

THE ASSISI DECLARATIONS

Messages on Humanity and Nature from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam & Judaism

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Content

THE BUDDHIST DECLARATION ON NATURE	2-3
THE CHRISTIAN DECLARATION ON NATURE	4-6
THE HINDU DECLARATION ON NATURE	7-8
THE MUSLIM DECLARATION ON NATURE	9-10
THE JEWISH DECLARATION ON NATURE	11-12
LINKS TO THE WINDSOR STATEMENTS	13
OTHER BELIEF-SYSTEMS	13-14

Note: We have included declarations on the environment made by several other faith-based communities who were not at the Assisi conference. This is done to provide the reader with a wider scope of belief-systems and their concerns about the materialistic approach to environmental matters with little or any given to the spiritual significance of preserving the natural habitat.

Faith Declarations on Nature

These are the five original Faith Declarations on Nature which were created in 1986, at a meeting held in Assisi by WWF-Internationa. The meeting stemmed from an idea by HRH the Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh at which five leaders of the five major world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism – were invited to come and discuss how their faiths could and should help save the natural world. By 1995 when the Alliance of Religions and Conservation was formed, the five initial faiths had issued more detailed statements, and six other significant world faiths had also made their statements about the environment. Links to the book, Faith in Conservation, published by the World Bank, in which all these eleven statements were published together for the first time, can be found at the end of this document.

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THE BUDDHIST DECLARATION ON NATURE

By Venerable Lunrig Namgyal Rinpoche, Abbot of Gyuto Tantric University

*Homage to Him whose vision and speech
Made Him unexcelled as a sage and a teacher;
The Being who saw the interdependence of Nature
And taught it to the world.*

In the words of the Buddha Himself: "Because the cause was there the consequences followed; because the cause is there, the effects will follow". These few words present the interrelationship between cause (karma), and its effects. It goes a step further and shows that happiness and suffering do not simply come about by chance or irrelevant causes. There is a natural relationship between a cause and its resulting consequences in the physical world. In the life of the sentient beings too, including animals, there is a similar relationship of positive causes bringing about happiness and negative actions causing negative consequences.

Therefore, a human undertaking motivated by a healthy and positive attitude constitutes one of the most important causes of happiness, while undertakings generated through ignorance and negative attitude bring about suffering and misery. And this positive human attitude is, in the final analysis, rooted in genuine and unselfish compassion and loving kindness that seeks to bring about light and happiness for all sentient beings. Hence Buddhism is a religion of love, understanding and compassion and committed towards the ideal of non- violence. As such, it also attaches great importance to wildlife and the protection of the environment on which every being in this world depends for survival.

The simple underlying reason why beings other than humans need to be taken into account is that, like human beings, they too are sensitive to happiness and suffering; they too, just like the human species, primarily seek happiness and shun suffering. The fact that they may be incapable of communicating their feelings is no more an indication of apathy or insensitivity to suffering or happiness than in the case of a person whose faculty of speech is impaired. Yet it would appear from past history that the opposite view has been predominant.

Hence many have held up usefulness to human beings as the sole criterion for the evaluation of an animal's life. Upon closer examination one discovers that this mode of evaluation of another's life and right to existence has also been largely responsible for human indifference as well as cruelty to animals, not to speak of violence in today's world. On sober reflection, one can find that there is a striking similarity between exterminating the life of a wild animal for fun and terminating the life of an innocent fellow human being at the whim of a more capable and powerful person. We should therefore be wary of justifying the right of any species to survive solely on the basis of its usefulness to human beings.

Many additional factors contribute to and reinforce this insight in Buddhism. A philosophical system which propagates the theory of rebirth and life after death, it maintains that in the continuous birth and rebirth of sentient beings (not only on this planet but in the universe as a whole) each being is related to us ourselves, just as our parents are related to us in this life. And just as our own parents have been indispensable to our upbringing in our present lifespan, in another particular span of our life another particular sentient being has given us the spark of life.

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

The fact that we are totally unaware of such a relationship does not undermine this observation any more than that a particular person is not someone's parent simply because they do not realize the connection.

We are told that history is a record of human society in the past. From existing sources there is evidence to suggest that for all their limitations, people in the past were aware of this need for harmony between human beings and nature. They loved the environment. They revered it as the source of life and wellbeing in the world. In my faraway country, I still remember what my parents said: they told us that various spirits and forces are dormant in the rivers, mountains, lakes and trees. Any harm done to them, they said, would result in drought, epidemics and sickness in human beings and the loss of the fertility of the earth.

We regard our survival as an undeniable right. As co-habitants of this planet, other species too have this right for survival. And since human beings as well as other non-human sentient beings depend upon the environment as the ultimate source of life and wellbeing, let us share the conviction that the conservation of the environment, the restoration of the imbalance caused by our negligence in the past, be implemented with courage and determination. These teachings lead us to the following words by His Holiness the Dalai Lama:

"As we all know, disregard for the natural inheritance of human beings has brought about the danger that now threatens the peace of the world as well as the chance to live of endangered species. Such destruction of the environment and the life depending upon it is a result of ignorance, greed and disregard for the richness of all living things. This disregard is gaining great influence. If peace does not become a reality in the world and if the destruction of the environment continues as it does today, there is no doubt that future generations will inherit a dead world.

Our ancestors have left us a world rich in its natural resources and capable of fulfilling our needs. This is a fact. It was believed in the past that the natural resources of the Earth were unlimited, no matter how much they were exploited. But we know today that without understanding and care these resources are not inexhaustible. It is not difficult to understand and bear the exploitation done in the past out of ignorance, but now that we are aware of the dangerous factors, it is very important that we examine our responsibilities and our commitment to values, and think of the kind of world we are to bequeath to future generations.

It is clear that this generation is at an important crossroad. On the one hand the international community is able now to communicate each other's views, on the other hand the common fact is that confrontation far outweighs constructive dialogue for peace.

Various crises face the international community. The mass starvation of human beings and the extinction of species may not have overshadowed the great achievements in science and technology, but they have assumed equal proportions. Side by side with the exploration of outer space, there is the continuing pollution of lakes, rivers and vast parts of the oceans, out of human ignorance and misunderstanding. There is a great danger that future generations will not know the natural habitat of animals; they may not know the forests and the animals which we of this generation know to be in danger of extinction. We are the generation with the awareness of a great danger. We are the ones with the responsibility and the ability to take steps of concrete action, before it is too late."

THE CHRISTIAN DECLARATION ON NATURE

By Father Lanfranco Serrini, Minister General, OFM Conv

"PRAISE THE LORD ... Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! For he commanded and they were created...Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his commands!" (Psalm 148)

To praise the Lord for his creation is to confess that God the Father made all things visible and invisible; it is to thank him for the many gifts he bestows on all his children.

God created everything that exists, freely, by his word, and out of nothing. He alone is totally other, transcendent and immutable, whereas all creatures are contingent, mutable and wholly dependent on him for their existence. No creature can claim to be part of his nature or a "spark" of his Being; but, by reason of its created origin, each according to its species and all together in the harmonious unity of the universe manifest God's infinite truth and beauty, love and goodness, wisdom and majesty, glory and power.

God declared everything to be good, indeed, very good. He created nothing unnecessarily and has omitted nothing that is necessary. Thus, even in the mutual opposition of the various elements of the universe, there exists a divinely willed harmony because creatures have received their mode of existence by the will of their Creator, whose purpose is that through their interdependence they should bring to perfection the beauty of the universe. It is the very nature of things considered in itself, without regard to man's convenience or inconvenience, that gives glory to the Creator.

But it is especially through man and woman, made in the image and likeness of God and entrusted with a unique dominion over all visible creatures, that the Lord's goodness and providence are to be manifested. This is how the Psalmist sings of man's nobility: "When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet, you have made him little less than God, and you crown him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands."

The Fathers of the Church understood well the marvel of man's dual citizenship and the responsibilities it placed upon him. In the words of St Gregory of Nazianzen, "God set man upon earth as a kind of second world, a microcosm; another kind of angel, a worshipper of blended nature... He was a king of all upon earth, but subject to heaven; earthly and heavenly; transient, yet immortal; belonging both to the visible and to the intelligible order; midway between greatness and lowliness".

Most certainly, then, because of the responsibilities which flow from his dual citizenship, man's dominion cannot be understood as licence to abuse, spoil, squander or destroy what God has made to manifest his glory. That dominion cannot be anything other than a stewardship in symbiosis with all creatures. On the one hand, man's position verges on a viceregal partnership with God; on the other, his self-mastery in symbiosis with creation must manifest the Lord's exclusive and absolute dominion over everything, over man and over his stewardship. At the risk of destroying himself, man may not reduce to chaos or disorder, or, worse still, destroy God's bountiful treasures.

Every human act of irresponsibility towards creatures is an abomination. According to its gravity,

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

it is an offence against that divine wisdom which sustains and gives purpose to the interdependent harmony of the universe.

Christians believe that the first man's refusal to live according to divine wisdom introduced disharmony into his relationship with God and creatures, and this rebellion has perpetuated itself in history in various forms of social and personal injustice, domination and exploitation, making it impossible for men and women to live in concord with one another and with the rest of creation.

But the heart of Christian faith resides in its proclamation of God's merciful fidelity to himself and to the works of his hands. Christians believe that God the Father has not abandoned men and women to their sinful ways but has sent the Saviour to bring redemption and healing to everyone and to all things. Indeed, they firmly confess that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God made man, that he is the fulfilment of his Father's covenant with Abraham for the salvation of all peoples and with Noah on behalf of all creation. They maintain that, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven in his glorified humanity, he reconciles all things visible and invisible, and that all creation is therefore purposefully orientated, in and through him, towards the future revelation of the glorious liberty of God's children, when, in the new heavens and the new earth, there will no longer be death, mourning, sadness or pain. Through Christ and through his life-giving Spirit, the Father creates and sanctifies, gives life, blesses and bestows all good things.

Christians therefore cannot be pessimistic about the future of the world, nor believe in its periodic disintegration and renewal, both of which would deny Christ's future coming to judge the living and the dead, when he shall bring his recompense to repay everyone for what he has done. The God of the living will not destroy what he has created, but, in the future transformation of the world, he will reward the just and punish the evil.

This Gospel influenced the relationship of men and women to the environment through monastic institutions. Benedictine monks, especially inspired by their founder's evangelical sense of the stewardship of natural resources, advocated a harmonious union between prayer and work, between intellectual and physical effort, and between theoretical and practical skills.

This Good News produced a unique example of man's reconciliation with all creatures in St Francis of Assisi, admired and invoked as the patron of ecologists and of those who are dedicated to the establishment of harmonious relations with the environment. Since God can express his will through all of his works, Francis was submissive to all creatures and scanned creation attentively, listening to its mysterious voices. In his 'Canticle of Brother Sun' the saint called all creatures his brothers and sisters because they are God's gifts and signs of his providential and reconciling love. To God alone do they belong, to him they bear a likeness, and in his name Mother Earth, our sister, feeds us. In his personalized relationship with all creatures, St Francis recognised his duty to reciprocate divine love with love and praise, not only in the name of creatures, but in, with and through them.

For St Francis, work was a God-given grace to be exercised in that spirit of faith and devotion to which every temporal consideration must be subordinate. All human effort in the world must therefore lead to a mutual enrichment of man and creatures.

Many are the causes of the ecological disaster which mankind faces today. Without pretending to be complete, the following should be singled out: uncontrolled use of technology for immediate

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

economic growth, with little or no consideration for the planet's resources and their possible renewal; disregard for just and peaceful relations among peoples; destruction of cultures and environments during war; ill-considered exploitation of natural resources by consumer-orientated societies; unmastered and unregulated urbanization; and the exclusive preoccupation with the present without any regard for the future quality of life.

Therefore, in the name of Christ, who will come to judge the living and the dead, Christians repudiate:

-- All forms of human activity - wars, discrimination, and destruction of cultures - which do not respect the authentic interests of the human race, in accordance with God's will and design, and do not enable men as individuals and as members of society to pursue and fulfil their total vocation within the harmony of the universe;

-- All ill considered exploitation of nature which threatens to destroy it and, in turn, to make man the victim of degradation.

In the name of Christ, who will repay everyone for good works, Christians call upon all men and women to pursue:

-- A synthesis between culture and faith;

-- Ecumenical dialogue on the goals of scientific research and on the environmental consequences of the use of its findings;

-- The priority of moral values over technological advances; -- Truth, justice and the peaceful coexistence of all peoples.

THE HINDU DECLARATION ON NATURE

By His Excellency Dr Karan Singh, President, Hindu Virat Samaj

In the ancient spiritual traditions man was looked upon as part of nature, linked by indissoluble spiritual and psychological bonds with the elements around him. This is very much marked in the Hindu tradition, probably the oldest living religious tradition in the world. The Vedas, those collections of hymns composed by great spiritual seers and thinkers which are the repository of Hindu wisdom, reflect the vibrance of an encompassing world view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living or non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power.

Hinduism believes in the all encompassing sovereignty of the divine, manifesting itself in a graded scale of evolution. The human race, though at the top of the evolutionary pyramid at present is not seen as something apart from the earth and its multitudinous life forms. The Atharva Veda has the magnificent Hymn to the Earth which is redolent with ecological and environmental values. The following verses are taken from this extraordinary hymn:

Earth, in which lie the sea, the river and other waters, in which food and cornfields have come to be, in which lives all that breathes and that moves, May she confer on us the finest of her yield

Earth, in which the waters, common to all, moving on all sides, flow unfailingly, day and night, may she pour on us milk in many streams, and endow us with lustre

May those born of thee, O Earth be for our welfare, free from sickness and waste. Wakeful through a long life we shall become bearers of tribute to thee.

Earth, my mother, set me securely with bliss in full accord with heaven, O wise one, uphold me in grace and splendour.

Not only in the Vedas, but also in later scriptures such as the Upanishads, the Puranas and subsequent texts, the Hindu viewpoint on nature has been clearly enunciated. It is permeated by a reverence for life and an awareness that the great forces of nature - the earth, the sky, the air, the water and fire - as well as various orders of life including plants and trees, forests and animals, are all bound to each other within the great rhythms of nature. The divine is not exterior to creation but expresses itself through natural phenomena. Thus in the Mundaka Upanishad the divine is described as follows:

Fire is his head, his eyes are the moon and the sun; the regions of space are his ears, his voice the revealed Veda; the wind is his breath, his heart is the entire universe; the earth is his footstool, truly he is the inner soul of all

Turning to the animal world, we find that animals have always received special care and consideration. Numerous Hindu texts advise that all species should be treated as children. In Hindu mythology and iconography there is a close relationship between the various deities, who are all different aspects of the same divine power, and their animal or bird mounts. Each divinity is associated with a particular animal or bird, and this lends a special dimension to the animal kingdom.

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

In addition, according to the Vaishnava tradition, the evolution of life on this planet is symbolized by a series of divine incarnations beginning with fish, moving through amphibious forms and mammals, and then on into human incarnations. This view clearly holds that man did not spring fully formed to dominate the lesser life forms, but rather evolved out of these forms itself, and is therefore integrally linked to the whole of creation. This leads necessarily to a reverence for animal life. The Yajurveda lays down that "no person should kill animals helpful to all. Rather, by serving them, one should attain happiness" (Yajurveda 13:47).

This view was later developed by the great Jain Tirthankara, Lord Mahavira, who regenerated the ancient Jain faith that lives down to the present day. For the Jains, Ahimsa, or non-violence is the greatest good and on no account should life be taken. This philosophy was emphasised more recently by Mahatma Gandhi who always spoke of the importance of Ahimsa and looked upon the cow as a symbol of the benign element in animal life. All this strengthens the attitude of reverence for all life including animals and insects.

Apart from this, the natural environment also received the close attention of the ancient Hindu scriptures. Forests and groves were considered sacred, and flowering trees received special reverence. Just as various animals were associated with gods and goddesses, different trees and plants were also associated in the Hindu pantheon. The Mahabharata says that "even if there is only one tree full of flowers and fruits in a village, that place becomes worthy of worship and respect." Various trees, fruits and plants have special significance in Hindu rituals. The Hindu tradition of reverence for nature and all forms of life, vegetable or animal, represents a powerful tradition which needs to be re-nurtured and re-applied in our contemporary context. India, the population of which is over eighty per cent Hindu, has in recent years taken a special interest in conservation.

What is needed today is to remind ourselves that nature cannot be destroyed without mankind ultimately being destroyed itself. With nuclear weapons representing the ultimate pollutant, threatening to convert this beautiful planet of ours into a scorched cinder unable to support even the most primitive life forms, mankind is finally forced to face its dilemma. Centuries of rapacious exploitation of the environment have finally caught up with us and a radically changed attitude towards nature is now not a question of spiritual merit or condescension, but of sheer survival. This earth, so touchingly looked upon in the Hindu view as the Universal Mother, has nurtured mankind up from the slime of the primeval ocean for billions of years. Let us declare our determination to halt the present slide towards destruction, to rediscover the ancient tradition of reverence for all life and, even at this late hour, to reverse the suicidal course upon which we have embarked.

Let us recall the ancient Hindu dictum: "The Earth is our mother and we are all her children".

THE MUSLIM DECLARATION ON NATURE

By His Excellency Dr Abdullah Omar Nasseef, Secretary General, Muslim World League

The essence of Islamic teaching is that the entire universe is God's creation. Allah makes the waters flow upon the earth, upholds the heavens, makes the rain fall and keeps the boundaries between day and night. The whole of the rich and wonderful universe belongs to God, its maker. It is God who created the plants and the animals in their pairs and gave them the means to multiply. Then God created mankind - a very special creation because mankind alone was created with reason and the power to think and even the means to turn against his Creator.

Mankind has the potential to acquire a status higher than that of the angels or sink lower than the lowliest of the beasts.

The word "Islam" has the dual meaning of submission and peace. Mankind is special, a very particular creation of Allah. But still we are God's creation and we can only properly understand ourselves when we recognise that our proper condition is one of submission to the God who made us. And only when we submit to the Will of God can we find peace: peace within us as individuals, peace between man and man, and peace between man and nature. When we submit to the Will of God, we become aware of the sublime fact that all our powers, potentials, skills and knowledge are granted to us by God. We are His servants and when we are conscious of that, when we realise that all our achievements derive from the Mercy of God, when we return proper thanks and respect and worship to God for our nature and creation, then we become free. Our freedom is that of being sensible, aware, responsible trustees of God's gifts and bounty.

For the Muslim, mankind's role on earth is that of a khalifa, vice-regent or trustee of God. We are God's stewards and agents on Earth. We are not masters of this Earth; it does not belong to us to do what we wish. It belongs to God and He has entrusted us with its safekeeping. Our function as vice-regents, khalifa of God, is only to oversee the trust. The khalifa is answerable for his/her actions, for the way in which he/she uses or abuses the trust of God. Islam teaches us that we have been created by God and that we will return to God for Judgement: that we are accountable for our deeds as well as our omissions. The khalifa will render an account of how he treated the trust of God on the Day of Reckoning. The notion that describes the accountability of the khalifa is akhrah. Islam is the guidance of how to live today so that we can face the akhrah; it is the Message which informs us of what will be involved in that reckoning.

The central concept of Islam is tawheed or the Unity of God. Allah is Unity; and His Unity is also reflected in the unity of mankind, and the unity of man and nature. His trustees are responsible for maintaining the unity of His creation, the integrity of the Earth, its flora and fauna, its wildlife and natural environment. Unity cannot be had by discord, by setting one need against another or letting one end predominate over another; it is maintained by balance and harmony. Therefore Muslims say that Islam is the middle path and we will be answerable for how we have walked this path, how we have maintained balance and harmony in the whole of creation around us.

So unity, trusteeship and accountability, that is tawheed, khalifa and akhroh, the three central concepts of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam. They constitute the basic values taught by the Qur'an. It is these values which led Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, to say: "Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded", and

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

"If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is charity on his part", and again, "The world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you his stewards over it."

Environmental consciousness is born when such values are adopted and become an intrinsic part of our mental and physical makeup. And these are not remote, otherworldly, notions; they concern us here and now. If you were to ask me what the notion of the Hereafter has to do with here and now, my answer might surprise you. I would say nuclear power and biotechnology. Both of these are very present here-and-now issues. Both have benefits and costs. Both have implications for the health and well being of mankind and nature. If I sincerely intend to be God's khalifa, His steward on Earth, then I must have an opinion about them, must prepare myself to make choices about them, because I will be accountable for what mankind has wrought with these devices in the Hereafter.

Islam is a very practical world-view. It seeks, in all its principles and injunctions, to give pragmatic shapes to its concepts and values. Indeed, the notions of tawheed and khalifa have been translated into practical injunctions in the Shariah. Such Shariah institutions as haram zones, inviolate areas within which development is prohibited to protect natural resources, and hima, reserves established solely for the conservation of wildlife and forests, form the core of the environmental legislation of Islam. The classical Muslim jurist, Izzad-Din ibn Abd as-Salam, used these aspects of the Shariah when he formulated the bill of legal rights of animals in the thirteenth century. Similarly, numerous other jurists and scholars developed legislations to safeguard water resources, prevent over-grazing, conserve forests, limit the growth of cities, protect cultural property and so on. Islam's environmental ethics then are not limited to metaphysical notions; it provides a practical guide as well.

Muslims need to return to this nexus of values, this way of understanding themselves and their environment. The notions of unity, trusteeship and accountability should not be reduced to matters of personal piety; they must guide all aspects of their life and work. Shariah should not be relegated just to issues of crime and punishment, it must also become the vanguard for environmental legislation. We often say that Islam is a complete way of life, by which it is meant that our ethical system provides the bearings for all our actions. Yet our actions often undermine the very values we cherish. Often while working as scientists or technologists, economists or politicians, we act contrary to the environmental dictates of Islam. We must imbibe these values into our very being. We must judge our actions by them. They furnish us with a world-view which enables us to ask environmentally appropriate questions, draw up the right balance sheet of possibilities, properly weigh the environmental costs and benefits of what we want, what we can do within the ethical boundaries established by God, without violating the rights of His other creations. If we use the same values, the same understanding in our work as scientist or technologist, economist or politician as we do to know ourselves as Muslims - those who submit themselves to the Will of God - then, I believe, we will create a true Islamic alternative, a caring and practical way of being, doing and knowing, to the environmentally destructive thought and action which dominates the world today.

THE JEWISH DECLARATION ON NATURE

By Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, Vice-President, World Jewish Congress

"Whoever is merciful to all creatures is a descendant of our ancestor Abraham."

(Bezoh 32b).

In the sacred writings of Judaism, Jews are described over and over again as "merciful people, the children of merciful people". (Yebamot 79a Shabbat 133b). The Talmud even tells us (Shabbat 151b) that heaven rewards the person who has concern and compassion for the rest of creation, but this assurance of reward is not the major moral thrust of Jewish teaching. Our tradition emphasizes that Jews are commanded to do what is moral, "not for the sake of receiving a reward" (Abot 1:3). The good is necessary even when it does not redound to our immediate personal benefit.

When God created the world, so the Bible tells us, He made order out of primal chaos. The sun, the moon, and the stars, plants animals and ultimately man, were each created with a rightful and necessary place in the universe. They were not to encroach on each other. "Even the divine teaching, the Torah which was revealed from on high, was given in a set measure." (Vayikra Rabbah 15:2) and even these holy words may not extend beyond their assigned limit. "And the Lord took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend it and guard it" (Genesis 2:15).

Soon Adam, man, the one creature who is most godlike, gave names to all of creation, as God looked on and approved. "And the name that Adam gave to each living being has remained its name" (Genesis 2:19) forever. In the Kabbalistic teaching, as Adam named all of God's creatures, he helped define their essence. Adam swore to live in harmony with those whom he had named. Thus, at the very beginning of time, man accepted responsibility before God for all of creation.

Judaism, of course, knows the doctrine of the world beyond death, but its central concern is with life in this world. The tzaddik, the righteous Jew, is not a pillar saint who has withdrawn from the world. He is someone whose conduct in the very midst of life helps to establish that which seems impossible - one can live in this world of righteousness without encroaching on the rights of other people or of any of God's creatures.

The festivals of the Jewish religion do call upon us to stand before God in awe at His Majesty, trembling before His judgments, but that is not the dominant mood of the Jewish faith. The festivals celebrate in joy, the cycle of the seasons of nature. The rabbis even insisted that "He who has denied himself any one of the rightful joys of this world is a sinner". (Baba Kama 91b). The highest form of obedience to God's commandments is to do them not in mere acceptance but in the nature of union with Him. In such a joyous encounter between man and God, the very rightness of the world is affirmed.

The encounter of God and man in nature is thus conceived in Judaism as a seamless web with man as the leader and custodian of the natural world. Even in the many centuries when Jews were most involved in their own immediate dangers and destiny, this universalist concern has never withered. In this century, Jews have experienced the greatest tragedy of their history when one third of their people were murdered by unnatural men and therefore we are today particularly sensitive to the

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

need for a world in which each of God's creations is what He intended it to be. Now, when the whole world is in peril, when the environment is in danger of being poisoned and various species, both plant and animal, are becoming extinct, it is our Jewish responsibility to put the defence of the whole of nature at the very centre of our concern.

And yet it must be said, in all truth, that this question of man's responsibility to the rest of creation cannot be defined by simply expressing our respect for all of nature. There is a tension at the centre of the Biblical tradition, embedded in the very story of creation itself, over the question of power and stewardship. The world was created because God willed it, but why did He will it?

Judaism has maintained in all of its versions that this world is the arena that God created for man; half beast and half angel to prove that he could behave as a moral being. The Bible did not fail to demand even of God Himself that He be bound as much as man, by the law of morality. Thus, Abraham stood before God after He announced that He was about to destroy the wicked city of Sodom, and Abraham demanded of God Himself that He produce moral justification for this act. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice?" (Genesis 18.25). Comparably, man was given dominion over nature but he was commanded to behave towards the rest of creation with justice and compassion. Man lives always in tension between his power and the limits set by conscience.

Man's carnivorous nature is not taken for granted, or praised in the fundamental teachings of Judaism. The rabbis of the Talmud told that men were vegetarians in earliest times, between creation and the generation of Noah. In the twelfth century Maimonides, the greatest of all rabbinic scholars, explained that animal sacrifices had been instituted in ancient Judaism as a concession to the prevalent ancient practice of making such offerings to the pagan gods (Mareh Nebuhim 111:32). The implication is clear, that Judaism was engaged in weaning men from such practices.

Judaism as a religion offers the option of eating animal flesh, and most Jews do, but in our own century there has been a movement towards vegetarianism among very pious Jews. A whole galaxy of central rabbinic and spiritual teachers including several past and present Chief Rabbis of the Holy Land, have been affirming vegetarianism as the ultimate meaning of Jewish moral teaching. They have been proclaiming the autonomy of all living creatures as the value which our religious tradition must now teach to all of its believers. Let this affirmation resound this day and in days to come. Let it be heard by all our brethren wherever they may be, as the commandment which we must strive to realise. This cannot be achieved in one generation and it will not happen through pressure from within or without. Jews will move increasingly to vegetarianism out of their own deepening knowledge of what their tradition commands, as they understand it in this age.

Our ancestor, Abraham inherited his passion for nature from Adam. The later rabbis never forgot it. Some twenty centuries ago they told the story of two men who were out on the water in a rowboat. Suddenly one of them started to saw under his feet. He maintained that it was his right to do whatever he wished with the place which belonged to him. The other answered him that they were in the rowboat together; the hole that he was making would sink both of them. (Vayikra Rabbah 4:6).

We have a responsibility to life, to defend it everywhere, not only against our own sins but also against those of others. We are all passengers together in the same fragile and glorious world. Let us safeguard our rowboat - and let us row together.

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

Links to the Windsor Statements

In 1996, eleven faith statements on the environment were published at ARC's inauguration at Windsor Castle. These were published together for the first time in Faith in Conservation by Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay, World Bank, 2002.

The book (13MB) can be downloaded from <http://tinyurl.com/3cl3wf> or each of the separate faith statements can be downloaded from the Faiths section of ARC's website www.arcworld.org

END

OTHER BELIEF-SYSTEMS - THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Prallagon Consulting Group - 21/01/21

Religions. All religions agree that nature is an act of divinity and should be treated as such... Almost all religions address the issue of the creation of the universe, or universes, in different forms and with varying degrees of clarity or detail.

No attempt is made to list them all. Many are so ancient that little information is available.

Animism. Encompasses the beliefs that all material phenomena have agency, that there exists no hard and fast distinction between the spiritual and physical (or material) world and that soul or spirit or sentience exists not only in humans but also in other animals, plants, rocks, geographic features such as mountains or rivers or other entities of the natural environment: water sprites, vegetation deities, tree sprites, etc.

Jainism. 'Jain thought is a useful case study of a system of values in which environmental protection and the idea of a 'web of life' are central, but which has evolved in India independently of Western environmentalism.' Jain environmental philosophy has an emphasis on the role of environmental protection and its interconnectedness that have universal relevance.'

Zoroastrianism. 'God is worshiped as supreme. Zoroastrians believe that everything he created is pure and should be treated with love and respect. This includes the natural environment, so Zoroastrians traditionally do not pollute the rivers, land or atmosphere. This has caused some to call Zoroastrianism 'the first ecological religion.'

Baha'i.

Among the principles guiding the Baha'i approach to conservation, the environment and sustainable development, these are of particular importance: Nature reflects the qualities and attributes of God and should, therefore, be greatly respected and cherished; all things are interconnected and flourish according to the law of reciprocity; the oneness of humanity is the fundamental spiritual and social truth shaping our age; and nature reflects the qualities and attributes of God.

Yorùbá. This is one of the most ancient civilizations, very advanced, and urbanized in the world. The environment is people and people are the environment in Yoruba religion, as Yoruba religion is palpable in the Yoruba environment. Religion pervades the Yoruba people in every aspect of life, and Yoruba beliefs and traditions evolved from observations and interaction with their environment.

Faith-Based Beliefs – The Environment

Therefore, caring for the earth is a significant central issue in the Yoruba life and approach to environmental issues with implications on leadership and society in Nigeria.

Page 14 Page 14

