

Ethics, Religion, and Ecology

Ximena Gallardo C., English

Browsing through *An Inconvenient Truth*, the reader is wont to find ethical and religious statements such as these:

My hope is that those who read the book and see the film will begin to feel, as I have for a long time, that global warming is not just about science and that it is not just a political issue. It is really a moral issue. (10)

While the crew watched the Earth emerging from the dark void of space, the mission commander, Frank Borman, read from the book of Genesis: “in the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth.” (12)

[Watching the 2005 floods in Europe] was almost like a nature hike through the book of Revelation. (108-109)

I believe that when God created us (and I do believe evolution was part of the process God used), He shaped us, breathed life and soul into us, and then set us free within nature, not separate from it, giving us intimate connections to all aspects of it. The relationship we have to the natural world is not a relationship between “us” and “it.” It is us, and we are aware of it. (160-161)

Those with the most technology have the greatest moral obligation to use it wisely. (250)

We can't afford inaction any longer, and, frankly, there's just no excuse for it. We all want the same thing: for our children and the generations after them to inherit a clean and beautiful planet capable of supporting a healthy human civilization. That goal should transcend politics. (287)

We [Americans] fought a revolution and brought forth a new nation, based on liberty and individual dignity....We made the moral decision that slavery was wrong, and that we would not be half-free and half-slave.... We recognized that women should have the right to vote.... We won two wars against fascism simultaneously, in the Atlantic and the Pacific, and then won the peace that followed....We took on the moral challenge of desegregation and passed civil rights laws to remedy injustice against minorities. (290-291)

Now it is up to us to use our democracy and our God-given ability to reason with one another about our future and make moral choices to change the policies and behaviors that would, if continued, leave a degraded, diminished, and hostile planet for our children and grandchildren—and for humankind....The choice is ours. The responsibility is ours. The future is ours. (296)

In fact, the almost very last words of the instructional section of *An Inconvenient Truth* end the text as it began, with its author stating, “I believe this is a moral issue” (298).

As we can see from the extracts above, it would be hard to discuss the message of *An Inconvenient Truth* without acknowledging its connection to moral/ethical and even religious standards. For its author asserts that the problem of global warming boils down to us distinguishing what is right from what is wrong and acting accordingly. At the same time, we should question Gore’s categorization of the climate crisis as “a moral issue.” Why does he not use the phrase “an ethical issue” instead? A visit to the *Oxford English Dictionary* clearly indicates that both terms may be used interchangeably. And yet, as *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* indicates, Americans read an important distinction between these synonyms:

Moral applies to personal character and behavior... measured against prevailing standards of rectitude...*Ethical* stresses conformity with idealistic standards of right and wrong, as those applicable to the practices of lawyers and doctors.

Common usage in the United States has also given “moral” a religious connotation, as compared to “ethical,” which is given a secular connotation.

Once we understand that there is a spiritual/rhetorical reason why the climate crisis is termed “moral” in *An Inconvenient Truth*, we can frame a lesson on the connection between ethics and the environment. Here are a few possible introductory questions:

Why does the author of *An Inconvenient Truth* call global warming “not just” a science problem and “not just” a political problem, but a *moral* problem? What is a science problem? (Please give at least one example). What methods are used to solve a science problem? Who is primarily responsible for a science problem? What is a political problem? (Please give at least one example). What methods are used to solve a political problem? Who is primarily responsible for a political problem? What is a moral problem? (Please give at least one example). What methods are used to solve a moral problem? Who is primarily responsible for a moral problem?

Why do you think the author uses the term “moral” instead of the word “ethical” to describe the problem with global warming? Write down what you think the difference between the two words is. Compare your definition with your classmates. (Optional: Find some formal definitions of both words). What are the consequences for us that global warming is a moral issue? Do you agree with him that global warming is a moral issue? Why? Why not?

A next possible step would be to consider what different moral/ethical, and religious traditions reveal about the relationship between humanity and its environment. For example, we can ask students to complete a simple assignment whose goal is to create a set of “commandments” on how to be a good steward of the Earth:

Make a list of rules different religions have (this part of the assignment may work wonderfully if you have a diverse set of students; if not see below). Based on the list of religious rules, create a list of similar rules to steward the planet. For example, if one of the rules that you have written down is “Thou shalt not steal,” how can you rephrase that rule to refer to humanity’s relationship with planet Earth?

If your students happen to have a very similar background, or if you want to expose them to diverse codes of behavior towards the environment, you could use the excellent sources on religion and ecology provided by the Harvard University Center for the Environment at <http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/main.html> . This site provides a plethora of information on the attitudes of different religious traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, and Shinto. Students could read, discuss, and write about the materials found at this site before creating their lists. As a class, the students could also try to find common ground among the different traditions to put together a list that encompasses most traditions.

Lastly, you may want to connect some of the principles of good stewardship that your students have generated to Gore’s suggestions for individual action to solve the climate crisis on pages 305-321 of *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Further readings:

Beyond the wonderful website set up by the Harvard University Center for the Environment mentioned above, here are some books from the LaGuardia Library you may want to examine:

Driessen, Paul. *Eco-imperialism: Green Power, Black Death*. Bellevue, Washington:

Free Enterprise P, 2003.

Driessen contends that imposing first-world, western views of environmental health on developing countries is unethical and detrimental to the peoples they are imposed on.

Morito, Bruce. *Thinking Ecologically: Environmental Thought, Values, and Policy*.

Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2002.

Morito synthesizes the development of Western, Eastern, and Aboriginal attitudes towards the environment.

Westra, Laura and Bill E. Lawson, ed. *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*, 2nd Ed. Lanham, MD : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001.

Laura Westra and Bill Lawson have edited a collection of essays examining domestic and international cases of “environmental racism” that might spark some interesting conversations in the classroom of how environmental policies are connected to color. For a historical perspective on environmental justice in the U.S., see also Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster’s *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York U P, 2001.

Zimmerman, Michael, ed. *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998.

Zimmermann and his fellow editors have compiled an excellent anthology of essays on environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and more. (The book is now in its fourth edition if you can find it outside the LaGuardia library).