

The **Shap** working party on World Religions in Education



World Religions in Education, 2008 – 2009, on The Environment

Editorial

*Four out of five people think that the number of cars in use is having a serious effect on climate and two thirds agree that everyone should reduce their car journeys. These figures apply as much to car drivers as to anyone else. However, the figures suddenly drop when people are asked whether they are willing and able to match words with actions. Less than half said yes to reducing car journeys. Another 12 per cent admitted that they could use the car less, but did not seem willing to. And 23 per cent say that people should be allowed to use their cars as much as they like.
(British Social Attitudes, published January 2008)*

It is now almost twenty years since this journal last tackled the environment. Then, as now, a wide range of perspectives was represented, and then as now, religions were seen as having a significant contribution to make towards engendering not just a proper respect for the natural world but also the changes in human attitudes and behaviour needed if we are to overcome environmental problems. But things have moved on since Shap's 'Humankind and the Environment' in 1989, and not in a positive direction. The concerns discussed then – animal rights, our relationship with nature, conservation of habitats and species, materialism, consumerism and the limits to economic growth – remain live issues, but in 2008 they are overshadowed by the increasingly urgent problem of human-induced climate change, with hardly a day passing without new and depressing accounts from environmentalists of melting glaciers, unseasonable weather and threats to biodiversity.

So, although two of this year's contributors also wrote for us in 1989, there was little danger of their repeating themselves or of this journal simply revisiting familiar ground. Martin Palmer describes in the opening article how, although twenty years ago he 'struggled to find a single religious leader who had seriously thought about these issues, we now find every religious leader has something to say.' That has certainly been true this year, and we track some recent statements in our round-up of news and resources towards the end of the journal. In this issue, however, we explore not just what is said and believed about the environment, the stuff of many text books, but whether and how words and beliefs are being matched by actions. Some contributors describe how traditional practices such as fasting are being re-interpreted in the light of contemporary concerns about the environment and the sharing of diminishing resources. Others describe debates and activities that may well be unfamiliar to outsiders: for example, 'green jihad', Orthodox Christian 'spiritual ecology camps' and the Sikh 'conscious kitchen' are probably novel concepts to most readers.

We also, as in last year's issue, include some of the religions, beliefs and denominations with interesting beliefs and points of view that do not always feature in RE text books or syllabuses. So we have contributions from Zoroastrian, Bahá'í, Humanist and Pagan writers and from an Orthodox Christian, as well as views that may be unfamiliar, even challenging,

from religious groups which do usually appear in the RE curriculum. Despite our best efforts, however, it proved impossible to get a Hindu contribution in time for publication, a regrettable omission.

As well as this diversity of worldviews, there is a diversity of approaches to the topic: academic, personal, historical, prophetic, poetic and practical. Some are more optimistic than others, but most would agree with the Islamic command to 'trust in God and tie your camel' – belief and personal action both being essential antidotes to the passive despair at the 'Fate, Doom and human folly' (as one contributor describes it) that could so easily engulf us. As another of our writers suggests, 'Doing nothing constitutes an action in itself.' One viewpoint that does not feature at all is doubt that the environment is a pressing issue and that religions have a role to play in raising the eco-consciousness of their adherents and influencing their behaviour.

Shap is an independent charity committed to the promotion of accurate information for those teaching about the world's religions. We have made some minor editorial decisions, for example to use 'Earth' for the name of the planet rather than 'earth' (except within quotations), but we need to say, as always, that the transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in the articles are those of the writers themselves, not of the Shap working party (which is almost as diverse as our contributors).

This year, for the first time, our primary supplement on the theme of the journal is published directly on the Shap website, where we hope it will reach more readers in primary education. Also for the first time, there will be a supplement to the journal on our website containing all the web-links given in this issue, plus some extras, to make it easier for you to use them. This Journal will eventually find its way onto the website too, and next year's, on "Food", will be even more accessible as it will be published directly onto the website.

We thank all our contributors, as well as the many members of the Shap working party who work so hard to produce Shap's other, highly recommended, resources: Carrie Mercier, who edits the substantial reviews section; Roger Howarth and Eleanor Nesbitt who produce the Shap Calendar and editorial notes; Lesley Prior and Farley Marsh, who write the primary teaching units on our website; and Anne Krisman and David Rose who produce the pictorial calendar. Finally, we are as ever very grateful to Mike Berry, Shap's administrator, for his efficient and cheerful management of the Shap office.

Marilyn Mason, with Alan Brown, Mary Hayward and Angela Gluck Wood