

CLIMATE CHANGE

a call to action



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Designer: joi foley

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Graduate Theological Union

2400 Ridge Road
Berkeley, CA 94709
510-649-2400
www.gtu.edu

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THE FOUNDING DOCUMENTS OF the Graduate Theological Union describe a mission that is both ecumenical and interfaith. For more than five decades, we have lived into that mission, but today our foot is definitely on the accelerator. We are currently offering our first courses on Hindu sacred texts and Hindu comparative ethics; we hope to offer our first courses in Sikh Studies as soon as next year. The purpose of these new initiatives is to increase the representation at the GTU table of all of the major religious traditions of the world, so that scholar-practitioners within these great traditions of wisdom and faith can engage one another and together address the challenging issues that grip our planet.

I have found no better rationale for this than the words of Northrop Frye, quoted by Mark Toulouse in a recent issue of *Theological Education*. Frye spoke of how all human beings are defined by social conditioning. “But,” he wrote, “while our conditioning defines us, it also limits, even imprisons us, and awareness of the limitations built into who and what we are, is one of the central elements in education, particularly religious education.”

This insight underscores the importance of the interreligious scholarship that takes place here at the GTU. Interreligious education can be liberating, enabling each of us to gain perspective on other viewpoints and cultural wisdom that are at odds with our settled and habituated world. It is not just tolerance of the other, but true enrichment and growth that are the sought-for fruits of our educational enterprise.

Interreligious education enables us to gain perspective on cultural wisdom that is at odds with our settled world.

Even as we seek the continuing expansion of courses and religious centers at the GTU, we are celebrating the receipt this summer of a gift of 189 works of sacred art from all over the world. These works, collected by the Lanier Graham family, are a graphic representation of the sacred sensibilities and artistic expression that have flourished in tribes and countries all over the world. We are seeking the necessary funding for display cases so these works can be shown throughout our buildings to fulfill their function—stimulating devotion and a life of the spirit.

We are planning a significant number of educational programs for wider constituencies (lectures, forums, conferences, online resources) this year. Already this past summer our Center for Islamic Studies co-sponsored a conference on Islamophobia that attracted 300 regular participants and over 6,000 viewers online. While the GTU continues to be centered on creating scholarship and new thought, we take seriously the issue of how

spirituality can be applied to the real problems of the world. You will see this concern reflected in this issue of *Currents*, where we look with others at issues of climate change and economic inequality.

We hope you will give this issue a good read, and we encourage you to use the GTU website to keep yourself updated on our online programs available to you as part of our wider learning community.

Russ Patterson



by Laurie Zoloth

LIFE INTERRUPTED

Public Theology for a Planet in Peril

THE MONSOON RAINS COME EVERY SUMMER and only rarely, in the past, would the rains overwhelm the villages. “But now the terrible floods come every year,” says the Kashmiri farmer. Look at the picture of the dry lakebed, result of the worse drought ever. “It’s the hottest year on record,” says the California rancher. “We are fighting the fires like it is a war.” Three thousand miles away, a Brooklyn carpenter laments: “Here’s the line that marks the flooded zone.”

The signs are everywhere. The world is changing. It is happening now.

A changing climate, deepening poverty, and the conflict that attends the quiet disaster—all happening now. The UN committee on climate change (IPCC) reminds us in its latest report that the changes threaten the food supply and particularly endanger the poor who live at the margins of the sea and the desert.

What does this mean for the religious scholars of the Graduate Theological Union in beautiful Berkeley?

I believe it means we must live a life interrupted, interrupted by the urgent reality of a world in desperate need—in need of not only technical solutions, but also conversations about what ideas, traditions, and language can help transform how we think and live.

When I came to the GTU as a doctoral student more than two decades ago, I found others who understood the power of religion and its place in our public discourse. Like my colleagues, I studied the texts and traditions of my own faith tradition, Judaism, because I sought language to speak about the poverty, the loss, and the need of the world. I thought finding new language was the way to begin, for the language of public discourse had become impoverished without the rich possibilities of theology arguments. Worse yet, the talk in the public square, with all its logic and expediency, had failed to provide a reason for moral agency, for simple altruism, or even much attention to the neighbor in need.

Of course, none of this is news to any member of the GTU community—then or now. For years, the GTU’s scholarship has been distinctive in its steady commitment to the project I will call “public theology.”



LAURIE ZOLOTH (PhD, 1993) is the 2014 president of the American Academy of Religion, and director of the Brady Program in Ethics and Civic Life at Northwestern University, where she has taught since 2003. Zoloth earned both her master’s in Jewish studies and her doctorate in social ethics from the Graduate Theological Union, and was named GTU alum of the year in 2005. From 1995 to 2003 she was Professor of Ethics and Director of the Program in Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University. In 2001, she was the President of the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities. She has been a member of the NASA National Advisory Council, the nation’s highest civilian advisory board for NASA for which she received the NASA Public Service Medal, the NASA Planetary Protection Advisory Committee and the Executive Committee of the International Society for Stem Cell Research, and she chairs the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Bioethics Advisory Board.

Like so many other GTU graduates, I have sought to maintain that emphasis in my own scholarship.

When I was elected president of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) last November, I thought a great deal about how to make public theology the center of our work. I felt initial disciplinary duties to my own field of bioethics, wanting to bring the intensity and passion of our discipline and all our tumultuous questions to the fore. But so often, our questions are about singular dramas—one individual in a hospital bed, one disease in a particular lab, a particular cell, a particular viral vector.

However, increasingly, when I have spent time with scientists or public health physicians, the talk has turned to something far larger: the way a slowly but dramatically changing climate has begun to alter everything. By this, they meant the way the pH of the sea was set, and how the currents beneath it ran; how the forest cover on the Sierras would fail; how the poles would warm, and the villages on the permafrost would shatter; how the insects could spread, and the arable land disappear. Scientists who studied malaria spoke of the changing range of the hosts. Scientists who studied coral reefs spoke of their destruction. Physicians described how the loss of land would lead to famine, and how drought drove migration into overcrowded cities. Synthetic biologists turned their attention to new fuel sources and drought-resistant cassava plants. Pediatricians at the medical school spoke of how more poverty, more hunger, and more crowding was giving rise to new epidemics and the return of old terrors like measles and whooping cough—and worse, the new opportunistic diseases that came from the expanding tropics, like Dengue fever or Chikungunya.

My science colleagues would ask: What are you doing? But within the humanities, there seemed to be no particular urgency about climate change. In religious bioethics, I found little concern expressed about the topic. In bioethics, we have acted as if the most important threat to children is that they might be plotted as “designer babies,” or that what threatens our freedom is hidden fMRIs, both technologies still impossible.


But it is clear that the future is indeed deeply in peril. The physical world is fragile and in significant danger. This is not merely a “social construct,” as we say in the humanities, nor a science-fiction fantasy, but an actual fact, as they say in the sciences, a

proven theory. I now argue that climate change, and the way that it threatens the lives of the most vulnerable, must be a critical focus of scholarship, thought, speech, and action in our field. Thus, the selection of climate change as the theme for the 2014 AAR Annual Meeting. If we could change our lexis, we would change our praxis.

Consider this thesis: Scholars in religious studies and theology have duties to the world. Why?

First, while the capacity to live in our society is a privilege that is contingent on responsibilities carried by all persons, I believe we scholars hold more profound obligations. Many of us live in worlds that are relatively protected, socially and physically. Our campuses, even if they are community colleges in the inner cities, are still protected by special police, still lighted and paved, lined with trees, possessing libraries with open access to millions of texts, with safe and healthy foods, watered lawns, and tidy places to put our used Volvos and new Prius cars. It is a world beyond imagining for the vast majority of the world's poor.

Furthermore, we often teach women and men who will wield public and corporate power over the lives and worlds of millions. Our place, our location, our relative status as members, in this sense, of Pharaoh's court, implies a duty, for we are as Joseph, the interpreters and analysts of the dreams of the past and the projects of the future, complicit in the organization of economies, the order of statecraft and institutions. Or, to offer another textual example, we are as Daniel, finding ourselves in the court to interpret




As religious scholars, we have obligations that arise from the brokenness of the world.

and enact the dreams of the powerful. And in this role, we teach texts of strong and persistent justice, biblical texts that must be spoken even in exile.

We have obligations that arise from the brokenness of the world, a contingent, fragile and unfinished project that, on its own, at the moment of rupture, interrupts the constancy of our being and pulls us to attention. The other side, in the moral sense, of the world's brokenness is the fact that we have the ability





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what we are making, what we
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need, what makes us comfortable.*

to repair—and this “can” implies “ought.”

There are other reasons: What I do and how I live are moral acts—every single gesture. While the gestures seem innocent, they are cumulative and set in motion a chain of actions that is part of the systemic order of the world. And the production, exchange and consumption of the goods and services are shaped so that the vast majority of wealth is controlled by a few, at the expense of the lives and the health of the poor majority.

We are the sort of creatures, as any Kantian will note, that are possessed of a “plight” and this plight is that we cannot not act. There is no “doing nothing,” for the doing of nothing is a something, a moral act, one in which you support the existing constructs of carbon use and the policies of the energy companies, and it looks for all the world like you are then acting as if you have a duty to them, one that you enact every time you get into the car. As scholars of scripture who know this and who are deeply aware of the special regard scripture has for the poor, we have a duty to speak to this regard.

Our abundance as Westerners creates special duties, for climate change is related closely with the way that we—each one of us—live every day. In our abundance and our ease, we are, in that sense, the perpetrators. We are, as Emmanuel Levinas noted, all “dwellers in the Cities of Refuge,” biblical cities set aside for people who have committed manslaughter, not intending the death of another, but being careless or morally blind.

Finally, we have a duty that emerges from the blunt fact that in scriptural texts we think important, the point is made over and over again: Your moral activities can affect the rain, the harvest, and the health of everything you love. The link between moral choic-

es and material outcomes is made continually, and it is received and studied toward normative action. The texts suggest the interruption of desire, of consumption, and of acquisition. They link that interruption to the order of the natural world, of harvest time and planting.

What can I do to interrupt your life? To pull you over and make you attend to this crisis? Consider this scene: Lunch with friendly fellow scholars, who happily eat all around me, and all agree that climate change is coming, that it will be terrible, and that it is foolish to deny this. Yet no one is ready to change their lives, to give up meat on their plate, or to abandon the car for a bike, to change habits of air travel to conferences that we zip in and out of on jet planes. Around us the world changes, but it can seem so far away from this lunch, this choice.

There is nothing I can say here that anyone who reads the daily news does not already know, except this: We must be interrupted; we must stop. To make the future possible, we need to stop what we are doing, what we are making, what we are consuming, what we think we need, what makes us comfortable. We need to interrupt our work—even our good work—to attend to the urgency of this question. For it is, as yet, only a question, one that needs a coherent answer, an answer we have not yet seen. Is our society unable to stop careening toward the deep trouble of the coming storm because we have not fully attended?

I do not know what thoughtful answers might spring from religious scholars devoting their full and serious research attention to the problem of climate change. This year, fully one third of the sessions at the AAR Annual Meeting will address the crisis with a variety of methods, texts, and interrogations. This is a good beginning, but there must be far more. We must work harder. We must do all we can. To live an interrupted life, to live a life of moral attention, is the first duty of the scholar. •

Climate Karma

Buddhist Responses to Climate Change

BUDDHIST SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS offer rich paradigms for seeing our deep interconnectedness and integration with the natural world. These can serve as encouraging bases for responding to climate change and indeed to all environmental concerns.

Numerous Buddhist scriptures express the sacred element found in all reality, understanding nature itself as a vital agent of liberation and healing. In this view, even supposedly nonsentient beings such as trees, flowers, and ponds have the capacity to expound the teaching of reality. The thirteenth century Japanese Zen pioneer Eihei Dogen radically proclaims in one of his earliest writings that when one person engages wholeheartedly in upright sitting meditation, even briefly, space itself becomes enlightened. This relationship between yogic awareness and the physical, phenomenal dimension recalls the traditional teaching that when a Buddha awakens, he constellates a Buddha field or Pure Land. Awakened awareness

is not separate from its land and the conditioned ground in which it arises. These and a great many other Buddhist accounts of a luminous, profoundly interconnected, and healing environment are not merely descriptive, but also prescribe protective ethical principles such as non-harming, and benefiting all beings. Formal bodhisattva precepts, taken as life-long commitments by dedicated practitioners, encourage not taking what is not given, acting with generosity, not turning anger into ill-will, and treating all with respect. These precepts serve as helpful guidelines and criteria for constructive responses to such environmental damage as climate change, deforestation, and mass species extinction.

We humans do not stand outside the environmental landscape as separate, objective observers or even as superior

caretaking stewards. Even to speak of “the environment” can encourage a false sense of estrangement. Rather, we are expressions of the mountains and waters with particular human perceptual, intellectual, and spiritual limitations and potentialities. Because we are portions of the whole landscape, we have the responsibility and ability to respond from our own vantage points, while recognizing our impact on the whole. Respecting our own limitations, and the wisdom of grasses, soil, animals, and plants, we can listen more carefully to the needs and perspectives of other beings, and act to enhance the common good.

This work for the common good includes speaking our truths to human institutional and societal powers, but without being self-righteous about any particular strategies or approaches to

Climate change can become a Dharma gate, an opportunity for our true Awakening, individually and collectively.

response. Practices such as lobbying governmental and economic institutions in various modes may sometimes be appropriate and useful. I have at times found nonviolent civil disobedience to be a worthy meditative practice. But it is helpful to be creative and flexible when thinking about not only how to respond, but also how to shift and open people’s awareness. It is important to speak with one another, and to listen to others’ perspectives. We need to encourage one another to act together, in many different modes, to respond constructively in whatever ways move us.

Considering the scientific evidence about the dangers of climate change, along with what news forecasters euphemistically call “extreme weather,” it is clear that over the next decades, human and other life on our world will unavoidably undergo





GTU DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

Mary Jo Potter

MARY JO POTTER has served on the Graduate Theological Union's board of trustees since 2008, and has been a faithful supporter of both the GTU Annual Fund and the GTU Endowment for more than a decade. She has more than 25 years of work experience in the healthcare, technology, and professional services industries. We recently asked Mary Jo to tell us a little bit more about herself, and why she donates both her time and money to the Graduate Theological Union.

Mary Jo was raised Roman Catholic in a small suburb northwest of Chicago. One of her neighbors was Jewish and was active in the local synagogue. Mary Jo forged a friendship with him, and they ended up teaching together. She visited his synagogue and taught New Testament to the congregation, while he taught the Hebrew Scriptures. Apparently, Mary Jo was engaged in interreligious dialogue long before her relationship with the GTU!

Mary Jo says she believes the GTU is more valuable now than ever. "The world is in great pain, and we cannot fundamentally find the commonalities in our journeys. We've lost track of the elements of life that bind us together." She continues, "Our common values have been lost to the extremes, whether economically, politically, or socially. The GTU offers a platform for genuine, deep, interreligious dialogue that can make an impact on world peace."

Please join Mary Jo Potter in supporting the GTU with a gift to the Annual Fund today. Your donation makes a difference!

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chronic and sudden climate distress. The situation is daunting, and it is easy to feel overwhelmed and hopeless. Yet such a response is neither helpful nor realistic. A critical part in the Buddhist teaching of karma (the workings of cause and effect) is that outcomes are not yet set. Everything we do has an impact. The latest climate science indicates that while we have passed some dangerous tipping points toward a seriously inhospitable habitat, humanity may still act to make a difference. We may still reduce carbon dioxide in the biosphere sufficiently to sustain a viable new situation. Buddhist meditative practice develops qualities of steadiness and sturdiness that include the flexibility to adapt. Such resilience, along with a mindset of cooperation and collaboration rather than competition and aggression, will surely be required in our new difficult situations.

Even as individual and communal Buddhist practice forms remain vitally adaptable to modernity, Buddhist thought is also shifting to meet our current situation. A fine example is one of my mentors, the Buddhist scholar and activist Joanna Macy, who formerly taught at the GTU as part of the faculty at Starr King School for the Ministry. Joanna includes climate damage when she identifies what is happening now in the world as the "Great Unraveling." Our modern world, based on the technological revolution and its assumptions of unending progress, is dissolving. Yet all over the planet, mostly beneath the concrete shell of the corporate mass media purview, is a "Great Turning." Many, many good people around the world are working to make a positive difference, including GTU students concerned with exploring constructive values and fresh modes of helping.

I have been inspired by Joanna's model of three aspects of making a positive difference. First is the vast work of holding actions, trying to mitigate the damage. This includes political activism, lobbying for social justice, and working to serve poor and marginalized persons whose suffering is increasing due to climate damage. The second area involves developing alternative, regional agricultural and economic structures. These will be increasingly needed as official, often corrupt, institutions of our society become increasingly ineffective and irrelevant. Such new ventures include organic farms, farmer markets, co-ops, micro-banks, and many other local experiments. The third area includes the work of seminaries, religious communities, and meditation teachers, to change our ways of thinking, the hearts and minds of humanity. We can help people to see that we are deeply interconnected, with one another and with the whole phenomenal world. Our very survival depends on shifting from mindsets of competition, material accumulation, aggressively overcoming so-called "others," and endless growth, toward a lifestyle of sustainability based on cooperation and caring.

Buddhism talks about Dharma gates, entryways to the teaching and practice of reality. From this perspective, climate change can become a Dharma gate, an opportunity for our true Awakening, individually and collectively. •

Rev. Taigen Dan Leighton, PhD (GTU, 2006) teaches online at the Graduate Theological Union via the Institute of Buddhist Studies, and is Guiding Teacher at the Ancient Dragon Zen Gate temple in Chicago. He has authored numerous books on Buddhist and Zen studies.



Environmental Ethics for Today—and Tomorrow

EVEN BEFORE I CAME TO THE GTU to begin my doctoral studies in environmental ethics, two facts were glaringly evident to me. The first is that the earth and its communities—both human and nonhuman—are at a historic moment, sandwiched between the blunders of the past and the possibilities of the future. The second truth is that we humans, being the “touchstone species,” as Charles Mann puts it in his book *1491*, have a unique role to play in the context of the ecological crisis, and particularly the challenges presented by climate change. As such, we have the responsibility to save our planet from imminent cataclysm—even as we recognize how our greed and careless behavior have contributed to the current situation. While it seems there isn’t much we can do to repair the blunders of the past, hope remains that we may still avoid the worst impacts of climate change and ecological degradation.

My concern for the earth developed as I was earning my master’s in ecology and environmental science, but I completed that degree with little awareness of the complex connections between environmental issues and other social concerns. That changed in 2005, when I had the opportunity to do tsunami-relief work among the fisher folk community in Cuddalore, India. My exposure to the tsunami-hit area awakened me to the impact of environmental devastation on poor people, and helped me see how ecological disasters perpetuate and intensify social injustices—particularly poverty. Sadly, in my homeland of India, the poorest of the poor, mostly Dalits and tribal people, live in areas most vulnerable to hazards such as floods, cyclones, and droughts. Throughout the world, the poor and marginalized suffer the greatest consequences of our environmental crisis, despite contributing the least to it. My

experiences working in that fishing village along the Indian coast compelled me to pursue the interconnections between ecojustice and social justice. Exactly how I would do that was unclear; but the GTU seemed to be the right fit for me.

There were several reasons I chose to study at the GTU. First, the work of my advisor, Carol Robb, in exploring the intersections of economic justice and gender roles, and in the field of environmental ethics, served as a token of promise for the kind of work I might do here. Secondly, I was drawn by the ways the ethics area at the GTU made a deliberate attempt to integrate ethics and social sciences. Finally, an important piece that tilted the balance toward the GTU was its awarding me a presidential scholarship, without which I wouldn’t have been able to study here.

At the GTU, I realized how theories of justice work in the real world, and how significant my role as a public intellectual is.

The clarity I had before beginning the doctoral program seemed to fade as I moved into it. Perhaps I required some time to reconfigure my world and my academic interests. It was like a jigsaw puzzle where there was more than one way to put the pieces together. But it was in the process of working to fit these pieces together that my true passions were discovered.

One real turning point in the journey of finding my passion was an op-ed piece I wrote for Dr. Robb’s theories of justice course, which dealt with various theoretical frameworks that help us determine how to distribute the burdens and benefits among ourselves. Although the ideas and ideals of justice seemed distant in class discussions, they came to life as I reflected on the theme of world hunger in light of those theories. I realized how those theories of distributive justice work in the



real world, and how significant my role as a public intellectual can be, in making sense of those theories for the common good.

Continuing that passion for the theories of justice, I did a research project along with my advisor in which we examined and evaluated various theories of distributive justice in light of their helpfulness

in addressing the land-rights issues of indigenous peoples. Despite the prominence of contemporary indigenous rights movements, we discovered that theorists of distributive justice paid little or no attention to the rights of indigenous peoples, and none of their theories considered native peoples as special subjects of concern in the process of distribution of goods (or land, in this case). Our project proposed that those who have traditionally fallen outside of the boundaries of the theories of justice be included.

The work we did, in seeking to broaden the concept of justice, wasn't new, of course. For example, Susan Moller Okin in her famous work, *Justice, Gender, and Family* (1989), did a similar task. She paved the way to include women more fully in the theories of justice. More recently, one of my friends and former cohorts at the GTU, Marilyn Matevia, in her dissertation *Casting the Net: Prospects Toward a Theory of Justice for All*, proposed a theory of justice that includes even the non-human animals.

Similarly, I am seeking to focus my dissertation on including another group that has traditionally fallen outside the sphere of theories of justice: the unborn children of future generations. Given that the impacts of climate change are certain to reach far into the future, there is a need for theories of justice to distribute the benefits and burdens across generations. Thankfully, work in that direction has already begun. Edward Page, in his *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations*, delves deeper into the matter and considers the question of currency of distributive justice for the future generations in the light of climate change. Similarly, Joerg Chet Tremmel has already unveiled a theory of intergenerational justice addressing the important questions of "what to sustain?" and "how much to sustain?" in light of our obligations to future generations.

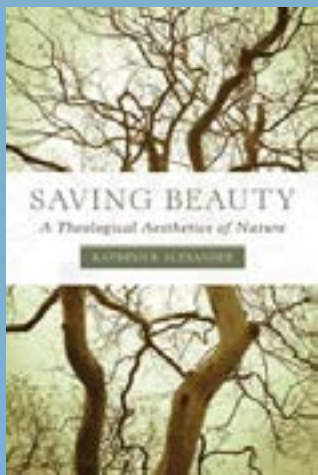
So, now, like Robert Frost's two roads that diverged in the yellow wood, I am at a crossroads in my own research here at the GTU. On the one hand, I could extend the work that has been done in the fields of theories of justice and intergenerational justice; on the other hand, I could explore the possibility of going beyond the theories of distributive justice in addressing the needs of the future generations. I am free indeed at the GTU to decide my path. What lies ahead may seem mysterious, but I am confident my path will be paved as I travel. •

Chaitanya ("Chai") Motupalli is a doctoral student at the GTU in the area of Ethics and Social Theory. In addition to his academic work, he serves as an assistant minister for families and young adults at a Methodist church in Berkeley.



Book Review

Beauty that Redeems



A 2013 GRADUATE of the GTU (PhD in systematic theology) and associate rector at Christ Episcopal Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, **Kathryn B. Alexander** takes us on a beautiful journey in her recent book, *Saving Beauty: A Theological Aesthetics of Nature* (Fortress, 2014). The book, based on her dissertation, examines "the experience of

natural beauty as a source of religious insight." Alexander outlines representative figures in the history of Christian thought who discuss the relationship between natural beauty and soteriology. She then explores theological aesthetics, which seek to "affirm the human capacity to know and love God as Beauty through experiences of the beautiful." She looks particularly at the work of Josiah Royce and further develops his ideas of religious insight stemming from nature. Alexander also surveys the art of Andy Goldsworthy, whose work with found objects in nature explores themes of transience between creation and destruction, as well as the captivating tension between human and divine creation. Finally, Alexander draws out her theological aesthetics of nature, which emphasizes the role of beauty in our own ecological age.

Through the course of this volume, Alexander not only provides an understanding of the bond between nature and salvation, but also attempts to discover what might provoke redemptive responses to ecological devastation. This vital contribution to ecological theology is both academically stimulating and socially inspiring in a way that is sure to stir your mind and soul.

—Nathan Michon



Choosing Our Kingdom

A 2011 SURVEY BY THE CENTER for International and Security Studies at Maryland and its affiliate, the Program on International Policy Attitudes, found a solid majority (65 percent) of those who said they “believe in God” see reducing global poverty and hunger as a spiritual obligation. However, only 15 percent of those same believers said they understand preventing climate change to be a spiritual obligation. It’s not that people do not see global climate change as a problem requiring action. Most respondents affirmed the reality and importance of climate change. However, they may not see the problem as a religious or spiritual matter.

As religious leaders and scholars, we must challenge this assumption. Each decision made by a religious community to use renewable energy sources has the effect of restraining harmful human impact on all our relations—plants, animals, the poor of every nation, including our own, and our extended families. In the same way, each environmentally responsible decision helps to strengthen the local community. Investment in renewable energy makes a larger contribution to the local and regional economy than an equivalent investment in corporate capital. It keeps more of the proceeds local and results in the hiring of more local people. As we shrink our carbon footprint, we grow our local social and economic capital. In this way, we show love and respect for the earth.

But local congregations tend to be smallish bodies, and the cosmos has been increasingly frustrated by the failure of significant players among the nations to agree to cooperate to mitigate the effects of climate change. Because CO₂ stays in the atmosphere for as much as 200 years, the need for immediate cooperation is huge. Our earth needs us to stop putting any CO₂ into the atmosphere, and to take more carbon out. To do so, we must not

only change our individual lifestyles, but also advocate for change on a national and global level.

International negotiations are responsive to pressures at home. The United States is one of the largest energy exporters, so the incentive is to ship more coal, pump more oil, and pipe more natural gas. I call these pressures at home the “Kingdom of Oil.” Contrast the Kingdom of Oil with Jesus’ notion of the Kingdom of God. They are similar, in that both are historical and geographically rooted, though with permeable borders. They are, however, characterized by very different public policies.

The Kingdom of Oil is the context that affects us all, and with which we collude. Our retirement portfolios probably include fossil fuel companies or electrical generation facilities that use fossil fuels. Our transportation is likely still dependent on fossil fuels even when

Most people affirm the reality and importance of climate change. But they may not see the problem as a religious or spiritual matter.

we try to cut back. While we enjoy many modern transportation conveniences, the consequences are passed on to those in future generations. The Kingdom of Oil offers many jobs, particularly in rural areas. In regions close to the centers of power, the population tends to identify with it, and its enforcement mechanisms are invisible. In regions further from centers of power, its unaccountable power alienates many of our relations, and enforcement tends to be more visible.

The Kingdom of God, by contrast, is theological language for “the common good,” the conditions for nourishing life on earth for all species. In the Kingdom of God, two-legged creatures have an important place, but not at the center, for biological systems are rich with biodiversity, and two-leggeds enjoy life but intentionally limit their impact so others



may live. The Kingdom of God looks different from geographical context to geographical context, and it recognizes many different forms of social organization through which people participate as citizens and contribute to making policy. These citizens contribute to feedback loops as they learn what it means to live lightly on the earth in their particular contexts, and provide for the vulnerable among us.

As people of faith living in this world today, we have a foot in both kingdoms. In the 21st century, Christians look to the church to be a sign of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes the sign is covered with mud, but congregations shape the way we understand what is church. Christians participate in a network that spans the globe. In the church, some places more than others, we have become sensitized to the interconnected web of life to which we want to be accountable and act to make changes. Yet in light of the steady increase of atmospheric greenhouse gases, there is still much to be done.

When the Kingdom of Oil bears down and makes its will known in the halls of government and commerce, we have access to another power, the Spirit of Truth being born. We will be most aware of it when we work together to accomplish yet another action toward God's kingdom. Let us dedicate the roofs of all our sanctuaries to God's purposes in the world, to life space for all our relations, and to the hope for the earth to which the Spirit gives a new push. •

Dr. Carol Robb is Professor of Christian Social Ethics at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and author of Wind, Sun, Soil, Spirit: Biblical Ethics and Climate Change (Fortress, 2010).



by Michael A. Smith

From the Soil to the Soul

IN LIGHT OF THE DISTURBING

statistics surrounding climate change, theologians, social justice activists, and people of faith must carefully consider the degree to which the environmental movement has historically marginalized the most vulnerable populations. While we are learning more and more about the tragic environmental consequences of lifestyles built on affluence, convenience, and disposability, what we often fail to see is the catastrophic impact of environmental degradation upon the disenfranchised and the dispossessed, including children, women, people of color, and the poor.

This summer, I led a two-week intensive course at the GTU's American Baptist Seminary of the West entitled *From the Soil to the Soul: Faith and Environmental Justice*. The course grew out of my own efforts to elevate eco-theology and bring attention to the issues of ecological injustice and environmental racism. Each night, for two weeks, students from several GTU member schools gathered to discuss how the justice demands of the gospel can shape our understanding of environmental issues and our relationship to the land. We examined the complex interconnections between issues like global warming, pollution,

habitat loss, and food insecurity, and considered how faith communities might become part of the solution.

As pastor of a historically African American congregation, I am aware that many in the Black church view ecology and environmental justice as concerns of the Caucasian middle-class that feel far removed from other, more immediate challenges facing our communities. Yet I'm also aware of how humanity's distorted relationship with the earth has particular impact on communities of color. Our church is located in a neighborhood in South Berkeley that is considered a "food desert"—a place where many people do not have access to healthy, affordable, and nutritious food, especially if they do not own a car.

Our congregation decided to address the issues of environmental justice and food security through the creation of our Soil to Soul Urban Garden Ministry. This led us to develop an organic garden on our church property, enabling us to provide cheap and healthy fruit and vegetables to the members of our church and the wider community, while also helping individuals reestablish a more life-giving connection to the earth.

Like the Civil Rights Move-





ment, the environmental justice movement began among poor and working-class African-Americans from the South, although it became a multi-cultural movement early on. But environmental stewardship can sometimes feel like a fleeting concept in impoverished communities where the legacy of migrant farming, slavery, sharecropping, and displacement has distorted people's relationship with

the land. As we consider the environmental issues facing low-income communities, the impacts of race and class often rear their ugly heads. Whether we are discussing the displacement of Native Americans, deforestation in Malaysia, illegal dumping in the Niger River, or the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, history bears witness to the fact that the disregarded, the disenfranchised, and the dispossessed live on the front lines of vulnerability and risk as it relates to the plight of the environment.

I became immersed in the environmental justice movement about 20 years ago when I served as a supervisor at the East Bay Conservation Corps in Oakland. At the time I managed contracts with several major land management agencies in the East Bay Area. Although these agencies employed inner-city youth through the conservation corps to deal with environmental restoration practices, these issues often seemed far removed from the neighborhoods of West and East Oakland where most of the young people lived. Furthermore, it often appeared that some staff members of these environmental agencies were more concerned with the protection of plants and animals than they were about the teenagers who came to work with them. Ironically, our young people were often asked to speak about the importance of protecting our local parks and waterways, but the officials who invited them to speak seemed unconcerned that none of these parks were located in the areas where these youth lived and that the water and air quality of the inner-city was often far more toxic than surrounding suburban areas.

As I read more on the subject of environmental stewardship, I found that very little available material was written by people of color; these individuals seemed to be marginalized by the mainstream environmental movement. Similarly, the environmental workshops and conferences I attended almost never included speakers or workshop leaders who were persons of color. Ironically, these workshops often addressed urban environmental issues in poor communities. Yet the voices of the poor and disenfranchised seemed to go unheard. I discovered there was indeed a huge difference between environmental stewardship and environmental justice.

Although politicians, activists, and even theologians throw around fashionable ideas about green living, most people do not understand the depth and the breadth of the environmental justice movement as well as the disproportionate impact that environmental devastation has on poor communities of color. In a chapter of *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina*, environmental justice pioneer Robert Bullard observed that low-income communities of color were hit hardest by Katrina: "Pre-storm vulnerabilities limited participation of thousands of Gulf Coast low-income communities of color in the after-storm reconstruction, rebuilding, and recovery."

Bullard lamented how "days of hurt and loss" gave way to "years of grief, dislocation, and displacement." New Orleans is only one of countless communities where such problems loom.

In light of these monumental struggles, I sometimes ask myself if one church's effort to create a garden of hope in its community really makes any difference. But Tracy Freeman, an ABSW

student who also serves as our congregation's Soil to the Soul Garden Coordinator, regularly reminds me that we are making change, albeit slow and on a micro level. Tracy helps me remember that when we convert a blighted lot into an organic garden, when we help one family eat healthier, when we motivate one young person to become involved in environmental justice, we are being successful. Each of these gestures is like tossing a pebble into a pond: Who knows where the ripples might lead? •



Michael Smith (right) and a community volunteer in the Soil to the Soul Garden.

Rev. Michael A. Smith is a graduate of American Baptist Seminary of the West (MDiv/MCL, 2010), and pastor of McGee Avenue Baptist Church in Berkeley. He is currently pursuing his PhD in the School of Public Service at Capella University.





by Doug Davidson

Bearing Witness to Suffering and Hope

Spotlighting Dr. William O'Neill, SJ, recipient of the GTU's 2014 Sarlo Excellence in Teaching Award


WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DO THEOLOGY AS a way of bearing witness to the suffering and passion of our world? This critical question has driven the work of Dr. William O'Neill, SJ, throughout more than a quarter century on the faculty of the GTU and the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University. Dr. O'Neill's dedication to rigorous theological scholarship that is firmly grounded in struggle and hope is a primary reason he was awarded the 2014 Sarlo Excellence in Teaching Award at the GTU Commencement in May.

Bill O'Neill is associate professor of social ethics at the Jesuit School of Theology (JST) and has taught in the GTU's doctoral program since he joined the JST faculty in 1988. His coursework and writings focus on issues of human rights, social reconciliation, refugee policy, and restorative justice. O'Neill is also a graduate of the Jesuit School of Theology, having earned his MDiv, STM, and STL degrees at JST in Berkeley, before moving on to Yale University, where he earned his doctorate.

O'Neill's scholarship and teaching have been sculpted by experiences around the world. He worked with refugees in Tanzania and Malawi, served with Mother Teresa in Calcutta, and taught on several occasions at Hekima College, a Jesuit School in Nairobi, Kenya. In 1995, in the wake of the genocide in Rwanda, he journeyed there at the invitation of a Rwandan colleague. "Traveling throughout the country, and seeing churches there filled with bodies left as a memorial... For me, it was life-changing," O'Neill recalls. "I began to think of my teaching as a form of bearing witness, as a testimony." Since that initial trip, O'Neill has returned to Rwanda several times to speak on social reconciliation and genocide.

He also had the privilege of attending some of the hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where he witnessed not only the brutality of apartheid but also the possibilities that can be born from such suffering. "I think of the work of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, and the remarkable courage and





compassion they showed. But it's not just the wisdom and courage of these great leaders but of the ordinary people. I remember hearing one South African mother confront the murderer of her child and say, 'I can never forgive you,' and then hearing another mother say, 'It is my Christian duty to do so.' How do we make sense of this? What can we say about the nature and limits of forgiveness?"

O'Neill explores questions like these in his class on The Ethics of Social Reconciliation, where he encourages students not only to master the work of others but to find their own unique voice. "I always ask students, 'Where is your passion?'" he reflects. A

few years ago, one student in the class was a young Tutsi from Rwanda, a Jesuit who'd lost most of his family. "I'll never forget hearing that student speak at the end. He said, 'We will never have reconciliation in my country until we Tutsi can recognize the suffering of those who have committed the genocide.' To me that's extraordinary, and it's not something I could orchestrate. But I try to create a space where students like that can speak, since I believe this is how the other students learn; these are the stories that they will take back. And so often, after one student says, 'This is the practice of reconciliation in my country,' then others will speak up about their own experiences. One of the Malagasy students, or one of the folks working in Peru, will say 'well, in our culture these are our experiences, and this is what we have sought to accomplish.' I feel my work is less about imparting information and knowledge than helping make these conversations possible, giving students a space where they hear one another, and find both their personal voices as well as something of a common voice."

O'Neill believes theological scholarship needs to stay rooted in the struggle and suffering. "For theology to be theology, it must engage the hard realities of our world." For the past thirteen years, he's also served as the Catholic chaplain at a federal women's prison, working mostly with poor migrant women. "Some of

these women are there for life, or for fifteen years; their children are taken from them; they have become in many ways what liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez calls 'nonpersons,'—those whose lives are considered unimportant failures. Again, I speak about bearing witness, but in many ways it's the witness of their lives—how, in the midst of so much suffering, they find the courage just to survive and to endure with a measure of dignity." He sees his work as important primarily as a part of this larger community that includes these women and others like them around the world, a way of testifying to both the struggle and the hope.

O'Neill deeply values the rich conversations that are made possible by the many faith traditions that are part of the Graduate Theological Union. "The interreligious and ecumenical nature of the GTU is so much a part of the fabric of our lives here that we can easily take it for granted," he says. Over the years he has worked in collaboration with the Center for Jewish Studies, looking at the implications of the holocaust, or Shoah. More recently, he and Munir Jiwa, director of the GTU's Center for Islamic Studies, were both speakers in a forum at the University of California addressing the topic of torture and Abu Ghraib. O'Neill believes that interreligious dialogue "often begins with compassion, in the sense of suffering with those whom history has consigned to the status of victim." He sees this as the common ground where different traditions can enter into deep dialogue that transcends doctrinal differences: "One of the great hallmarks of the world's religious traditions is that summons to compassion. What does it mean to have a compassionate heart that becomes our wisdom? I think the GTU is an extraordinary place for this kind of interreligious dialogue."

O'Neill says he is particularly honored to receive the Sarlo Excellence in Teaching Award because he recognizes the degree to which George Sarlo and his family were "deeply affected by the holocaust," which has also shaped O'Neill's own life and scholarly work. He also expresses his thanks to his faculty colleagues at the GTU, as well as to the "ones who make it all possible"—the students with whom he works. "At the end of the day, it's the students I'll remember. It's a privilege to have our lives interwoven, even for a short time. To see students gain the wisdom and courage to speak—that for me is really the great grace of these twenty-five years of teaching."

Doug Davidson is associate director of marketing and communications for the GTU.





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2400 Ridge Road
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— Dr. Laurie Zoloth (PhD, '93)

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Upcoming Events

Distinguished Faculty Lecture

"Reformations that Matter (and Some that Don't)" by Christopher Ocker, San Francisco Theological Seminary. Response by Augustine Thompson, Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology.

November 6, 7:00 pm

Chapel of the Great Commission, 1798 Scenic Avenue, Berkeley. Reception to follow in Badé Museum.

Annual GTU Reception at AAR/SBL

Honoring our 2014 Alumna of the Year, Dr. Suzanne Holland (PhD, '97).

November 22, 8:00 - 11:00 pm

Harbor Terrace at the Grand Hyatt, 1 Market Place, San Diego. Please RSVP by **Friday, November 14**, to alumni@gtu.edu, 510-649-2431.

Not open to the public.

Current & Upcoming Exhibitions

"Queer Santas: Holy Violence," works by Alma López. Doug Adams Gallery, 1798 Scenic Ave., Berkeley, **through January 9, 2015.**

"Formless Form: The Art of Sho," calligraphy by Ronald Y. Nakasone, GTU Library, 2400 Ridge Rd., Berkeley, **through January 31, 2015.**

"Byzantine Icons" from the Collection of the Patriarch Athenagoras Orthodox Institute, Doug Adams Gallery, 1798 Scenic Ave., Berkeley, **January – May 2015.**

All events are open to the public, unless noted.
Visit www.gtu.edu/events for more information.