Tom Hayden Finds Spiritual Roots for Green Message

■ Environment: The Bible—despite traditional interpretations to the contrary—offers imperatives to treat the Earth as sacred, political veteran says in new book.

By LARRY B. STAMMER TIMES RELIGION WRITER

That may come as a surprise to many who still think of him as the 1960s student radical arrested at the tumultuous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago.

But Hayden, now 56 and a veteran of the California state Senate—and rumored to be a mayoral aspirant in Los Angeles—has written a new book that looks into the Bible's creation story for a spiritual imperative for safeguarding the environment.

Titled "The Lost Gospel of the Earth" and published by Sierra Club Books, the tome argues that the way in which Jews and Christians have traditionally interpreted Genesis has contributed to today's environmental crisis.

He challenges organized religion to treat the Earth as sacred.

"What I believe is needed is the kind of passionate engagement in the environmental cause that the clergy of America gave civil rights in the 1950s," Hayden writes. "Unfortunately, what we are seeing today instead is the religious right vigorously condemning environmentalists as pagans while defending the property rights of polluters as somehow protected by the mandates of Genesis. Meanwhile, the mainstream religious institutions have been largely silent and little engaged in the environmental debate of the past 25 years."



Los Angeles Times

Tom Hayden is urging clergy to take a more active role in conservation issues.

Placing undue emphasis on the Genesis account in which God gives humans "dominion" over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the air—and indeed over all the Earth—has become a license to pillage the planet, Hayden says.

"Religion is about defining what we should consider sacred and treat accordingly," Hayden elaborated in an interview

this week. "For the most part Western religion excluded the environment from what was considered sacred and the drama became centered on the human and how to live a good life according to good values. . . . The universe and rocks, trees and the earth were the background. . . . Once [it is] outside the realm of what's considered deserving respect, reverence [and]

being held sacred [it is] constantly at risk of extreme abuse."

Hayden is not the first to link environment abuse and the scriptural account of creation. As the environmental movement grew during the 1960s and '70s, adherents often held up the holistic worldview of Eastern religions, or Native American sacred teachings, as better models.

Of course, many take issue with such interpretations and offer other theological reasons why the environment is such a mess. One is an "idolatry" that places trust in things instead of God, leading to, among other consequences, conspicuous consumption—or what the Bible itself decries as materialism. Scientists and environmentalists have long pointed out that overconsumption in the West places as much of a burden on the global commons as does the "population bomb" in the Third World.

Hayden says that his four years of research and teaching college courses in "ecotheology" did find an undercurrent of environmentalism in sacred writings, what he calls the "lost gospel of the Earth."

God, he says, declares at each step of creation that it is "good," a starting point for revering the Earth as holy.

Hayden says his interaction with students at Santa Monica City College and Cal State Sacramento helped him hone his analysis and arguments.

As a politician, he sees power in the greening of religion, viewing it as providing an enduring rationale for walking gently on the Earth.

"I don't think you get it from science. I don't think you get it from politics. I don't think you get it from business. I can't see businessmen waking up in the morning and saying, 'I'm enthusiastic about working 18 hours a day to green my company so that I

Please see HAYDEN, B5