

# **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

## **Theology and conservation**

The 1986 Assisi Declarations, and further statements from meetings at Ohito, Japan, and Windsor, UK, in 1995, were landmark events in bringing together religions and environmental action. For the first time the teachings of the major religious faiths had been used to challenge the misuse and neglect of the natural world. Each faith had been able to demonstrate a clear spiritual duty that required its followers to live their lives in ways that care for the natural world. This duty is firmly rooted in sacred writings, stories and traditions as well as the interpretations of prophets, scholars and saints. The theological authority of the Assisi Declarations is therefore the fundamental underpinning of the whole Religions and Conservation movement.

You can download the full text of the original Assisi declarations at:

<http://tinyurl.com/c378tvw>

you can download the full text of the Ohito declaration at:

<http://tinyurl.com/7u8ueej>

Below are edited versions of the five Assisi declarations from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic and Judaic theology.

## **Assisi Buddhist declaration**

Author: **Venerable Lungrig Namgyal Rinpoche**, Abbot of Gyuto Tantric University, Dharamsala, India

There is a natural relationship between cause and its resulting consequences in the physical world. In the life of sentient beings too, including animals, there is a similar relationship of positive causes bringing about happiness and negative actions causing negative consequences.... Undertakings generated through ignorance and negative attitude bring about suffering and misery.

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

## **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

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. ... Many have held up usefulness to human beings as the sole criterion for the evaluation of an animal's life.

The theory of birth and rebirth after death maintains that in the continuous birth and rebirth of sentient beings each being is related to us ourselves.

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. (My parents) told us that various spirits and forces are dormant in rivers, mountains, lakes and trees. Any harm done to them, they said, would result in droughts, epidemics and sickness in human beings and the loss of the fertility of the earth.

Since human beings (also) 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.

### **Dalai Lama's statement:**

*Our ancestors have left us a world rich in its natural resources and capable of fulfilling our needs. This is a fact. ... We know today that without understanding and care these resources are not inexhaustible. ... Now that we are aware of the dangerous factors it is very important that we examine our responsibilities ... and think of the kind of world we are to bequeath to future generations.*

*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.*

*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.*

# **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

## **Assisi Christian declaration**

Author: **Father Lanfranco Serrini**, Minister General, Ordo Fratrum Minorum, Conventual

God created everything that exists, freely, by his word, out of nothing. ... All creatures are .... wholly dependent on him for their existence. 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.

He created nothing unnecessarily and has omitted nothing that is necessary. (His) purpose is that through their interdependence they should bring to perfection the beauty of the universe.

Man and woman, made in the likeness of God and entrusted with a unique dominion over all visible creatures. "You have made him little less than God, and you crown him with honour and glory. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands." Psalm ??

"He was a king of all upon Earth but subject to heaven" – St Gregory of Nazianzen

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. ... 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.

Christians believe that the first man's refusal to live according to divine wisdom introduced disharmony in to his relationship with God and creatures and this rebellion has perpetuated itself.... making it impossible for men and woman to live in concord with one and other and 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

## **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

his hands. ... 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.

Saint Francis of Assisi: ... called all creatures his brothers and sisters because they are God's gifts and signs of his providential and reconciling love. ... St Francis recognised his divine duty to reciprocate divine love with love and praise. For St Francis ... all human effort in the world must therefore lead to a mutual enrichment of man and creatures.

Therefore, in the name of Christ, Christians repudiate ... all ill-considered exploitation of nature which threatens to destroy it and in turn make man the victim of degradation. (and) call upon all men and women to pursue ... the priority of moral values over technological advances.

### **Assisi Hindu declaration**

Author: **His Excellency Dr Karan Singh**, President, Hindu Virat Samaj, Kashmir India

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 ... marked in the Hindu tradition. The Vedas... which are the repository of Hindu wisdom, reflect an encompassing world view which looks upon all objects in the universe, living or non-living, as being pervaded by the same spiritual power. 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.

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 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.

## **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

Numerous Hindu texts advise that all species should be treated as children. According to the Vaishnava tradition, the evolution of life on this planet is symbolised by a series of divine incarnations beginning with fish. ... This view clearly holds that man did not spring fully formed to dominate lesser life forms but rather evolved out of those forms itself. This leads necessarily to a reverence for animal life. 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 ... All this strengthens the attitude of reverence for all life, including animals and insects.

Forests and groves were considered sacred (by ancient Hindu scriptures) and flowering trees received special reverence. 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'.

The Hindu tradition of reverence for nature and all forms of life represents a powerful tradition which needs to be renurtured and reapplied in our present context. What is needed today is to remind ourselves that nature cannot be destroyed without mankind ultimately being destroyed itself. 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. Let us declare our determination to halt the present slide towards destruction, ... and even at this late hour to reverse the suicidal course upon which we have embarked.

### **Assisi Islamic declaration**

Author: **His Excellency Dr Abdullah Omar Nasseef**, Secretary General, Muslim World League, Makkah al-Mukarramah, Saudi Arabia

The essence of Islamic teaching is that the entire universe is God's creation. ... The whole of the rich and wonderful universe belongs to God, its maker. ... God created mankind - a very special creation because mankind alone was created with reason and the power to think. ... we can only properly understand ourselves when we recognise that our proper condition is one of submission to the God who made us. ... our freedom is that of being sensible, aware, responsible trustees of God's gifts and bounty.

## **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

For the Muslim, mankind's role on earth is that of a khalifa, vice-regent or trustee of God. ... 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. 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.

The central concept of Islam is tawheed or the Unity of God. ... (Allah's) trustees are responsible for maintaining the unity of His creation ... by balance and harmony. ... 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.

It is these values which led Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, to say: "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."

If I sincerely intend to be God's khalifa ... than I must have an opinion about (current) environmental issues, 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. ... Such Shariah institutions as haram zones ... 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.

Shariah should become the vanguard for environmental legislation. Our ethical system provides the bearings for all our actions. Yet our actions often undermine the very values we cherish. 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 .... properly weigh the environmental costs and benefits of what we want, what we can do

## **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

within the ethical boundaries established by God, without violating the rights of his other creations.

If we use (these) values ... then I believe we will create a true Islamic alternative ... to the environmentally destructive thought and action which dominates the world today.

### **Assisi Judaic declaration**

Author: **Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg**, Vice-President, World Jewish Congress, New York, USA

"Whoever is merciful to all creatures is a descendant of our ancestor Abraham" (Bezoh 32b)

The Talmud even tells us (Shabbat 151b) that heaven rewards the person who has concern and compassion for the rest of creation.

When God created the world, so the Bible tells us, He made order out of primal chaos. The sun, the moon, 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. "And the Lord took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend it and guard it." (Genesis 2:15.) 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 creation.

The tzaddik, the righteous Jew ... is someone whose conduct ... 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 highest form of obedience to God's commandments is to do them not in mere acceptance but in the nature of union with Him. 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. ... 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 need for a world in which each of God's creations is what He intended

## **Alliance of Religions and Conservation: Educational resource 1d**

it to be. Now when the whole world is in peril ... it is our Jewish responsibility to put the defence of the whole of nature at the very centre of our concern.

Man's carnivorous nature is not taken for granted, or praised in the fundamental teachings of Judaism. Judaism as a religion offers the option of eating animal flesh ... but in (the 20th) century there has been a movement towards vegetarianism among very pious Jews. (Rabbinic and spiritual teachers) have been proclaiming the autonomy of all living creatures as the value which our religious tradition must now teach to all of its believers. ... Jews will move increasingly to vegetarianism out of their 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. 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 (it).