



Eternity and Ecology –the contribution of the faiths to the environmental movement

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In 1985 a colleague and I wrote the first book for schools on religion and ecology, *Worlds of Difference*, which accidentally launched a whole programme of working with religions world-wide. Published by WWF UK, it was read and appreciated by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, then International President of WWF. In the book we explored how eight different belief systems, ranging from Australian Aboriginal, through Christianity and Islam to Humanism and Hinduism, understood the natural world and how this understanding shaped how they treated it.

The result of this book was that WWF made working with the faiths the theme of their 25th anniversary, held, appropriately, at Assisi, the birthplace of St. Francis, in 1986. It was the first time that the religions had come together to discuss the environment, and the first time that any environmental group had talked with any faith group, never mind five faiths: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.

Why did WWF do this?

The reasons are interesting because they still lie at the heart of the difficulties and opportunities that the partnership between the faiths and the secular world embody. Prince Philip put it most succinctly. If the environmental crisis was just a crisis of information, we would be through it by now. We have the information: about habitat loss, species extinction, deforestation, and loss of soil, water pollution, air pollution, climate change and all the rest of the issues. The problem is not information, but purpose and intention. Facts and figures alone will not 'save the planet'. That can only be done by moving people, by touching their souls, generating enthusiasm and commitment, excitement and action. And there are two forces that have done that throughout history and still do today: the Arts and Religion.

This was why WWF International invited the five faiths to come to Assisi to see how partnerships could be created whereby the information of the environmental movement could be fused with the networks, insights and authority of the great faiths. This is what the partnership is still about to this day – at its best.



However, there were some at the Assisi meeting who embodied another set of ideas, namely that if only the religions would preach the specific environmental message of this or that environmental campaign group, would campaign on this or that specific topic, or would endorse a particular message, then the world could be saved, environmentally that is.

Today, twenty-two years after Assisi, religion and conservation, faith and ecology – however you describe it – has become one of the major forces for protection of the planet. It has been a long hard struggle. I was responsible for designing the Assisi event, ran the WWF Network on Conservation and Religion created from that meeting, and have headed the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) since its foundation in 1995. For many years we were considered as fringe, marginal, possibly loopy and maybe even dangerous, by mainstream environmental groups. From the religious side, from very modest beginnings where we struggled to find a single religious leader who had seriously thought about these issues, we now find every religious leader has something to say, even if this doesn't always translate into any serious or significant action.

Now we are courted by media and by all the major environmental groups, many of which now have full-time staff dedicated to working with the faiths, by international bodies such as the World Bank and the UN. World-wide there are probably somewhere in excess of half a million religious-based environmental projects, ranging from the sacred mountains of the Daoists of China and the Christian forest management training centre of Papua New Guinea, through the Islamic ban on dynamite fishing by Muslims off the coast of East Africa and organic farming by Orthodox nuns in Greece, to the Interfaith Light and Power company in the USA (1) and the Green Sabbath movement of Judaism (2).

Why?

Well, the answers are many: recognition by the major environmental groups that they need to work with civil society; acknowledging the vital role in many communities of faith; our work on charting the actual stakeholder role of faiths: 8% of all habitable land is owned by faiths; 54% of all schools are created, influenced or run by faiths; faiths publish more weekly journals than the whole of the EU; they are the third-largest shareholding group in the world (14% of the total capital market); they have the largest printing operation in the world (in 2005, 72 million Bibles, 125 million New Testaments and 4,500 million Bible leaflets were printed) and a moral authority second to none.

But we still face the same diversity of expectations as in 1986. Many groups come to us wanting to 'use the religions to deliver their message'. We point out that the faiths already have their own message, thank you, but we can explore with them how they feel about a specific topic. For example, 5% of all commercial forests are owned by the religions. However, nearly 20% of forest is considered to be sacred – from the 2.4 million hectares of the Shinto shrines of Japan to the sacred forests of Vrindavan in India where Lord Krishna danced. Approached by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), whose logo you will now find on all B&Q wooden materials and all Co-op paper products, who wanted the faiths to join their stewardship programme, we soon realised that FSC was inappropriate for the faiths. FSC assumes it is working with rapacious, capitalistic companies, who care nothing for the forests but everything for profit. However, many of the faiths will protect forest for completely different reasons from those which FSC would raise; an example is the Maronite Church of Lebanon, which has owned the largest surviving native forest on the east coast of the Mediterranean, a biological hotspot of huge ecological significance, for 1400 years, and considers it to be a sacred forest as it surrounds the statue and church of Our Lady of Lebanon. So, in a collaboration between major forest-owning faiths and supported by ARC, the Church of Sweden and the Shinto of Japan, the faiths are now creating the Religious Forestry Standard to help protect and sustainably manage both religiously-owned commercial forests and sacred forests.



The biggest area of contention is campaigns. Campaigns are a great tool for campaigning organisations, but don't work well with the faiths. Campaigning groups need new campaigns as much to raise new funds as to achieve goals. They run for eighteen months to three years and are target driven; rely heavily on blame, guilt and often highly simplistic solutions and often achieve very little in the long run. The faiths simply don't work on that time scale. The strength of the faiths is that they are the longest-lasting human institutions in the world. Even the youngest of the faiths we work with has outlived empires, dynasties, various nation states, the League of Nations, Communism as a state power, and fascism. The faiths have perfected the ability to seem eternal yet be constantly changing. They have done this because they understand how human psychology works and it is not on eighteen month or even three year campaigns. Human psychology changes because of incremental shifts and accommodations brought about by repetition, reinforcement, fun, reflection and habit. This is what the faiths have perfected.

Faiths also know that you can scare and blame people and make them feel guilty and sinful some of the time but not all the time. The environmental movement is predicated on notions of blame, guilt, sinfulness, wrong-doing and apocalypse. If I hear anyone else tell me that 'this is our last chance to save the world' I think I will run screaming. It used to be the provenance of apocalyptic religions to forecast that the world will end on such and such a date. Now it is the environmentalists who do so – with as much credibility as those now long-forgotten apocalyptic groups.

Faiths know you can ask people to reflect, acknowledge their weaknesses and foolishness, sins and misdemeanours, some of the time, for example Lent or Ramadan. But they also know that you must let people celebrate and party – and boy does that happen at, for example, Easter or Eid Ul Fitr! Faiths also know that celebrations are important because if there is nothing to celebrate then why bother? When we did the Assisi meeting in 1986, we called it a Celebration. It was as if we were heretics! All the environmental organisations said that this was the wrong term because there was nothing to celebrate. But if there is nothing to celebrate, we give up; we dry up as human beings. Fast and feasts; reflection and celebration: this is how faiths have passed on their truths and established their models down the millennia. And stories. Facts and figures are fine, but stories are how faiths have told each generation the core insights of their faith. Not pie-charts and statistical tables, but stories are what move people.

This is why, in response to a request from the UN to involve the faiths in addressing climate change and the natural environment, ARC, in collaboration with many secular environmental agencies and religious environment groups such as IFEES (Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences) is developing the following. Each major faith tradition is creating a seven-year plan to be formally announced at the end of 2009. The seven-year plan is designed to develop generational changes in the way we treat the natural world. At a local level, seven-year plans will be drawn up by local congregations/communities, based upon the major faith template. Here below are some of the questions that each group is addressing.

What are you already doing of which you are proud?

- To what extent have you carried out an environmental audit of your assets and looked at issues such as your use of natural resources, recycling practices and reducing your carbon footprint?
- Have you encouraged your own faithful to do their own environmental audits and take action accordingly?
- Have you set aside a specific festival to focus on your traditions on the natural environment – for example a tree festival or a Creation celebration? If no, could you? If yes, could it be expanded and improved?



What would you like to do now and in the future?

- Could you draw together from your audits and educational material handbooks for the faithful on how to live more simply and environmentally, with practical suggestions drawn from your experience? How could these be developed and published through your publishing houses or through your websites?
- What potential is there in your educational work for environmentally auditing the schools under your care, and for incorporating into the curriculum teachings about the environment?
- Are there faith-associated youth organisations where this could be integrated, for example through youth camps in nature, street-cleaning projects, and forest schools?
- To what extent have you examined assets like forests or land under your care and asked whether they could be differently protected or managed to better contribute to sustaining our planet?
- If you have publishing houses, have you examined their impact on the environment?

Have you ever considered this...?

- Are there any stories or traditional practices that highlight how your tradition has always cared for creation?
- Have you looked at your role in tourism within the countries in which you operate, including your sacred buildings and holy places and, where relevant, the tourist information areas around them, as well as hotels, guesthouses, gift shops, cafeterias and restaurants, and asked if there might be more environmentally-friendly ways to conduct any business enterprises you have?
- Could such youth groups and/or members of your diaspora community think about 'eco-twinning' with environment projects where the effects of climate change are being felt first-hand? This 'eco-twinning' could be with projects of your own faith in another country or in other regions of your own country.
- Are there any further imaginative ways you believe you could lessen the impact of climate change? What are these?

These questions might also be worth considering as an educational tool. Perhaps some of these ideas could form the basis of a school project with local faith communities and help your local faiths to create their seven-year plans for generational change.

Editors' notes

(1) See <http://www.theregenerationproject.org/> for more about the Interfaith Power and Light campaign, a USA-based religious response to global warming.

(2) See *Generalising about Jews* by Clive A. Lawton in this issue for more on Jewish environmentalism.