

Eric Holmlund Introduction speech: “Common Ground”

Buongiorno a tutti. On behalf of the Parco Appennino Tosco Emiliano, welcome to the Marola Seminary and today’s symposium on Religion and Ecology. I am a professor from Paul Smith’s, a small environmentally-minded college in New York State. In this capacity, I am assisting the Park in organizing today’s event. I was invited by Park President Giovanelli and Park Director Vignali for an extended visit this autumn intended to deepen and grow the collaboration between the Park and Paul Smith’s College. It has been a profound and exciting experience for me, as you would imagine. I would like to acknowledge the staff of the Parco Appennino Tosco Emiliano, especially Chiara Viappiani and Natascia Zambonini for their support and efforts to coordinate and deliver all the various components of today’s event.

This morning we have come together for a singular opportunity to hear distinguished scholarly voices from diverse academic backgrounds, speaking on a subject of concern to us all. We will hear from three professors from three different universities: Clarkson University and Paul Smith’s College, both from the northern region of New York State, and the University of Modena and Reggio-Emilia, close to your home.

We will start with Professor Melloni’s *historical* and *theological* perspective on the significance of Bismantova and Pope Francis’ environmental encyclical, then consider the startling scientific implications from *deep time* as Professor Stager teaches us about global ecological change from the distant past to the far-flung future. We will learn about our *really* big problems. After a short break, we will close the program with an address by Professor Vitek, which grapples with the ethical choices confronting us by our relationship to *agriculture* amid evolving philosophical conceptions of the *role of the land*.

Today’s symposium provides us an opportunity to explore the benefits of *convergence*. We are attempting today to bring often-diverging ways of seeing, experiencing, and interacting with the universe together, emphasizing common interests, common experiences and visions, common motivations and values.

Many people will say that *music is a universal language*. That it bypasses the brain's frontal lobes and allows direct and immediate connection. The same can be said of a *sunrise*. Of the sound of a river tumbling over mountain rocks, the song of spring's first birds, or of cows shuffling off for a day's rumination in the fields. Or of the experience of standing on a lofty mountain summit, or *seeing the galaxy* on a calm, cool night. *Interpretations* of the meanings of these things might differ, but much of the *phenomenal experience of the senses* in response to these conditions and objects rings true across cultures, political divides, and philosophical perspectives. I want to bring us to a place of crucial importance. I want to focus our attention on our *universal and shared experience* of our lives on Earth, our common planet.

Convergence is all around us. I serve as a professor of a subject known internationally as Environmental Studies. Over the last three decades, Environmental Studies scholars have expanded the field to include a variety of disciplines that, until fairly recently, have been addressed in comparative isolation. Science, history, art, philosophy, sociology, economics, ethics and religion have distinguished academic traditions as *longstanding* and *distinct* disciplines. However, as we confront, describe, and grapple with both ongoing and emerging crises involving science, nature, human culture, and spirit, it is increasingly obvious that our problems and dilemmas *do not respect the artificial distinctions* we customarily make between academic fields.

Today's problems are urgent and complex, involve a host of *intersecting issues*, and demand cooperative and synergistic expertise drawing from a combination of disciplines. It is both short-sighted and ineffective to consider, for example, science and religion as existing in two isolated and separate areas of concern. Obviously, all scientific knowledge is generated in a world filled with spirit, religion, passion, mystery and faith. Conversely, religious theology and creeds are expressed and experienced in a world of nature, governed by physical relationships and laws, elements, organisms, and processes—the realm of empirical phenomena.

By their nature, scientific conclusions are *constructivist* and *provisional*. That is, they change direction, grow, sometimes reverse themselves, and morph with the *incorporation of new knowledge*, technology, debate and insight. While religion and theology are also subject to

insight, debate and transformation, the tools of creed, symbol, and morality work best for most adherents as *focusing principles*, stable and enduring guide-stars that *reduce confusion* and doubt by clarifying ultimate ends and means. Science is adept at generating *novel information* from the empirical interface by and for a comparatively small number of peers and consumers, while organized religion is generally supreme in its ability to *communicate and connect* with billions of believers. It is no wonder that each sphere tends to work independently.

We are realizing that we limit ourselves when we *erect and reinforce* boundaries between science and religion. Humans are adept at integrating complex and apparently contradicting information. At solving problems. And at telling both old and newly-created narratives. With our remarkable brains and imaginations, we are capable of exploring science and religion *together*, and are now faced with the welcome challenge of, not reconciling two *divergent* visions, but applying *complementary* tools and ideas for our common goals and necessities.

Where do the circles of science and religion coincide? To me, there is an obvious answer: the Earth. Not just the physical, observable Earth, but the living, imagined and spiritual dimensions of this dynamic and vulnerable planet. Science alone is insufficient to solve our existential challenges. The same holds for Religion. Science presents certain information, usually in the field of time, but does not in itself marshal sufficient action or response from a large number of people who are not scientists. Religion specializes in human behavior, collective values, eternity, and the sacred but is less helpful in describing specific chemical, physical, and ecological processes in useable detail. You might say that science without religion lacks *authoritative strength* for the planet's present need, while religion without science lacks *the technical expertise to precisely understand* and effectively address complex bio-physical problems.

Any scientist will tell you that reason alone is not enough. We need resolve and moral authority to take healthful and prudent actions and see them through. This is one of the strengths of communities of faith. Today, we take a small step toward dialogue, sincere listening, and union between these two titanic and relevant sources of wisdom. Now and in the future, we *must act*, together.

Further, world religions have many common messages to *guide* our environmental actions. A Harvard University study of the environmental messages incorporated in the world's religions found that they instruct their respective adherents to uphold *seven universal values* with respect to nature and the our living planet: reverence, respect, reciprocity, restraint, redistribution, responsibility and restoration. And so we see that it's all there: world religions are directing us *all* to be environmentalists --to revere, respect, and take care of the natural world. For its own sake, for God's sake, for our sakes. Religions herein support the work of science to improve our knowledge, reverence, and stewardship of nature. To me, *a synergetic relationship* between religion and science is both fitting and inevitable. For, in a manner of speaking, doesn't science allow the faithful to better understand and appreciate the extent of the incomprehensible genius of God? And don't scientists need to hear and move to the music of the spheres to enrich and guide their labors?

Eminent Yale professors John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker have concluded that the world's religions are undergoing transformation, and are, simultaneously, entering into an *ecological phase*, where the faithful look to their sacred texts and interpreters for guidance amid increasing ecological chaos. While Pope Francis is perhaps the most prominent religious leader to urge environmental action, he is not alone. Every major Christian denomination has issued calls for scripturally-founded ecological action. Eastern religions have long emphasized balance and harmony between humans and nature. Indigenous voices have been raised for millennia in celebration of nature's dominion and, more recently, in mourning of the loss of biodiversity, open space, and clean water. Thus, we are not alone. The planet's faiths are singing, in harmony, a plea for environmental awakening.

In closing, I suggest that the most compelling and urgent overlap between religion and science is the crisis at hand in their metaphoric and literal common ground: the Earth. Science enables us to see the Earth and diagnose its health and ills, while religion exalts the Earth as sacred, thus providing the spiritual and moral energy to galvanize human action. Let us, today, encounter the *converging* circles, focus on our common ground, and begin the conversations and work we are called by the planet, and our spiritual sources, to do.