Christian perspectives on the environment. When Granberg-Michaelson interviewed me I was finishing an undergraduate zoology degree at the University of Montana and had just been baptised as a Christian after no childhood church experience. I was active in the church-based peace movement against nuclear weapons, and had worked summers in environmental education for the National Wildlife Federation and an evangelical Christian wilderness program. By the time the book was published, I had full-time employment at a Lutheran environmental education centre and had been confirmed into the Roman Catholic church. Granberg-Michaelson's narrative was oriented toward an audience of American evangelicals, but his account of the interview with me provides a useful baseline for this analysis, both in terms of personal experiences, but also as a comparison of religious environmental concerns at that time.

For over a decade afterwards I taught at various outdoor and environmental education programs and in a series of contract wilderness leadership positions including Outward Bound. I also worked for the Mennonite Central Committee (an international relief, development and justice nongovernmental agency), did a Master's degree in outdoor environmental leadership, moved permanently to Canada, wrote and advocated for environmental, peace, and justice issues, and began a career as university faculty. In recent years I have been attending a Mennonite church. Along the way I also facilitated programs for Roman Catholic and Anabaptist (Mennonite) churches, and participated in writing an ecumenical series of inserts for church bulletins and an associated study guide on environmental topics and eco-theology. Through all of these years I kept journals, and wrote other comments, evaluations and self-reflections about program delivery. In some cases, groups wrote reflections that I collected and stored.

Over the years I facilitated workshop, retreat or Sunday school sessions for all of the denominations mentioned above, and gave lectures or Sunday sermons to a broad spectrum of religious groups. Workshop or small group sessions usually included several content elements. Study of relevant biblical passages and theological exposition on the meanings of these passages and religious themes were always included. Background of contemporary environmental issues could address specific issues (endangered species, environmental justice), or a range of issues, and with more advanced groups placed environmental issues in the context of political-economic systems. All sessions included self-reflection, and sometimes included group goal-setting or planning for action and accountability. These elements were adjusted according to the length of time with the group (e.g., a single Sunday school session or a longer series), and the age or denominational group type. Adult or high school Sunday school sessions typically included between 5 and 12 people and were structured around information sharing and discussion. For retreats and Sunday school sessions, participants had usually chosen to attend. Sermons or lectures usually allowed less interaction although sometimes a "coffee social" or question period was held afterwards. The groups and event types varied considerably. Since long-term data was not collected, it is impossible to evaluate the effects on participant behaviour of the events. The themes presented below are patterns noted repeatedly in my records of the occasions used as data for this study.

Since no single specific occasion provides the basis for the following themes, those who will be engaging with religious groups about environmental concerns are cautioned to apply the following themes with care. It is important to understand the theological and subcultural emphases of reli-

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Dominion – the domineering model; the typical "command and control" model that predominates contemporary society.

Stewardship – benevolent management; for the good of the creation, as stewards for the true owner (God).

Partnership – which decentres humans, placing them as *part* of nature, *a la* St. Francis of Assisi.

Sacramentalism – signs of the divine presence; recognizing the immanence of God in all things (but not to the extent of pantheistically identifying the divine with the created order).

Eco-feminism – whose chief contribution has been an analysis of power relations and domination of all forms including nature.

Prophetic-Teacher – an urgent moral calling and activism.

Evolutionary – drawing on scientific insights coupled with natural theology, *a la* Thomas Berry.

Figure 1. Rasmussen's (1991) description of the seven "streams" of Christian approaches to human relations with the rest of creation.

gious groups. While there is much in common between Christians of various denominations, there are also distinctions in terms of theological emphases, language used, style of worship, and so on. Rasmussen (1991, 967) outlined seven approaches within orthodox Christianity toward understanding the human relationship with the rest of creation (see Figure 1). He described these as "living streams... [that] flow together."

In practical terms, for a Roman Catholic group, the idea of the created order as a sacrament — as a sign of the presence of God — was a natural fit. For Mennonites (one of the historic peace churches) the theme of "peace with the creation" had powerful resonance (see Redekop 2000). These denominational (or subcultural) variations play some role. In addition, filters of personal experience, socialization, and levels of critical thought interact with theological and spiritual awareness in the individuals involved in any educative event. Individuals do not think or live alike, even within common expressed beliefs or values.

At the beginning of many sessions, I asked participants about their personal goals for learning about "Christians and the Environment." Figure 2 presents participants' goals from one 7-week adult Sunday school series in a Mennonite congregation in 1995, grouped into two categories exactly as I presented them back to the group. The teaching was subsequently adjusted to take account of the participants' concerns. At that time I listed the goals in two categories — "theological" and "pragmatic." However, if foundational beliefs impact practice, there is no simple demarcation between such categories. In goals presented in the figure, a genuine interest in questioning prior understandings can be seen, as well as

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Theological:
– Clarify Christian belief and environmental issues versus "new age" fears.
– Grapple with the tension: treat God's creation with "holiness," but not deify the earth.
– Sometimes a conflicting message in the Bible regarding caring for the earth.
– How to interpret Christianity to embrace the environment.

Pragmatic:
– Why are some concerns really an issue? (E.g., the Brazilian rain forest?)
– What can we do?
– Does what we do have an impact? Is it too late?
– Understand global interrelationships — resource use and impact on individual consumer.
– How can Christians work with non-Christians?

Figure 2. Goals expressed by adults in a Sunday School class (Mennonite) at the beginning of a 7-week series on "Christians and the Environment."

some views that would be barriers to learning about the environment. Such goals — in their range and their specifics — were similar among church-based groups with whom I have worked over the period, so Figure 2 serves as a representative example to help illuminate the opportunities of church-based settings for effective faith-based environmental learning. I assess effectiveness by the admittedly subjective measure of the apparent interest in participants in the environment and the ways that they verbalized how the environment was or was not a matter relevant to their faith lives.

Obstacles

The obstacles to faith-based environmental engagement fell into four primary clusters — *paradigmatic, applicability, critical*, and *conviction*. Obstacles are not barriers; they can be addressed and possibly overcome.

Paradigmatic Obstacles

Paradigmatic obstacles are those elements of theological beliefs or worldviews that disable attention to environmental concerns, as the first goal in Figure 2 hints. For example, some Christians expressed concern that environmentalism may be founded on nature worship or other aberrant belief systems. In Figure 2, this obstacle is represented by one participant as "grappling with a tension," and by another as "new age fears." Another factor that contributes to solidification of this obstacle has been deliberate dismissal by some environmentalists of the Christian religion as having anything constructive to offer about the human-earth relationship and the positive attention paid alternative and often pantheistic belief systems (e.g., Booth 1999). Naess (1989, 186) highlights part of the tension when he points out that both the Old and New Testaments present "praise of creation without praise of God" as a form of "heathenism."

Over the last two decades, this obstacle has lessened. Youth and young adults seem genuinely surprised that anyone would question the legitimacy of Christians being concerned about the environment, as they were so questioned in the earlier years. "The kids were interested, no need to defend it [concern for the environment by Christians]" I wrote of a presentation to a Mennonite youth group in 1994, somewhat surprised. "Watched their eyes roll when I told them about an environmental message once being considered like heresy," read a margin note on a presentation to adults in a Christian Reformed church in early 2004. But while accepting of a stewardship message, an evangelical group in 2000 was highly suspicious of the St. Francis-like "stream" of partnership with the rest of creation. Therefore, paradigmatic obstacles of this sort still have salience in the content of presentation on environmental matters.

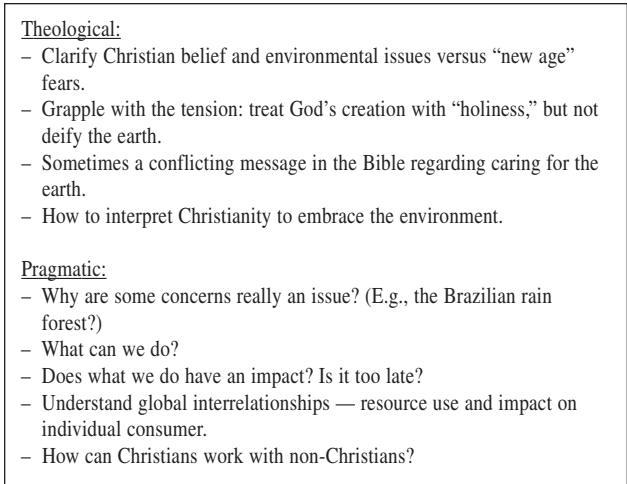Another paradigmatic obstacle is a pietistic faith system

that focuses on personal, devotional religious experience. Such a religious paradigm includes tacit or explicit beliefs that only heaven or the afterlife matters, that this world will pass away, or even that the "world" is corrupt and fallen. It is well expressed by the words of an old hymn, that "this world is not my home, I'm just passing through." Such belief systems can weaken engagement with environmental or social issues. Thus, paradigmatic religious practice also becomes a barrier of applicability as presented below. Many people outside Christian communities hold to similar views in considering spirituality to be about personal beliefs only, as if there is no rational component that can be intellectually interrogated. Biblical scholars have insisted on the inappropriateness of an otherworldly overemphasis to Christian faith, especially if leading to excessive disengagement from this-worldly matters (Finger 1997), but this paradigm has a long history.

Applicability Obstacles

Applicability obstacles are conflicts over the appropriate amount of attention to give environmental concerns. Many people asserted that human social concerns are priorities over environmental issues. In Figure 2, the third and fourth lines show attempts to grapple with this form of barrier to environmental concern. Working against poverty, on homeless issues, anti-war movements, or in food banks may be considered more important. "Save babies, not whales" read a bumper sticker once given to me as a way of insisting 'human' needs should have exclusive attention for Christians. Congregations and their members are sometimes so overwhelmed by the many concerns to which a faith perspective seems to require response, that there is little time or energy to address all of them. This might lead to prioritizing, which can make it appear as if environmental concerns do not matter. In religious circles this obstacle may be further buttressed by the theological contention that God is most concerned for the humans made in the "image of God." In this respect, these categories affect each other, as this paradigmatic contention may be used to justify an application failure.

These contentions persist despite the fact that sound biblical and theological scholarship has shown the idea that God is not concerned about the other-than-human parts of creation is unbalanced. In some cases, consideration of such scholarship has helped participants understand that there should be no conflicting message about prioritizing humans exclusive from the rest of creation.[4] More broadly, the environmental justice movement has clarified how environmental concerns are also social justice concerns. This movement was catalyzed by the United Church of Christ's 1987 analysis of hazardous wastes and race in the U.S. (UCC Commission for Racial Justice 1987) and, as with the civil rights movement, has received strong organizational support from churches. A stronger faith-based emphasis on "eco-justice" may be developing through coalition organizations such as the United States' National Religious Partnership for the Environment (Kearns 1995; Shibley and Wiggins 1997). As noted above, younger participants in recent programs are often surprised when I tell them it used to be considered highly suspect for a Christian to be involved in environmental concerns.

Another applicability obstacle is the practice of faith in individualistic ways. Consistent with the pietistic form of the paradigmatic obstacle noted above, many people operate as if faith should be personal rather than public, or that it is individually rather than socially relevant (such as when the focus of religious life becomes limited to one's "personal relationship with Jesus"). Expressions of this obstacle include prioritizing evangelism or charity-work as more important than social justice, or the claim that religion has no place in the public sphere. Individualized spirituality holds strong sway in a modernist world wherein religious faith is to be private and personal.[5]

Critical Obstacles

Critical obstacles are those that result from underanalysis of societal and cultural factors that affect the human-earth relationship. Several of the pragmatic goals in Figure 2 represent a willingness to consider critical obstacles. An inadequate cultural critique or a weak understanding of the significant role of social structures in directing human life are common features of participants in most environmental education settings (Bowers 1993). Cultural values often operate at the tacit or taken-for-granted level. However, lack of "cultural literacy" can particularly affect religious believers in two ways (Warren 1993). First, believers may elevate cultural values to the status of the religious message. For instance, viewing the environment solely as a resource for human utilization is part of a Western cultural worldview (Bowers 1993; Finger 2004; Naess 1989; Oelschlaeger 1994); such commodification of creation is not consonant with Christian scripture or tradition (Attfield 1983; Berry 1981; Bratton 1992; Redekop 2000; Walsh 2004). Second, interpreting scripture or understanding one's experience and values is affected by historical, social and cultural factors. Thus, development of a cultural critique is vital for sound religious education.

Understanding the socio-ecological interconnections of problems and potential solutions requires a critical awareness that accounts for the influence of social structures on individual and group agency. "I wish I could just buy fair-trade and be done with it" wrote an adult participant in a post-session self-evaluation, representing personal lifestyle change as easier than awareness of global economics. Christian thinkers have long attended to "the powers and principalities" and "sins of society" that implicate everyone in this entangled

web (Finger 1997). However, developing a critical and sociologically sound understanding about the interconnections of various issues, structures and the faith community or person is challenging.

Conviction Obstacles

Finally, obstacles of *conviction* are barriers on the level of lifestyle and willingness to act. There are any number of reasons why a person would resist proenvironmental learning. Many of these reasons are little different in a church context than in other contexts. These obstacles include one's current standard of living, willingness to make changes, motivation to act, level of knowledge, awareness of action strategies and other factors (Kollmus and Agyeman 2002; Robertson 1994; Robottom and Hart 1995). Overcoming these obstacles is no small matter. However, these obstacles are much researched in environmental education literature and require little particular knowledge of the church context. On the other hand, moral commitment, community accountability, and other factors found in church contexts and described in the next section can potentially lead to more effective responses.

Opportunities

Opportunities are those factors in a church environment that are favourable to effective faith-based environmental learning and responsive action. Opportunities fell into three clusters — *subcultural, motivational*, and *public theology*.

Subcultural Opportunities

Subcultural opportunities are those social practices of congregations that lead to more effective learning occasions. Churches promote dialogue and engagement with issues and important life questions through study and fellowship groups. Some congregations are more effective at involving their members. The small group settings of Sunday school, bible study groups, base communities, and fellowship groups are not only the likely occasions for such a topic as faith and the environment, but also tend to maximize most of the following opportunities. In other words, religious participation can be substantively more than the stereotypical hour's attendance on Sunday morning. This represents a subcultural opportunity to engage with the likes of environmental issues.

While there are numerous reasons for church attendance, many people involved in church contexts sought ways to connect their life, faith, and beliefs, and were open to personal growth. "I never realized how much care for creation was connected to my religion; I have to rethink everything, and I don't know if I can," wrote a college-aged participant in a post-session evaluation. One of the consequences of regular involvement was the exposure to topics that one might not otherwise consider. "I never would have thought about the

environment, except you came to our church," participants have said on numerous occasions. In North American society, adults have relatively few explicit learning opportunities outside of the workplace. Even for nominal participants, openness and regularity of attendance may allow breakthroughs to deeper commitment. Furthermore, involvement in a congregation includes some accountability, and some respect for wisdom of tradition, elders, and history, all of which can be used in pro-environmental ways. It is easy to find specific denominational statements about the environment, or quotes from historical figures expressly relevant to the particular religious group or tradition (e.g., John Calvin for Presbyterians, Martin Luther for Lutherans), and to expose people to resources in other parts of the Christian tradition.

Through many of their 'subcultural' practices, congregations encourage self-reflection, confession of mistakes, application of moral principles to everyday behaviour, and the social expectations of listening to others, discussion and being challenged. Lessons and sermons are expected to be directly applicable to personal life, rather than abstractions. Such opportunities help counter the 'conviction' obstacles noted above. I have often asked groups to commit to each other and set up opportunities to "check-in" and hold each other accountable, or have follow-up sessions. Considerable research shows that such follow-up enhances the likelihood of adaptation of new practices. Many of the participants' goals represented in Figure 2 show an openness to explore new ideas and apply them to their lives. Such openness was clearly facilitated by a conducive subcultural setting that valued new learning in the context of a faith community. These are elements that can be utilized in critical reflection and that can generate new learning and practice.

Finally, as part of the subculture, church-based participants are already familiar with talking about values and moral discourse. Those involved in congregations may even have experience engaging in contentious moral discussions. One example is informative. After a working group of which I was a member produced an item that was to be made available for insertion into church bulletins, the Christian group that sponsored the production engaged in considerable discussion. The one-fold insert was on animals and endangered species and was titled "Who is My Neighbour?" Clearly associated with biblical teachings about loving one's neighbour, for the farmers that dominated this group, this was a troublesome issue. One fellow asked "Are you suggesting we are to love our animals?" As they sought to determine the proper treatment of farm animals, they were able to employ a respectful dialogue within a quest for moral discernment, because prior experience with talking about values and listening despite disagreement were part of the subculture already present in that group. Another group's discussion traversed from

the intrinsic value of each human life (including those with severe disability) to whether similar value should extend to every aspect of creation. This rather abstract discussion was also helped in that many of the congregation assisted others in the congregation to care for several severely disabled relatives. The subcultural norm of mutual aid already being practiced provided opportunity for more thorough consideration of environmental engagement.

Motivational Opportunities

Motivational opportunities are those dimensions that potentially increase the effectiveness of environmental awareness because of the faith-based commitment. First, participants often expressed a *desire* to "do the right thing" even in the face of countervailing cultural norms and therefore sought to discern what that "right thing" might be. Secondly, a sense of *duty* or obligation can support desire. Feeling responsible to God-Creator could be a powerful incentive to proenvironmental concern, when the subject is presented. Participants expressed the desire and sense of duty to apply faith-based, environmental awareness in their lifestyles. Yet when we talked about their successes, they often expressed how difficult it is to make environmental choices in North American society, which shows that individualized solutions to environmental practice need support which the church community may be able to provide.

Strong moral foundations are another 'motivational' factor. Lifestyle decisions founded in moral valuations may increase the lasting power of church-based environmental engagement. A pastor's sermon told of a Trappist monk who argued for "love" as the answer to the energy crisis of the 1970s (later published in Granberg-Michaelson 1986). Far from the groovy hippie, the monk explained that love committed people to a willingness to discuss conflicts, engage in community-making, work through the difficulties of carpooling, co-housing or community-shared agriculture, and a myriad of other practical actions (see also Bratton 1992). Strong foundations are needed to initiate and maintain environmental change, particularly in a society that does not support ecologically sensitive lifestyles. Commitment generated in a religious context may be a powerful source of the "green fire" strong enough to result in sustained effort to maintain ecologically-sensitive lifestyles (Haluza-DeLay 2000). Motivational factors increase the likelihood that ecological values will be expressed in action and sustained over time.

Public-Theological Opportunities

The final cluster of opportunities is those factors that can constructively engage the public discourse within a pluralist society. I have labelled this category as the opportunity of "*public-theology*" in line with Mennonite scholar Thomas

Finger's (1997) use of the term. Finger (1997, 10) suggests that each religious tradition has distinctive characteristics that may assist the "critical conversation with culture," its assumptions, and the vital concerns common to all. Gottlieb (2003, 493-494) notes that:

> *Asserting that environmental degradation is not only a health danger, an economic catastrophe, or an aesthetic blight, but also* sacrilegious, sinful, and an offense against God *catapults religions directly into questions of political power, social policy, and the overall direction of secular society.*

Modernist thought that strips mystery from the mundane and the sacred from the day-to-day, that cannot see value beyond dollar signs, or that calls beauty and integrity irrelevant are not hallmarks of either religious or environmentally-oriented worldviews. Long deliberation on the human-creation relationship, a message of hope in seemingly dark times, and the possibility of a counter-culture are a few examples of the public-theology opportunities that may enrich public environmental discourse.

One public aspect is that being part of a congregation is a commitment that makes a statement to others, although it may be unintended. A large proportion of the North American population still aspire to high religious ideals (despite some high profile scandals) and continue to participate in religious activities. This commitment results in countless volunteer hours, charitable donations, and other unremarked actions (NSNVO 2003; Wuthnow and Evans 2002). Applicability and critical obstacles are addressed by the public dimension of faith-based practice. In the line at a church retreat in the late 1990s, I was astonished to witness "a little old lady" ask if a certain food product was "organic or fair-trade." Many churches buy fair-trade coffee and wash dishes at potlucks, retreats, or coffee socials rather than using disposables. Were religious groups to take a stronger and more deliberate stand on caring for creation, as many churches have toward civil rights, violence in media, apartheid, developing countries' debts, and other social activism, more weight might be thrown to environmental care, especially in association with social justice (Boff 1995; Gottlieb 2003).

Another 'publicly theological' opportunity is that religious groups can (and sometimes have been) an example of counter-hegemonic discourse and practice. My first encounter with Mennonites in 1988 was a surprise. Their style of life (characterized as simple, frugal, healthy, and oriented toward mutual aid), based and expressed in that faith tradition, was similar to the lifestyle which up to then I had mostly associated with those committed to environmental concerns. Theologian Donald Kraybill called the Church "the upside-down kingdom," because of ethical exhortations such as

loving one's enemies, commitment to service for "the least of these" in society, and sharing of economic resources (Finger 2004). In its best expressions, the Church has been an example of alternative standards at odds with dominant social values.[6] Participants in sessions often talked about trying to lead less materialistic lives or more family-oriented lives, or serving the community. They drew on a whole range of Christian teaching that exists on such matters as moderation, simplicity, materialism and commodification, with implications for environmental behaviour, and an explicit cultural critique (Berry 1981; Boff 1995; Gottlieb 2003). Such traditions help address applicability obstacles as described above. These opportunities of public-theology contradict other social forces by insisting that lifeworlds and the earth are not to be commodified, a lesson that many faith groups continue to confront even as they are challenged by the culture in which they exist.

For some church members, discovery of the numerous historical and theological alternatives that exist in the Christian tradition has been enlightening (see Figure 1). Many authors (including Lynn White) have pointed to St. Francis of Assisi as an example for ecologically sensitive practice. Dubos (1974) and others have highlighted the Benedictine monks, characterizing them as conservationists to the Franciscan preservationists (*stewardship* compared to *partnership* in Rasmussen's (1991) terms). There are numerous additional exemplars (Attfield 1983; Oelschlaeger 1994). Although these currents were typically secondary to the main flow of historical Christendom, they have had considerable influence, and provide resources that can illuminate contemporary eco-religious action.

Finally, aspects of the religious worldview can enrich the public discussion of environmental issues (Hitzhusen 2006). Church-based groups often expressed a hopefulness amidst difficult times (e.g., "perseverance in times of trial or tribulation") and celebration rather than the doom-saying that is often perceived to permeate the environmental movement. Internalisation of the virtue of humility in the face of the many demands and inevitable failings of ordinary life can be motivation to keep trying and not lose hope. More to the point, spiritually oriented people act upon a belief that God-Creator is at work in the world. In the rationalist atmosphere of academia and the modern world, the religious insistence that the divine is actually present and active is heretical.

Possibly even more heretical is the notion that the earth itself is active and responsive. The biblical accounts make the outlandish claim that the "mountains will sing and the trees clap their hands."[7] Walsh et al. (1996) explain how the responsiveness of creation may be more than poetics, a view that strongly counters dominant metaphors about the mechanistic inertness of other-than-human nature. I listened to a man with a doctorate in biology talk about "listening to creation." A group of college-aged evangelicals talked about how they had prayed together on a nature walk, and in a pause in the prayer, a squirrel chattered. They were giddy about the "squirrel praying with us." I often gave out a prayer exercise and those who tried it often talked about the experience: responding to God *in* nature, or of feeling *partnership* with "the rest of creation." These challenges to the precepts of rationality are part of a cultural critique that cracks the modernist, instrumentalist and scientistic paradigm. Such 'public-theology' factors help address paradigmatic obstacles noted above, as well as critical obstacles.

In summary, the basic Christian message includes the motivation for committed action to make the earth a better place, more in line with the Creator's presumed intents. It incorporates subcultural elements that may facilitate pro-environmental awareness and behaviour. Finally, it has a public critique of greed, self-centredness, materialism and the hubris of an overemphasis on human rationalism and exuberant humanism that may also worsen environmental problems. These themes demonstrate that there are many reasons to expect a favourable result from engaging in pro-environmental work in religious contexts.

Green and Theo-centric

Within current and historical Christian practice and thought are numerous resources that can help to inform an environmentally-respectful religious vision. Furthermore, the capacity for self-correction and self-criticism is assumed in scripture and tradition (Walsh 2004). The last two decades have seen a veritable explosion of "eco-theology" and religious or spiritual deliberation on environmental concerns. The literature is too extensive to reference here, but there is a great deal of interest in the Christian community for considering adequate and appropriate responses to issues affecting God's creation. Gottlieb (2003) believes that the response of religious communities to environmental concerns has been at least as quick as other important institutions, such as business, the medical establishment and labour. The Church's reflections upon the secularized desacralization of creation are one of its little known "treasures" (O'Gorman 1993).

The autoethnographic analysis presented in this study shows some of the obstacles and opportunities present in efforts to engage with environmental concerns in church-based or religious settings in North America. Some readers may conclude that I have painted an overly rosy picture of the possibilities of enhancing environmental action in the church context. Certainly it is very difficult to generate the deep-seated socio-cultural change needed to address today's considerable social and environmental problems (Warren 1993).

As Mezirow (1997, 10) states, "to become meaningful, learning requires that new information be incorporated by the learner into an already well-developed symbolic frame of reference." As has been noted, religious believers are also affected by dominant social norms, possibly to the point where religious beliefs are superseded by contradictory cultural values. However, over the past two decades there have been valid changes in religious organizations regarding the environment.

When Granberg-Michaelson interviewed me in 1987, his summary focused on perceived conflict between Christian faith and environmental concerns (and consistent with the book's intended audience, used language oriented to American evangelicals that makes me somewhat uncomfortable, providing my first experience of narrative representation). As he summarized,

> After accepting Christ, Randy initially never thought there was any conflict between his Christian faith and his love of the creation. But the more Randy talked with other Christians, the more he encountered attitudes and assumptions that gave him concern (Granberg-Michaelson 1988, 14).

The four specific concerns that Granberg-Michaelson delineated in 1988 are all still present to some extent and have been noted here.[8] But unlike the 1980s there are now strong environmental movements within religious groups, including the National Religious Partnership for the Environment in the U.S. (comprised of Jewish, Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical networks), and Kairos in Canada (comprised of Catholic, United, Mennonite, Anglican and other denominational organizations). Many denominations have made declarations, and many congregations have instituted energy conservation, green building, or other environmental programs. The religious environmental landscape has changed since the mid-1980s. Granberg-Michaelson's account of my early efforts at combining Christian spirituality and ecology emphasized "frustration and isolation" for me and many other like-minded believers, which is not the case now.

More importantly, each of the four "areas of questioning" inhibiting Christian environmental attention were presented by Granberg-Michaelson as theological orientations. As this analysis has demonstrated, obstacles to engaging environmental issues within North American Christian communities are not merely theological. The environmental ethics discussion seemingly assumes that by the adoption of a more ethical orientation the problems of the environment will be solved. In response to this, Dickson (2000) insists that environmental philosophers and other scholars engage much more closely with the empirical questions about what will help formulate more sustainable communities and sounder

environmental ethics. Similarly, the environmental discussion has often assumed that proenvironmental behaviours follow from attitudes, but this has been shown to be far more complex or even wrong-headed (Kollmus and Agyeman 2002; Robottom and Hart 1995). Dickson (2000) further asserts that rather than simply trying to affect the tall order of changing worldviews, environmentalists of all disciplines might also work at affecting changes *within* worldviews. It would also be helpful for social researchers interested in environmental issues to give more attention to how environmental values are produced and maintained in the face of societal pressures to live in unecological ways. For those with religious commitments, the church community is a significant context for the formation, development and maintenance of values and behaviours. More importantly, in a culture that holds to a worldview generally antithetical to ecologically-sensitive lifestyles, the support of others paddling against the mainstream current is crucial to success.

O'Gorman (1993) notes that the two communities — environmental activists and faith groups — with their various strengths would do well to talk with each other. Among the barriers to this communication, O'Gorman asserts, are the different languages each community uses along with the legacy of the Lynn White thesis. This language does reflect genuine differences in views of the world and solutions to the human-environment intersection. The Church will speak in theo-centric language about such practices as creation-care, while the environmental community will speak of such things as environmental management and eco-centrism. Both will mention "stewardship," but the term has many different meanings. Religious people will want to know how ecological awareness is part of the journey that leads to a fuller knowing of the divine and greater faithfulness.

In dialogue religious and non-religious people concerned about the environment may find much in common and a good basis for alliance. For example, Bowers (1993) argues that modernity's cultural values have, among other consequences, privileged a future-oriented notion of progress, and dismissed traditional knowledge and past understanding of human relations with the land, thus furthering the problematic flowering of technological and humanist hubris, a critique made by numerous theological analyses (e.g., Berry 1981; Finger 1997). Twenty centuries of disciplined reflection have developed considerable resources in the global church with which to address many issues of life. As new questions arise — such as what to do about the environmental crisis — new insights develop, often building on that extensive tradition or rediscovering fertile, but little-cultivated alternatives. The immense literature in "eco-theology" that has developed in the last 30 years — except for a few thinkers such as Thomas Berry and Wendell Berry (no relation) — has gone mostly

unnoticed by the environmental community. The variations in Christian orientations to the environment — such as those expressed in Figure 1 — may also confuse people who expect a definitive Christian position.

This paper has been admittedly exploratory and focused on an analysis of my own experiences. Nevertheless, the autoethnographic account enhances understanding of the religious-environmental nexus. Social scientists are interested in how belief structures are played out in lifestyle and action. This study demonstrates that more deliberate studies of the interaction between the cognitive praxes of religious and environmental movements will be beneficial for both social scientific understanding and practical application.

For environmental work in church-based contexts to be effective as an agent of change, it must respect the churches' traditions (both scripture and history) and culture. Environmental work in church-based contexts must also engage the members in critical analysis of their understandings of their faith responsibilities under contemporary social and environmental conditions, attending to the particular manifestations of obstacles and opportunities such as those presented above. But the potential of this powerful source of moral and social suasion should not be overlooked in seeking to fan the green fire towards a more ecologically aware society.

Endnotes

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2. Note that "church" means a congregation or religious community in this paper, rather than either a building or a particular denomination. When capitalized, it will mean Christianity as a whole, although Christianity is by no means a monolithic entity. In addition, religion and spirituality will be generally conflated in this paper. Although the words are often construed to have different connotations, in many ways "spirituality" connotes an individualized approach that may reflect dominant Western cultural values of individualism and self-reliance (Elias 1991; Haluza-DeLay 2000). Furthermore, Cavanaugh (1995) argues that "religion," that is, a domain of human experience segregated from the everydayness of life and other spheres of meaning, has been constructed as such by modernity and western secularization.

3. For examples of denominational statements and action in the United States, see the website of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (http://www.nrpe.org/statements/index.html).

4. Debate exists over the *relative* value and role of humans in creation. See Kearns (1995) for discussion of three broad strains in eco-theology (stewardship, eco-justice, and creation spirituality). For some theologians, humans have a unique position as the conscious portion of creation (e.g., Thomas Berry). More commonly, especially from a 'stewardship' position, humans may be valued differently than the rest of creation, although this does not mean that the rest of creation is to be *un*valued. These debates are beyond the scope of this paper.

5. Individualism is implicated by numerous commentators. Bellah (1985) insists it is the fundamental weakness in American society and supersedes any notion of community or the common good. Elias (1991) describes the effects of individualism on spiritual trends. To its detriment, western discourse has allowed individual rights to pre-empt communal rights or responsibilities to the earth (Bowers 1993; Naess 1989).

6. This is not to deny that the Church has often failed to meet its ideals, nor that Christians have often accommodated to the cultural norms and paradigms of which they are a part, and constructed societies of egregious oppression and violence. Walsh (2004) argues that in contrast to many meta-narratives, Christianity incorporates internal corrective narratives that can help it reorient. "The challenge of using the church's inner humanizing vision to confront its own inauthenticity and blindness is a never-ending one" (Warren 1993, 77).

7. E.g., Psalms 97, 104, 148, Hosea 2, Isaiah 24. Job was exhorted to "ask the animals and they will teach you, or the birds and they will tell you..." The fish and the earth were also supposed to pass on a message (Job 12:7-10).

8. They included 1) Dualistic division of body and soul; 2) Soteriological beliefs that "the world" was sinful, therefore irrelevant; 3) Eschatological beliefs that if the world will be destroyed, why worry about it? 4) Saving souls matters more than environmental protection. For the most part, these are included in what I have termed "paradigmatic" obstacles in this paper.

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