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PRESS CONFERENCE BY UN ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME ON RELIGION AND ECOLOGY

The results of a three-year series of conferences, carried out by the Harvard Project on Religion and Ecology, were presented Tuesday at a Headquarters press conference sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The Project, which addressed the role of the world's religions in helping solve environmental problems, was co-sponsored by: UNEP; the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions; the Center for Respect of Life and Environment; Bucknell University; Interfaith Center of New York; and the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science. It was also announced at the press conference that the work would be continued through an ongoing Forum on Religion and Ecology.

The Director of the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions, Lawrence Sullivan, said religious beliefs had always been a significant element in shaping new ecological systems. At the heart of today's environmental crisis was a ravenous craving for light and its by-products -- from firewood and the fossil fuels of coal, oil and natural gas, to food grains and meat protein. Humans were hungry for the light energy stored in dark matter by plants. The same light fuelled the religious imagination.

He said religions offered useful principles to guide responses to today's environmental challenges. Those principles included altruism, compassion and the ability to act contrary to narrow self-interest. Other principles included: community-building values; a sense of justice and other cultivated virtues that insist on a just and appropriate distribution of resources; an ability to mobilize community-wide passion and action; self-criticism or the capacity to provoke a critical rethinking of one's ways ranging from repentance to atonement; aestheticism and restraint; and a long-term perspective. Religions also offered legal and ethical structures and traditions, he added.

Michael McElroy, Chair of the Harvard University Committee on the Environment, said humans were responsible for incredibly rapid global changes without having any real sense of the consequences. There was a need to change the focus from individual rights to communal responsibilities. People needed to appreciate that the changes taking place on earth were a result of consumer habits. They also needed to have a better sense of the consequences and how to change to a more global view of their responsibilities.

Tu Weiming, Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy, Harvard University, said that it was not news that environmental degradation and an ecological crisis were threatening human survival. The Project was a coalition of people in religion, economics, education, science and public policy who had signalled their effort to go beyond a set of outmoded, but very

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enduring dichotomies, such as religion and science, east and west, and the material and spiritual.

They wanted to formulate a truly ecumenical vision of the human condition and find viable ways to be human in the twenty-first century, he continued. The African proverb that the world was a treasure held in trust for future generations captured the spirit of the Project. A communal but critical consciousness had emerged among public intellectuals, whose ideal was to establish a permanent network to connect and exchange important data about ecological issues via the Internet and E-mail.

The Project also signalled the emergence of a new collaboration of politically concerned, socially engaged, culturally informed and sensitive people, who were also religiously musical, he added. They wanted to explore new ways of being in the world and being human. Those people were consumer advocates, academics, in the mass media, business, government, professional organizations and human rights movements. They were primarily concerned with future generations. They wanted to encourage young people, particularly in America, not to be obsessed with a narcissistic, hedonistic, individualistic mindset, but to become concerned about the public sphere and have a sense of hope.

A Project Coordinator, Mary Evelyn Tucker, from the Harvard Center and Bucknell University, said more than 1,000 people from all parts of the world had helped conceive and construct the Project. Although the environment was in danger, there were no ethical restraints for dealing with the breakdown in human-earth relations, especially the exploitation of nature. The Project aimed to bring the moral force of the world's religions to bear on the problem. The idea was to look at nature as a source of life, rather than a resource; something that sustained people in many ways, by providing food, clothing, aesthetics and spirituality. The hope was to evoke a deeper sensibility to nature, so as to strengthen human responsibility. The Project explored the rich resources of the religious traditions in shaping and orienting human life, sustaining local cultures and inspiring enduring civilizations.

Project Coordinator, John Grimm, from the Harvard Center and Bucknell University, said the Project and the ongoing Forum were part of the process of broadening of the environmental discourse. They brought religious traditions and the richness of their cultural setting to the discussion. Natural ecology had been addressed from the standpoint of science and also from such social ecology issues as public health and population. Religions needed to interact with the sciences and other traditions.

Maurice Strong, a Senior Advisor to the Secretary-General, said that there was a need for a fundamental change of course. Humans had created a material civilization that had brought untold wealth to many, made others victims and widened disparities. Now, economic life must be seen as a means,

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rather than an end in itself. Economic and selfish drives must be put at the service of the highest moral and ethical principles. Religions had not always played a positive role and, sometimes, the narrow perceptions of very sincere religious people had provided a pretext for neglecting responsibilities to God's creation and the natural world. But, religion spoke to people's basic motivation. Although economic and security motivations were dominant, fundamental moral, spiritual and ethical motivation still dominated.

He said there were efforts to promote a citizen-wide movement for an earth charter that would articulate the basic moral and ethical dimensions that must guide people's lives. "I do not believe that our civilization will in fact make it through the next century, unless we move onto a pathway where our economic, security and political life is driven by, and motivated by, and in the service of our highest moral and spiritual instincts and values," he said.

Tim Wirth, President of the United Nations Foundation, said that the idea of people as stewards of God's creation was a profoundly important and driving force for individuals. People had a sense that something was profoundly wrong. "We have to think and work differently", he said. Since 1992, the world's concern about the environment had decreased and had been overtaken by a set of economic goals. "Trade only" was now the dominant concern. The opportunity and hope would come from thinking about the spiritual side of the problem and from appealing to people's sense that something was wrong. That approach would provide another way to right the ship, before it was too late, he added.

A correspondent asked what form the new Forum would take? Ms. Tucker said the 10 conferences in 30 months were an accomplishment. The focus now was on creating the Forum and planning would take place over the next several months. More than 60 people had signed onto it.

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