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Time for a New Environmentalism

Environmentalists can learn a lot from the successes of missionary religious movements

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Since the early years of the environmental movement, some voices within the movement have pointed out that fighting power plants, dams, deforestation, mining, and roads is a game of defense, one that can never be won. As the [late environmentalist Peter Berg](#) used to say, such fights are “like running a battlefield aid station in a war against a killing machine that operates just beyond reach, and that shifts its ground after each seeming defeat.” In the 30 years since Berg uttered those words, the killing machine has only grown in size and power; meanwhile the environmental movement has mostly failed to evolve its tactics to go on the offensive.

Thus, it is time to create a deeper environmentalism — one that can provide a vision of a sustainable future in which human well-being is achieved while restoring Earth’s biocapacity. This will mean an environmental movement that crafts a multi-century strategy, not just annual campaign goals; that builds fellowship among supporters, not just signature lists; and that doesn’t go hat-in-hand every year to foundations and affluent individuals whose wealth is derived from the very system that needs to be dismantled. We need a movement that can learn from the most successful movements in history: missionary religious philosophical movements.

Missionary religions have rooted themselves across a variety of geographies, eras, and cultures, and today have billions of adherents. Religious philosophies offer something fundamental that the environmental movement has so far failed to provide: a way to understand the world and humans’ place in it, as well as how to behave in that world. Just as important, religious movements build committed communities of adherents — helping each other in times of need and celebrating and mourning together — and draw their resources and power directly from these communities.

Why haven't environmentalists done the same? We need to create ecophilosophies that offer humanity an ethical code to live by. We need to provide an explanation of suffering (*theodicy* in religious terms). And we need to tell a story that offers individuals a clear and unequivocal purpose — one as simple as “it is humanity's role to care for and now heal the Earth of which we are part and on which we so utterly depend.”

And then we need missionaries to spread these ecophilosophies. Organizations to set up social services to help those in need and convert them to a new way of thinking and living. Activists to go door-to-door like Mormon youth and convert people for the planet. (Canvassing operations built just to extract campaign contributions don't count.) We need to build community gathering places where Earth fellowship roots and flourishes, and develop ways to cultivate the artistic expression and political action of those within these communities.

Environmentalists need to start providing people with real, tangible assistance, just like the Christian soup kitchens, food pantries, and clinics across the United States or the Islamic madrassas across Southeast Asia. There's no shortage of need for such eco-missions — in developing countries, of course, but also in overdeveloped, inequitable countries like the United States. [Atrocious daycare centers](#), underserved school systems, failing hospitals, even predatory lending operations are all excellent intervention points for eco-missionaries. Just imagine a non-profit payday loan store that in the process of lending (at a more reasonable rate) teaches clients how to extricate themselves from both the debt trap and the destructive consumer culture at its root? After all, the faster we facilitate a transition to a [degrowth](#), post-consumer future, the better off people and the planet will be.

But truthfully, it might already be too late for a gentle transition to a sustainable civilization. We've already committed ourselves to a nasty, brutish future — with at least 2 degrees Celsius of climate change baked into the coming centuries. Given that the world's governments are busy divvying up the Arctic instead of writing a climate change treaty, and that fossil fuel companies have trillions of dollars of reserves already earmarked and ready to extract (including new sources of shale gas and tar sands), it would take a miracle for us to keep climate change under catastrophic levels of 3, 4, even 6 degrees.

Miracles probably don't have a place in ecophilosophies like they do in monotheistic missionary religious philosophies. Neither will ecophilosophies promise the kind of eternal salvation that the world's two most successful missionary religions, Christianity and Islam, offer. But I believe that environmentalists can offer something almost as attractive: *physical* salvation (or at least a higher chance of survival), here in this world. We can help prepare those who listen for the turbulent times ahead. Basic skills — cooking, gardening, foraging, sewing, carpentry — will become far more valuable in the radically local and disrupted future we'll live through, and teaching these to adherents might mean the difference between life and death. Creating ecophilosophical groups today that can prepare their members for that transition—psychologically, spiritually, and economically—now while also mobilizing their members politically (just as religious groups mobilize their adherents to act politically as part of their service) will be much more effective than running one defensive campaign after the next.

If we work today to spread new ecological philosophies, when the dark age that we've likely set upon ourselves concludes centuries from now, and a new civilization starts to flourish around the poles of the planet, we might have a cultural orientation that is no longer obsessed with growth, but understands humanity's utter dependence on the planet for our ability to survive and thrive. So that instead of once again creating a civilization that grows until it collapses, we can truly bring about a just, equitable, and sustainable civilization that so many of us long for.

Erik Assadourian is Senior Fellow at Worldwatch Institute and co-director of [State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible?](#) He is author of the book's "[Chapter 10: Re-engineering Cultures to Create a Sustainable Civilization](#)" and "[Chapter 27: Building an Enduring Environmental Movement.](#)" A longer version of this essay was first printed in [Earth Island Journal](#).

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