



# Roundtable: Greening the Flock

## Participants

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### How should religious institutions foster sustainability?

*Science might persuade us that the Earth is in jeopardy thanks to human abuses, but religion could be the motivator for us to do the right thing about it. Despite perceived clashes between adherents to science and followers of a higher power, preserving the planet and the people on it does not have to be a secular undertaking. Sustainability: The Journal of Record gathered representatives of a variety of religious institutions to talk about religion's appropriate role re: the environment, whether there's a textual basis for faith-based involvement, and the practical measures that leaders and congregants can take to foster sustainability. Excerpts from the discussion follow.*

## Religion's Role

**Peter Adriance:** What is the role of religion in fostering a sustainable world?

**Peter Brown:** The role of religion in fostering a sustainable world is essential, although I would use a different word than sustainable. I would use the word *flourishing*. You could have a sustainable world but not a desirable world or a just world, and I think as a single phrase, flourishing gets closer to it. There is a notion in Quakerism that to me helps to frame this issue. It comes from Rufus Jones, at least in my experience, and he referred to the human self as amphibious, as living in part in time, in ordinary time and having your lunch and making phone calls and things like that, but also as having the possibility of living in a time that's eternal, or timeless maybe being more accurate, where you perceive yourself to be part of a very long-term order in which you want to move in a direction of justice and of abundance.

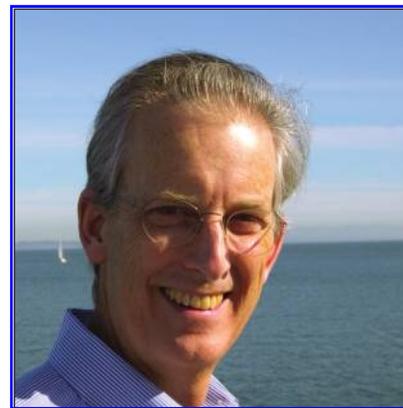
I've found a very useful set of concepts from a book by James Carse called *Finite and Infinite Games*, where he contrasts finite games, like hockey or baseball, which is in a fixed place with a fixed number of players and a referee and rules can't be changed, all that kind of thing, where the point of the game is to win, with another kind of a game, which he calls an infinite game, where the point of the game is to keep the game going. And in an infinite game, the weaker players are aided by the stronger. The rules can be

changed. The place can be changed. The point is for everyone involved to progress.

To me, that lines up with Rufus Jones's discussion of the amphibious self. The self of the present in time is the self that's playing a finite game, but the self that is part of a long-term, eternal, and hopefully just order is someone playing an infinite game.

**Peter Adriance:** The idea of moving things forward, I would agree with that in terms of Baha'i perspective; we think the purpose of religion is to assist humanity in carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization.

**Fr. John Rausch:** Let me just quickly say that Roger Gottlieb is a recognized person in terms of religious environmentalism, and he pretty much proposes that religion does have within it the seeds that could possibly steer us away from the abyss that we are seemingly going toward in terms of destroying the Earth. From my perspective, dealing with the Catholic community as well as the ecumenical community in Appalachia, we can present religion either as something very static, like dos and don'ts, things like that, or something very evolutionary and progressive. We might even use phrases like "building the city pleasing to God" or "being a co-gardener with God." In other words, something that would project a progressive—going toward a goal where all of human fulfillment can be attained.



Peter Adriance

**William Aiken:** I really like Peter's concept of flourishing, which is a much more attractive thing than something that's just sustainable. And I agree with John's outlook that religion has the seeds of moving



us forward. I think religion played a role in getting us where we are today. If we change our religious vision to one of living in an interdependent harmony with the environment, we would see it as being integral to our own lives, not as some other. Religion can play a big role.

The other role that I would introduce for religion, aside from that of moral persuader, which I think is an important one, would be that of religion in communities, and those communities can be examples. Those communities themselves can begin to pilot things, can begin to be living, breathing examples of people trying things. So it can be a persuader, and as a community, it can set examples to the world.

**Nicola Coddington:** Not only does religion have a role, it's essential if we're going to have the shift in perspective and value that is going to be necessary to change our behavior. Religion played a profound role in every previous cultural revolution, such as ending slavery, the civil rights movement, and so on.

One of my spiritual heroines is the Buddhist Joanna Macy, who writes about what she and others call the Great Turning, which she talks about as having three dimensions: actions to slow damage to the Earth and its beings, analysis of structural causes and structural alternatives, and shift in consciousness. That includes many, many forms, including new understandings of traditional religions, and new approaches to ecology that integrate theology and deep ecology. Religion doesn't just have a role, it's essential.

**Peter Adriance:** You mentioned shifting in consciousness and building new understandings. Now, religions have been around for a long time. How come they're changing or they need to change now? Or what is it that they didn't do in the past? Why don't we have the transformation yet that we're looking for?

**John Wood:** It's almost as if the general public is just discovering that somehow religion might have a role. And I think all of us know that for the past 30 or 40 years, as the whole question about environment has been rising to the forefront, now what we call sustainability, that religion has been part of that all the way along. It's a major and central social formation. Things do not happen in our culture without it. People don't live lives that are just education or just law or just government or just business. They live whole lives, and religion is part of that.

It's important to remember where we've come from and the fact that, as we talk about sustainability today, we're standing square on the shoulders of people that have been laying a very strong foundation. I know from my own institute for 30 years, Cal DeWitt, Au Sable Institute's founder and president emeritus, has been part of the move working with scientists and theologians to uncover—and some

might say re-cover—the biblical narrative, to open up the scriptural texts and ask what do these things mean for us today.

And so you say, "Why has it taken so long?" These things don't happen overnight. This is an intergenerational issue and question, and, as humans, we have a much longer time frame in mind.

**Fr. John Rausch:** Religion follows the world; the world doesn't follow religion. In other words, the questions that come up—Why was there World War I? Why was there the dropping of the bomb in Hiroshima? Why did we have the Holocaust? Why do we have the environmental crisis? Now theologians get to work. Even though they should have been on the forefront, in reality, theologians usually are trying to pick up the pieces, with "Here's some meaning after this destruction that just happened."

**Peter Brown:** If I could just make a slight dissent from that. Religion has a very prophetic role, to call attention to things that are in need of being addressed that I think is also prescriptive and proscriptive. Certainly in many, or maybe all, of the world's major religions there have been people who have done that.

### Sustainability in Religious Texts

**Peter Adriance:** Do religious texts support or promote sustainability?

**Rabbi Fred Dobb:** I would answer the role of religion a little differently, to describe it as a conscience, a goad, and a touchstone. It's a conscience because religion and spirituality can call us to our deepest selves. It's a goad because they all carry prescriptions for productive action, which is needed out of fealty to the text, but also out of fealty to creation itself. And a touchstone because we literally touch something that is deep and powerful and beyond us, and often ancient, as well, and we have the imbued wisdom of a whole community across time and space, so that the environmental movement did not begin for us in 1962 with Rachel Carson (author of *Silent Spring*), important as that contribution was, but it goes back to all of our sacred scriptures.

In terms of the texts themselves, it's not so much whether the texts support or promote sustainability or not, it's really more about the hermeneutics, the interpretive approaches that we employ rather than the texts themselves. The texts are always multivocal. Most of them were very progressive in the eras when they were generated, whereas a literalist reading today with modernity advancing so fast would render some of those texts possibly counterproductive from an environmental or sustainability standpoint. But if we can hold on to the essential sacredness and



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forward-thinking-ness and big-picture vision of our sacred texts—and all of our scriptures certainly share those elements in common—then we can say, yes, the texts do support and promote sustainability.

**Cassandra Carmichael:** What does sustainability mean if you are a person of faith? From our perspective, in our education and worship materials, if you were to follow scripture and to follow God’s call, there would be no question that you would live your life sustainably. When we’re looking at the texts and scripture and we’re looking at the teachings of God, it does include justice. You can’t be sustainable if you aren’t also just, and I don’t think that you can be fully a person of faith or fully religious without living a sustainable life.

There’s no role for religion in sustainability. That’s segmenting out sustainability as the big picture and religion as a portion thereof. I think that that’s not the correct question to ask, if that makes sense. If you are a person of faith, you should be, if you read the scriptures and follow God, following the path of sustainability.

**Peter Adriaance:** So the short answer would be, of course religious texts support and promote sustainability?

**Cassandra Carmichael:** Right.

**Fr. John Rausch:** While we affirm the religious texts, I think perhaps what we need to also think about is the methodology of trying to secure our understanding of where we are historically at this moment. In Appalachia, we have two bishop’s letters. One is “This Land Is Home to Me,” 1975. The other is “At Home in the Web of Life,” which is about sustainability. That was 1995. The methodology is, first of all, a closeness to the people. I think from our traditions, we would find that loving God is always attuned to the suffering of the people, and in this instance we can say the suffering of God’s creation.

Then, in addition to closeness to the people, there is a true digging into the sciences of our day, whether that’s a social science or the biological science or whatever. In the Catholic tradition, we would say we need to invoke the Holy Spirit to see where this text and where this cry of the poor, where this cry from the broken Earth, is coming to us and leading us. It’s a question of methodology as to how to apply those texts today.

**Peter Brown:** I’d like to just offer a dissent from some of this. This question is very broadly stated, do religious texts support or promote sustainability? Well, there are lots of religious texts out there, and I think we’re really doing a disservice just to lump everything together ... I think that both in the Judeo-Christian tradition ... there are texts that go

in lots of different directions in there, and I wouldn’t be comfortable with a sort of blanket statement that everything is going in one direction. There are texts in the Old Testament that seem to justify wiping out whole groups of people, things like that. We need to just be much more cautious and scholarly about this. There are some texts that are very, very useful to go back to. There are other texts that aren’t so useful, and I think we need to just say that.

**Peter Adriaance:** Certainly, there is some truth to what you say there, Peter. It seems to me, though, that our understanding of the texts evolves over time. As Fred said, the times change from when the religions were revealed, and I think we have to apply present-day knowledge and science, also, to our understanding of the sacred texts. We somehow have to blend them together.

### Practicality Versus Spirituality

**Peter Adriaance:** Are religious interactions supporting practical, Earthly sustainability measures or focusing more on a spiritual component to sustainability?

**Rabbi Daniel Swartz:** There’s a tremendous amount of variation on that from congregation to congregation and religious denomination to religious denomination, and that’s probably pretty good. We talk about diversity being a good thing in a biological sense. I would say that a diversity of approaches to this issue is probably a good thing, as well. There are certainly some real challenges on the practical aspect, and I would hope that congregations don’t stay away from actually doing something practical just because it’s difficult. But it’s easy for folks in the general environmental community to see only the practical—you know, reducing carbon footprint kinds of actions—as being worthwhile. That misses the whole power of religion that Fred was talking about earlier on.

We’re not just members of the Sierra Club who happened to walk into this building with these strange religious symbols on it. There’s something there that has meaning. Having folks who really explore the spiritual dimension of these questions is vitally important.

**William Aiken:** Both dimensions are important. Buddhism posits that the core problem for most of humanity stems from the twin poisons of greed and/or ignorance. Lack of harmony with one’s environment is often pointed to as resulting from the effect of the poison of greed. But what teachings like Buddhism contribute from a religious or spiritual standpoint is this concept of inner awareness and inner mastery. How much is enough toward well-being? Is genuine well-being a product of more products, or is it a product of being more instead of having more?



**John Wood:** I'm going to join Cassandra here in pushing back against the question framed as an either/or. We often do that, and we end up saying you have to do one or the other, and we've heard already that that just doesn't seem to work well in this area. Part of the problem, if we look back, has been a kind of sense that religion dealt with spiritual things, and then you got on with the practical things of your life. I've certainly grown up, and I know many people have, hearing from pastor after pastor, saying, "Listen, what happens on Sunday morning has to happen the other six days of the week." That's been a constant challenge. So it's taking both of those things together.

The Council of Christian Colleges and Universities has instituted a grant program on taking first steps toward sustainability in the institutions, so there's initiatives in that direction. The years of work with graduate students has resulted in a number of non-profit organizations, including the Renewal Group, which is a group of students. They just finished a 30-campus tour, stirring up clubs, working on young people, undergraduates, to try and get them involved in sustainability. There's quite a groundswell of real practical stuff.

**Rabbi Fred Dobb:** There's this beautiful quote that many, particularly Christian services that I've attended, end with, saying, "Our worship has concluded. Our service has just begun." That says a lot. Similarly, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, has a great quote on this: "A theology which is not a plan of social action is merely a way of preaching and praying. It is a menu without the dinner." . . . But lest we have just the empty structure for a meaningful life without actually creating it and living it, then religion is failing at its core mandate.

## Success Stories

**Rachel Novick:** The most important issue for sustainability's success in religious institutions is meeting people on their own turf. Despite that popularity and talking about care for creation, Western religion is deeply anthropocentric. I don't think there's any point in trying to change that, nor do I think it's necessary to change it, because a people-centered view of sustainability can be equally, if not more, effective at driving societal change than a nature-centered view.

I recently heard an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change scientist quoted as saying, "With all due respect, the face of climate change is not the polar bear, it's the children of Africa." And that really speaks to religious communities that have a focus on social justice and concern for the poor. I think it's hard for people to grasp that driving their cars here in America can impact the availability of drinking

water for a kid in Southeast Asia, so we have to find ways to make that really explicit in order to be successful.

Just as an example, this is why we're planning a conference for this fall called *Renewing the Campus: Sustainability and the Catholic University*, so we can articulate the connections between theology and Catholic social thought and science and practical sustainability efforts. We've begun to see success in raising awareness of these connections.

**Fr. John Rausch:** The whole notion of environmental justice speaks to the Catholic experience. I, in Appalachia, run these tours on mountaintop removal, so I do actions such as a prayer on a mountaintop, where I take 60 people on top of a mountain. We have a prayer service, and in order for God to hear that, I usually take *The Associated Press* along with me. And by getting that out in the press, it really focused on the fact that mountaintop removal, which is destroying communities, which is an assault on low-income people as well as creation, has a direct link with wasting electricity, whether you're in Chicago, in New York, Baltimore, wherever, because the electricity that people outside Appalachia use affects the quality of life for people right here.

So this option for the poor or this bringing about some sort of a linkage between our indifference to God's creation and how people are just trying to survive, I think that is a strong way of getting this across. We've done prayer in a valley. I did a prayer on a mulch pile one time. The idea is to project to people that there are consequences for the way we travel on this Earth.

**Peter Brown:** I'm uneasy with the notion of sticking with an anthropocentric framework basically for strategic reasons only. The scientific evidence of humanity's being part of the evolutionary process is, in my judgment, overwhelming. It kicks the legs out from under a lot of the anthropocentric arguments that are out there. I think we need to emphasize the harm we're doing to the human core, which we are doing at a massive scale, but we need to extend that with sympathy and charity and compassion toward all living things. I would think that there's no reason to make the choice that's been put on the table. I would dissent strongly from it.

**Peter Adriance:** The whole notion of sustainability is not an environmental thing. It's a very integrated social, economic, and environmental picture and set of challenges that are interrelated. This is one of the challenges of understanding about sustainability, that people tend to lump it too much with the environment, perhaps, and it's something that the faith community can help to integrate in their approach.



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**John Wood:** Let me just chime in on this, because I think Peter Brown is making an important point. I don’t think John, when he’s talking and praying on the mountaintop, is trying to separate people from the creation, but in fact trying to connect them. One of the ways at the Institute over the years that we’ve done this is, it’s a pedagogical technique, and that’s what we call an integrated day, in which all of the courses that are meeting in a session come together, pick out a topic, and then we also insist that this be field-based, not just done within the confines of a room somewhere.

So they go out and begin to look at things from a multidisciplinary perspective, and the lesson that comes through over and over again, that if you harm the natural world, if you harm the creatures, then you harm people. If you marginalize and harm people, invariably the natural world gets destroyed as well. And those two things really go together.

**Fr. John Rausch:** I have great respect for both the anthropocentric approach as well as the web-of-life perspective. And, yes, I probably would be a web of life—my philosophy would go toward that. However, I want to raise people’s awareness that currently in West Virginia, there is violence going on over mountaintop removal, and it’s because people are feeling their jobs are in jeopardy. People who have been threatened that their job will be lost because they are doing mountaintop removal or something involving the environment. So immediately they will label everybody as an environmentalist or a hippie. Boom. Now we have all these people who are trying to understand about keeping some balance between creation and the human community, right? In my mind, appealing to the anthropocentric is the way people listen right now. That’s what they’re going to hear. If I were to say, “Let us look at the web of life,” I think I in many churches would be discounted as an environmentalist, one who is not realistic because of economics, because of our jobs, because of our entire society.

**Rabbi Daniel Swartz:** This is a time when lots of people are afraid economically, and in other ways as well, and that’s a realistic fear. We’ve been in these communities and we’ve stayed in these communities through economic upheavals in the past. It’s part of our unique role to be able to go and speak to some of these fears, and an incredibly valuable thing for us to do.

### Overcoming Internal Resistance

**Peter Adriance:** Do others think that there’s some internal resistance that you’ve encountered to sustainability measures? And if so, what is it and how have you dealt with it?

**Rabbi Fred Dobb:** Certainly, there’s internal resistance. We as individuals are internal messes of contradictory emotions and impulses and values. Why should we expect our organizations to be any different? ... But a big piece of where we can bring religious values to bear to address the internal resistance is religion’s contribution to environmentalism of taking the long view. We have texts like Exodus 34 that speak about thinking in the third and fourth and thousandth generation. Sometimes taking the long view is not only the religious approach, it’s also the most effective one.

**Peter Adriance:** In the Baha’i writings, there’s a reference to civilization being on this planet for a minimum of 5,000 centuries beyond where we are now. So if that’s the case, it makes it unconscionable to ignore the long-term impact of the decisions we’re making today.

### The Link between Religion and Science

**Peter Adriance:** What is the connection between religion and science in the sustainability realm?

**Rachel Novick:** I really see sustainability as a bridge between religion and science based on the threat of climate change. I think these two groups are finding that they have more in common that they used to think that they did. This is largely because the scientific community, at least in this area, has shifted away from the traditional role of science just describing natural phenomena and processes, and these descriptions often didn’t intersect with or were at odds with a faith-based perspective on the world, or were perceived that way, at least. But when it comes to the climate, scientists now have much more of a focus on what the state of the planet ought to be, and the role of human responsibility in that state, so they can move further into the moral realm of religion. And we’re seeing a lot more positive kind of intersection.

**William Aiken:** I see the two as being incredibly complementary, perhaps, from a slightly different perspective. I see science providing the information, the knowledge that’s needed to understand the mechanics of biology, etcetera, and I see religion providing the virtues that can be important to overcome what Fred described as our mess of internal contradictions to navigate toward the better responses, to take that information and use it with a little more wisdom, to use it with a little more compassion, to use it with a little more sense of social justice. I’d say overall in the picture, they work well together.

**Peter Adriance:** A few of us were at the National Conference on Science, Policy, and the Environment a year or two ago, where 1,200 scientists came



together, and there was a religious presence at the conference as well, and a lot of the discussion centered around this complementary nature of science and religion. The scientists were really appealing to the religious community that they had a profound role to play in moving us toward sustainability, that the scientists could provide the facts, but the religion and the religious communities could provide the motivation, tell us why we should act.

**Cassandra Carmichael:** It's interesting, because I was listening to Focus on the Family this morning, and they were talking about evolution versus creationism, and I had to turn it off because I just had to roll my eyes, because I feel like this is an old fight from years ago. They are complementary. I don't see what the argument or the separation is about. And I think that there is a unique role that each of us plays in this movement trying to achieve sustainability. It's a false dichotomy to set it up as religion v. science, like there's going to be some fight in the boxing ring between the two, and I wish that we could move beyond those arguments so that we could work more together.

**Peter Adriance:** I agree with you. Do you think we've made progress in that regard?

**Cassandra Carmichael:** Well, I'm not a youngster anymore, but I would say that of the younger folks that I meet, this is not something they talk about. They get it. And I feel like that they must look at those of us that are older than them and sort of roll their eyes and say, "Why are you guys even wasting your energy on this?" In some ways, the generation that we have birthed now is much more connectational.

When I give presentations to older folks—30s and over—sometimes I get these questions of connection. But when we give presentations to the high schoolers and the young adults these days, we don't get these same sort of questions of connection. I think that's a good sign.

**Rabbi Daniel Swartz:** Scientists give us practical knowledge, but they also are spiritual beings, and we shouldn't deny their ability to talk about that, and we may give spiritual guidance, but we also have an incredible amount of practical knowledge about areas that many scientists don't in terms of how to move hearts and move feet. So both of us need to be both practical and spiritual, and to see those words as being artificial categories.

**Fr. John Rausch:** From our tradition, all truth is compatible, and the very fact that science looks at truth in a certain way, religious truth is also truth in another way. They are compatible. It's a question that I think people in the church, those who are in religion, have just got to try to figure out. ... And I want to come back to that other word that was used

about 45 minutes ago—we're both looking in a prophetic way as to how we must live together, prophetic from science—people like Jim Hansen, who can say, unless we get down to 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide, we're going to lose the polar ice caps, and prophetic from the religious point of view that unless we figure out how to live in God's garden, we're going to brown out.

**Peter Adriance:** Beautiful. From a Baha'i perspective, I totally agree about the compatibility. We look at it as a spiritual principle, science and religion must agree.

### The Role of College Students

**Peter Adriance:** How can religious institutions foster sustainability on college and university campuses?

**Rachel Novick:** I think that some of the most important strands that religious institutions can draw on when thinking about how they can impact university campuses are their sense of community and their culture of service and social action. This is definitely something that I've seen in the year that I've been here at Notre Dame. One of the biggest challenges to sustainability in America, I think, is how individualized our culture is in general. People don't see themselves as being able to do much to save the planet on their own. But religious communities tie people together and create this potential for group action, and people really start to see how they can make a difference when their actions are compiled with others.

For faith-based universities that already have a strong social action presence on campus, I've found that it's more effective to build environmental action on that foundation than to start from scratch. On all campuses, there's a tremendous potential for joint social justice and environmental sustainability programs.

**Rabbi Fred Dobb:** Thinking for secular universities, all religious institutions, whether congregations or agencies, have college-age participants who come home on weekends or summers or whatnot, and often there's a real mismatch between the clued-in awareness that dominates so many of our campuses and the painfully last-generation approaches that often predominate in our individual congregations. I cannot count the number of ardent 20-year-old Jewish environmentalists who I have heard refuse to set foot in a synagogue because they still see Styrofoam there. There are a lot of basics that religious institutions can do in that sense to at least support those who are fostering sustainability on college and university campuses.

I would just add that it's a two-way street, and the question in some ways works better the other way.



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How can the energy on college and university campuses foster sustainability in religious institutions? And actually, a lot of the answer, some of the cutting-edge approaches and some of the desperately needed energies are right there in our younger members if we would only find ways to surface and bring to the forefront their concerns and truly empower these younger participants in our religious institutions to help us lead in the right direction.

**John Wood:** I'll chime in just again on this question about what religious institutions can do to foster sustainability on college and university campuses. We really, obviously, struggle with that over the years, and I think there is a generational shift that's occurring. I'm finding young people that are much more aware that the context in which their education takes place is part of the text that they're learning. They're turning more inward, more locally, and thinking about, as we just heard, a question about Styrofoam inside of a synagogue. They're interested in what we do here, not just learning about the big problems somewhere out there. And so it's the way we build our buildings. It's the way we handle our grounds and our facilities. It's how we teach as much as what we teach that brings an important lesson.