The Parliament of the World's Religions and the Work of Creation Care: A Pragmatic Apologetic for Interfaith Engagement in Covenant Perspective

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At the Covenant Congress that was part of the extended festivities of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a young David Nyvall spoke about the project of interreligious engagement in a manner seemingly contrary to the spirit of the unprecedented gathering of religious representatives from across the globe:

> ...we feel it is a precious responsibility of love to stand in a brotherly relationship to all who are included in the Lord's prayer. But in no way do we understand the Savior's prayer as a union of the whole world on the broad foundation of general brotherly love and the insight of common interests. Least of all do we think that the unity about which the Savior prayed was an alliance between the religions and faith of people of all times. Such an alliance can be bought only for the price of Christianity itself and is a great misfortune, a fearful transgression, a new Judas act toward the Savior. In relationship to every effort toward unity at the price of Christ and the gospel, between Christ's enemies and friends, between the world and the congregations, we are thus willing to be looked upon as intolerant and narrow-minded.[1]

1 David Nyvall, "Characterization of the Swedish Mission Covenants in Sweden and America" (1893). Translated by Eric Hawkinson (1973). Republished in Glenn P. Anderson, ed., *Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations*, 2nd edition (Chicago, IL: Covenant Publications, 1999), 140-41.

If we read Nyvall's words at face value, it appears that he is attempting to navigate the tension between God's inclusive embrace of the whole world and the exclusive claims of the Christian gospel. This of course is a tension that has befuddled Christians for millennia, and Nyvall is not exceptional in his attempt to navigate it. Although we consider Nyvall to be not a prophet but rather a historically situated figure formative for many of our own institutions as Evangelical Covenanters, it behooves us to enter the same tension he experienced: how do we stand in brotherly relationship to all in a manner that exemplifies rather than sells out the Christian faith?

In this essay, I advance a pragmatic apologetic for interfaith engagement from my dual perspective as a lifelong Evangelical Covenanter and as a present trustee of the modern Parliament of the World's Religions nonprofit organization. A pragmatic apologetic can be understood as (1) respecting that interfaith engagement is sometimes viewed with suspicion and as a potentially transgressive activity and thus in need of an "apologia" or defense, and (2) appealing to the mission-minded Evangelical Covenant Church's practical spirit that allows for holy vocation to be found within a range of human activities, including but not limited to soup kitchens, hospitals, music festivals, and interfaith dialogue.

For the sake of contrast, a different philosophical foundation for interfaith engagement would be the metaphysical argument that would (1) be premised on the idea that many if not all the world's diverse religions point towards the same divine reality, and (2) appeal to a sense of duty that the world's religions federate into a single global community, just as God is ultimately one. The metaphysical argument—although interesting and seemingly harmonious—would paradoxically be more likely to divide Evangelical Covenanters than to unite us. This is because as we affirm "the reality of freedom in Christ" we are knitted together in a denominational community that diverges in the matters of biblical interpretation and theological doctrine upon which any metaphysical argument would have to rest. Neither does the metaphysical argument resonate with my own hands-on experience of interfaith engagement, making me at best a faulty second-hand narrator of such a rationale for interfaith engagement. Therefore, I bracket aside metaphysical argumentation for the sake of bringing focus to the pragmatic apologetic

that undergirds this particular essay.[2] The pragmatic apologetic I seek to explore instead is rooted in the Evangelical Covenant Church's resolve to practice "creation care" as a form of biblical witness.[3] Because the work of creation care that we as Christians in general and Covenanters in particular subscribe to is something we believe to be commanded to all humans regardless of their religious identity, in addition to the urgency of the global ecological and political crises that increasingly entangle us together, the need for collaboration across religious divides becomes achingly obvious.

The structure of this essay is as follows. I first explore the impetus for interfaith engagement as it arises from a practice of creation care, expanding the definition of stewardship to include not just concern for tangible life and nature but also stewardship of our intangible covenants. I highlight the United States Constitution and the Paris Agreement as covenantal documents that support institutions that are relevant for the work of creation care at a global level and worthy of our attention as stewards of God's creation. I then explore the landmark document of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, "Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration" (or simply "the Global Ethic") as a quasi-covenant that, while not truly covenantal, creates the space for cooperation across religious divides and accordingly helps us steward the covenants we have made to each other as humans. I conclude by suggesting that Christian participation in the Parliament of the World's Religions has the creative potential to bring the transformative power of gospel to institutions in need of revitalization to address the immense ecological challenges facing our planet.

Autobiographical Note

I do not write from a place of pure objectivity but rather from deep participation. I currently am in the middle of a three-year term as a board member of the Parliament of the World's Religions. My journey to this role began in 2016, a time where I held a number of simultaneous

2 Although I would hope that any fellow Evangelical Covenanter who makes a well-reasoned metaphysical argument would encounter hospitable ears and a spirit of open-mindedness within us, rather than falling victim to the autoimmune disease of exiling whomever among us points us towards the greatness and incomprehensibility of God by troubling our human-created religious boundaries—an autoimmune disease that from my perspective is a phenomenon found within each of the world's religions.

3 See "2007 Resolution on Creation Care," Evangelical Covenant Church, covchurch.org/resolutions/2007-creation-care/.

vocational calls: I was the part-time director of student ministries at Ravenswood Evangelical Covenant Church, a member of the steering committee for an organization called Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, a master of divinity and master of public policy student at the University of Chicago, and (through an agreement with the University of Chicago's multi-faith Divinity School to be able to take courses within my own tradition) a visiting student at North Park Theological Seminary. During this time, certain faculty members at North Park Theological Seminary were in an e-mail thread about who in their network could take up the invitation to serve as an informal representative of the Evangelical Covenant Church on the Parliament of the World's Religions' newly formed Climate Action Task Force. I was recommended for the role and although I was initially hesitant given my other commitments, I found various ways to use this opportunity to fulfill work study requirements for my master's program between 2017 and 2018. In 2019 I aged out of Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, graduated from the University of Chicago, and left my staff role at Ravenswood Evangelical Covenant Church to move to Washington DC. In 2020 I was invited to join the Parliament's Global Ethic Committee; in 2021 I served as a temporary staff person to coordinate the virtual convening of the Parliament and in 2022 was brought on as a trustee.

From Creation Care to Interfaith Collaboration

Within contemporary Christianity, "creation care" is the fulfillment of the biblical command from our Creator to have dominion over all living things [4] and fulfill our created purpose to till and keep the garden.[5] With respect to the church's public witness towards a secular world, creation care is how Christians anchor their faith when forming political coalitions with the institutions of the environmental movement birthed in the late twentieth century.

However, regarding the church's inner life, "creation care" may be better understood as an act of worship reflecting goodness and praise back to the Creator God. An underappreciated aspect of Genesis 1 that may humble our anthropocentric interpretations of the text is that, unlike most other parts of creation, each of which God spoke into existence and saw "that it was good,"[6] humankind is not considered good in and of itself. Instead, after creating humankind, God "saw *everything* that he

4 Genesis 1:26-28.
5 Genesis 2:15.
6 Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21; 2:24.

had made, and indeed, it was *very good*."[7] In other words, separate from the rest of creation, Genesis 1 does not argue for the inherent goodness of humankind; instead, only in right relationship to the wholeness of creation and our inherent purpose to care for it does humankind become the final puzzle piece that makes God's creation very good. As the lyrics of "All Creatures of Our God and King" remind us, "And *all of you* with tender heart, forgiving others, take your *part*. . . . Let *all things* their Creator bless, and *worship him* in humbleness."

Crucially, the biblical case for creation care predates any form of religious identity. In the terms of biblical narrative, Adam and Eve were not Jewish nor Christian nor even "religious" in any institutionalized way. They may have been "spiritual" in the sense that they were intimate with their Creator, but in Eden there was no sacred text nor ordained clergy nor traditional ritual that would be characteristic of what we today identify as religion. Therefore, whereas other commandments found throughout the Bible can be assumed to apply to God's covenanted people, the mandate to care for creation is one that Christians can reasonably expect of all other humans—and, lest we be charged of the sin of hypocrisy, all other humans can reasonably expect of Christians![8]

Let us supplement this biblical exegesis with some etymology and a dash of common sense. The words "creation" and "environment" are often used interchangeably, but whereas creation alludes to a creator, environment implies that someone or something is being impacted by—and impacting—its surroundings. Our English word "environment" comes from the Old French *environ* to refer to that which surrounds or encircles us. Included in our surroundings is not just plants, wildlife, water, and air but also other human beings. While it is probable that these human beings share a similar culture and language as us, it is not guaranteed that they have the same religion or worship the same god, if any. And yet not only are they part of our surroundings, but we too are also a part of theirs; how we care for or pollute our environment is how we care for and pollute theirs—and vice versa. Regardless of whether we have chosen to live in war or in harmony or indifference, our environmental destinies are intertwined. Therefore, for Christians, the imperative of creation care becomes the impetus for an interfaith encounter. The

7 Genesis 1:31, emphasis added.

8 Note that not every religion has a creation cosmology that assumes a creator deity. Therefore "creation care" alone cannot be an axis for broad interfaith engagement, and thus it is better to appeal to environmentalism as a common albeit imprecise term.

question now becomes: how might this interfaith encounter become constructive?

Extending the Practice of Stewardship

Stewardship is the central practice within creation care. Through the analogy of the work of a steward who has been entrusted with the responsibility to care for the owner's possessions, the word "stewardship" emphasizes that God's creation does not belong to us humans. The concept of stewardship comes to us from the New Testament where it often is used to translate the Greek word *oikonomos* ("household manager") in parables and epistles.[9] Some Christians who may not recognize the importance of creation care still do recognize the importance of a stewardship ethic in the contexts of financial giving and the cultivation of our individual talents for mission.

The terminology of stewardship has also found currency within secular environmentalism[10] and while the definition has changed with the context, the principles behind stewardship arguably remain one of the most important ideological contributions of Christianity to modern environmentalism and one of the more effective means by which Christians have proclaimed the gospel through our relationship to creation.

Stewardship is an abstract concept that has been applied to many different contexts. Through the following thought experiment, we can construct another ladder of abstraction that I believe will be worth the climb. Imagine a large garden, perhaps the Chicago Botanic Garden if you are familiar, or another similar garden closer to home. Now imagine the head steward of this large garden. The only means by which this steward is capable of stewarding such a garden is through the use of tools such as trowels, pruners, rakes, sprinklers, tarps, and tractors. Each of these tools has an acquisition cost, a learning curve, and even a character of their own (you may notice that the head steward has even nicknamed the tractors: the fastest tractor is "Earnhardt," the most powerful tractor is "Schwarzenegger," etc.).

It is not difficult to imagine these tools as something to be cared for in their own right—if not for their own sake, then for the sake of caring

9 See in particular Luke 12:42-44; 16:1-13; 1 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Peter 4:10-11. Note that *oikonomos* shares the same etymological root as our modern "ecology" and "economy," both of which can be understood as abstractions of the household concept, and the former of course reinforcing the connection between stewardship and the vocation of creation care.

10 Jennifer Welchman, "A Defense of Environmental Stewardship," *Environmental Values* 21, no. 3 (August 2012): 297-316.

for the garden itself. This means keeping tools out of the rain so that they do not rust or rot, repairing tools when they break, sharpening and lubricating tools when needed, and teaching younger stewards the best ways to handle these tools so they are not damaged through unnecessary wear and tear.

If the first step up this ladder of abstraction is that the practice of stewardship can apply not only to the care of local parcels of God's creation but also to the tools that care for a particular parcel, the second step up the ladder of abstraction is what happens when we consider regional and global environments as objects of stewardship. From water-stressed river basins to anthropogenic climate change, we are becoming increasingly aware of the consequences of collective carelessness towards environments that are demarcated at a scale beyond our immediate individual experience. However, the challenges facing these regional and global environments are not of the sort that can be addressed with trowels, pruners, rakes, sprinklers, tarps, tractors, and other physical tools. We must instead rely on the intangible institutions that govern human behavior.

Such institutions range from political negotiations (i.e., who gets to pollute, and how much?) to legal enforcement (i.e., how to stop those who pollute beyond an approved limit); from cultural norms (i.e., the construction of stigma around pollution) to business and scientific innovation (i.e., discovering new means of guaranteeing a comparable goal with less polluting side effects). These institutions are the means by which the vocation of creation care "scales up," but these institutions are far from spontaneous: societies can be politically gridlocked, legal systems can lose the balance between lawlessness and oppression, cultural norms may be nonexistent or disregarded, and innovation can be stifled or underfunded. In the same way that stewardship is applied both to the garden and the tools alike, so too can stewardship be applied to the more-than-local environment and the institutions that regulate human interaction with it.

But how do we care for and steward these institutions? It would be categorically absurd to claim that we should keep them out of the rain, mend their cracks, or lubricate their joints. Nor is it immediately obvious that the goal should be to make these institutions stronger, bigger, more powerful, or better financed; many of today's environmental (and other) crises are the result of self-referential and amoral institutions that through their unchecked growth have become unaccountable to the greater good.

I argue that one of the most meaningful ways by which we can

positively steward the institutions that govern our shared environment is through caring for the covenants that undergird these institutions. More succinctly, stewardship of covenants made between humans can itself be an act of creation care.

Divine Covenants and Human Covenants

Before continuing, let us first acknowledge that the word "covenant" itself is a loaded term! Most obviously for readers of this journal, the term evokes our identity as Covenanters, a name rooted in our history as Mission Friends but also reflective of how we are bound together in institutions ranging from youth camps, printed publications, healthcare, retirement homes, pension plans, financial endowments, multi-generational families, layers of bureaucracy, appointed leaders who may simultaneously inspire us and bewilder us, and much more. The word "covenant" also evokes one of the wildest biblical innovations relative to rest of the Ancient Near East: the idea that God himself would covenant with humans, instead of the tradition where humans would covenant with each other with their gods as witnesses and guarantors of these covenants. Similar to how stewardship can apply to local and global environments alike, so too do covenants have meaning at levels ranging from treaties between powerful nations to the intimate institution of marriage between two individuals—and the brutal stings of war and divorce alike often contain within their venom the same pain experienced with a shattering of the underlying covenant. Finally, muddying the waters is a relatively recent and popular folk usage: "covenant" as a kind of promise or pledge with some extra spiritual willpower backing it.

Any definition will necessarily bracket off some of the historical richness of the term, but for the purposes of this essay the following (although admittedly wonky) definition will suffice to encompass a variety of meanings: a covenant is a commitment device that works through modifying the way in which the covenanting parties are situated in their world, and the corresponding incentive structure is accordingly modified in such a way that parties to the covenant are bound together towards a common and more desirable goal. In other words, what distinguishes a covenant from an ordinary promise is not that the covenant is spoken in a heightened spiritual valence, but rather that the person making the covenant allows for himself or herself to have "skin in the game," to increase their own vulnerability to the possibility that they won't keep the covenant.

Consider the Noahic covenant as an example. Covenanting to never

again decimate nearly every living thing through flooding, God places a rainbow in the sky as the sign of that covenant. The emphasis here is not on the colors but rather the shape of the sign: a bow pointed upward to the heavens, implying an arrow of divine proportions directed straight at God and threatening to launch if God were somehow to break this promise.[11]

We may also consider the covenant with Abram, where through the representation of a smoking fire pot and flaming torch God passes through the slaughtered animal pieces that have been laid out by Abram, effectively saying, "May I suffer the same fate as these animals if I violate the terms of this covenant."[12] This is the same ritual and implication we see in the human-to-human covenant we read through the prophet Jeremiah: "And those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts."[13]

Much can be said—more than space here allows—about the creative innovations that arise within the Bible as the practice of covenant-making is translated from being something done between humans, to being something done between God and humans, back to being something done between humans in light of the divine covenants, and so forth. Yet, whether the covenants are with divine or human partners, it is still proper to claim that covenants can be an object of human stewardship insofar as they do not belong to us but yet we are responsible for their maintenance. Care for these intangible covenants happens in the following ways:

1. **Obedience**—simply put, the easiest way to damage if not outright destroy a covenant is to be disobedient to the terms of the covenant. Even after the consequences for disobedience are suffered (for example, exile into Babylon) the requisite trust has been lost.
2. **Embodiment**—from the practice of circumcision as a sign of the covenant with Abraham, to the Eucharistic sacrament of physically ingesting the new covenant in Christ's body and blood, the Bible emphasizes that covenants are not merely words and ideas but rather something that we embrace with our whole bodies.
3. **Remembrance**—the specific language of remembering a covenant is used throughout the Hebrew Bible in reference to

11 Genesis 9:8-17.
12 Genesis 15.
13 Jeremiah 34:18.

God remembering the covenants that he has made.[14] Humans can also strengthen covenants by keeping them front of mind[15] and in their heart.[16]

4. **Transmission**—covenants often are an intergenerational inheritance, which places on older generations the responsibility of teaching these covenants to younger generations.[17]
5. **Adaptation**—as covenants are passed down through the generations, new generations may find it necessary to adapt or modify them. This may simply be because circumstances have changed, or because the original version of the covenant was found to be inadequate or disobeyed. Jeremiah testifies to such an adaptation from God's perspective: "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors."[18]

Contemporary Covenants for Creation Care

In light of today's ecological crisis, we can identify a number of contemporary covenants that have been made between humans and which demand the attention of Christian stewardship as an act of creation care. For this section, we focus on two particular covenants: the covenant underlying the United States Constitution and the covenant forming within the gaps of the Paris Agreement.

As the United States is one of the leading polluters globally, our collective decision-making will be a significant factor determining whether or not humankind steers the planet away from ecological catastrophe. This is true not simply because of the vast scope of economic activity within the borders of the United States but also because of the United States' influence among—and power over—other polluting nation-states. The United States Constitution is the primary mechanism for such collective decision-making, not simply laying out rules and procedures of federal elections, but also limiting the powers of different branches of the federal government vis-à-vis each other, the states, and citizens. With regard to ecological concerns, the United States Constitution as currently amended tends towards restricting the power of those who wish

14 Barat Ellman, *Memory and Covenant: The Role of Israel's and God's Memory in Sustaining the Deuteronomic and Priestly Covenants* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).
15 Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18.
16 Deuteronomy 6:6.
17 Deuteronomy 6:7; 11:19; Psalm 78:5-8.
18 Jeremiah 31:31b-32a.

to regulate pollution rather than the power of the polluters themselves; unlike the state constitutions of Montana, Illinois, Hawai'i, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, and Pennsylvania, there is no federally recognized constitutional right to a healthy environment.

Federalism (derived from *foedus*, Latin for "covenant") is part of the covenantal tradition, with the United States Constitution being among the clearest examples of this legacy. The critical moment in this history began with the various covenants formed by the Puritan settlers to establish and govern their communities while an ocean away from the accountability of the British crown. These religious covenants that established congregations became the model for secular covenants that established the political communities that would later join into their own covenant with each other to establish the United States in the revolutionary era.[19]

This discussion is not meant to imply that the United States Constitution is somehow above criticism or even to be considered as inherently good.[20] Nor is it meant to conflate the words of the United States Constitution with the underlying American covenant, which is embodied by voters standing in line at polling places, elected officials coming together to congress, protestors marching in the streets, and volunteers showing up to serve at soup kitchens and blood banks. The claim is simply that the covenantal political system in the United States is itself an object of stewardship as part of the Christian vocation to creation care.

To make the point more bluntly: to avert the worse-case scenarios of climate change and other ecological catastrophes will require major transitions in the United States' approach to energy, agriculture, water, land management, biodiversity, and more. These transitions correspond to significant changes in power and status that need to be constitutionally negotiated, and where the United States Constitution is found lacking the capacity to negotiate these changes, an even stronger American covenant is needed to guide the government and citizens alike through the process of amending the Constitution in a manner that results in broad ratification.

Assuming the best-case scenario for the United States regarding its ecological footprint and constitutional system, such changes alone will

19 Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

20 Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

not be enough to solve the planetary challenges that if not addressed will soon result in humankind's failure to obey God's command to establish dominion over creation. This is because the United States is not the only polluter, but rather shares a planet with the more populous countries of China and India and many smaller countries that pollute more on a per capita basis.

The Paris Agreement is the most prominent mechanism for facilitating international cooperation towards climate change. Adopted by 196 parties at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21), the Paris Agreement consists of ambitious "nationally determined contributions" or non-binding national plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These voluntary plans are subject to a series of reviews, including a "global stocktake" every five years to inventory progress made towards the goals of the Paris Agreement. The theory of change is that this process of measurement and transparency will lead to greater accountability within the international community and within national governments towards their citizens.

When the Paris Agreement was ceremoniously signed on Earth Day 2016, a number of children and youth were in attendance to witness, including 16-year-old Tanzanian youth representative Getrude Clement who addressed the assembly and the young granddaughter of John Kerry, then-Secretary of State for the United States, whom Kerry held in his left arm while he signed the Paris Agreement on behalf of his country.[21] As part of his closing remarks, then-United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon remarked:

> With their signatures today, governments have made a covenant with the future. The children who were with us this morning reminded us of our responsibility to them and to future generations….I will look to civil society and the world's young people to hold Governments to account for the promises they made today. This covenant with the future is a covenant with you. Hold them to it.[22]

Ban correctly indicates that witnesses are a key ingredient of a covenant.

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21 Photographs of this event are available to view at un.org/sustainabledevelopment/parisagreement22april/. Accessed September 17, 2023.

22 Ban Ki-Moon, "Secretary-General's Closing Remarks at Signature Ceremony for the Paris Agreement on Climate Change [As delivered]," April 22, 2016. Available to view at un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2016-04-22/secretary-generals-closing-remarks-signature-ceremony-paris. Accessed September 17, 2023.

In the Ancient Near East, the gods of the covenanting parties would be invoked as witnesses responsible for the enforcement of the covenant; similarly, the covenant of marriage traditionally has at least one or two witnesses. In the covenant that corresponds with the Paris Agreement, Ban suggests that the next generation has been promoted from their typical role as inheritors of the covenant to the more powerful role of witnesses.

In the years since the signing of the Paris Agreement, youth worldwide have stepped up to the role of witness. The best known example of this is the work of Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, who at age 15 began skipping school with the sign *Skolstrejk för klimatet* ("School Strike for Climate") to underscore the absurdity of going through the motions of traditional education when the security of her own future on the planet was not being guaranteed by her teachers' generation, and has since inspired a series of "Fridays for Future" climate strikes across the globe with pre-pandemic participation numbers in the millions.

As part of a pastoral study fellowship with the Louisville Institute, I spent a week-plus in Massachusetts in the fall of 2019, attending services at two Evangelical Covenant churches on the weekends and visiting sites of religiously imbued environmentalism during the weekdays. One of these sites was a gathering of the youth-led Sunrise Movement meeting in the upstairs of Boston's Old South Church. Although the gathering was ostensibly secular, I was struck by how much it resembled the structure of a religious service: there was music and singing, time to welcome old friends and visitors, an extended reflection on an important text (instead of an exegesis of holy scripture, it was a PowerPoint focused on a couple lines of the Green New Deal), and breakout groups for extended discussion. This was covenantal activity pushing the United States to fulfill and exceed its obligations to the Paris Agreement for the sake of the planet, in the same city where the congregational covenants of the Puritans had helped to establish the constitutional order that created the United States and allowed for such an assembly to take place without fear of government intrusion. There may have been a yearning for a spiritual basis for their gathering, but if so, that was secondary to their yearning for a safe planet to grow up on.

The Global Ethic

Let's recap the argument so far. First, the work of creation care mandates an interreligious encounter due both to the sharing of our environment and the sharing of our humanity with people of other religions. Second, the practice of stewardship within creation care extends

not only to the direct care of the natural world but also towards the tangible and intangible tools that are used to care for the natural world, including the covenants that support the institutions that regulate our collective environmental decision-making. Third, particularly at the level of regional and global environment crises such as climate change, these covenants include those associated with the United States Constitution and the Paris Agreement.

Let's push the third point a little bit further to emphasize the importance of interfaith work. Because of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion, the United States is a pluralistic society with a diverse range of religions, denominations, sects, and spiritualities among the citizenry. Similarly, even if these countries themselves are not internally pluralistic, the signatories to the nearly universal Paris Agreement includes countries that together represent virtually all of the world's religions among their citizens. Whether we are considering the United States or the entire world, it follows that stewardship of the corresponding covenants is inherently a multi-faith endeavor.

It is important at this juncture to distinguish between interreligious encounters at the local versus the global level. Local encounters may look like attending services at the neighborhood mosque, partaking in langar at the nearby gurdwara, sitting down to tea or coffee with a Buddhist colleague, or joining an interfaith project to protect others experiencing homelessness. These are all important encounters, particularly when we consider the health of our local congregations. However, these local encounters do not coordinate human activity at the regional or global scale necessary for the sake of stewarding the aforementioned covenants. If we consider the foregoing to be a "vertical" problem between the local and global, there also is a "horizontal" problem when assembling religious leaders who are recognizable at the global level. First, there is the problem of official representation. In a purely numerical sense the Bishop of Rome may represent the most Christians worldwide, but most non-Roman Catholic Christians would resist having the Pope serve as their official representative. Similarly, the Dalai Lama may be the most visible representative of Buddhism despite only formally leading a

fraction of Buddhists worldwide.[23] Furthermore, other religions such as the Bahá'í faith and modern paganism do not have centralized leadership structures that could produce the sort of officers who could function as institutional peers to leaders like the Pope or the Dalai Lama. Other religious communities still are suspicious of any project of cooperation that occurs at the global level—here we can think of many in our own Christian family, such as the Amish, as examples.

I assert that the Parliament of the World's Religion's answer to these problems is the Global Ethic Project (note that I am speaking from my own insight as a trustee of the Parliament, not repeating an official position of the Parliament). As part of the 1993 convening of the Parliament of the World's Religions, German theologian and Catholic priest Hans Küng spearheaded the drafting of a document to establish a statement of moral directives found within all religious traditions and secular ethical systems. Initiated during a time of post-Cold War optimism about the future of globalization, it likely was assumed that such a minimalist ethic[24] would facilitate interreligious and therefore international solidarity and cooperation. The resulting document, *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*, detailed four such directives: nonviolence and respect for life, a just economic order, a life of truthfulness, and equality between men and women. This document was ratified in the summer of 1993 by a vote of the Parliament's trustees and endorsed by more than 200 leaders from more than forty different faiths and spiritualities. Although today the optimism regarding globalization has significantly soured, the Global Ethic document remains a guide to the Parliament's cooperative endeavors, helping to address the aforementioned "vertical" problem of interfaith cooperation by identifying suitable activities of global scope. It also helps address the "horizontal" problem by providing a boundary definition for determining who and what can be included in the Parliament's official programming: whomever is working towards any of the Global Ethic's directives is welcome to the dialogue, whether they lead a whole denomination or simply are an active member of a small nonprofit organization.

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23 Incidentally, due to the desire of the Roman Catholic Church to protect its Chinese interests, it is quite difficult to get the Pope and the Dalai Lama to meet together despite their high mutual regard. See Josephine McKenna, "Dalai Lama Says Pope Francis Is Unwilling to Meet: 'It Could Cause Problems,'" *Religion News Service*, December 11, 2014. Available to view at religionnews.com/2014/12/11/dalai-lama-says-pope-francis-unwilling-meet-cause-problems/.

24 Michael Walzer, "Moral Minimalism," in *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 1-19.

I consider the Global Ethic to be a "quasi-covenant." It is like a covenant in that it corresponds to a written text (i.e., Küng's *Towards a Global Ethic*) that supports an institution (i.e., the Parliament of the World's Religions) towards achieving a higher moral vision. Like the covenants spoken of earlier, the Global Ethic can be obeyed, embodied, remembered, transmitted, and adapted. One such adaptation includes the so-called "fifth directive" for sustainability and care for the earth, adopted at the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto.

However, the Global Ethic is not quite a true covenant. Covenants function by providing a means for parties to the covenant to make a commitment to each other by actively changing something about how they are situated in their world, whereas the Global Ethic merely requires that signatories recognize a piece of their preexisting moralities within the document. Raising the Global Ethic to the level of a covenant would be an exercise in lowering the bar to a common moral denominator: each religion has a rich maximalist ethical tradition that provides not just moral precepts, but the resources and practices and virtues required for their realization. Rather, the Global Ethic is better understood as a much smaller slice of each moral tradition that just so happens to be held in common.

What then is the value of the Global Ethic, particularly with regard to the questions laid out in this essay? In the same way buildings with ambitious architecture require scaffolding to be built, I believe the Global Ethic functions as a blueprints for a "scaffold of trust" for adherents of different faiths to come together in order to make and reinforce covenants in support of important causes. Christians called to the work of creation care will find that each of the directives (i.e., not only the fifth directive for sustainability) point us towards zones of interreligious cooperation from which we can better steward the covenants that underlie the United States Constitution and the Paris Agreement. And the Parliament of the World's Religions convenings, whether in 1993 or 2023 or in the future, is precisely what that scaffolding of trust looks like when assembled.

Conclusion

Even though they are among the best tools available to us, neither the United States Constitution nor the Paris Agreement is sufficient for addressing the ecological crisis that manifests our present failure as humankind to care for God's creation. Something new and unprecedented is needed for us to properly address climate change and other such catastrophes. The hope that inspires my participation in the Parliament

of the World's Religions is that from this assemblage of faiths something creative can emerge which is proportional to the task of incubating the human covenants needed to properly care for creation.

What might this look like? Perhaps it is something akin to the participation of the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, where a small group of primarily non-English speaking Christians entered the public square and found the legitimacy to begin building institutions that would serve the greater good. Perhaps it is a new impulse of the Holy Spirit challenging the boundaries of what we properly consider to be "religion" that we use to divide ourselves into different faiths, creating the sort of spiritual community yearned for by some of the young participants in the Sunrise Movement that is both centered on a power that we recognize as Christ but not recognizable to us as a familiar form of Christianity. Or perhaps it is something as simple as ongoing interreligious learning and a healthy dose of competitiveness where each religion works to reduce their carbon footprints the fastest. Truly, I do not claim to know; I act in faith but only see through a glass darkly. Returning to the Nyvall's 1893 quote cited at the beginning of this essay, we see within Nyvall's extended remarks a confidence in the gospel to work through all people of all religions in unprecedented ways:

> God does not work independently of people, but in them and through them. We have a complete faith in the precedence and superiority of the gospel of Christ in comparison to all other words and thoughts. Therefore we see with joy that all people and religions are voluntarily meeting with the gospel in a manner not seen until now.[25]

In 1929, a more mature Nyvall would remark that compared to the non-narrative creedal formulations of faith (such as "the mere statement of monotheism which Mohammedans and Jews accept as willingly as any Christian") the New Testament is found to be "bubbling over with life."[26] If the language of the Global Ethic had been available to Nyvall, I would like to think he would celebrate it as an opportunity for people of all faiths to find how their own moral principles intersect with those found in the gospel, and through this intersection have an encounter

25 Nyvall, "Characterization of the Swedish Mission Covenants in Sweden and America," 141.

26 David Nyvall, "Covenant Ideals," edited by Karl A. Olsson (1954). Republished in Anderson, *Covenant Roots*, 152.

with a living Christ that brings a new vitality to their own beliefs. The younger Nyvall, speaking in 1893, concludes:

> And in the Christian longing for mutual fellowship we see one of the most hopeful signs that the time is ripe for a creative act of God through which an absolutely new age of peace and glory will appear and God's Church will be gathered from all camps and battlefields, from struggles and darkness and blunders, and will triumphantly pass over into the kingdom of God.[27]

Here is where I begin to most clearly recognize my own motivations for the interfaith endeavor within the annals of Evangelical Covenant history that are my spiritual heritage. If it has not already been made clear, I will admit to being pessimistic towards the fate of the planet. The work of safeguarding creation is a battlefield that seems as if it has already been lost, largely due to the blunders of humanity in succumbing to greed, selfishness, and convenient untruths. The Church has been no exception in this regard[28] and itself stands in need of forgiveness and restoration. It is in such despair that I reach out to those places where God may be working in ways that through the lens of my own upbringing I do not recognize as "God," using the compass of common moral principles to determine who is a potential ally in the struggle, seeing how far the boundaries of the kingdom of God can truly extend. And it is through this reaching out that God looks to reach back and usher in something new and unprecedented. That through these yearnings God may act to restore creation by witnessing to a novel covenant emerging between a diverse and divided humanity encountering the gospel afresh, bringing us closer together in our original created purpose: to tend to the garden of God's creation.

27 Nyvall, "Characterization of the Swedish Mission Covenants in Sweden and America," 141.

28 For an illuminating read on the entanglement of the American Church and the oil industry, see Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).