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Why God Cares: Religion and the Energy Crisis

When faced with the daunting specter of world energy issues and environmental crisis, it is natural to focus on finding solutions to our problems of sustainability and pollution. Before jumping into a frenzied search for solutions, however, it is necessary to take a hard look at precisely why we care to solve this problem in the first place. This is a much broader question, rooted in culture, philosophy, ethics, and religion. How we as a species deal with our spirituality has a great impact on our obligations to each other, to the world we live in, and to future generations.

Looking at the potential harmfulness of the energy crisis, it is remarkable that more people are not concerned about changing lifestyles and conserving resources. Our high rate of growth and energy production are causing widespread climate change, poisoning our air and resulting in the extinction of species. Humanity cannot continue to consume energy at the present rate given the limited supply of fossil fuels and the consequences of pollution, yet there seems to be a problem in cultivating widespread public concern for these issues. Even if the average American does not know the specifics of the matter, most everyone is aware of global warming, dying species, and the fossil fuel problem, so the lack of motivation does not stem from ignorance. There is some other factor contributing to the motivation problem, one that goes much deeper into human nature.

The basic problem faced in cultivating concern about the environment is one of selfishness. In our modern secular society people are encouraged to be self serving, seeking individual success. They are valued for what they are able to accomplish for themselves, with the assumption being that many individuals working independently will result in success for the whole (Dorff 95). This obsession with success and progress has become the religion of the modern world, its primary concern. Many people blame this attitude for a growing sense of spiritual emptiness in our society, a void that has been filled with growthism and selfishness, and could be better solved by the incorporation of spirituality (Brockelman 36). This apparently godless attitude, however, does appear even in the religious traditions which claim to shun it.

One of the most basic moral values is that of liberty, the ability to exercise some amount of control over your individual life. When given the liberty to make choices, people are given the possibility of selfishness. This concept has many different definitions and implementations across the world, but all agree that on some level it is good to preserve liberty and bad to impede it. Eastern religious traditions seek a release from the suffering of life and the limitations of the individual personality, defining freedom as complete independence from the material world. Semitic religions, on the other hand, tend to look at freedom through the concept of free will, as a fulfillment of the individual personality through a conscious relationship with God. Another aspect of this more western view is the definition of freedom as the ability to enjoy life without oppression, giving the concept a social and political dimension. Either way, freedom for the individual is in conflict with the morality and benevolence which should motivate concern for energy issues (Ward 42-48).

If the search for freedom creates tension with morality, then why are people motivated to be moral? Several reasons are given by Buddhist scholars. Often people act morally because they seek rewards or fear punishment. This is certainly reinforced by a society which enacts laws and limitations in order to preserve order, and on a more instinctual level it has always made sense for humans, as social animals, to cooperate and be just to one another. For Hindus the concept of Karma, the belief that good or bad deeds in this life may determine future destiny, may motivate people to be moral. The second reason to be moral is a belief in the source of the rules that dictate right and wrong. This attitude can be observed in the traditions of Judaism and Islam, two religions that tend to see God as a just and objective lawmaker, above all criticism or questioning (Ward 51). This can be likened to the relationship between a young child and parents or teachers whose apparent infallibility is a matter of childlike faith. Finally, the third reason Buddhism gives for moral action is simply the wish to be virtuous (Medhidhammaporn 34-36).

This leads to a critical question: What is morality? If people wish to be virtuous, then there must be some basis for determining what virtue is. As complex a question as this is, there do seem to be some universal moral truths based on basic needs like food and water which are necessary to survival (Ward 40). People have common needs, and it is from this shared nature that we derive our concept of community and humanity. First of all, it is necessary to recognize and respect others as people, seeing the individual as similar to the group. The idea of impartiality, seeing each individual as equally good, is also a part of this moral base. These principles establish the universality of a society. Not all people agree on the boundaries of this universality, some limiting it to a certain group of people while others extend moral obligation to include other species and even inanimate objects, but within whatever sphere is established, individuals are considered similar. This similarity is important because based on shared characteristics, what is moral for one person in a society is moral for all people in that same situation. Committing to this principle is the basis for moral decisions, whatever the specifics of the belief system may be (Runzo 23).

Looking across religions and even outside spirituality, all moral theories take into account the principle of benevolence which says we should wish well to others (Runzo 23). Versions of this "golden rule" crop up across the globe, based on empathy with beings similar to ourselves. Principles of empathy and non-injury are very important to Hindu thought (Bilimoria 7). Confucius stated in the Analects, "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire," and one Buddhist aphorism states that "He who for the sake of happiness hurts others who also want happiness, shall not hereafter find happiness." Jesus is quoted in Mark 13:33 as saying "Love your neighbor as yourself" and in the Hadith the prophet Muhammad declared that "No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." These rules are all based on the idea that when one sees all beings as similar to himself, he will cause no harm to them (Runzo 26). Underlying this assumption is the belief, held by the Confucians, that humans are instinctually naturally good and kind. Seeing someone in need, the impulse is to help them for no reason other than natural empathy (Tucker 331).

Universal as this principle of benevolence is, it has been interpreted differently all over the world depending on the degree of its implementation and the scope of its application. Taken to the extreme, benevolence should result in purely selfless behavior, caring only for the welfare of others. The Christian notion of selfless love, the Confucian ren or human-heartedness, and Buddhist compassion all reject selfish behavior, as do many other creeds (Runzo 26). Buddhism itself denies the existence of the self, tracing all evil back to selfishness. The self only exists in relation to the physical world, and people, being selfless, contribute proportionally to the whole state of the world, so that each is culpable for the wrongs of all, and the world's problems are each individual's as well (Wright 221-223). This contrasts greatly with the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam which place a strong emphasis on free will and the individual's relationship with God. This gives individuals, possessing of a strong sense of self, a large amount of control over how they treat others and the world in general (Bartolomeus 39).

Also important to morality are the limitations that different beliefs set on the scope of benevolence. Buddhists and other eastern religions tend to extend the golden rule outside of humanity to all beings which experience pain or suffering (Rockefeller 47). This contrasts with the more anthropocentric Abrahamic religions which see humanity as the most blessed of all God's creations, a point of view which has had profound effects on our modern western worldview. These traditions see nature as a part of God's relationship with humanity, a gift that people have been given because of His generosity. This is perhaps at the root of the western ideology which places a high priority on human progress, individual morality, and the uniqueness of human society. Lamenting the emphasis of these traditions on the power of humans is not helpful, however. Humanity does in fact hold great power because of the impact our actions have on the natural world and it is necessary to come to terms with that responsibility (Bartolomeus 35-37).

Despite the differences in perspective between the world religions, most do acknowledge the responsibility that humans have for the environment and the wellbeing of other species. Native Americans such as the Inuit believe that both animals and people have souls and have a close relationship to one another, so much so that it is said they come from a common ancestor. They must respect animals so that they continue to be plentiful and provide for human needs in a sort of symbiotic relationship between people and nature (Robinson). Biblical thought is wildly different from that of the Native Americans, having battled against paganism and animism to create a humanity-centered religion, but Jewish texts also make it clear that the protection of the environment is mandatory (Gendler 68). Adam was given dominion over nature but also charged with the duty of preserving it, a relationship emphasized by God's later covenant with Noah, promising never to destroy humanity or the natural world again. Israel's fate is shown to be tied to the land, dependent on God's will and His control over the natural world. There are laws commanding that the land be allowed to rest every seventh year as well as dietary laws restricting consumption and protecting animals from pain, evidence of an important balance between paganism and monotheistic indifference (Dorff 105).

Christianity and Islam have developed the idea that humans dominate over nature only as God's agents, that God can limit the usage of nature (Dorff 106). Christianity deals with this responsibility through the example of Christ, the humble servant. Given stewardship over the earth, people are supposed to turn that power into humility and attempt to serve creation just as Christ served his people. Islam also deals with this duty by calling people the khalifa, appointed regents who carry out God's will rather than their own. This lightens the moral load on humanity somewhat, seeing humanity as more of a middleman while the ultimate responsibility rests with an all powerful God (Bartolomeus 37-38). The Muslim worldview is also slightly different in that the natural world was created to fulfill specific functions, such as providing sustenance and shelter for humans, and will never fail in that God given mission unless faced with a stronger force. Nature and man are both created to serve God's purpose, but are quite distinct in that humans have been given free will (Tabataba'i 67-68).

Independent of humanity's obligations to the natural world, religions the world over also emphasize the duty of humans to one another and to their society. Judaism and Islam both express a strong obligation to family and community. Born into the Jewish community, the individual is necessarily a part of a social structure in which religion and family are of the utmost importance (Dorff 104). Islam emphasizes a child's duty toward his parents, considered the foundation of the child's life. Parents with this mindset see their children as extensions of themselves, and as such must prevent them from committing evil, teach them how to live, provide for their education, and integrate them into society (Tabataba'i 189-190). Confucianism also emphasized the family and creates a strong link between generations, expressed through a great respect for ancestors (Tucker 334).

All of these moral duties to nature and society strongly support the current environmental concern for the future of energy use, and all play large roles in the lives of billions of people worldwide. Our behavior is harming animals and plants worldwide, will possibly result in discomfort for our descendents, and is already causing problems in our society. According to the moral standards put forth by religious creeds, these problems should be demanding our full attention, but in many cases they have been pushed aside and ignored. This is because many ethics focus on human behavior in the present and in the context of human society. It is incredibly difficult for people who have an anthropocentric worldview to expand their ethics to include obligation to the entire biosphere, especially when that requires sacrifice on their part. It is even more difficult for anyone to feel empathy for generations of people who they will never meet, somewhere in the future, or for people suffering the environmental impacts of our energy use on the other side of the globe. Our ethics simply do not stretch that far, cannot be applied that broadly because of the emotional energy required to care for that many people and to tackle such a big problem.

In order to counteract this problem of emotional and moral distance, we must find ways to bring issues of sustainability and environmentalism closer to home. A change in our society's attitude toward nature will be essential for creating a sustainable global community, an advance perhaps even more important than any scientific or economic approaches to our environmental problems (Tucker 331). Whatever faith people belong to, they must examine it carefully to understand how its principles apply to future generations and the natural world, recognizing the intrinsic value of both rather than their utility in the present. Only by cultivating a respect for our world and the people who will one day inherit it will we be able to incorporate them into our moral sphere, seeing them as equal to others in our consideration.

Such a task, taking all of creation into account when evaluating the morality of any action, does not seem humanly possible. Certainly, reverence for nature does not necessarily depend on spirituality, but the problem we face is too big for one person to deal with. Together, the people and faiths within society need to rely on and learn from each other in order to confront the issues that face us, and for the religious, it may help to believe that something larger than humanity cares as well. It certainly couldn't hurt.

[Comments: This is well written, and your class presentation was even better! It showed that you have a good understanding of the moral dimension of the energy-environment problem. It's interesting to try and understand the origin of concern for future generations that probably everyone in class has to some degree, and how this affects our lives. You tackled the most difficult and fundamental problem in the course and did a fine job of putting things in perspective. A good starting point for reflecting on these religious and philosophical questions. RDB]

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