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Heaven on earth: Religion returns to the environment

By David Ward, Deseret News

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Dr. Nalini Nadkarni speaks at the "Biodiversity, Endangered Species, and Resiliency" panel discussion at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City on April 12. (Laura Seitz, Deseret News)

Coming home from school each day in Bethesda, Md., Nalini Nadkarni had a difficult decision to make: which of the eight maple trees in her front yard was she going to climb that afternoon?

Little did she know that the next 50 years would be full of her favorite childhood pastime. Known by many as the "queen of canopy research," Nadkarni has climbed and studied cloud forests the world over, including those in Costa Rica, Papua New Guinea, the Amazon and the Pacific Northwest.

Now a professor of biology at the University of Utah, she's spent the last few years branching out, so to speak, engaging the mediums of dance, poetry, television — even rap music — to take the treetops to the people. And by "the people," she means everyone from prisoners to parishioners.

With a Hindu father and Orthodox Jewish mother, Nadkarni realized early on that nature — and the need to take good care of it — plays a prominent role in all religious traditions.

"Throughout the Talmud, Quran, Buddhist writings and so forth, you come to realize that trees represent something spiritual that connect people to God and the Earth. In the Old Testament alone, there are 328 references to the words 'tree' and 'forest,'" she said April 12 at the University of Utah's annual Stegner Symposium, which this year focused on the relationship between religion and the environment.

Nevertheless, in a 2010 Pew Forum poll, only 6 percent of Americans said religion is the biggest influence on their

environmental views. And less than half (47 percent) said that their clergy speak out about the environment. Judeo-Christian theology has been criticized for anti-environmental tendencies going back to historian Lynn White's 1967 article in the journal *Science*, which condemned exploitation of the scripture in Genesis about man's dominion over nature.

Hoping to change the story line, conservationists and faith leaders — including, in the case of the Stegner Symposium, a general authority of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — are coming together to discuss doctrine and advocacy, highlighting the ways in which religion can — and in many cases is — returning to environmentalism after decades away.



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An evangelical perspective

Tri Robinson discovered God at the age of 16 on a mountainside overlooking Antelope Valley in Los Angeles County. The view from his family ranch took in a finger of the Mojave Desert and was, in a word, "breathtaking."

"I knew it couldn't be an accident," said Robinson, founding pastor of Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Boise, Idaho. "God revealed himself to me in that moment."

Robinson also spoke at the Stegner Symposium, looking more cowboy than clergy in a slightly faded button-down shirt. It was only proper — his ties to the land run deep. He and his wife Nancy raised their family on that rustic ranch during the turbulent 1970s, a time in which, as

Robinson tells it, evangelicals and environmentalists largely parted ways.

The best-selling book "Population Bomb" by Paul Ehrlich was published in 1968, helping to fuel the Zero Population Growth movement. By the time *Roe v. Wade* became law in 1973, the countercultural Jesus Movement of the 60s and early 70s was fading and the environmental movement was on a more secular, politicized path.



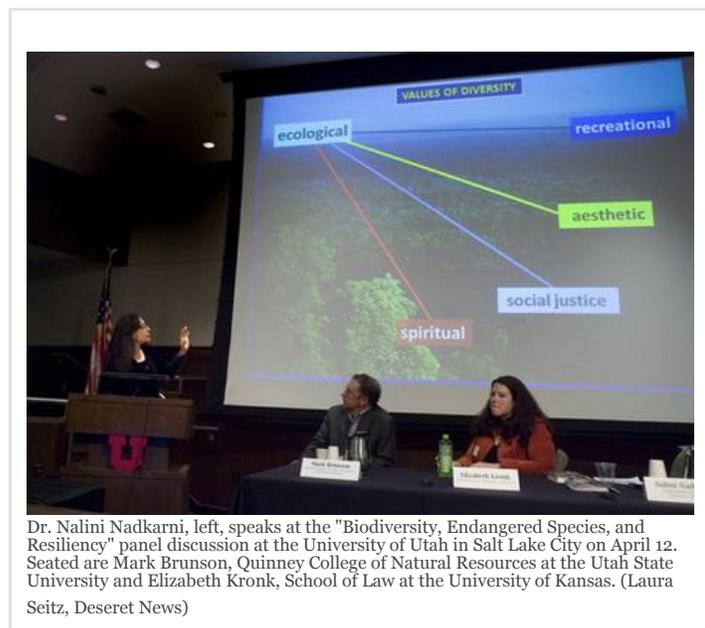
“I was a closet environmentalist all that time,” he said.

Mark Brunson, Quinney College of Natural Resources at the Utah State University; Elizabeth Kronk, School of Law at the University of Kansas and Dr. Nalini Nadkarni participate in the "Biodiversity, Endangered Species, and Resiliency" panel discussion at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City on April 12. (Laura Seitz, Deseret News)

In 1989, he and Nancy moved to Boise to plant a church, but it wasn't until a decade later that he began searching the Bible for a theology of the environment. His study resulted in what he called a "green letter Bible" and his first sermon on the topic.

“When I preached that first sermon, I was scared to death. I went to the Lord and said, ‘I’m afraid, but I’m going to do it.’”

The entire congregation gave him a standing ovation and he went on to write the book “Saving God’s Green Earth: Rediscovering the Church’s Responsibility to Environmental Stewardship.”



“They’d just been waiting for someone to say, ‘It’s OK to care about the environment.’”

Today, Robinson’s ministry focuses on Isaiah 61, a nearly 2,800-year-old messianic prophecy that says the Lord will come to set captives free, heal broken hearts and turn ashes to beauty.

It also includes a striking metaphor: the previously downtrodden shall be called “the trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.” They are those who “shall build the old

wastes ... the desolations of many generations.”

“He will reform, renew and revive all things,” Robinson said. “Isaiah 61 is really all encompassing of a humanity that has lost its way.”

He believes that “creation care” requires a holistic approach, tackling myriad thorny problems ranging from polluted air and soil to poverty, human trafficking, illiteracy and broken homes.

“It’s a sanctity of life issue. You can’t just take one of these issues, you have to take them all.”

The key to that, he believes, is to change the environment of people's hearts.

"If you get the toxic waste out of somebody's heart, it will change their thinking and their thinking will start affecting their actions."

Mormon theology

Elder Marcus B. Nash of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, gained a love of the outdoors in his youth while hiking the North Central Cascades not far from his hometown of Seattle.

"To me, it's a profoundly spiritual experience," he said in an interview. "Sitting at or above timberline at night wrapped up in a sleeping bag, you just lay there and look up at the stars and you're gazing into eternity."



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Speaking a few minutes after Robinson at the Stegner Symposium, Nash focused his remarks on Mormon theology.

He began with the meditations of King David and Moses on the majesty of God and the smallness of man (Psalms 8:45, Moses 1:7-10), and then moved into a narrative in which God created the Earth as a proving ground for his children in order to carry out his overarching purpose of "bring(ing) to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." (Abraham 3:24-25, Moses 1:39)

Nash said that all things were created spiritually before they were created physically, and cited Joseph Fielding Smith, the 10th prophet of the LDS Church, saying, "Every creature has a spirit."

"We are all stewards — not owners — and we will be accountable to God for how we use his creation," Nash explained.

Repeating the words of the church’s 15th prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, he said, “When we make the earth ugly, (God) is offended.”

Turning to the Pearl of Great Price, he told of the prophet Enoch, who heard the Earth mourn its filthy state and cry out for rest and cleansing. Witnessing this, Enoch wept and asked God to have compassion upon the Earth. (Moses 7:48-49)

“Unbridled, voracious consumption is not consistent with God’s plan,” Nash said, urging meekness, humility and care for the poor. “Despoiling nature is almost always a result of selfishness.”

Quoting the counsel Brigham Young gave to early LDS settlers of the Salt Lake Valley more than 150 years ago, he said, “Keep your valley pure; keep your towns pure as you possibly can; keep your hearts pure.”

Nash stressed that God cares deeply for all life, especially his children (D&C 59:16-20), and concluded with his experience hiking in the trees and mountains of his home state:



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“I loved in my childhood to be in the woods, and to sense ... the silent, eloquent witness the towering evergreen trees bore of the Creator. As I grew older (I went) beyond the woods, to hike the magnificent granite rocks and peaks rising above the timberline ... (which) speak of the power and majesty of God — and His matchless genius for beauty.

“Our test on this Earth is whether we will choose wisely and follow God, treat His creations with respect, and use them to bless our fellow man and woman. The better we care for the Earth, the better it will care for us.”

Mainline advocacy

For Sally Bingham, it started in the 1980s with a simple observation.

She was a mother of three, sitting in her Episcopal congregation in California when it occurred to her, “Why don’t our clergy ever talk about care for God’s creation over the pulpit?”

Bingham had recently been invited to serve on the board for the Environmental Defense Fund and kept hearing about problems such as deforestation and overfishing.

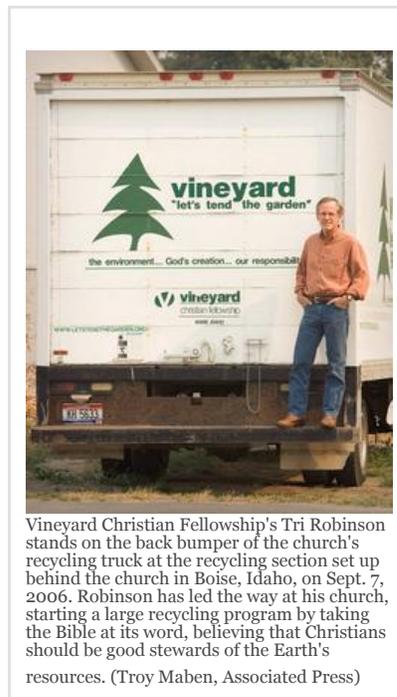
“We have prayers in the Episcopal Church for reverence for the Earth,” she said. “Why aren’t we actually doing anything about it?”

No member of the clergy she asked — and she asked many — could offer a satisfactory answer. “They would say, ‘The environmental community can do that’ or ‘We’re about saving souls.’”

“Well, there won’t be any souls to save if we don’t have (clean) air and water,” Bingham responded.

Finally someone asked her, “Why don’t you go to seminary and find out where the disconnect is between what we believe and how we behave?”

“Well, I have time to go to school,” thought Bingham, whose youngest child was in second or third grade. So she enrolled at the University of San Francisco as a 45-year-old freshman and then entered the Episcopal seminary.



Vineyard Christian Fellowship's Tri Robinson stands on the back bumper of the church's recycling truck at the recycling section set up behind the church in Boise, Idaho, on Sept. 7, 2006. Robinson has led the way at his church, starting a large recycling program by taking the Bible at its word, believing that Christians should be good stewards of the Earth's resources. (Troy Maben, Associated Press)



Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, right, presents Reverend Sally Bingham the Energy Globe Award 2002, for the category traffic and community, during the ceremony gala March 6, 2002, in Linz, Austria. The energy award honors ecological energy projects. (Rubra, Associated Press)

Ten years later, she was ordained to the ministry and founded Interfaith Power and Light, a religious environmental advocacy organization.

Today, more than 14,000 congregations have signed a covenant with IPL, indicating their commitment to implementing solutions ranging from solar power to organic gardens to energy-efficient light bulbs.

“I didn’t see myself as a leader in the religious community,” Bingham said. “I

had to overcome lots of skeptical feelings.

But I asked myself, ‘What if Mary had said, “No?”’”

She currently serves on President Obama’s Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. When asked if political advocacy might rub some the wrong way, Bingham, who took the question while on a break from lobbying on Capitol Hill, responded: “Our message is not one of politics, it’s one deeply rooted in theology, which says we are the stewards of creation.”

Citing the two great commandments, she said, “If you love your neighbor, you don’t put engine oil in the storm drain behind your house. You don’t pollute your neighbor’s air or water. You’re kind to your neighbor.”

Given the disconnect she felt a quarter-of-a-century ago, does she believe that religion is finally returning to the environment?

“What gives me hope is that more and more people are getting on board,” she said. “I feel like it’s happening.”

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Elder Marcus B. Nash, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, addressed the 18th annual Stegner Symposium at the University of Utah Law School on April 12. His remarks focused on the relationship between LDS doctrine and the environment. (lds.org)