



**Spiritual Ecology**<sup>1</sup> by  
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AS A PERSON PRIVILEGED to be nearing the end of his eighth decade on this beloved planet, I am able to take a somewhat long view of contemporary history. I was raised in the mid-twentieth century, the child of a fully secularized and rather militantly atheist household, like those of many American Jews in that era. Of course, my atheist father was himself the grandchild of hasidic Jews, but that belonged to the distant and mostly forgotten past. Religion itself, as a force in human affairs, was seen as a thing of another era. Jews coming out of eastern Europe thought of religion as an ultra-conservative force on the world stage; its image was that of the Russian church in the latter days of the czar, or of the hapless rabbis who stayed behind in old-world small towns and with their values, as thousands of Jewish young people moved off to the cities and to new continents, engaging the bold new world of the twentieth century. Secularization was seen as a constant and unstoppable process.

No one, looking ahead from the mid-twentieth century, would have predicted the tremendous role that religion would play in the twenty-first. No one, that is, except the embattled people of faith. To everyone's surprise but their own, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and others fill the front pages of contemporary newspapers, which document us as a tremendous—and sometimes, indeed, frightening—force in world affairs. The question before us is whether we can make this be good news, even redemptive news, for the history of human civilization. As a religious person who does not anticipate the direct interference of a divine hand in history to save us from ourselves, I have come to ask the question of such salvation differently. Will the resurgence of faith in God, or a rebirth of religion, bring about the deliverance of our so urgently threatened planet? Needless to say, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. We have seen Buddhists slaughtering Muslims in Myanmar recently, and Muslims slaughtering Christians and Yazidis on the battlefields of Syria. But it was not so long ago that we heard of Christians slaughtering Muslims in the refugee camps of Lebanon, and of a certain Jew, cheered

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted with the author's permission from Arthur Green, *Judaism for the World* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2020), pp. 261-262 and 268-271.



on by others, who did the same to Palestinian Muslims, thereby desecrating the holy grave of our shared ancestors. All this hate and slaughter keeps these so-called religious folks too busy to confront the most serious challenge of our age, the environmental crisis that threatens to overwhelm us all, exacerbating every other crisis as it rains down death and destruction upon everyone, without distinction. But is there also a good, possibly even salvific, side to this new power of religion, one that might lead us to together face, rather than ignore, that challenge? How do we bring such a committed and shared religiosity to birth? Let me propose another way of asking the question. Is it coincidence that the first species to have the ability to destroy our biosphere as a fit habitat for all higher forms of life is also the first to be equipped with the moral conscience and perspective that might prevent us from doing so? Religions, despite all their limitations and narrowness of vision, serve humanity as the great vehicle for that moral conscience. To say it in classical Western theological language: might it be that the rebirth of religion is emerging from a divine call that is welling up within us, stirring us to repent of our collective abuse of this planet, and of one another, before it is too late? Is God seeking to protect that last shred of moral conscience in humanity? Is religion itself being given the gift of this awareness and power to stir conscience by the One it worships in order to awaken humanity from its dangerous self-serving slumber before the earth is pillaged to the point of utter destruction?....

We people of faith need each other, my friends, and the world needs us to realize how much we need each other. We have to show that we can stand together in awareness of the miraculous nature of our existence. We need to share and give expression to a sense of divinity that penetrates every moment of our lives, enlightening even their darkest corners. We need together to form the core of a new resistance to the brutalization of humanity in our era, the disregard for the sacred quality of each human life and of the created world of which we are a part. In the growing strength of religion as a factor in human affairs, we have been given a great gift, a salvific opportunity that we cannot allow to slip between our fingers....

The contemporary religion we articulate will need to be based upon a fully nature-embracing spirituality, one that sees the divine presence as embodied within the physical world. This can be hosted by a great variety of theological views within both the Jewish and Christian traditions. But we must move away from the legacy of Platonism that we Westerners all bear, distinguishing between a “true” spiritual world and the “merely” physical. A creation-inflected spirituality means that we celebrate the divine presence within all of God’s creatures, however we spell out the details of that presence. A sense of spirituality is precisely that which brings us closer to an appreciation of nature and a sense of awe before its wonders.

That awakening of wonder and its renewal is the most important message that we religious folk—all of us—have to bring to the postmodern world. My chief mentor in recent years is the Rabbi of Chernobyl, who died in 1797. I have just completed a translation of his great book of homilies, *The Light of the Eyes*. (Chernobyl was once known for a very different kind of bright

light than that for which it is remembered in history!) In speaking of the Exodus from Egypt, he says that our Exodus has already taken place. The real enslavement of Egypt was that of

mind and spirit, leaving its victims unaware of the reality of God. Unlike the enslaved Israelites of old, we have our faith; we are aware of the divine presence that fills all the world. The challenge, he says, is how to make our actions, our moral selves, live up to our spiritual awareness.

Our situation is a bit different. We, too, live in an “Egyptian bondage” of mind and spirit. In our case, it is the secularized consciousness of our society, along with too much pursuit of success and comfort, that blinds us to the wondrous quality of existence that surrounds us in each moment, if only we could open our eyes to it. As the hasidic master knew so well, the first task of religion is the liberation of the spirit. As we attain that freedom and reawaken our souls, we need to act, both individually and as a collective force, in ways that fulfill our sacred vision.

We religious folk represent a tremendous potency for change in our world. Religion is still the language that moves the hearts and minds of most of humanity. We religious leaders of the West need to find a way to reach out to our counterparts throughout the world, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. We need to make common cause in defense of a truth that we all share, however varied our nuances in ways of expressing it. All that exists contains the power or presence of the One who created it. Therefore, we must walk through this world with love and reverence, doing all we can to preserve its glory for future generations. This shared vision needs to be translated into real political action, both within national voting campaigns and in international forums, perhaps new ones that we should create together.

The great power of religious faith in our world must be seen as a divine gift and a sacred opportunity. In it may lie humanity’s greatest hope for liberation from self-destructive forces that will cause terrible harm in times already upon us, both to our own offspring and those of all the other species that depend upon us for survival. But what we do with this gift is in our hands, especially those of our religious leaders. Only in working together, embracing this earth as divine Creation, will we be able to move forward.