Waters of baptism,” “living water,” “water of life” — “water” is a powerful symbol in Christianity. But when it comes to water as an environmental, public-policy issue, should communities of faith be involved? Do communities of faith have anything distinctive to contribute? I argue the answer to these questions is a resounding “Yes.” The participation of communities of faith in public-policy discussion is vital if we are to realize a vibrant and just ecological future.

In 1967, in a famous essay in the prestigious journal, Science, Lynn White Jr. concluded that, “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for our ecological crisis (1206). Christianity bears this burden because it long interpreted Genesis to say that “no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes,” and modern Western science and society were formed with this human-centered understanding (1205). It is not science and technology but Christianity that bears responsibility for the ecological crisis, for while science and technology made humans capable of creating the ecological crisis, science and technology are neutral tools. How humans use science and technology makes all the difference, and how we use science and technology is “deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion” (1205).

Because of the profound influence of human-centered Christian understanding, we—including “those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christian”— “are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process” (1967, 1206). Despite Darwin, we remain “superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim” (1206). “Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious,” White continues, “the remedy must also be essentially religious” (1207). The ecological crisis will not be solved by “more science and more technology,” we must “find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (1206).

White, realizing no one remains free of some overarching understanding of human nature and destiny (i.e., free from some basic religious vision), and too realistic to consider inventing a new religion, recommends we rethink Christianity and reawaken the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi in his imitation of “the ultimate gesture of cosmic humility,” wherein the transcendent “assumed flesh, lay helpless in a manger, and hung dying on a scaffold.” Christians should assume a similar humility, love all “beneath” them, and act out of love for all creatures and all creation (1967, 1207).

Happily, White was not alone in his ecological concerns and spiritual instincts. Widespread awakening to the ecological crisis in the 1970s spurred inter-religious spiritual reawakening to all creation. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, conservative and progressive Christians alike were talking about greening churches, stewardship of creation, and love for all creatures. Scholars, with a newfound respect for indigenous understandings of humans as a part of creation, developed new courses in green theology, eco-hermeneutics, eco-spirituality and, in the vein of new religions, Deep Ecology and Gaia theory. At the grassroots level, people and communities of faith formed a multitude of creation-care and local environmental-advocacy groups. Across religious traditions, among conservatives and progressives alike, the self-emptying spirit of St. Francis was rekindled and burst forth.1

In 1968, Science published another famous essay, Garrett Hardin’s “The Tragedy of the Commons.” A “commons” is an open, shared resource, such as the atmosphere, a watershed, lake, ocean, or fishery, or, in Hardin’s example, a pasture open to all. For centuries, Hardin explains, herders may happily share a commons. When the population of cattle and herders reaches the carrying capacity of the commons, however, the “inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy,” for, “[a]s a rational being, each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain” (1244). When a herdsman adds to his flock, the benefits are wholly his while the detriments of overgrazing are shared. From the point of view of each herder, then, the rational course is to add cattle. This is “the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons” (1244). “Therein is the tragedy,” for in an unregulated commons in which everyone pursues his or her own best interests while populations increase, “ruin is the destination” of all (1244).

Hardin’s essay affirmed a predominant social-scientific understanding of human nature. Humans are conditioned by the genetic and social dynamics of kinship and reciprocal altruism, but insofar as humans transcend biological and social conditioning and make rational decisions, they will seek to maximize individual security and gain. This idea, Hardin argues, is consistent with modern science’s revelation that in “real life” the ultimate good is survival (1968, 1244). Thanks to “free market” economic theory inspired by Adam Smith, which holds that individuals intending only personal gain are “led by an invisible hand to promote ... the public interest,” people have had a tendency “to assume that decisions reached individually will, in fact, be the best decisions for an entire society” (1244, citing Smith, 1937, 423). This affirmation of the pursuit of self-interest, Hardin notes, aligns with a policy of laissez-faire with regard to...
commons, such as atmosphere, water, and fisheries (1244).

Hardin's essay created an immediate sensation because he explained, contrary to confidence in the “invisible hand,” why rational action (i.e., pursuit of self-interest) in our finite world will inevitably lead to destruction of commons and ruin for all. Science and technology can only delay ruin as populations increase on local and global commons (1968, 1244). Like White, then, Hardin agrees there is no scientific or technological solution to ecological commons challenges. A change in morals and regulation of commons—“mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon”—is required (1247). Given the inherent selfishness of human nature, however, how can we expect humans to escape the logic of the commons at collective, political, “mutual coercion” levels? Who will watch the watchers (1245)?

Lynn White offered a classic answer to this question. Religions—rich with condemnation of enduring human tendencies to avarice, selfishness, and exploitation—are no strangers to Hardin’s understanding of human nature. Like White, Christianity (and most religions) also affirms a countervailing force: human awakening to transcending agape, to desire for good for all creatures. As illustrated by Jesus’ fidelity to love even to the cross, the good of survival can be trumped by the good of love and justice for all. This transcending affirmation, so beautifully visible in the life of St. Francis, is revealed when our hearts ache over the suffering of others, and in our pangs of conscience when we recognize ourselves as causes of suffering. When we gather to agree upon “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon,” White suggests, we can in that collective setting awaken ourselves to agape, appeal to our higher nature, to conscience, and agree to public policy that is realistic about human selfishness and also committed to realizing as just and good a future for all creatures as is humanly possible.

But Hardin will have none of it. He judges appeals to love and conscience “pathogenic” (1968, 1246). If we ask a man who is exploiting a commons to desist “in the name of conscience,” what are we saying to him? What does he hear?—not only at the moment but also in the wee small hours of the night when, half asleep, he remembers not merely the words we used but also the nonverbal cues we gave him unawares? Sooner or later, consciously or subconsciously, he senses that he has received two communications, and that they are contradictory: (i) (intended communication) “If you don’t do as we ask, we will openly condemn you for not acting like a responsible citizen”; (ii) (the unintended communication) “If you do behave as we ask, we will secretly condemn you for a simpleton who can be shamed into standing aside while the rest of us exploit the commons” (1968, 1246). Hardin recommends hard-nosed realism in accord with the scientific revelation that the ultimate good is survival (of the fittest). The most advanced nations enjoy standards of living unimaginable even to emperors of old. Earth cannot support even the current human population at such standards. What posterity demands, Hardin concludes, is “lifeboat ethics.” The most advanced nations should close their borders (for the lifeboat is full) and stop sending resources abroad. He literally invites people of conscience to jump overboard (1974).

For religious professionals like myself, who are surrounded by people giving stunning quantities of time, talent, and money in response to their love for all creation and all creatures, the idea that insofar as humans are rational they are irremediably selfish is obviously false. The world’s classic faith traditions are well aware of humans’ selfish and exploitative tendencies, and they clearly distinguish between the good of sacrificing out of love and the evil of allowing oneself to be taken as a chump. People of faith can accordingly agree to the need for “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon.” The distinction will be that people of faith will insist that central/overlapping norms (moral ideals) should shape the contours of mutual coercion (public policy).

Hardin’s “lifeboat ethics” gained few overt followers, but his view of humans as wholly selfish agents, and his criticism of Smith’s “invisible hand,” endured in late twentieth-century social and political science. The question, “who guards the guardians” remained open, and religious moral ideals and communities remained marginal in academic social scientific and political discussions. Most troubling, in many discussions economic efficiency came to play the role of “highest good.” The problem is that appeals to efficiency alone marginalize creation and all creatures, including concern for the good of humans. If efficiency alone is our measure, then we will not care or even notice if there are severe ecological impacts and radical economic inequities, as long as more wealth on the whole is generated.

For example, Paul Debaere et al., writing in Water Policy (2014), notes that in Australia’s Murray-Darling Basin, water’s economic productivity is sixty-seven times more efficient in manufacturing—and ninety-nine times more efficient in mining—than in agriculture (639). On what grounds, Debaere asks, “should a dynamic market economy shelter agriculture [or, by the same reasoning, endangered species or ecosystems] from structural changes” (641)?
Debaere can evidently imagine no such grounds. But if economic efficiency is the sole measure, then there are no grounds whatsoever for sheltering agriculture, endangered species, and ecosystems from devastating ecological change. Thus Peter Hill, writing in *The Independent Review* (2014), can argue that the decimation of bison in North America—from thirty million in 1800, to ten million in 1860, to under one thousand in 1886 (490)—was not an ecological tragedy but an unqualified good, for bison were replaced with cattle, which are more efficient in the conversion of grass into dollars. With regard to contemporary global food production, two alarmed scholars Rebecca Clausen and Stefano Longo (*Development and Change*, 2012) explain how efficiencies of scale are resulting in the “pauperization” of millions of relatively inefficient family farmers and fishers. If economic efficiency is the ultimate criterion, they object, the pauperization of millions, human and non-human alike, appears as part of an unqualified “good”—a “good” unrelated to justice and creatively well-being.

Fortunately, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, social scientists began to realize the standard, twentieth-century picture of humans as normless, selfish agents was false. Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for helping to establish that humans 1) do act selflessly in accord with norms, 2) change behavior in response to verbal chastisement for violation of community values (even when offenders remain anonymous and personal profit is sacrificed), 3) preserve commons better when policy is a shared creation, and 4) self-regulate and govern commons most effectively when there is significant face-to-face communication and compliance is understood primarily in normative (not legal/financial penalty) terms (Ostrom, 1999, Kraak, 2011).

A prejudice against *agape* and religion endures, however, for Ostrom continues to interpret altruism within self-interested parameters, though she refers grudgingly to the utility of “religious mystification” (1999, 525). And, when Ostrom and her colleagues note that their findings affirm the vital role of institutions that cultivate and carry moral norms, the institutions they list are “corporations, charitable organizations, neighborhood groups, organized religions, and public and private schools” (Kinzig, *et al.*, 2013, 165). The disconnect from reality is stark if one takes a moment to reflect (historically, globally, and with regard to religious and secular states alike) upon the relative moral-carrying capacity and influence of “neighborhood groups,” “charitable organizations,” “corporations”(!), and “private schools”—in comparison to the moral-carrying capacity and influence of religions.

Faith communities and their moral ideals must be vital players in the formation of environmental policies if we are to realize a most loving and just ecological future. White was right to think the ecological crisis can largely be laid at the feet of Christianity. He was also right to think that Christianity’s potential for reawakening humanity to love for creation and all creatures can play a vital role in providing the means through which the crisis can be addressed. White would be thankful that—while the Christian community has a long way to go, and while persons who pursue wholly selfish ends remain distressingly powerful—Christians across the world are increasingly embracing the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi.

**Bibliography**


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1 The connection between religion and environmentalism has become so tight that in 2003 Dustin Penn, a biologist hostile to any understanding which “opposes scientific materialism and reductionism,” consequently rejects a “large segment of the environmental movement,” including “ecofeminists,” “ecotheologists” and nature writers like Wendell Berry—though he grants that “moralizing” does appear to influence behavior (277).
2 Here Hardin cites Plato’s famous line. See especially with regard to the “who will watch the watchers” problem, James Krier (1992).
3 In 1968 Hardin, along with mainstream evolutionary theory, considered conscience/altruism to be self-eliminating in the long term. By the early 1980s, Hardin, again along mainstream evolutionary theory, had realized his error concerning the purportedly self-eliminating character of conscience/altruism (see his 1982 essay, “Discriminating Altruisms”). With regard to evolved “altruisms,” see Sober and Wilson, Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior. Insofar as he insists upon remaining within Darwinian parameters, which requires selection (i.e., among multiple players), Hardin quite rightly refuses to affirm altruisms beyond a group level (e.g., family, tribal, ethnic, national). By definition (again, because it requires selection), evolutionary theory cannot encompass/explain agape/universal altruism, which Hardin consequently refers to as “promiscuous altruism.” By contrast, appeals to universal agape/altruism are common in religions such as Christianity. An appeal to universal altruism is also characteristic of atheistic ethicists such as Peter Singer—whom Hardin names explicitly as an opponent in “Discriminating Altruisms” (172). Singer considers appeal to universal benevolence to be a sine qua non for ethics (2011, 10). Singer’s affirmation of universal benevolence led him to draw conclusions very different from Hardin’s concerning the obligation of rich people and rich nations towards poor people and poor nations in his well-known essay, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” (1972).
4 Hardin provides no empirical evidence for this conclusion. To be fair, Hardin is reflecting a consensus view among social scientists in the late twentieth century (e.g., consider the so-called “complete theory of rationality” that informed twentieth-century game theory). Note that from Hardin’s perspective the divide is not, as it is classically, between people of conscience and people who are wholly selfish (most of us fall somewhere along the middle of this continuum between saints and scoundrels). According to Hardin, the divide is between people who are wholly selfish and clueless chumps (i.e., he provides a neat apologetic for wholesale selfishness—from the perspective argued here, by contrast, wholly selfish people are to varying degrees evil, are likely to cause others concrete harm insofar as they gain power and political influence, and should be, proportionately, subjects of moral disdain).
5 I refer here to the “overlapping” of John Rawls’ (1993) “overlapping consensus.”
6 See also, Mark Van Vugt (2009).
7 Consider, for instance, that, despite Goodstein’s “steep decline” rhetoric, 80% of Americans claim a religious affiliation, and of the 20% who do not claim religious affiliation, 66% believe in God, and 20% pray daily (Goodstein, 2012).
8 In this context the serious problem with the Citizens United decision, insofar as it creates super-powerful, sometimes trans-national “persons” whose ultimate and/or sole goal is the maximizing of “their” own profit and power, and who are profoundly influential in the formation of public policy (through the co-option of the energies of real people), begins to become visible. For the reasons Hardin cynically rehearses vis-à-vis people, when it comes to such inanimate persons,
who are literally incapable of having a conscience, appeals to “self-regulation” and “voluntary compliance” are a fool’s
game. What is needed is “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon” (i.e., public policy), but it is critical that those reaching
the mutual agreement are imperfect but partly good, well-informed, living people. Ideally, people who have been selected
to play leadership roles in policy-making would be selected in part because they have demonstrated good moral resolve
and judgment, and the political system would be structured so as to ensure that it would be difficult for moral concerns to
be subverted by those pursuing wholly selfish ends. Otherwise, in a world with an expanding population, Hardin’s tragedy
dynamics take unmitigated hold with regard to local and global commons, and ruin does become a possible destination for
all (even those with lifeboat fantasies). Fortunately, again, across the globe, and (in analogous ways) across religious
traditions, the spirit of St. Francis is largely in ascendance.