

Matthew T. Riley
matthew.riley@aya.yale.edu
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**Yale Summer Symposium: Religion and Environmental Stewardship
Environmental Education For Clergy, Lay Leaders, and Seminary Faculty
Bringing Together Science, Theology, and Ethics**
June 5-7, 2012 at Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven CT

Thomas Berry described the early years of the twenty-first century as a moment of grace. Moments of grace, Thomas explained, are times of transformation and renewal that emerge out of deeply felt sensitivities to, and experiences of, community. These moments are simultaneously cosmological, historical and religious in nature. As I reflect on the Yale Summer Symposium on Religion and Environmental Stewardship that took place earlier this month at the Yale Divinity School, I cannot help but think of the conference as such a transformative moment.

We gathered as a community of scholars, church leaders, musicians, scientists, liturgists, and students for three days of scholarship, deep spiritual reflection, and shared story. What emerged from our three days together was a remarkable confluence between the academic **field** of religion and ecology and the moral **force** of our religious communities to address an issue that we all care deeply about: the worsening ecological crisis and our role, as members of the human, Earth, and Universe communities to do something about it.

While it is never easy when reflecting so soon after an occasion such as this to put one's finger on exactly what it was that made that particular moment shine, I feel confident in observing at least five intersections where the energy and passion of the conference participants was unmistakable:

First, the liturgical elements were both innovative and uniquely compelling. Yale Professor of Christian Communication Tom Troeger and singer/songwriter Maggi Dawn, along with both students and alumni, brought together religion and ecology not just in an academic way, but through instrumental music, worship, prayer, jazz, and hymns. Weaving together Christian worship, cosmology, and love of the Earth, they invoked music and preaching that was simultaneously reveling and revelatory. Simply put, it was an instance of unparalleled grace and synchronicity.

Second, we were treated to several inspiring displays of cooperative thinking and surprisingly productive riffing between scientists and theologians that went above and beyond the norm. In particular, Yale Divinity School professor Willis Jenkins and Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies professor Os Schmidt demonstrated just how smooth and compelling a dialogue between a scientist and a theological ethicist can (and should) be. By approaching the same environmental question not just from two disparate fields, but intentionally *with each other, through one another, and in a mutually supportive way*, they demonstrated what I consider to be a new benchmark in collaborative thought. Having seen dozens of similar attempts, I regarded it as a breakthrough in terms of both intellectual cohesion and discursive fluidity between representatives from the realms of religion and science.

Third, there seemed to be a terrific amount of energy amongst the clergy and church leaders in attendance in regards to the *Journey of the Universe* project. Jim Antal, the Massachusetts conference president of the United Church of Christ (UCC) seemed

almost supercharged with his enthusiasm for what the film could do in the UCC church. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, the organizers of the conference, drew upon Thomas Berry's recent book *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth* to translate the message contained in the *Journey of the Universe* into uniquely Christian terms. Conversing with my fellow attendees afterwards, I had the impression that not only was Tucker and Grim's translation of the cosmological ideas of differentiation, subjectivity, communion into Trinitarian terms a singular expression of creativity and vision, but it was also experienced as a moment of hope and inspiration.

Fourth, I think that religion and ecology as an academic **field** and moral **force** is really starting to see the potential that can be reached when the academic aspects of religion and ecology are matched up carefully in an engaging and creative way with on-the-ground preaching, practical training, greening of facilities, and other engaged practices. With presentations from Laurel Kearns and Beth Norcross of the Green Seminary Initiative, a lively workshop by GreenFaith's Fletcher Harper and Stephanie Johnson of the Episcopal Bishops of New England, and other similarly engaged practitioners, presenters seemed to be reaching the audience at a level where participants felt not just intellectually, theologically, or morally compelled in respect to environmental issues, but they also felt empowered and engaged. More and more, individuals are connecting the theoretical with the practical, and the presenters at this symposium seemed to have established a degree of resonance that will be the benchmark for years to come.

Lastly, this particular symposium was simply buzzing with energy from students, from church leaders, from ministers, and from the academics in attendance. The energy level and enthusiasm was almost palpable and this made all the difference. As eco-theologian Larry Rasmussen spoke of the transforming power of science and religion to guide us through the "emergence of ecological civilization in the Anthropocene," for instance, faces in the audience lit up and those seated around me hung poised on every word. Larry's talk, with his focus on topics as far ranging as the guiding ethic of the *Earth Charter* or the orienting story of the *Journey of the Universe* film, was but one example of the many innovative and thought provoking presentations that captured the imagination of those present. The passion and enthusiasm of the attendees for the entire three days of the conference was more than palpable, it was electrifying!

That we are experiencing a moment of grace is clear. As Thomas tells us, such moments are privileged moments. On the one hand, we stand poised on the brink of ecological despair. On the other hand, we are given moments such as these where community, scholarship, and the guiding traditions of the world religions converge to remind us that we are not lacking in the creative energy needed to move ahead into the future. Moments of grace can lead to moments of transformation. This symposium, this moment of community, was perhaps such a moment.