



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The Carbon Footprint of Faith

Clay Nelson © 14 March 2021

I have shared in the past that I was reared by, and infused with the values of, a staunch empiricist. Yet my scientist father was a highly committed and active member of the Episcopal Church most of his adult life. Furthermore, to everyone's surprise, including mine, he parented an Episcopal priest who evolved into a Unitarian minister. As a teenager I could not untangle the mystery of how belief in science and faith could be embodied in a single skin. It was a conundrum. It was an impossible juxtaposition. It was mind-numbing cognitive dissonance. It defied an adolescent's black and white view of reality.

I finally asked him to unravel the mystery. Expecting the usual long explanation with footnotes, I still remember his answer verbatim: "What can't be proven can't be disproven." In my reflection on that answer I imagined a Venn diagram. One circle is science. The second circle is faith. They overlap. The overlap science may someday be able to explain. As science creates as many questions as it answers, faith and science are destined to be strange bedfellows for the foreseeable future. The fruits of this coexistence we have seen in Galileo, Copernicus, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, Gregor Mendel, Louis Pasteur, Blaise Pascal, and the discoverer of oxygen and carbon monoxide and the first to find a practical use for carbon dioxide — fizzy drinks — Unitarian Joseph Priestley. This is only a sample of the long list of scientists who were also people of faith.

So, it turns out science and faith are not natural enemies. They both begin as beliefs. As you determine which beliefs are most important to you they become values you hold. Those values determine how you treat yourself and others and approach life situations. Those then lead to how you act. As a Unitarian I believe that science and faith inform each other and serve somewhat like a feedback loop that gives us peace like a river and strength like a mountain to make the world a better place than we found it.

From my perspective this alliance between science and religion is counter-intuitive. For so much of history religion has not put its best foot forward, from justifying wars religion started to burning witches, from turning a blind eye to slavery to encouraging and even nurturing imperialism; from creating ghettos for the "Christ-killers" to keeping women in "their place". The list goes on and on. And yet we cannot just ignore religion's impact on climate change. Almost nine out of 10 people around the world consider themselves religious. That figure shows that, while in many countries

religion is not as dominant as it once was, it still has a huge influence on us.

As a marker of identity that transcends national borders, religion influences many environmentally relevant behaviours. Thus, understanding religion's role is key to tackling environmental challenges that are also fundamentally transnational.

Religion influences many aspects of lifestyle that affect the environment: childbearing decisions and the use of contraceptives; risk behaviours and use of health services; whether people see climate change as human-caused, or related to forces beyond human control; consumption patterns, and thereby use of natural resources and emissions of greenhouse gases; and willingness to take actions to abate environmental degradation.

Religion is sometimes defined as the relationship between people and that which they value as holy, often in supernatural terms. All faiths share a common ethic based on harmony with nature, although a wide gap is often perceived between the religious texts and the current practices of the adherents of those religions.

A surprise to many is that religion has had major positive influences on the natural environment. Animism, a view of the world found among many traditional peoples, believes a spiritual link exists between humans and nature, leading to the founding of sacred sites protecting nature.

The Baha'i faith teaches that the grandeur and diversity of the natural world are purposeful reflections of God. Buddhism teaches that respect for life in the natural world is essential, underpinning the interconnectedness of all that exists.

Christianity teaches that all creation is a loving act of God and that humanity may not destroy biological diversity or destroy God's creations without the risk of destroying itself.

Islam teaches that the role of people on earth is that of *khalifa*, or trustee of God, whereby humans are entrusted with the safe keeping of Earth and its variety of life. The prophet Mohammed is quoted as saying: "There is a reward in doing good to every living thing".

Jainism, one of the oldest living religions, teaches non-violence towards human beings and all of nature. It believes in the mutual dependence of all aspects of nature belonging together and bound in an intricate relationship.

Judaism outlines a series of ethical obligations relevant to the conservation of nature. "Take care not to corrupt and destroy my universe, for if you destroy it, no one will come after you to put it right" (Ecclesiastes, Rabbah 7).

All Buddhist teaching revolves around the notion of dharma, which means truth and the path of truth. Buddhism cares for wildlife and teaches that the protection of biological diversity is respect for nature and that living in harmony with it is essential.

Hinduism believes in the forces of nature and their interconnectedness with life itself. Certain rivers and mountains are sacred, as they give and sustain life. All plants and animals have souls, and people must serve penance for killing plants and animals for food. The Bhagavad Gita presents a clear description of ecology and the interdependence of all life forms, from bacteria to birds.

The teachings of Sikhism are based on a premise of life liberated from conspicuous consumption.

Shinto, the system of indigenous religious beliefs and practices of Japan, is strongly rooted in rural agricultural practices with ceremonies and practices that guide the relationship between people and nature. Societies with declining biodiversity are seen as being in decline themselves.

While religions teach an enlightened approach to relationships between humans and humans and the natural world, their adherents often pervert or ignore them. It reminds me of a cartoon of Jesus, Moses, Muhammed, Buddha and Kali in a support group with Jesus lamenting their common need to be spared from their followers. Only one example of these followers is required: white Christian Evangelicals in the US embracing Trump's demagoguery, homophobia, racism and xenophobia.

And yet, in spite of the followers' failings, we can't ignore 87% of the world population because they are religious. Those who value preservation of the planet need to mobilise religious leaders to promote positive ways their faithful are called to combat climate change. It can be done successfully. Pope Francis, a scientist himself, has already had a major impact on the thinking of Catholics in this regard.

Another highly successful intervention can be seen in Tanzania. On an island off the coast, fishermen had been using dynamite as a quick and easy way to bring in the day's catch. But this method of fishing is very damaging, destroying coral and killing immature fish and turtles.

Local conservation organisations tried to educate the fishermen on the harms of dynamite fishing, but this fell on deaf ears. The government then banned the practice, but again the fishermen took no notice. Then ARC stepped in.

The Alliance for Religions and Conservation (ARC) is a secular body that helps faith leaders to create environmental programmes based on their faith's core beliefs and practices.

Members of ARC realised that all the fishermen were Muslim, and that the local sheikhs had a lot of influence in the community. So they showed the sheikhs passages in the Koran that promote pro-environmental behaviour, and told them that dynamite fishing goes against these teachings. The sheikhs spread the information to their community and, as devout Muslims, the fishermen listened.

One local fisherman, said: "I've learned that the way I fished was destructive to the environment. This side of conservation isn't from the mzungu ["white man" in Swahili], it's from the Koran."

So what is the carbon footprint of faith? It will depend on those of us whose faith perspective leads us to value earth justice and to act accordingly. Unitarians have a pretty good history of being on the right side of this issue. Where we have failed is in trying to go it alone with the 13% of the world who don't identify as religious. We are all too likely to believe science alone will save us. We say we honour the wisdom of all the world's religions, and yet we tend to favour humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. Unless we can overcome this bias and embrace other religions as partners, our faith will help destroy the planet.

Conversation starter: How can you expand your faith in service of the planet?