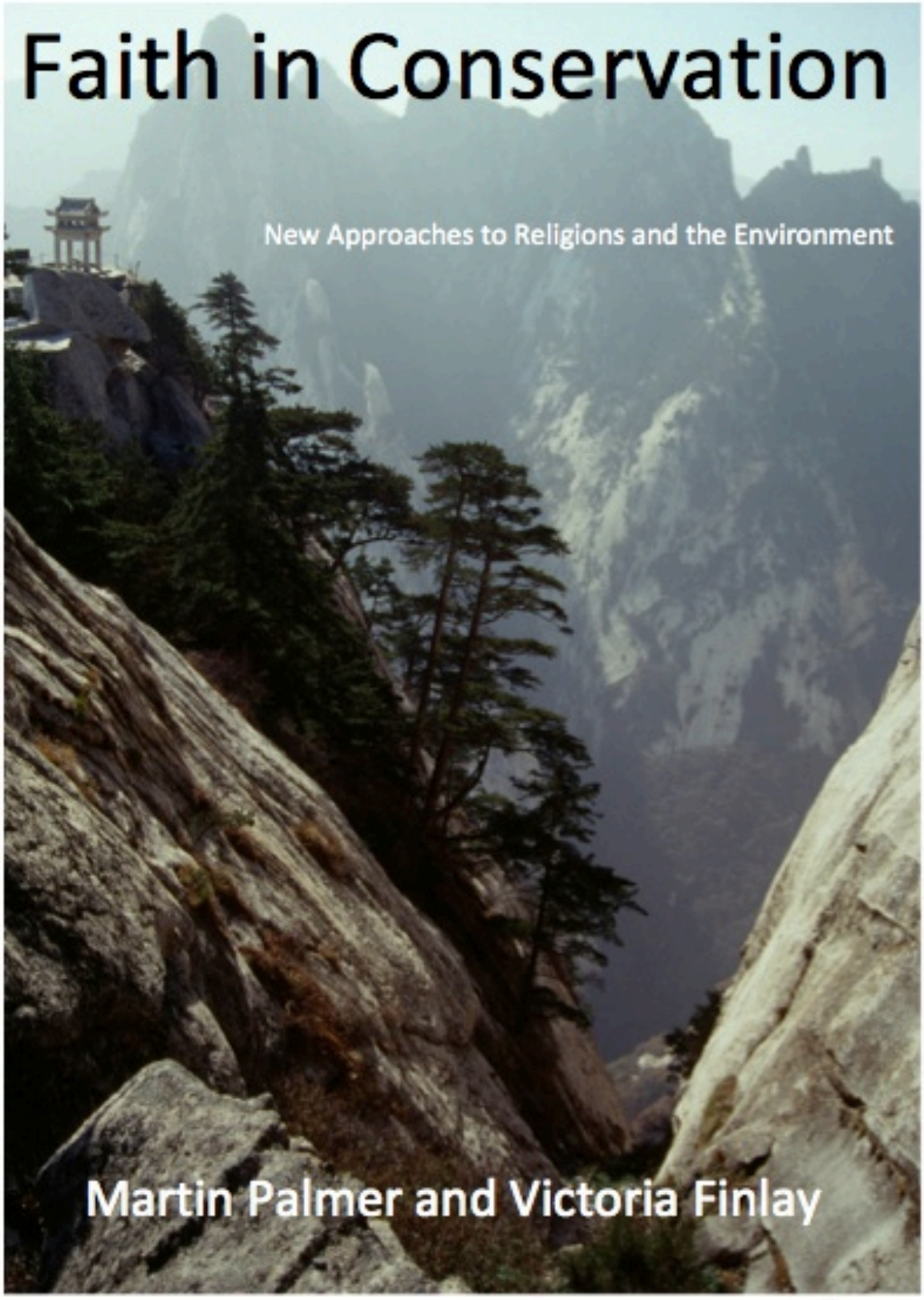
Faith in Conservation
New Approaches to Religions and the Environment
Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay

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Preface

Imagine you are busy planting a tree, and someone rushes up to say that the Messiah has come and the end of the world is nigh. What do you do? The advice given by the rabbis in a traditional Jewish story is that you first finish planting the tree, and only then do you go and see whether the news is true. The Islamic tradition has a similar story which reminds followers that if they happen to be carrying a palm cutting in their hand when the Day of Judgment takes place, they should not forget to plant the cutting.'[1]

There is a tension in the environmental world between those who wish to tell us that the end is almost here and those who want to encourage us to plant trees for the future. In 1992, for example, we were all told, in any number of press statements before the event, that the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro was "the world's last chance to save itself."[2] And indeed many major reports emerging from environmental bodies paint a picture of terrifying, impending destruction – in a sincere desire to shock people into action.[3]

Year after year, these groups have been gathering information that shows beyond reasonable doubt that parts of our living planet are slowly but surely being diminished, polluted, fished out, hunted to the edge, built over, cut down, erased, or – as it is most chillingly expressed – simply "lost." It is increasingly clear, and still shocking, that human activity has assisted (if not created) many serious problems. These include the increase in global warming, the destruction of many core species of the seas (cod are almost

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[1] The story is from the Al-Musnad of Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, written in 1313 and reprinted in 1895 in Cairo. Quoted in M. Izzi Dien, The Environmental Dimensions of Islam (Cambridge, U.K.: Lutterworth Press, 2000), 104.

[2] The statement was made on a number of occasions by Maurice Strong, secretary general of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992.

[3] Organizations that have produced such reports include The Club of Rome and the Worldwatch Institute, among others.

extinct through careless overfishing), the destruction of entire forests within a single generation and the accelerating spread of deserts. Around the world, hundreds of organizations chart, report, and analyze the declining health of our world and urge urgent action on anyone who will listen. Such groups often fall back on the vivid language of Biblical or Vedic (Hindu) accounts of the end of the world – apocalyptic imagery that encapsulates our deepest terrors more graphically than any chart or statistical breakdown can ever do.

Powerfully emotive language is used to make us feel that we are sitting on the edge – that, in the words of the Jewish story above, the end of the world is nigh. For example, Maurice Strong, secretary general of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, declared in 2000:

> *"I am deeply convinced that the new millennium we have just entered will decide the fate of the human species... The first three decades of this century are likely to be decisive. Not that we face the prospect of extinction as a species during this period but we will set, irrevocably, the direction that will determine the survival or the demise of human life as we know it. Surely the divine source of all life, which most call God, could not have presented us with a more paradoxical challenge."*[4]

If the environmental crises facing the world today were simply a matter of information, knowledge, and skills, then we would be heading out of these dangers. For more than thirty years the world's major institutions, scientists, and governments, and some of the largest non-governmental organizations (NGOs), have compiled and analyzed details of how we are abusing the planet. Since 1972, huge conventions have brought these people together to discuss the state of the world. Each year the World Conservation Union publishes its Red Data Books, chronicling the loss of species and habitats in great detail. Today we can discuss the issues of global warming in very specific terms: charts show the destruction of tropical forests, and the loss of crucial habitats is described in books, papers and films.

Yet the crises are still with us. The simple fact is that knowledge on its own is not enough. As the two stories at the beginning of this preface show, all this information has to be set within a wider framework to make much sense. Take, for example, the famous case of the destruction of tropical rainforests. At the first major United Nations meeting on the environment,

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[4] Quoted in Survey of the Environment 2000 (Chennai, India: The Hindu, 2000), 15.

held in Stockholm in 1972, scientists and environmentalists made powerful presentations on the fact that many countries were selling their rainforests for cash (for reasons of poverty as well as opportunism), only to find themselves left with eroded and impoverished soils. The experts presenting the case assumed that their audience would share their concern at this loss, and stop the deforestation. But that was not the framework within which everyone was listening. A number of politicians and business people went home to their developing countries and informed their superiors that apparently there were groups who would pay good money for all that rainforest – and the rate of destruction of the rainforests rose perceptibly after Stockholm. This was partly because the meeting had opened some people's eyes to the commercial potential of their forests. Both politicians and environmentalists had the same data but different assumptions, different values, and different frameworks.

Ultimately, the environmental crisis is a crisis of the mind. And likewise, appropriate development is ultimately an appropriate development of the mind. We see, do, and are what we think, and what we think is shaped by our cultures, faiths, and beliefs. This is why one of the more extraordinary movements of the past few decades began to take shape. For if the information of the environmentalists needed a framework of values and beliefs to make it useful, then where better to turn for allies than to the original multinationals, the largest international groupings and networks of people? Why not turn to the major religions of the world?

In 1986 this is exactly what the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) International did when it invited five major faiths – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism – to Assisi in Italy to explore how they could work on environmental issues. The encounter was so successful that in 1995 His Royal Highness Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, then president of WWF, launched a new international non-profit organization, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC). By 2000 six more faiths had joined the Alliance – Baha'ism, Daoism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism – bringing the total to eleven, with ARC working in just under sixty countries. [Note: In 2013 the Confucianists joined, bringing the total to twelve major faiths.]

ARC’s role is to help major faith bodies develop environmental programs and projects in association with secular bodies as diverse as WWF, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and the World Bank. As part of the Alliance each faith has compiled its own statement summarizing its relationship with, and beliefs about, the environment.

Prepared with the help of the World Bank, this book shows how religions need to be, and increasingly are, in partnership with the environmental and development movements in order to make this world a better place for all life – or, as the faiths more poetically and perhaps more tellingly call it, all creation.

Chapter One: Changing Worlds

0h children of Adam! …. eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters. Holy Qur'an, Surah 7:31

In 1989, when communism fell in Mongolia, there were three registered Buddhist monks. Today, along with the government and the World Bank, Buddhism and the many revived monasteries are a fundamental part of the development and environmental programme for the country.

The sounds of the explosions could be heard for miles. Even at night it was possible to spot the giant plume of water shooting up into the air, casting up its bounty into the night sky. Then, like sharks, the little boats would swoop in and trawl up the dead and dying fish – and not just fish. For anything that was swimming in the waters off the coast of Tanzania on those evenings when the dynamite fishermen went fishing, died in the blast.

For centuries, the Muslim fishermen of the Tanzanian coast had fished these waters. Based on islands such as Zanzibar or Masali, they depended on the sea and their harvests for their livelihoods and for the survival of their communities. Deeply religious, these poor communities eked out a living generation after generation. Then someone introduced dynamite. The results were dramatic. For centuries the fishermen had had to hope that they were casting their nets in the right places, deep enough and wide enough to make a decent night's catch. Now, by throwing sticks of dynamite into the sea, they could haul in almost guaranteed catches and it took so little time.

What they did not know (and did not think was their business) was the terrible destruction they were doing, not just to the fragile ecosystem of coral and reefs but also to their own long-term survival. Dynamite wreaks havoc on the delicate balance of nature – of which fishermen are part. It indiscriminately takes out the young fish along with the mature ones, whereas traditional fishing leaves the young to slip through the nets and breed later. The explosion also destroys the very environment within which

the fish live. It kills plankton, breaks up reefs and corals, and wipes out the vast array of plant life and other species upon which the shoals of fish depend for their survival. Ultimately, the fish shoals die away and the fishermen and their communities are left with decreasing catches or have to travel much farther out to sea in order to find any fish at all. No one benefits in the long run.

But it was dramatic and fun and for a while yielded high returns. The question therefore became how to help the fishermen understand the long-term problems they were causing, and then stop them. It was the kind of environmental issue that many governments around the world were, and are, trying to address. At first, the Tanzanian government and associated environmental agencies went the usual route: they launched an education program. But like the majority of people in marginalized communities (or indeed perhaps any communities), few fishermen either read or pay much attention to government leaflets, and even fewer looked at those produced by NGOs, no matter how worthy. Then came legislation: dynamite fishing was officially banned by the government. But again, such communities take quite a pride in ignoring or outwitting such laws. Then a group of scientists, sent by an international body concerned with species loss, arrived on one of the main islands. They brought all their own food and tents and camped out in the wild rather than living with any of the fishing communities. After three weeks spent studying the issue they came to an extraordinary conclusion. The only solution, they said, was for the government to have armed patrols capable of hunting down, or at the very least deterring, the dynamite fishermen.

These scientists ostensibly focused on the survival of species, but they made only passing reference to one of the most important species of all: human beings. In part this was because in choosing where they stayed and what they ate they had not made any effort to know the fishermen and their families. But partly it sprang from a strange problem that bedevils certain approaches to ecology and environment: that of ignoring human communities, which are of course as much part of the environment as plants and animals. To its credit, the Tanzanian government only half-heartedly applied the draconian measures – not particularly wanting to shoot its own citizens, even if they were acting illegally. So the problem dragged on. Then a solution of startling simplicity was developed.

The fishing villages of the East African coast are almost all Muslim, and as such they are organized under a religious leadership of sheiks who have enormous authority in the communities. And unlike government officials in far-off capital cities (and particularly unlike well-meaning foreigners from

European and American NGOs), the sheiks are very much part of those communities. The basis of the lives of these fishing families is Islam, with its Qur'an, its Shari'ah laws, and the traditions and customs of the faith. This is what holds the lives of the people together, and this is what provides the worldview they consider to be paramount.

In 1998, in a joint venture with several NGOs (CARE International, WWF International, ARC, and the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science), the sheiks on Masali Island came together to explore Islamic teachings about the appropriate use of God's creation. From these studies the sheiks drew the conclusion that dynamite fishing was illegal according to Islam. They used Qur'anic texts such as "O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters" (Surah 7:31). Stories about the Prophet Muhammad's own actions denouncing waste (see chapter 5) were told to convince the fishermen and their communities that what they were doing was against the express wishes of God.

In 2000, the Muslim leadership of Misali and surrounding smaller islands banned dynamite fishing and taught that anyone who ignored this ban risked incurring the wrath of God and endangering their immortal soul. Dynamite fishing was dramatically curtailed. By 2003, in collaboration with scientists and ecologists but guided by the profound insights of their own faith, the communities were developing sustainable fishing. What government laws and the threat of violence failed to do, Islam in partnership with the environmental insights of conservation bodies managed to achieve. And it did so for the simple reason that it made sense within the people's culture and worldview, and it drew not just upon ecological information but on a profound understanding of human nature in the sacred texts.

Whose world?

We all want to change the world for the better. The question is, whose world is it and how can it be changed? We live in many worlds. I am sure you will have had the experience of the differing worlds of the pessimist and the optimist: two people see the same drinking glass, but one sees it as half empty, the other as half full. But it goes much deeper than that. For example, let us take the example of a fox. What do you think a fox is?

To some people, it is simply a reddish-coloured mammal; to others it is a classic example of urban adaptation by wild animals; to yet others it is something to chase on horseback. To some animal lovers, the fox is a symbol of the survival of nature against urbanization and the cruelty of hunters; to others, who have fed foxes in their gardens with bread and scraps, it is a beautiful creature appearing almost by magic with its cubs. To cartoon makers and storytellers in many lands, the fox is a wily, cunning creature; to the chicken farmer, the fox is a predator who can wipe out a livelihood. To Hindus and Buddhists, the fox is a soul just as they are, and may even be someone they knew in a former life. To many Japanese, the fox is a fearful sight, because they believe that it is inhabited by evil spirits intent on taking over human beings.

So let's ask the question again. What is a fox? Our answer has to be: "It depends on what you believe." This is true of everything around us. We understand things because of what we believe. If you believe that hunting is wrong, you will see animals such as the fox, bison, or tiger in one way. If you are a hunter, then you will see them in a different way. If you like sausages, then you will see the pig in one way. If you are a vegetarian, you will see the pig somewhat differently. If you believe the world is there to be used as you want and when you want, then you are not likely to treat it the same way as someone who believes it is the loving manifestation of a Divine Being or that all life is itself part of the Divine.

What you believe gives meaning to what you see. It determines how you use, treat, and respect the rest of the world. The challenge to those seeking to make the world a better place is how to help different visions and different experiences of the world to work together. If you do not realize there are different worlds, but insist everyone should see the world as you do, you can lose key potential allies who feel their world has been ignored. Seeing and respecting other worlds opens up vast possibilities.

Two versions of a forest

The coastline of Lebanon has been massively developed in the past 20 years. Towns have spread north and south, creating an almost unbroken line of urbanization along the seashore and covering the hills behind with vast stretches of concrete homes and roads. At times, driving along the coast can seem like driving on a long highway cutting through suburbia. As a result, the natural environment of the Lebanese coast is under unprecedented pressure. It is one of the most dramatic examples of something that is

happening all around the Mediterranean: the coastlines are being built upon, destroying rare ecological systems and running the risk that the Mediterranean will soon be a sea ringed by concrete.

In response to this rapid development, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and other environmental agencies identified the Mediterranean coast as a priority for preservation and set up a task force to help it. WWF International counts the survival of Mediterranean shrub lands and woodlands on its list of the 200 most important world ecosystems to be protected. Aerial photos taken in the late 1990s highlighted the degree to which development had already reduced shrub lands and woodlands in countries such as France, Greece, Turkey, and, perhaps most dramatically, Lebanon. The one bright green spot of hope was discovered to be a sizable ancient forest north of Beirut covering three hills. The researchers from the task force were surprised and delighted to discover this remaining block of forest, the forest of Harissa, and immediately took steps to ensure its protection.

They contacted the landowners of this rare and crucial forest, and sent them a forty-eight-page scientific, economic, and legal document demanding a promise to abide by national and international laws to ensure the protection of the forest. In the worldview of the people in the taskforce, these laws and the weight of the scientific evidence were paramount. They wanted to do good and were anxious to help the landowning organization fall into line with the good that they wanted done. They got no reply. It took the wisdom of a local environmental group, led by a Druze and a Maronite Christian, to work out why.

The forest of Harissa belongs to the Maronite Church of Lebanon. The church has owned this forest for centuries, perhaps as long as fifteen hundred years. Its priests and decision-makers were not ignorant of the forest's beauty and environmental importance, but it had a deeper significance for them. It is known as the “Holy Forest of Our Lady of Lebanon”, and at its heart is the Cathedral of Our Lady, with a giant outdoor statue of the Virgin Mary, whom many see as the Protector of Lebanon. Yet in the document from the task force – written in that strangely unappealing language that so dominates the utterances of the environmental movement and scientists – no mention of the forest's spiritual, cultural, historic, and emotional significance was made. Its authors simply did not see that world of the Harissa forest, and as a result they were unable to communicate with the Church and its followers.

A new approach was needed. ARC and WWF already had a joint program called "Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet", designed to recognize commitments to the environment made by communities based on people's religious traditions and their beliefs about the natural world.'[5] Protecting the sacred Harissa forest seemed to be an ideal example of a Sacred Gift. With this in mind, representatives of ARC and the local Association for Forest Development and Conservation (AFDC), staffed by both Druze and Maronite environmentalists and volunteers went to meet the head of the Maronite Church. The palace of His Beatitude the Maronite Patriarch lies within the sacred forest of Harissa itself. Within half an hour the Patriarch had committed the Church to protect the forest in perpetuity. By drawing upon the Church's sacred understanding of the forest and experiencing the world through the insights of Maronite theology, culture, and tradition, the decision – and pledge – made sense locally as well as internationally.

It is worth comparing the first document sent to the Church, which they ignored, with the document the Church later drew up with the help of AFDC and ARC. The differences between the documents reflect the huge differences between the two worlds, even though both share a common concern and now a common commitment to protect this rare forest. The following dictatorial definition of why the task force thought the Church would want to work with it is a classic example of a view of human nature, commitment, and intentions that sees the glass as half empty:

> *Dedication to biodiversity protection – i.e. is the area especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biodiversity and associated natural and cultural resources?*
>
> *To satisfy this test, the area's custodians must have protection of biodiversity as a first order management objective. If other objectives take precedence over biodiversity protection, then the area as a whole, or those parts of the area where other objectives take precedence, should not be classified as a protected area. Forests managed for other environmental functions, such as soil or watershed protection, will not qualify as protected areas where these other functions are higher order objectives than maintenance of biodiversity. Forest areas*

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[5] WWF and ARC summarized the notion of a Sacred Gift as "a practical, concrete and active expression of a religious tradition and its belief about the natural world. This initiative will honour what is already happening and through specific Gifts will indicate significant new commitments." From the Sacred GTTE Checklist pertaining to voluntary forest protection, WWF/ARC, November 12,1999.

dedicated to environmental protection functions other than biodiversity should be distinguished from protected areas and labelled differently (e.g. as protected forests).[6]

In contrast, this is how the Maronite Church expressed its commitment to protect the forest and its "biodiversity," and perhaps more important, why:

For centuries the Church has defended the natural beauty and Godliness of the forests and hills of Harissa, as well as so many other holy places in Lebanon.... In so doing, we observe that the land and the flora and fauna on it, do not ultimately belong to us. We are simply the guardians of what belongs to God. It is in this spirit that the Church has for centuries protected such sites as Harissa. But today, new threats endanger this holy site and so many others. Harissa is now surrounded by the growth of buildings and just as the Basilica [cathedral] is a boat floating on the mountain so Harissa floats like a ship of nature above the tide of modem development. Therefore the Church must speak boldly and make clear to all that the Holy forests of Harissa will remain, protected, managed and owned for God by the Church... It is this conviction which leads us to consider the forests of Harissa registered under the name of the Maronite Patriarchate as a Maronite Protected Environment of Harissa.

In protecting this area, the Church will continue to ensure that the diversity of plants, trees, animals and birds given by God, nurtured by the Church will be maintained.... We are aware that not only does the world need to know why we are making this clear statement, but our own faithful need to understand that this action springs from our faith. St Maron [the fifth-sixth century hermit saint after whom the Church is named] sought God in the wilderness of creation, amidst nature itself. Today, in the spirit of St Maron we need to rediscover why God wishes His Church to care for nature, through education, through teaching and preaching. Through looking again at the life of St Maron and the thousands of hermits who sought Christ in the forests and valleys, we can become true believers, caring for all aspects of God's creation.

That is why the forest is now protected formally as well as spiritually. That is also why, since the declaration of the protection of the forest in 1999, the Church has created an ecology center for young people, protected several other major woodland sites, and developed a program of environmental

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[6] From the document endorsed by the WWF Core Forest Advisory Group, October 1999.

education and action in nearly a hundred villages and towns, becoming one of the key advocates of environmental protection in Lebanon. Why have they done it? Because they believe in it.

How sad it would have been if these two worlds – that of the evangelizing environmentalists with their awareness of the importance of this forest in the wider picture, and that of the Church with its tradition of protection which needed reawakening – had not been able to meet. By insisting that people adopt their view of the world, many campaigning groups cut themselves off from natural allies, who may see things differently but no less compassionately.

Seeing many truths

Many people are actually rather scared of being told that their worldview is just one among many. We like to think that unlike so many others, we see "the real world". Yet the world we see is a construct of our minds, our backgrounds, our training, and our assumptions. The world is, thank goodness, bigger, more exciting, and more diverse than that which we alone see.

My co-author, Victoria Finlay, tells a story about how her worldview was turned upside down. She was nineteen and spending a university summer teaching math and English in a Tibetan refugee camp in India. She was living in one of the children's homes, with about twenty children and a young housemother. One evening she was sitting with some of the children, telling them stories and singing songs before they went to bed. A bedbug crawled up her bare ankle and she casually squashed it against her skin. And then she looked around and saw the unmistakable expressions of horror on the children's faces. "It was as if they had seen me pick up a kitten and strangle it while in the middle of a song: it was a horror of casual violence that was beyond their comprehension." At that point my friend realized that the way she had seen the world was not the only way. After that summer she switched her university course from economics – "which was just one way of seeing human behavior, a way that I wasn't sure I believed" – to social anthropology, so she could understand the concept of pluralism that she had seen so vividly.

Most people in the West grow up with the notion that truth is monolithic: that there is only one true way to explain how the world evolved – evolution – and only one true faith, whether that is Christianity, Islam, atheism, or

something else. In the West we tend to want there to be one pathway and one right answer, whether this is "one true way of democracy" or "one true model of economics" or "one true way of bringing up your children" or "one true way of dealing with terrorism". But the rest of the world sees this as rather childish and not very helpful.

I found this out on my first visit to India, when I was in my early twenties. I was working with people of different faiths – Hindus and Jains and Muslims – helping them develop educational resources so that European schoolchildren could learn how their religions worked and what they meant. At a personal level this caused me some confusion. If Christianity were true as I had been culturally taught-then the others de facto could not be. Yet I was moved by much of what I was seeing. I raised this problem at a meeting with Indian Christians. They gently pointed out that perhaps it was not "the other religions" that were the problem, but me! It was my assumption that my tradition was ultimately the best and therefore only serious model that was the problem. It had nothing to do with other people's different beliefs and ways of seeing. "Relax," they said. "God is bigger than your thoughts, greater than your models and wiser than your philosophies. Relax and listen."

It broke apart my inherited worldview – thank goodness. It forced me to see that maybe I was the problem. It is like this for all of us. We have to have a worldview, otherwise we cannot function. As the psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote, we have to inhabit a worldview that explains most things for us because if we didn't "we would be crushed by the sheer awe-ful-ness of the universe." The problem comes when we think that this is actually the only reality, or that it is any more than a helpful way of looking at something that is actually rather complex. The world is so much more exciting than that, and in order to make it a better world we need to realize this and then create structures that enable diverse and even conflicting worldviews to work side by side.

Constructing a future

An illustration of how worldviews can differ is provided by the extraordinary story of the rebuilding of the statue of Avalokitesvara in Mongolia. From 1924 to 1989, Mongolia was a communist country. Indeed, after Russia, it was the second country to go communist. The government committed all the terrible actions of Soviet communism, including the suppression of religion: in the purges of the 1930s and again in the 1950s tens of thousands of

Buddhist monks were murdered and virtually all monasteries destroyed. A few were kept as museums, and in 1989 just one monastery in the capital city Ulaanbaator was kept open as a "functioning" monastery to show visitors from abroad that religion was not oppressed. It is said that by 1989 there were just three monks allowed to work openly.

Mongolian people have traditionally believed that their country is under the protection of a deity called Avalokitesvara, who is the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In Buddhism, Bodhisattvas are beings who, through countless lives of exemplary goodness, have reached a point where they can slip the physical ties of rebirth and escape to Nirvana, never again having to suffer the troubles of existence. Yet these enlightened beings decide instead to help other souls escape the cycle of rebirth. Of these compassionate beings, Avalokitesvara is the most loved.
In 1911 Mongolia gained its freedom from the Chinese, and one of the first things its people did was to cast a twenty-six-meter-high statue of Avalokitesvara in bronze. In the 1930s Stalin ordered that the statue be destroyed, and legend says it was shipped in pieces to Russia where it was later melted down to make bullets for the war against the Nazis. In 1989 there was another huge shift in Mongolia's history. Communism collapsed and out of the mess arose a democratic movement. In this first non communist government was a young politician named Enkhbayar, who headed the Ministry of Education. Or, as it was called in those heady days of freedom, the Ministry of Enlightenment.

The country was in disarray. Poverty, poor housing, the aftermath of forced collectivization, and settlement of the nomads meant the country was convulsed with problems. The euphoria of the fall of communism was soon replaced by the grind of making a new society. Aid agencies and intergovernmental bodies poured in with advice, plans, schemes, projects, and programs – as well as funding. They all knew what needed to be done: new educational priorities, development models, criteria for funding and sustainable growth and so forth. Yet what happened took them all by surprise, and – for those who were able to understand – it revolutionized their understanding both of Mongolia and of how to rebuild a country.

Enkhbayar and other key ministers decided what they needed to rebuild first, and made a public announcement to that effect. No outside agency would touch this project, considering it a waste of time and money. Yet ordinary Mongolians poured money in, giving what they could, even if it was only a few coins. Relying upon Mongolians themselves, rather than on international help, the project became the focus of social, political, and spiritual life in Mongolia and gave thousands pride and hope.

And what were they building, when they needed schools and housing so badly? They were remaking the 26-meter-high statue of the Protector of Mongolia, Avalokitesvara. From the worldview of the aid agencies it had at first seemed a colossal waste of money, yet from the worldview of so many Mongolians it was a massive success and the beginning of a new era. As Enkhbayar (who became both prime minister and president of Mongolia) explained, without pride in themselves or in the sense that they were once again protected, how could the Mongolians move on? What had he to offer his people if they did not value themselves? With foreign aid he could provide more schools, projects, and funds, but what would they be worth if people did not have a sense of who they were?

The statue changed everything. It also changed the worldview of a number of aid agencies with respect to what it is that helps people make sense of the world and thus change it. The world has so many more dimensions than many of us think, and as soon as you start including different worldviews the engines of change and of making the world better are fascinatingly diverse. In this book we celebrate this diversity, as well as offering models that show how – far from needing to be resolved by one grand plan – this diversity can work.

The World Bank and other faiths

This book is the product of a most unusual informal working relationship between ARC and the World Bank, which began in 1995 when ARC was launched. Each of the participating faiths was asked which contemporary secular phenomena they felt could be most important in helping, or hindering, the work of the faiths on the environment. Two came out clearly: the mass media, especially satellite television, and modern economic thinking, embodied for many of the faiths in the *modus operandi* of the World Bank. This is why the World Bank was present at the launch of ARC in the person of Andrew Steer, then head of the Bank's environmental department. The debates, discussions, and even disagreements that arose from that initial encounter were enough to encourage the faiths to accept an invitation from the World Bank to take the contacts further. The fledgling ARC was asked to coordinate this from the faiths' side, and this led to a series of meetings in London and Washington over the next two years between ARC staff, religious leaders, and the World Bank.

In February 1998 the first full formal meeting was held between religious leaders and the leadership of the World Bank.[7] Since then ARC and the Bank have developed closer links through, for example, the involvement of World Bank staff such as Kristalina Georgieva, Andrew Steer's successor, at the ARC/WWF-International Celebration of Sacred Gifts for a Living Planet held in Nepal in November 2000.[8] There, World Bank, ARC, and religious representatives met to discuss practical projects to be undertaken together in countries such as Mongolia, Cambodia, and Indonesia.

In 1998 ARC held a meeting with a major international financial body set up to assist development and sustainable growth. But for some people in the financial organization, this meant that the work should be done on their terms only. This was vividly brought home by one man who spoke to the team at the reception afterwards. He was delighted, he said, that the world religions were being brought together. He looked forward to them agreeing to the same thing and behaving in the same way because he was a statistician and the anomalies that different faiths created really messed up his statistics. He will be disappointed by this book.

Diversity is the building block of change. From the language of evolutionary science, we know that diversity is crucial to the development of life on earth. Only through diversity can you have the variety that ensures that when one dominant species collapses or when one kind of environment gives way to another, new species and ecosystems can emerge to continue the journey of life on earth. If this is so for creation, then I would argue it is true for humanity as well. We need diversity because all models, all beliefs, and all

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[7] This conference, which was organized by ARC and co-chaired by the Archbishop of Canterbury and President James Wolfensohn of the World Bank, led to the formation of the World Faiths Development Dialogue. This research body met again in Washington in November 1999 and Canterbury in October 2002. Its mandate is working on development priorities such as education, health programs, post-conflict resolution, and gender issues. Environment and natural resource management are explicitly not included – ARC is the body working on environment and natural resource management from the faiths' perspective with the World Bank.

[8] The involvement was made possible through a grant from the World Bank-Netherlands Partnership Program, Biodiversity/Forest Window, to the World Bank East Asia and Pacific Environment and Social Development Unit. This grant led to the creation of the Forest and Faiths Initiative.

systems fail. Without diversity we would not have the intellectual and practical wherewithal to tackle problems that we cause through our own beliefs and systems. Without diversity we could not evolve.

I go back to the gentle lesson I received from the Indian Christians. Both my world and my God were too small. My problem was not out there: it was inside me. And what is true for an individual is equally true for institutions and communities-including of course the great religions. So why and how did we end up with such small worlds to inhabit, and what, if anything, can we learn from the experience of the world's oldest institutions about the nature of permanence and change? This is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Two: How Did We Get Here?

'Ahimsa – this is a fundamental vow and runs through the Jain tradition like a golden thread. It involves avoidance of violence in any form, through word or deed, not only to human beings but to all nature. It means reverence for life in everyform including plants and animals. Jains practice the principle of compassion for all living beings at every step in daily life. Jains are vegetarians.' The Jain Statement on Ecology

In the past hundred and fifty years the major religions of the world have suffered more persecution, more deaths and destruction of their sacred places by ideologies opposed to religion, than throughout the whole of the rest of recorded history. Yet the faiths are still here...

So how did we get to think so small?

The West has a particular genius for creating (and then seeking to spread) systems of belief that cannot stand other systems of belief. Where this was once thought only to be true of missionary Christianity, we can now see it at work in just about every other form of ideology that has originated in the West. Take Marxism. Marxism is a Western creation: it was built on a Judeo-Christian worldview, but its Truths, by which everything is to be seen and judged, are not based on spiritual values but on economic laws and the inevitable march of history. The worldwide spread of Marxism involved a deliberate attempt to destroy existing beliefs and value systems-whether religion, feudalism, or even basic capitalism. Its intolerance of competitors is one of its most disturbing characteristics.

Capitalism likewise finds little space for competing value systems. And in order to destroy them it invokes not revolution but quasi-divine powers called "market forces," which are allowed the sovereign right to remove, ignore, or override other value systems. Even the many people who wish to change the world for "humanitarian" or environmental reasons sometimes suffer from a blinkered vision of the rightfulness of their values and beliefs and the need to impose these upon others in order to do them good.

I was recently shown a copy of a proposal drawn up by a very respectable international environmental group. It was a plan based on the knowledge that the gases emitted by cattle can contribute quite considerably to global warming. The proposal was to persuade nomadic people in the Central Asian steppes to agree to have their herds of cattle killed. And in return for having their traditional way of life trashed in the name of preventing global warming, the nomads were to be offered solar-powered TV sets by the environmental group.

Somewhere along the line someone had lost sight of the plot. Or, more disturbingly, they actually did believe that in order to make the world a better place a traditional way of life had to be broken and replaced by a consumerist, television-based worldview. And they believed that it was fine to start with targeting poor, vulnerable communities that could be bribed, rather than the huge multinationals-automobile manufacturers creating car exhaust, for example, or the dairies and burger chains with their vast cattle production that contribute so massively to global warming, but have stronger lobby groups than the nomads. The proposal, incidentally, did not receive funding.

The common trait of all these movements – whether Marxism, capitalism, or environmentalism – is their desire to make a different world, a world that they would all claim to be better, but that involves everyone else becoming and thinking "like us." Yet most people in the world have lived with pluralism and diversity for millennia and they see no such need for one absolute world vision. The roots of this primarily Western desire to make everyone think and behave in the same way lie deep in history, and they have shaped not just how the West reacts, but increasingly how all the world reacts.

On one level, it all started on a dark night in Athens in the late fifth century BC. On that evening the young philosopher Plato and his friends went on a rampage. Through the night they tore up and down the streets of the city attacking the statues of the gods that lined the roads, placed outside people's homes to protect the families. The reason for their hooliganism was that their teacher Socrates had taught that the profusion of "gods" and

"goddesses" was a smoke screen hiding the reality that all Truth and all Divinity is One. Socrates taught that there were no gods or goddesses and ultimately there was only one Mind, one Divine Force, behind the whole of existence. This belief in the monad – the absolute and unemotional Oneness behind all existence – has been the core model in the West ever since, and in the spirit of Plato and his friends, those seeking to convince others that there is only One Reality have been breaking other people's statues ever since.

In the West we have great difficulty accepting that diversity has any real role in the world. Remembering Socrates, there is a feeling that either there is only One or there are the Many-there cannot be both. As a result, both religious and secular missionary movements arising from this monad model have over the centuries sought to convince the world that there is only one way forward, one truth, and one reality. Theirs.

It found its early manifestation in the Pax Romano – the political policy of the Roman Empire – and then found another vehicle in Christianity, with its claims of absoluteness and its rejection of other faiths as false. This model held sway until it was challenged in the eighteenth century by the rise of the new absolutes of nationalism and revolution, followed by yet more absolutes: socialism, Marxism, capitalism, industrialization, science, economics, fascism, and so forth. All of these purport to be concerned with making a better world, but all seem to carry with them an intolerance of any values other than their own.

One world, many worlds

Not long ago, a group of very eminent environmentalists, economists, and other people concerned with the future of the world held a meeting to discuss what they called a "new ethic." Talk of this new ethic had been popular for some time, and arose from a sincere desire to try to make the world a better place by creating an ethical code-a code that could be seen as binding upon everyone, whatever their religious background. It is a fine ideal, and also potentially a highly divisive one.

At the meeting sat a lone Hindu representative, a scientist. When it came to dinner on the first night, after a day of exhaustive and exhausting discussion about common codes of morality and ethical structures for enforcing ethical behavior, the Hindu raised a little question. Why, he asked, was meat being served for dinner? The others reacted badly and asked in return why he was

raising such a question. "Because," he said, "in my tradition, ethics means not eating a living creature".

Many people who want to make the world better, such as the earnest new ethics group above, act like latter-day evangelists. They know what is good for the world, and they are intent upon helping us to do what they know is best whether we like it or not. En route, views, beliefs, values, and even ways of life that don't fit get at best ignored. At worst, the new missionaries actually try to destroy such beliefs and ways of life, as in the story of the Central Asian nomads, where the plan was not only to break the herding life but to replace it with the banality of TV.

In the struggle to persuade the world to accept a model of absolute truth a great deal else has been crushed. And ever since the age of ideology began with the French Revolution of 1789, one of the main targets has been religion. This was for good reasons as well as bad. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, and any system that has almost total control will go bad. Medieval Christianity in Europe, eighteenth-century Islam in India, Tibetan Buddhism in the late nineteenth century, or militant Sikhism in the twentieth century are all examples of what happens when religion has the power to exercise almost full control. No religion has escaped debasement by human greed, stupidity, or ambition, and by the time of the eighteenth century in Europe much of religious life was a sham. It needed to be broken in order to reform.

But as so often happens, the baby was thrown out with the font water. All aspects of religion were soon either condemned by revolutionary movements or consigned to irrelevance, often by relegating them to the realm of "private choice" or "individual conscience." Furthermore, what began as a sincere desire to break the stifling hold of corrupt religion – as in eighteenth-century France – soon became a desire to break religion altogether because the new ideology wanted to take its place, power, authority, and wealth.

By the mid-twentieth century religion was being physically persecuted in nearly one-third of the world, from the Soviet Union through China and Mongolia to Mexico. Elsewhere (including in the major countries of Europe) it was increasingly sidelined, with its ancient networks of schools and welfare institutions and its role as pastoral caregiver increasingly being taken over by the state. Religion had also been relegated to the sphere of the mind. Science and in particular psychology had largely displaced religion in the intellectual firmament. Up until the eighteenth century, religion provided the dominant model of reality through which people saw, understood, and

related to the world. Even at the beginning of the scientific revolution (often linked to figures such as Isaac Newton) religion still provided the framework within which the new scientific discoveries made sense. This is rather nicely borne out by the mock epitaph for Isaac Newton, written by the English poet Alexander Pope around 1718:

> *Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:*
> *God said "Let Newton be!" and all was light*.

By the mid-twentieth century, such a cohabiting of God and science was largely unimaginable. Religion was seen as the enemy of science, or at least as having once been relevant but now displaced by the discoveries of science. Many people forecast that religion would soon be extinct, except in those areas of "backwardness" where modem economics, science, thought, philosophy, politics, and society had yet to make any significant impact.

At the heart of all these changes lies the same attitude that led Plato and his mates to go on a destructive rampage: intolerance and fear of diversity. What has made this intolerance even more dangerous than the youthful Plato is that so many of the new ideologies have contended that their model was the only one that could make the world happy and thus legitimated the destruction of those who stood in their way. Yet despite predictions to the contrary, religion is not dying out. In some places – including Britain – it is struggling, but in other places it is burgeoning. For example, the first book published by the World Bank on faith and development in 2002 was focused on the Church in Africa, where, it pointed out, most of the poor are deeply religious. Indeed, the Christian Church has grown five-fold in Africa over the past forty years.[9]

Today, this simplistic but destructive way of thinking is changing. The work of the World Bank in partnership with religions is a classic example of this. Until recently the World Bank has not been known for its tolerance of diverse social and economic models. Indeed it has tended to operate with a single

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[9] The book, Faith in Development, was based on a meeting sponsored in 2000 by the World Bank and the Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa on alleviating poverty in Africa. It was attended by senior Bank staff who spoke not just on the economic and social aspects of development, but also on the spiritual aspects. The focus of the meeting was poverty, but the communique included the statement that "[w]e are committed to protecting the natural environment." See D. Belshaw, R. Calderesi, and C. Sugden, eds., Faith in Development: Partnership between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa (Oxford: Regnum; Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2002).

model of economic truth that it maintains would ensure the good life for all – if only followed properly. One book even described it as a "faith."[10] But today some senior decision makers in the World Bank are actively seeking diverse models and no longer feel that there is a Truth that has to be applied come what may. This nascent change in thinking is also evident in increasing numbers of people in the environmental movement.

The World Bank and other development organizations have been greatly affected by the increasing discussions (both internally and externally) of a broad agenda around ethics and development. Some of these themes were exemplified in an exhibition on cultures, religion, and ethics at the International Monetary Fund headquarters in Washington, DC. The exhibition opened in September 2002 and was organized and inspired by the work of Hans Kuing.[11] Partly as a result of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and in an effort to reach out to a wider audience of social actors and civil society organizations, the World Bank and many other institutions are attempting to delve deeper into issues that are deeply embedded in the central mission, culture, and values of development.

The fear of diversity is beginning to give way to the recognition that no single model can ever do justice to the breadth and depth of human experience or possibility. This breakdown of reliance on "the One" is what is now making it possible for some of the various worldviews that have survived for centuries to begin to find a way of contributing together for a more pluralist future. Christianity, for example, is a classically monolithic model – but much of contemporary Christianity has begun to develop a theology of pluralism. "Ecumenical" is a key word, and Christianity is now one of the most active faith groups in the interfaith world. Moral certainty can be a very dangerous thing and can blind its followers to the true nature of their role. A fascinating example of this comes from the Jains.

Looking anew at old beliefs

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[10] Susan George and Fabrizio Sabelli, Faith and Credit: The World Bank's Secular Empire (London: Penguin, 1994).

[11] See Hans Kung, Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions of the World Religions (New York: Continuum, 2001) and World Religions: Universal Peace, Global Ethic (Tubingen, Germany: Global Ethic Foundation, 2002).

Jainism arose in India at the same time as Buddhism, around the sixth century BC. Its fundamental teaching is ahimsa – nonviolence – and it is taken so seriously that even today Jain monks and nuns will gently sweep the floors in front of them to ensure that they do not harm even an ant. The strict teaching of ahimsa led the Jains to forswear any trade that involved taking any form of life. So they moved out of agriculture, leatherwork, meat production, and so forth and instead looked for trades that involved inanimate objects. Even today Jains dominate in the fields of mining, gem dealing, and petrochemicals.

In 1991 the Jains applied to join the original WWF-International network on conservation and religion. But they got a shock. Proud of their ancient tradition of ahimsa, they were confident that their impact on the natural world was gentle and positive. But when they actually checked, they found they were mistaken. In terms of environmental protection, mining, the exploitation of gems, and the development of petrochemicals are among the most damaging activities. By concentrating on what they did not do – hunting, meat production, and agriculture – the Jains had not really looked at the impact of what they actually did do. Their ahimsa principles, which led them into mining and petrochemicals in the first place, were actually being undermined by the contemporary practices of these industries, now increasingly destructive to the environment.

In response to these insights, the Jains set about tackling this issue with their customary aplomb. They created an annual award for the Jain-run industry that had done most to mitigate its harmful impact upon the natural environment, and they began to look at ways in which their involvement in such industries could be pro- rather than anti-environmental. It will take time and it will not be easy, but guided by their worldview the Jains will change and will make a significant difference to the future of the world.

This is only possible because, once again, an ancient religion is challenged and allowed to return to its roots in order to find a way forward. As the next chapter will begin to show, it is exactly this pluralism that is the way forward for a world in which monolithic worldviews have had their day. We have thought small for a long time. Now it is time to think big, and think more widely and wisely.

Chapter three: Changing Minds

'Daoism has a unique sense of value in that it judges affluence by the number of different species. If all things in the universe grow well, then a society is a community of affluence. If not, this kingdom is on the decline.' – The Daoist statement on ecology (chapter 10)

According to the World Bank study Voices of the Poor*, poor people trust their religious organizations more than any other institution with the exception of their own social institutions.*

The crisis was a severe one and the invasion seemed unstoppable. They flew in by the millions and brought almost total devastation in their wake.

It was the early 1970s and the brown plant hopper had arrived in Indonesia. This small insect was sucking the rice crops dry. In previous years the crops had increased dramatically as a result of massive use of pesticides and the introduction of irradiated rice. For the rice-plant-sucking hopper this was a paradise, and hoppers were now at plague levels of infestation: previously each insect would lay three eggs a day, now they were laying ten, and Indonesia was facing a possible famine. It was at this point that Professor Ida Nyoman Oka, then a professor in the agriculture faculty at the Gajah Mada University in Jogjakarta, became involved.

The Ministry of Agriculture needed professional advice. By this they meant scientific advice. However, after a great deal of thought, Professor Oka – who also happened to be a Hindu priest – and his Hindu colleagues called on their knowledge of religious lore as much as of agriculture. They recalled the story in which a good king tries to kill a wicked demon king, but whenever he cuts off a head, two spring up in its place. In Hindu lore, the good king wins by remembering the moral principle of not killing

And so did Professor Oka. He persuaded the desperate government to try a new approach, one that did not rely on chemical warfare. And in the end the brown plant hoppers were defeated not by using new weapons but simply by stopping the use of pesticides at all. This "passive resistance" allowed many other species to recover. Once the insect's natural predators – other insects and spiders – had returned to normal levels, they took care of the brown plant hopper and the balance was restored.

The lesson from this experience was that the great religions have learned more about how to really work with the problems of the world than some of the "missionary" environmental groups who often have solutions but perhaps not always wisdom. Sometimes it is only by remembering what we really believe in that we can change our underlying behavior in relation to the natural world. This approach is reflected in the projects that the World Bank and ARC are supporting.

In this chapter we will look at how the religions help to change minds, and we will also see what we – as people who care about the earth, whatever our spiritual beliefs may be – can learn from them.

First of all, the role of religion in helping people change how they think and therefore behave is something that many would see as a contradiction in terms. The popular perception of religions in the secular world is that they are unchanging and unyielding. Yet the extraordinary fact is that religions survive only when they adapt to new circumstances, and this is what the successful world religions have been doing for more than two thousand five hundred years. The unsuccessful ones, for example, the Stonehenge culture of Bronze Age Britain, were the ones that were unable to adapt – and they are either extinct or at least on the endangered list. Only faiths that could be flexible have remained.

To cite another important example. In the Middle Ages, European Christianity had become deeply corrupt. Then the trauma of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century shattered the notion of the Church having "negotiated a deal with God". The old sense of security that people had in their faith was in tatters. But Christianity survived. The Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation response were radical rethinks of the whole of religion in Europe, which meant that by the late sixteenth century two virtually new modern versions of Christianity had emerged, replacing the medieval version. The faith had survived because it had adapted.

And here we have one of the secrets of success of religions: they know how to seem timeless and yet how to shift with the times. This is one of the ways in which they have shaped all the major cultures of the world throughout history: they have stayed relevant. Religions – at their best – manage to combine change with authority, and they define new moods and shifts in perception rather than just jumping on the bandwagon of any passing social trend. After all, according to the World Bank's major study of poverty, “Voices of the Poor”, poor people trust religious organizations more than any

other organizations except their own social institutions.[12] As the Indonesian story about the plant hoppers highlights, over the centuries religions have learned a thing or two about nature and our place within it, as well as a thing or two about human behavior.

What we need now are more opportunities for these insights to be heeded and understood. And if they are indeed understood and then acted upon, this will benefit the environment, local communities, and also the religions themselves, some of which are at critical points in their own histories. To show how religions often have something important to contribute to the environmental debate, I will give the example of the Daoists in China, who are helping solve a critical environmental problem with a solution that almost nobody in the secular world had even imagined.

Saving tigers with philosophy

Traditional medicine has a history in China that stretches back at least two thousand years. Although rooted in ancient knowledge, it nevertheless has been a key part of Chinese modern medicine since 1949, when Mao Zedong declared that medicine should walk on "two feet" – meaning China should use both traditional and Western scientific ways of healing. The strategy mostly worked and in recent years traditional Chinese medicine has become very popular outside China as well. Today, virtually every major city in Western Europe has its Chinese medicine shops and clinics. The demand for the products, primarily prescriptions, has rocketed. This, combined with the huge increase in spending power of people in China, has created a huge demand for the traditional ingredients.

Mostly this is not a problem; indeed it is probably beneficial. But certain prescriptions have had a devastating effect on wild species. For example, tiger penis and rhino horn are key in a number of popular prescriptions for impotence; tiger bone and bear gall are supposedly linked to strength. The demand for these ingredients has led to illegal hunting and trapping, or cruel "milking" of bears for gall. And it has pushed several species to the very brink of extinction. The Chinese government has made many of these ingredients illegal, but the trade is continuing. The trouble is that there are many illegal or unofficial practitioners: some are charlatans but many are

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[12] D. Narayan, "Voices of the Poor," in Belshaw, Calderisi, and Sugden, Faith in Development. Also see D. Narayan, Voices of the Poor, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 2000-2002).

heirs to ancient lineages of healing practice. It is these people – and their clients – who need to be reached. This was where the Daoists came in.

Chinese medicine is based upon an understanding of reality different from that of Western medicine. Its worldview is based on belief in the Dao – the nature of the universe – which is best described in a famous series of verses in the Dao De Jing, written in the fourth century BC:

> *'The Dao gives birth to the One:*
> *The One gives birth to the Two:*
> *The Two gives birth to the Three:*
> *The Three gives birth to every living thing.*
> *All things are held in yin and carry yang:*
> *And they are held together in the qi of teeming energy.'*[13]

The One is the universe, which gives birth to the two primal forces of yin and yang, which are the natural forces of opposites. Yin, for example, is cold, wet, winter, female, and earth, while yang contrasts to this by being hot, dry, summer, male, and heaven. They are locked in perpetual combat, yet – as their classic symbol shows – each contains the seed of the other. So while autumn and winter are yin, they inexorably give way to the yang spring and summer, which in turn give way to autumn and winter and so on. These Two give birth to Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, which give birth to all living things, but with humanity given the role of balancing everything else. And all life – including human – is said to be motivated by the power of the breath that animates each of us, known as "qi."

Traditional Chinese medicine builds upon these theories by saying that to restore health in a sick person, one needs to reconnect him or her with the natural flow of life. Illness comes from an imbalance of yin or yang and a subsequent crippling of the qi – which is how the ingredients of medicines are decided.

Although Daoism is the philosophical gatekeeper of the traditions underpinning Chinese medicine, curiously no one had thought to approach the Daoists to help deal with the current problems. In part this was because the Chinese government was embarrassed by the religious-philosophical

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[13] Chapter 42 of Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching), adapted from the translation by Man-Ho Kwok, Martin Palmer, and Jay Ramsay (Shaftesbury, U.K.: Element Books, 1997).

basis of Chinese medicine, and in part it was because the Western scientific bodies tackling the issue saw the problem as one of education and science, and didn't appreciate the spiritual theories that underpinned it. There is also a real problem in that the growth in use of traditional Chinese medicine is now often unconnected to its original roots, for it has become a major industry – and this industry has been the target of most work on making traditional Chinese medicine more environmentally friendly. However, in such a struggle, all potential allies need to be developed and this is what has happened with the Daoists.

Once the Daoists were alerted to the problem, they offered some highly practical and yet also deeply philosophical answers. First they went back to the core of traditional Chinese medicine and concluded that any medicine that either endangered a rare species or caused undue suffering to animals was doomed to be a failure.[14] How could you cure one species by destroying another, or by inflicting terrible pain on another part of the universal Dao?

In 1999 the Daoist Association of China issued an edict excommunicating any traditional medical practitioner who uses prescriptions that contravene the laws of balance. But prohibition was only one part of the solution. Daoist scholars and healers then set about researching, from their vast library of ancient medical texts, alternative prescriptions that did not involve endangered species. It is a strategy that might contribute to solving the enormous problems that the growth and increasing "industrialization" of traditional Chinese medicine have created. Practitioners are likely to pay more attention to a teaching that not only shows them why their medicine won't work but also offers them a traditional alternative, than they would to a government edict. But even more importantly, Daoists are not operating as remote scientists. These scholars already have contact with, and the respect of, unofficial traditional medicine practitioners-many of whom live close to temples or on or near Daoist sacred mountains.

In this example the Daoists were asked only to explore the ancient basis of traditions that were proving to be damaging to the environment. What actually happened was that a new dimension of Daoist teachings emerged, rooted in tradition but addressing a contemporary issue. It is an example of how all religions move forward while maintaining ancient truths. But religions have other strengths as well that we can learn from. Because alongside the ability of faiths to reinvent or reinterpret themselves lies an extraordinary ability to convey complex social ideas through simple stories – stories that people remember.

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[14] China Daoism, November 1999 (in Chinese).

Telling wonder-ful stories

For example, consider the all-important notion of compassion. Many parents, teachers, governments, and activists want to encourage the people around them to be kinder, gentler, and more thoughtful to others. In many countries, children are now taught a class called "citizenship" which is supposed to inculcate good behavior. Meanwhile – with a strange echo of nineteenth-century missionary activities – some of the more earnest environmental groups have tried over the past fifteen years or so to develop a notion of a new world ethics: a code of good behavior which they say everyone ought to follow.

But few of these secular approaches recognize a basic tenet of human behavior: telling people what is good often leads them to do exactly the opposite. For example, in the United Kingdom, it was found that programs designed to stop children smoking or being racist often actually encouraged them toward this behavior. For the young people it suddenly offered them a way to thumb their noses at Authority. So, then, how can anyone effectively share the vision of a more compassionate world, in order to encourage other people to want to be part of it? There are ways of doing it without moralizing.

Religions, of course, have been as guilty of moralizing as anyone else, but they have also learned that the best, perhaps the only, way to pass on a truth or insight is through humor, storytelling, mystery, and awe. Take, for example, the Islamic teaching of caring for people less fortunate than yourself. The following story is one of the most beloved of stories, one that takes the listener into a wonderful world of compassion – not by exhortation, but through a sense of mystery.

Once upon a time, the story goes, there lived in a great Muslim city a man called Ahmed. All his life he had been saving up for his once-in-a-lifetime trip to Makkah for the pilgrimage of Hajj. Every Muslim who can is supposed to make the long, arduous pilgrimage to Makkah in fulfillment of one of the main teachings of Islam. He was not a wealthy man and Makkah was a long way away, but over the years he had managed to save enough money and now the time was coming for his departure. A group of his friends were also going and the night before they were due to leave they gathered at his house to celebrate the beginning of their adventure.

After they had all left, Ahmed and his family went to bed. But sleep was not to last long. Early in the morning a fire broke out four doors away and Ahmed and his family rushed to help their friends.

They found a terrible scene of destruction and distress. The family had lost almost all their belongings, and their house was nothing more than a pile of smoldering wood and stone. So Ahmed offered his house and set about helping rescue what could be retrieved from the fire. As a result, when his friends came at midday to collect him he told them to go ahead and he would catch up with them within a day or so. So they went off, urging him not to take too long.

But it took nearly a week before the neighbors' situation was under control and Ahmed had to spend some of his savings. Just as he was ready to go, a young mother of three children, whose husband had died a year before, also died. Ahmed realized that someone had to help the children find a loving home. He spent three days sorting this out and once again found he needed to use some of his saved money to solve the children's problems.

By now, it was getting almost too late for him to catch up with his friends and his money was stretched to the limit. Still, he packed his bags and prepared to leave. This time he got half a day from the city when he found a man who had been robbed, lying by the roadside. Bringing him back to the city, he paid for him to be treated by a good doctor and offered him hospitality in his own house.

It was with a sad heart that Ahmed realized it was too late to go to Makkah. Furthermore, he had only very little of his hard-earned cash left. He felt a failure, as if he had somehow let God down. But there was nothing to be done about it.

Two months later his friends returned with great rejoicing and came straight to Ahmed's house. When he opened the door he immediately apologized for not having come to Makkah and having let them down. They stared at him wide-eyed. "What do you mean?" they asked. "We saw you there." They saw his astonishment and continued, "Yes, you had the place of greatest honor and we wondered why."

The power of such a story is that it draws you into the narrative (and leaves you to draw the conclusions) while imparting core beliefs and values of Islamic life and teaching. It is a way of involving people that businesses, for example, have tried to make use of in commercials, and that secular environmentalists would do well to pay attention to.

Long-distance thinking

The symbolic nature of religious actions offers a powerful model for changing the world-in manageable steps but, importantly, with a long-term view. Quite often in ARC we are asked to join a "crucial" or "vital" campaign on some vast issue such as management of forests or protection of the seas. We are invited to throw all our weight and connections into a campaign only to discover – just as we have got the impetus going – that another "priority" comes along and the former "vital" campaign is over.

Religions take time to move but when they do, they make commitments for a very long time. For example, in many cities and towns the only surviving green patches are those surrounding old places of worship. If you visit Tokyo, for example, and look down from the train as it sails over the city en route from the airport, you will see that it is only around the old Buddhist or Shinto temples that any greenery survives: often ancient trees or small ponds struggling on in the midst of the concrete. In Istanbul, it is the old churches and mosques that provide the green lungs: around the famous mosque of Eyup, the ancient trees that have been preserved because it is a sacred cemetery are the last breeding place of storks on the Golden Horn. In Bangkok, a similar story is to be told: the wats, or Buddhist temples, provide vital green spaces not just for smog-weary citizens but also for many species whose habitats have otherwise been destroyed.

In the United Kingdom, a scheme to exploit this phenomenon of urban survival was launched in the late 1980s. The project was called "Living Churchyards" although it was not so much a vision of the dead rising up as of the dead providing sanctuary for species whose living space had been so cut back. It encouraged more than six thousand five hundred British churches to run their little plots of land as "sacred ecosystems" – without pesticides, and mowing the grass only once a year – ensuring that a number of species of birds, reptiles, insects, and bats can thrive.

This is an example of turning something that has always existed – the local churchyard – into something that embodies the Church's core teachings about respecting nature. The scheme has been outstandingly successful for several reasons. First, because it immediately makes sense; second, because it is simple to execute; third, because it is theologically sound; and fourth, because it enables millions of local people, through their churches, schools, and community groups, to become involved in a manageable environmental project.

From this one program there has now sprung a whole code of conduct – built upon protecting the ecology of what is often called "God's acre" – not only for graveyards but for the management of church lands in general. It took nearly fifteen years for all this to begin to develop its potential, but once a pattern of land management is established, it will remain part of "how we do things in the Church" for many years to come. Until, indeed, it is time to adapt again.

The second example of long-term thinking offers an even greater time scale. In Sikhism, time is measured in thre-hundred-year cycles. In 1999 Sikhs moved into their third such cycle. The first two cycles had been named as they began, and although the names were inspired by events just before each new cycle, they also shaped the spirit of that cycle. For example, the years between 1699 and 1999 were called the "Cycle of the Sword," because in the late seventeenth century the Sikhs were fighting for their lives against the Mughal Emperors who had invaded India; the Sikhs decided to fight back not just for themselves, but to protect all the weak and vulnerable. The Cycle of the Sword ended with a terrible civil war in the Punjab, when Sikh militants sought to create a separate state and the Indian government crushed them.

As they approached 1999, the Sikh leaders wanted a very different theme for the next three hundred years. At the time ARC was working very closely with the Sikhs on developing land management and alternative energy schemes. Through our discussions, the idea arose of naming the new cycle the "Cycle of the Environment" or the "Cycle of Creation." This was agreed by the whole community and now the Sikhs have made a three-hundred-year commitment to focus on the environment. What does this really mean? Well, one early benefit is that many Sikh temples now hand out tree saplings as a sign of blessing to worshippers instead of a sticky sweet. It is estimated that ten million saplings are being distributed every year, making up the woodlands and gardens of the future. Religions can make commitments like this because they think in the long, long term and have the experience of having done so for a long, long time.

Having seen how religions work over extended periods, communicate through stories, and change minds by reminding people what is most vitally important to them, I want to show how environmentalists (both faith-based and secular) can put this learning into practice in order to care for nature.

Work with what you have; perhaps it is enough

Often all that is needed is to shine a new light onto a traditional practice for its significance to become relevant once again. Take, for example, Islam's recovery of its ancient codes for ecological management.

So many trees have been destroyed in Indonesia that Java has now lost all of its lowland forest. In response to this crisis, and urged on by a joint ARC/ World Bank program, some Javanese Muslims are recovering ancient traditions of protection of trees-traditions that have lain dormant and almost unnoticed within Islam for centuries. Building upon this, Islamic leaders, working in collaboration with conservationists from the Botanical Garden of Indonesia, started to develop a "new tradition" among rural Islamic communities in upland areas to appoint a "guardian" of each hill or mountain.

This is no fanciful spiritual position: these village-appointed sheriffs are responsible for monitoring their local area for logging and other damaging behavior. "It appears already that state forestry companies and police are heavily involved in illegal logging," said Kyai Thontowi Musadda, the cleric who started the scheme. Once the local communities realized that protecting the environment was part of Shari'ah, or Muslim law, they not only began to demand the resignation of the corrupt officials but also slowly became active protectors of the mountains themselves, giving new life to an Islamic tradition that is more needed today than it was when first promulgated.

Likewise, in Thailand, environmentalists involved with the Buddhist Protection of Nature project helped Thai Forest monks identify a tradition of protecting the forests. The fact is that where there is a monastery or even just a simple monk's dwelling, the forest surrounding it – for five or even ten miles – becomes sacred. It cannot be logged for fear of upsetting the monks and the Buddha or the many forest deities associated with rural Buddhism. By making a decision to choose to live in endangered forests, the Forest monks can be active environmentalists even as they meditate.

In both the Indonesian Muslim case and the Thai Buddhist example, nothing new has been created, but old traditions have been given a new role and meaning. This has happened because the religions have opened themselves up to meet the environmental, scientific, and political groups struggling to make a better world. Without the challenge that comes from these largely secular forces, it is doubtful that the faiths would have undertaken these

activities. Yet without the faiths, the chances of the secular forces ever actually effecting serious changes in human behavior are slim.

Finding allies

In 1986 His Royal Highness Prince Philip, then president of WWF-International, suggested that for the conservation movement to have any real chance of success, it needed to find allies who could help spread the message and engage people in the struggle to save the earth. And so he took the unprecedented step of inviting representatives of five religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism – to join with the key environmental movements in exploring what the various teachings had to say about caring for creation. The meeting was held at Assisi in Italy, the birthplace of St. Francis, the Catholic saint of ecology. And the reasons for its importance were spelled out by Prince Philip in his opening speech:

We came to Assisi to find vision and hope: vision to discover a new and caring relationship with the rest of the living world, and hope that the destruction of nature can be stopped before all is wasted and gone. I believe that today, in this famous shrine of the saint of ecology, a new and powerful alliance has been forged between the forces of religion and the forces of conservation. I am convinced that secular conservation has learned to see the problems of the natural world from a different perspective, and I hope and believe that the spiritual leaders have learned that the natural world of creation cannot be saved without their active involvement. Neither can ever be the same again.[15]

It is this changed vision, this wider worldview, that lies at the heart of serious change, and for this to happen all of us – religious and secular – have to encounter some worlds that make us uncomfortable, as well as others that excite us with new ideas, models, and visions.

Prince Philip was not preaching entirely to the converted. To most people, even those who were present at Assisi, this idea of the forces of religion and conservation coming together sounded very odd indeed. To many of them, religion was either something they thought was no longer particularly relevant to the modem world, or something they thought was a private

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[15] Religion and Nature Interfaith Ceremony (Gland, Switzerland: WWF International, 1986), 42.

matter. Yet as we have shown, whatever our own spiritual beliefs, religions do have lessons that make a lot of sense, and that we could all benefit from hearing. Some of them are, predictably, about how to be good, some of them are about how to be effective, but one of the most important lessons is – perhaps surprisingly – about how not to be too pious. Indeed it is about how to party.

Protect the earth-and ourselves

One of the saddest features of the activist world, be that environmental work, peace work, or whatever, is the phenomenon known as "burnout." So many activists throw themselves so deeply into their activities to create a better world for others that they end up exhausted. Here, again, religions have been there before them – and might be able to offer some advice.

There is a moving story of St Francis that sheds some light on this. Francis was a visionary, totally committed to the service of all creation in the name of God. He allowed no possessions, either for himself or for his other brothers in the early Franciscan movement. They were not even allowed their own prayer books. In 1210, Francis travelled to Rome to present the Pope with the Rule for his new religious movement. But to his astonishment the Pope refused to authorize the Rule. In great distress, Francis begged him to explain. The Pope said that while he had no doubt that someone as driven as Francis could live by the extreme laws he had drawn up, as Pope he had to consider those who would not be able to give everything every day with no thought of themselves. He asked Francis, in compassion, to draw up new rules that could be honestly lived by ordinary mortals-that would not, in modern English, lead to burnout. Francis did so and the vision of the Franciscan Order, which has inspired so many millions, was created. It was created out of compassion as well as out of passion.

Religions know that you cannot just make demands on people: you have to give as well, allowing people to celebrate as well as repent. The great faiths embody this in the cycle of each year, and there are many lessons to be learned by looking at how religious calendars are broken up into manageable portions, offering a variety of times, spaces, and thoughts for the year. In Christianity, for example, the high points of the year are marked by both fasting and feasting. Fasting is important because it reminds people of the need for self-restraint, for times of thoughtfulness and reflection which are aided by having an outward sign – fasting – of an inward spiritual journey. But the fasts, Lent and Advent, for example, are immediately followed by

feasts – Easter and Christmas. These times of feasting are times to celebrate life and its abundance, its wealth and its joys.

Islam has a similar pattern with the fasting month of Ramadan followed by the fun of Eid-Ul Fitz, and in Indonesia this was linked to ecology in a program developed by the World Bank to produce a series of daily reflections on the environment distributed to radio stations and newspapers around the country during the Ramadan fast, with a suitably exciting environmental celebration scheduled for Eid.

The need to acknowledge the limits to what any one individual can do, and the need to have fun and relax, are vitally important truths for any group or movement seeking to change the world for the better. There are two Jewish sayings that highlight this. The first is that on the Day of Judgment, you will be judged and condemned for all the legitimate pleasures you could have enjoyed but did not. The second, more contemporary, saying is that no one has ever said on their deathbed, "You know, I wish I had spent more time at the office".

Understanding the importance of balancing the need for repentance with the need to party is a central insight into human psychology that the faiths can bring to the environmental and developmental movement. And, similarly, the very human art of setting goals while recognizing that sometimes those goals are only to be striven for in order to discover a deeper truth is also central to all the faiths.

Let me give a personal example. For a long time I have had a special interest in the divine feminine element both in Christianity and in Chinese religion. In Chinese religion she is manifest in the stories, statues, and person of the popular goddess Guanyin. She is the female form of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara, whom we met in Mongolia in chapter 1. The focus of her tradition is her sacred island and mountain of Putuo Shan, which lies some thirty miles off the eastern coast of China near Shanghai. I have wanted to visit this place for a long time. But I have never made it. Each time I have tried, the trip has been cancelled. For a while I was getting a bit desperate and feeling as if I was fundamentally failing to achieve my intention. Then I came across a phrase by a sixteenth-century Buddhist master. He put everything into perspective for me by writing that "You don't have to go to the East Sea to meet Guanyin. Putuo is in your

mind."[16] The faiths would argue – and their way of living usually bears witness to this – that to change the world you need to change yourself and that only from this will flow that ability to see the world differently which is the very heart of change.

The stories above are all about taking what is best within a tradition and giving it a new meaning in a different context. They are also about having a sense of the wonder of life that is often, sadly, missing. Groups seeking to improve the world too often come across as worthy, dull party-poopers. This is as true for the secular world as it is for the more puritanical elements of the religious world. Part of the challenge the mainstream elements of the faiths bring to the environmental and development movement is the worldview that this is a wonderful creation, loved by God and held in compassion by the divine. That alone is worth celebrating, as it is every morning in, for example, the morning prayers of the Catholic Church or the pujas of Hindu devotees.

A worldview that sees only the worst and most depressing traits of human society doesn't inspire or excite anyone else. It might frighten them, but terror is not a good basis for a worldview. Religions have been as guilty as any group of using scare tactics to try to get commitment. Visit any Buddhist temple in, say, Sri Lanka or China and you will find the eighteen hells of Buddhism graphically depicted on the walls, intended to scare people into good behavior. Or listen to a fiery Christian or Hindu speaker talking about the torments awaiting the soul. But these approaches are more fringe than many outsiders appreciate. Much more fundamental is the fact that through religions, people down the ages have celebrated births, marriages, birthdays, special events, beloved saints and gurus and have dealt with death, sorrow, pain, and betrayal. Religions honor the mundane sacredness of everyday life.

In November 2002, at the request of Prince Philip and as a gift to Queen Elizabeth II for her Jubilee Year, ARC hosted a "Celebration of Creation" at the Banqueting Hall in London. Representatives of each of 11 major religions participated with prayers and music, dance, and even a tranquil garden

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[16] Quoted in Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsay with Man-ho Kwok, Kuan Yin: Myths and Revelations of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion (London: Thorsons, 1995).

created for the day.[17] The event was called a celebration because there was so much for which to give thanks: that the environmental movement has begun to resist the destruction of our planet, and that side by side with them, all the major faiths are taking up the challenge of protecting creation as well.

The religions celebrated that day because for all faiths, creation is wonderful, mysterious, profound, and hopeful. One of the greatest sacred gifts the faiths can offer is hope: hope that through the insights of the environmental movement and the faith of people worldwide, we can begin to reverse our destructive role and create something beautiful with nature.

And as I have shown in this chapter, one of the first steps in that reversal is to apply some of the ways that religions can teach us how to change destructive mindsets. These are:

- Telling wonderful stories – a subject I will return to in chapter 5
- Thinking and acting in the long term, rather than considering only the next election or funding cycle
- Looking at what we have already in terms of wisdom, and applying it to new problems
- Working hard, but not too hard
- Celebrating what we have, rather than just crying over what we have lost.

The transformation of individuals has to go hand in hand with the transformation of institutions. In the next chapter we explore one of the most ambitious (yet also achievable) examples of how institutions can also change individuals.

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[17] The 11 faiths that are members of ARC are Baha'ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism (with Confucianism joined in 2013).

Chapter four: Investing in the Future

No one lighting a lamp puts it under a basket but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. The Bible (Matthew 5: 15-16)

More than one in six of the world's population is Catholic.

At the height of the Great Terror in 1935, the French foreign minister suggested that Josef Stalin should take Catholicism seriously. The Soviet leader derisively replied: "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?"[18] The answer, of course, was none – popes no longer have armies. Yet ironically a few decades later it would be a pope – John Paul II – who helped bring down the empire that Stalin built so ferociously. Furthermore, while the Pope may not have an army in the conventional way he is head of the largest single voluntary organization in the world: the Catholic Church, with more than 1 billion followers worldwide and an influence to match.

This chapter shows how, in the struggles to create a better world, the potential "divisions" or "battalions" of the faiths have been largely ignored – or perhaps they have been invisible, even sometimes to themselves. It also argues that one religion or NGO or even the biggest bank in the world can have only a limited impact on its own – and that if we are really going to help support biodiversity, humans need to recognize, live with, and ultimately make use of our diversity in beliefs, experiences, and resources. This is acknowledged in the Millennium Development Goals adopted at a United Nations summit in September 2000 and promoted by the World Bank.

Katherine Marshall, director of the World Bank Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, puts the first point well:

> *The world of religion has been an unacknowledged and often unseen force for many development practitioners in the past. Many reasons, both good and bad, explain this divorce; hard-won traditions of separation of state and religion are deeply ingrained and deliberately place a remove between development and faith issues....*

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[18] Quoted in Winston Churchill, The Gathering Storm, vol. 1 of The Second World War (Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1948), chap. 8.

> *The suggestion that religion is important for development and the converse, that development is important for religion, and hence that dialogue between religious institutions and leaders and their counterparts in development institutions should be enhanced, has jarred a goodly range of people. The two worlds are often seen as far apart; religion deals with spiritual matters, whereas development is very much in the material world. It takes little reflection to advance past this first reaction, but the initial take has significance; it highlights the vast differences in the perceived worlds and also the emotional reaction that bringing them together can stir.*[19]

However, there are encouraging signs that the secular world is waking up to the significance of the religious. For example, in a speech to the World Bank in March 2003, the Taoiseach (prime minister) of Ireland, Bertie Ahem, said he offered

> *"particular praise for faith-based, or missionary, orders who for decades have provided education and health for countless thousands of poor, including many of today's African leaders. Ireland's missionaries have played a crucial role in the development of many African states. Their work has provided the foundation for our close bonds with many of our African partners. As our overseas aid budget increases, we are ensuring that our support for missionary orders also increases. I agree with [World Bank President] Jim Wolfensohn that in addition to their development work, the churches have brought an ethical and spiritual dimension to development cooperation based on their moral authority which makes them crucial partners in development."* [20]

It is a welcome statement for many faith-based environmentalists – but it is still unusual enough to attract attention. And the problem is not just with the secular bodies. Religious communities have not really taken stock of their true influence either.

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[19] Katherine Marshall, "Development and Religion: A Different Lens on Development Debates," Peabody Journal of Education 76, no. 3/4 (2001): 339-75.

[20] Bertie Ahern, "Globalization, Partnership and Investment in People: Ireland's Experience" (speech to the World Bank, Washington, D.C., March 13, 2003).

Discovering spiritual currency

In 1999 ARC started to develop an asset audit of the major faiths: we wanted to see how much they were worth financially. We thought some of the bigger faith bodies at least would know the assets they had. But most of them did not. Perhaps the most interesting example of this happened in Nashville, Tennessee, at the initial meeting with the United Methodist Church. This Church is the fourth largest in the United States, and has some eleven million members. It is organized into sixty-six "conferences" across the country and has well-developed boards dealing with ministry, education, women, social affairs, mission, publications, pensions, and so forth.

At this first meeting we met heads of some of the key boards who told us one by one what they were doing on environmental issues. Eventually we came to the Pensions Board representative. She informed us that her board had a socially responsible investment program, which meant that virtually all the pension funds were ethically monitored, and the board sought to move funds into socially responsible areas and companies. Impressed, we asked how much the Pensions Board handled in terms of its investment portfolio. And when we learned that it was around $12 billion we were even more impressed. We then asked what the total stocks and shares portfolios of the entire Church were worth. No one knew. But we were invited to go away for a few months while they worked it out. A few months later the answer arrived.

The United Methodist Church in the United States had holdings of around $70 billion. (By comparison, the Church of England holds nearly one hundred times this amount.) We found similar stories among other groups: massive funds, some socially responsible investment, and great potential for doing more. What we had discovered, almost by accident, was the immense financial clout of the major faiths. It is a power that has not been used in a concerted way, and indeed it is a power that to a very great extent the faiths are almost shy about.

There is a traditional embarrassment about the relationship between (to use Christian language) God and Mammon-which has meant that the faiths have been somewhat reticent in exploring their actual stakes in the physical, economic, and social life of the world. The faiths have not really sought to flex their financial muscle, yet many of them have assets far greater than many banks or multinationals.

In understanding the role of the major faiths, we need to think in terms of major businesses and not see that phrase as in any sense derogatory. And

we need to look at some very big numbers. The Catholic Church, for example, claims over one billion members – one-sixth of the world's population. It has a full-time staff of one and a half million priests, monks, and nuns. That figure can be increased to over twenty million if the teachers who work in Catholic schools (including partly state-funded schools as in the United Kingdom, schools that are part of a denominational state system as in Germany, and schools that are private as in the United States) are added to the list. There are also half a million or so lay people working as social workers or youth workers or administrators in Catholic-related roles worldwide.

In terms of buildings – including churches, monasteries, retreat centers, schools, parish halls, sports facilities, publishing companies, media centers, research centers, and universities-the Church owns something in the region of one million structures. In many countries the Catholic Church provides the welfare net to catch the most impoverished and the most needy. And in countries such as Italy, Brazil, Germany, and Spain, it also runs the majority of the historic buildings-the churches and cathedrals that are the very heart of the national tourism trade.

How does it pay the wages of all those people? It cannot rely on the dollars, euros, and pounds that go into the collection plates on Sundays, although they help. The answer is that the Catholic Church supports such a vast empire of staff, services, and facilities through its shares, stocks, and other assets. It is in effect a business, or more accurately a series of businesses, with a huge portfolio of investments held locally, nationally, and internationally.

By looking at the Church in this way we can begin to understand this faith group's potential for serious action on environmental and developmental issues. Many NGOs and international bodies are desperately trying to build themselves constituencies, capacity, and networks, but the Catholic Church already has all of that in place. It is present in virtually every country, and in almost every town and village in many countries. It has one hundred and forty-one ambassadors accredited to its headquarters in the Vatican – an indication of the seriousness that many countries accord to relationships with the Church. It also, as we have seen, has a great deal of money and investment power. In this light, the decision not to take seriously such a vast and proven multinational business does seem rather naive. Yet the traditional attitude of so many secular groups to the Church is that – in some way they find difficult to articulate – it is "no longer relevant."

Sikhism is another good example. In India, where more than four-fifths of Sikhs live, the Sikh community of thirteen million maintains some twenty-eight thousand temples known as gurdwaras. Each gurdwara runs, as an essential part of the temple complex, a "langar" or free kitchen where anyone regardless of need, creed, or caste-will be fed. Day in and day out the Sikh community, from its own resources, feeds anyone who comes. It is an extraordinary gesture: the community as a whole feeds about thirty million people a day. The energy consumption for such an undertaking is vast and the social significance impossible to overstate. Millions of people survive in India because of the Sikh gurdwaras. Add to this the role of schools and other welfare institutions such as clinics and care centers, and we are looking at a major national enterprise without which India would be much the poorer.

Again, such a huge undertaking needs careful financial management. The contributions of the faithful are managed as large portfolios and invested in business ventures before they come to be invested in food for hungry people. Without the accountants, the spiritual and welfare work of the Sikhs could not continue for long. Yet, as Katherine Marshall of the World Bank pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, these immense resources have not been taken seriously and-as we found – even the faiths had not really appreciated their potential role for using their financial as well as spiritual clout to make the world a better place.

International interfaith investment

In November 2000 there was a big meeting in Kathmandu between representatives of major faiths and the environmental and development worlds. They agreed to support the creation of what would be an international interfaith investment group, named "3iG," and ARC was asked to undertake its organization. It is one of the best examples of what can happen when different worlds meet and agree to find ways of working together that not only respect the differences, but actively build upon them.

Following the debates at Kathmandu, the key mission statement for 3iG was to encourage each faith to assess its portfolios with "due regard to [its] beliefs, values, the environment and human rights so that all life on Earth can benefit." Most of the faiths had already established clear moral policies about what they should not invest in: few would buy shares in tobacco companies, distilleries, gambling organizations, arms manufacturers, or companies they perceived to support blatantly unethical governments. But although several had also supported vital incentives such as micro-lending –

giving small loans at tiny interest rates, often to village women – most had not thought about using a large part of their funds to invest in ventures and companies with beneficial social and environmental impact.

The faiths are almost unique in having a long-term perspective on investments, while the general market often has to think shorter term. Even though they have to make good returns on their investments in order to keep on going, they do not have to take all the profits tomorrow. Increasingly, however, the short-term outlook for such investments is also favorable. Ethical investments are being seen by the commercial world as significant because of their sustainability: on a simple level, if a company is efficient enough to conserve energy and take steps to protect the environment, it is probably efficient enough to do its business successfully.

This is a good model not only of how secular and religious worlds can cooperate, but also of how the differences between and within religions can be developed positively.

Several faith groups decided to focus their innovative investment on a few key areas, including alternative energy. At the moment new projects in this area often lack development funding, and so are vulnerable to the efforts of existing energy providers to stop their plans. To break out of this "poverty trap," the alternative energy movement needs an estimated $700 million in research and development. One single faith group, even if it has a portfolio as big as the United Methodist Church's, cannot afford to put this amount of money into research and development.

Another important aspect of the interfaith investment model is what has been called the "cascade" effect, which takes faith-inspired, socially responsible investment to a completely new level. Take the United Methodists again: their own pension fund is $12 billion. But their active congregations include between 5 million and 7 million families. Citigroup estimated that each family probably has investment savings (in the form of pensions, equities, bonds, and so on) of $50,000 to $75,000-which means that the estimated constituent fund of Methodist faith members is between $250 billion and $500 billion.[21] Even in the clipped language of banking investment managers, the potential impact is clear.

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[21] Michael Even, "The Market Impact of 'Faith-Consistent' Investing" (paper presented at ARC/3iG Conference, New York, N.Y., June 19, 2002).

The 3iG model is one of the more dramatic examples of the interaction between religious worlds and secular worlds. Let me give some more modest examples to indicate how bringing worlds together can amplify the contribution of each in ways that they could not achieve alone.

Saving the vultures

The first example is the problem of the disappearing vultures of Mumbai in India. For the Zoroastrians (known in India as Parsees because they originally came from Persia), the disposal of the dead is crucial. Central to their teaching is respect for the Seven Bounteous Creations – sky, water, earth, plants, animals, humanity, and fire and the sense that human beings as the purposeful creations of God, are the natural overseers of these Creations.[22]

But according to Zoroastrian teachings, the dead human body is ritually (and actually) polluting. It cannot be buried for this would dishonour earth; it cannot be burned because this would dishonor fire; it cannot be thrown into the river or sea because this would dishonor the waters. So the Zoroastrians build Towers of Silence. These extraordinary structures stand in the center of downtown Mumbai and elsewhere in India and Iran where Zoroastrian communities live. The bodies are laid out on these towers and left for the vultures to pick clean, after which the bones can be gathered and disposed of.

The trouble is that there are not enough vultures left in Mumbai to eat all the corpses. This is due to air pollution, loss of habitat, and the fact that the city has become cleaner so there is less for the vultures to scavenge. The loss of vultures is a serious problem and has been addressed by a unique partnership. The Parsees have linked up with specialist bodies, such as the natural history section of the Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai and various international bodies concerned with protection of vultures, to develop an intensive raptor-breeding program. So that this is not just a selfish project, they are also assisting vulture-breeding programs around the world to share information and knowledge so that these extraordinary birds, which have

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[22] As the Zoroastrian statement on ecology says: "The great strength of the Zoroastrian faith is that it enjoins the caring of the physical world not merely to seek spiritual salvation, but because human beings, as the purposeful creation of God, are seen as the natural motivators or overseers of the Seven Creations."

had a bad press but which are vital for the disposal of carrion, can be preserved.

The lost sutras of Mongolia

Meanwhile, in Mongolia, an unusual project combining both old and new wisdom has developed in collaboration with the Buddhist communities, the government, WWF, the World Bank, and ARC. Following the collapse of communism in 1989, Mongolian Buddhism was able to emerge from underground, where it had been driven by terrible persecution. It has now begun to rebuild its role as one of the foundations of Mongolian life, culture, and identity. The country is undergoing rapid development, which is necessary to ensure a decent standard of living for its citizens. Yet the inappropriate development of so many countries in the past fifty years has served as a warning, and has caused the government to try to find a new model. Part of this involves looking at the past and at ancient writings about the sacred nature of Mongolia.

Gandan Monastery, supported by several international agencies, commissioned a book entitled *Sacred Sites of Mongolia*, which gathers together ancient texts or sutras that mention sacred places. Many of these sutras were thought to have been lost under the communists. They not only list the sacred mountains, rivers, and valleys, but also set out rules for the survival of the delicate ecology. The book's introduction says:

> *One of the major reasons for working with the traditional religion of Mongolia is that buried deep within it are legends, stories, even names which tell us a great deal about a proper relationship with nature.... For many outside Mongolia it might seem strange to look to the names and legends of the past to build a new future. But Mongolia has a delicate ecology, which has been respected – indeed venerated – throughout history because people instilled in names and legends wisdom concerning the correct and appropriate use of such places. In an era of rapid change such as that which confronts Mongolia at the start of the twenty-first century, we need to know how to walk gently upon this fragile land and the past tells us how.*[23]

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[23] Sukhbaatar, Sacred Sites of Mongolia (Ulaanbaator: World Wide Fund for Nature/Alliance of Religion and Conservation, 2002), 24.

Through legends telling of how a mountain goddess will send landslides to those who cut down trees in her sacred forest, or of river deities who will send floods if the area is stripped of vegetation, the Buddhist sutra writers and their shamanic forebears pointed out the adverse effects of deforestation and overgrazing on fragile floodplains in ways that were intelligible to the devout. With this information, development planners can look at the warnings from the past as well as discover areas where the sacred texts allow development to take place. The success of this venture can only be seen over the very long term, but now a complete sacred development and conservation map of Mongolia can be made. It will be used along with economic models, think-tank studies, and all the other paraphernalia of contemporary development structures to give Mongolia a chance for a sustainable and biologically diverse future.

The president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, summed up these ideas:

> *The changes in Mongolia since the collapse of Communism ten years ago have shown that the country's religious traditions have formed a firm basis upon which to rebuild a country with a strong historical perspective and identity. This rebuilding must encompass more than just infrastructure; the links between physical and psychological recovery should be addressed as well. This process will involve rebuilding people's memories, hopes and beliefs. One way to aid in the process of rebuilding is to document Mongolia's sacred lands, an act which will in turn help to guide the ways in which land and resources are used.* [24]

The pagodas of Cambodia

The third example comes from Cambodia, with a small project working with Buddhist monks and a range of government and NGO groups. The project depends on the fact that in all villages and many towns in Cambodia, the center of the community is the pagoda. With the support of some overseas sponsors and advisers as well as local government officials, a local nongovernmental group, Mlup Baitong, working with Buddhist communities through the 1990s. The priorities have been to protect the monastery forests and to open up the pagodas for discussions about environmental issues. The fourteen pagodas in the main project have three-hundred-and-sixty monks

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[24] Sukhbaatar, Sacred Sites of Mongolia, 5.

and thirty-four nuns but they reach out to more than thirteen thousand villagers.

First Mlup Baitong helped organize workshops for monks and nuns, who were later inspired to talk to the villagers about how to preserve the natural environment. So after fifty-five workshops for the monks, there were four-hundred-and-fifty village lectures, and several discussions about nature held on closed-circuit radio on Buddhist holy days. By 2002 nine pagodas had conducted water surveys to document their wells and ponds, calculate their total usage of water, and measure contamination, following which they have dug new wells, introduced rainwater jars and water filters, and installed latrines. Two pagodas were involved in building improved cooking stoves. When it was shown that these burn half as much wood as ordinary stoves, Mlup Baitong started a campaign throughout the region to provide them to all pagodas.

Monks have also been involved in building tree nurseries and planting seedlings, with eight schools adopting nurseries and compost bins as part of a school environment program. By 2002 more than a thousand trees have been planted – ritually marked together with seedling ordination ceremonies. In its small but effective way, this project has produced a model that works. And because it draws upon the basis of Buddhism and its relationship to local communities as well as national governments, it can be replicated across the Buddhist world.

The biodiversity of beliefs

All these examples share a celebration of diversity; they are not an attempt to get everyone to think in the same way. In 1986, when Prince Philip invited five major faiths and representatives of the environmental movement to Assisi to explore how they could become partners in conservation, it quickly became clear that there was a problem. Of course there were many common concerns shared by the groups, but what was to be made of their differences? They had very different conservation, environmental, ecological, and scientific ideas-indeed they couldn't even agree on terminology. In the end everyone decided to adopt a very simple slogan, which is still the basis for such work, alliances, and cooperation between faith and secular groups today.

The slogan was: "Come, proud of what you bring of your own, but humble enough to listen." In many ways this (rather than the common denominator, as some would like it) is the basic creed of pluralism. So often in so-called interfaith work, differences are glossed over in the name of a superficial unity, which benefits no one. The religions do what they do not because of some general belief in the Divine, but because of very specific beliefs.

In Papua New Guinea, for example, the Evangelical Alliance has developed a training center for Christian pastors and laity to learn forest management, biodiversity, and general ecological awareness. The center itself is an extraordinary place, deep in the forest where training and worship can take place within the very environment that the participants want to protect. But the heart of the project is not the training center but the Bible, which the Christians of Papua New Guinea consider to be their natural source of authority. They believe that the Bible contains the true Word of God, revealed in order that humanity may live a more godly life, saved by Christ and redeemed in order to redeem the world.

This kind of language-focused on Christ, God, and the Bible-might alienate many in the secular world, but in Papua New Guinea, where ninety-seven percent of people are Christian, it makes much more sense than statistical studies and the application of international strategies for the protection of biodiversity. These Christians are rereading and reinterpreting the Bible in light of the threats to the biodiversity of their country and its precious forests. Were the Bible not placed at the center of the project, the Churches would have no real sense of involvement, and one of the main networks – respected, owned, and adhered to by the vast majority of people in the country – would have been left out.

The World Bank recently hosted a meeting of conservative evangelical leaders organized by A Rocha, a Christian NGO, and chaired by the Bishop of Liverpool. It focused on discussing the biblical basis for caring for creation and considering the place of environmental issues among this opinion-forming group. The group is significant both within the United States and in many of the Bank's client countries, and yet it could be typified as being at worst negative or at best neutral when it comes to environmental stewardship; they spend much time debating and defending creation but virtually no time caring for it.

Both these projects are pluralist, in that a Bible worldview is working hand in hand with other worldviews (represented by the World Bank, ARC, and other groups) and everyone agrees that preserving what Christians would call God's creation, and environmentalists would call biodiversity, is vitally

important. The Papua New Guinea project is working because all the partners realize they are speaking different languages, but ultimately they all believe in a similar goal.

Some people, who fear difference and diversity, have a rigid vision of the future. For them the perfect future involves one world, united by one belief (be that, for example, Christianity, Baha'ism, democracy, or Marxism) and united in one goal (of peace, sustainability, or whatever). All it needs, they think, is one more missionary push, five-year plan, or big funding effort, and the rest of the world will begin to think as they do. But this is never going to happen, and it never should happen. There is no record of any single belief system totally dominating the world. And human beings are far too awkward for that ever to happen in the future.

Appropriately, one of the best models for how human beings can conserve nature comes from nature itself. One of the key arguments for protecting biodiversity is that without it, evolution cannot continue and life on earth could die out. All around us there are millions of species: some are dying out, some are just emerging, some are irrelevant to evolution, some are possibly crucial. The earth needs this range for those times of vast extinction, with the dominant species dying out and leaving space for others.

So if diversity of species is fundamental to physical evolution, then perhaps diversity of thoughts, beliefs, values, and ways of life is also fundamental. And those people who believe that evolution and creation are the work of God might like to see this diversity of thought as part of the Purpose of God – the very weft and warp of life itself. This pluralism is one of the best models for tackling those complicated conservation problems for which no one system can offer a sure way forward; it is as important for effective faith-based investment as it is for grassroots projects that involve participants from different backgrounds. And, as I will explore in the final chapter, perhaps one of the greatest ways to invest in nature's future is not only to accept differences and diversity, but also to celebrate them.

Chapter five: Celebrating the Environment

God called to Moses out of the burning bush. "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." – Hebrew Bible, Book of Exodus, The Torah (3: 4-5)

"The intention is to introduce you to reality, not to imitate nature. It is to show you not what you see, but what is real... Everything in Creation – including humanity – was created pure but not perfect, and the purpose of being born is to reach your true potential". Brother Aidan, icon painter

Religion, like every other human organization, fails. It fails to achieve most of its own self-proclaimed goals, and it fails to prevent abuse and exploitation of its structures, powers, and beliefs. In this it is no different from every other human organization.

Yet religion, as we have observed before, survives and has survived longer than any empire, monarchy, nation, or company. Somewhere along the line the main faiths have discovered a few basic truths about how the world and humanity behave and why – and this has been the core of their success. And they succeed often enough to be worth perpetuating.

The secrets to success

What are the secrets of this ability to survive, indeed even to grow? One of them is that religions tend to provide what people tend to need. At their best, they can give meaning as much to the ordinary as to the extraordinary; can provide comfort as well as challenges; can stimulate as well as create places for rest; can offer entire cosmologies to explain the meaning of life, as well as provide a quick prayer to get someone through

the worries of an exam or an argument. In popular language they offer a holistic view of life that few other groups can get close to offering.

This was better understood a hundred years ago than it is today. In Britain, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Mexico, for example, the emerging socialist movements both admired and feared the power of the Church. They set out deliberately to counter its influence by creating alternative belief systems, in effect new "Churches," which they housed in special buildings called "labor churches" or "halls of science." There the energies, skills, music, Sunday schools, teachings, liturgies, and even the annual cycle of festivals usually found in Churches were replicated, but with a socialist content. They wanted socialism to became a new faith. They all failed. The fact is that humanity does not live by bread alone. Nor by ideals. Each of us spins a web of stories, legends, and beliefs around ourselves and those we love, and these stories are part of what makes life possible.

The importance of telling tales

As I showed in chapter 3, all religions pass on their messages and their ethos by telling stories. Here I want to show how this skill can be extended to pass on messages about the environment and social development.

Just for a moment, think about how you tell your own story. From the tens of thousands of events in your life, you will probably have selected no more than four or five which, if someone asks you who you are or why you do what you do, you will tell by way of explanation. Even statements as simple as "I am married" or "I am a mother" or "I work for X company" or "I had a tough childhood" are stories spun to help make sense of a vast and vague world and to provide the questioner with an acceptable answer. You will have stories about your relationships with your parents and partners, about what kind of people your children or your friends are, about your beliefs, and about the hardships you have suffered and how you dealt with them. And you will also have stories that you don't want to tell other people, but that you tell yourself.

The fact that you are reading this book probably means that you care about the issues of conservation or faith or both. If someone was interviewing you and said, "Tell me what person or what experience led you to this interest," what would you say? In my own work, for example, because I am officially "religious," people tend to tell me why they do things, not just how they do them. It is one of the many enjoyable parts of running an alliance between religions and conservation-indeed I often think it is what makes it possible.

But all that I do is provide an excuse for something that just about everyone would like to talk about. Could your organization also create such a space for drawing out the personal in order to understand the professional? Is there space there for stories?

Beneath the professional jargon, CVs, profiles, and so on lies a real truth. It was not facts and figures that persuaded us to get involved: it was for reasons more personal, complex, and varied-reasons that are best explained by stories. Given that we interpret the world through stories even if we sometimes like to call them facts, it is somewhat surprising that in the environmental and development movements people rarely use stories but rely instead on dry statistics or facts with no context. This can lead us to miss the point of an activity and at its worst can even bring us to destroy the very thing we seek to understand.

An extreme example of this is given by the writer and environmentalist storyteller Thomas Pakenham in *Remarkable Trees of the World*. He tells of a university researcher in Utah who wanted to confirm that a certain tree was the oldest in the world. So he obtained permission from the National Park Service authorities to use a special drill to remove a central core from the tree so he could count the rings. Unfortunately the drill broke. The researcher, anxious to retrieve the precious drill, was then given permission to have the tree cut down. After it was felled, the researcher retrieved his drill and learned he had been right. The tree was more than four thousand nine-hundred years old and was perhaps the oldest living thing on the planet. Or rather it had been.[25]

But what good did it do him to know this? The point is, the researcher wanted a story, and he didn't realize that for it to be true he didn't necessarily need *Guinness Book of Records* facts. Perhaps if the researcher had talked to local people they might have told him ancient tales about this ancient tree and he could have let it live, with uncounted rings, for another thousand years.

Yet stories can help people change their behavior: indeed our Utah researcher unwittingly provided such a behavior-changing story by being an example of what most people do not want to be. And here we can learn from the great religions. For it is by telling and remembering traditional stories that the religions are often most persuasive and positive in protecting the

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[25] Thomas Pakenham, Remarkable Trees of the World (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).

environment, both by reminding people of the right way of doing things and by promoting a greater sense of responsibility for natural resources. Here are two stories that show the importance – and the possibilities – of storytelling.

Muhammad and the river

One day, according to the *Hadith* (a book of traditional and authenticated accounts of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), the Prophet was traveling from one town to the next with his followers. They were just crossing a river when it became time for prayers. Naturally they used the river to perform the ritual ablutions required before prayer. However, the followers of the Prophet were astonished to see him enter the river with a little bowl. This he filled with water and it was this water with which he performed the ablutions. When asked why, surrounded by a whole river, he took so little water to use, he said that just because there is plenty this does not give us the right to waste or to take more than we really need.[26]

This is one of the most powerful stories that Muslims use to teach about our need to respect the environment. And even today, in the modern world, when Islamic teachers and leaders need to remind people not to waste resources this is one of the main examples they will use. Sometimes when faith-based environmentalists work on projects, all they need to do is remind local people of the stories they know already.

Krishna and the serpent

Similarly, in India, a story of Lord Krishna and the evil serpent has helped develop river environment schemes (and give local people a renewed sense of responsibility for that environment) in ways that statistics could not begin to do.

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[26] Ibn Maja, Sunan Ibn Maja, ed. F. 'Abd al-Baqi (Turkey, 1972), 1, 146. This Muslim story is echoed in the Hindu saying: "Everything animate or inanimate that is within the universe is controlled and owned by the Lord. One should therefore accept only those things necessary for himself, which are set aside as his quota, and one should not accept other things, knowing well to whom they belong." From Sri Isopanshad, Mantra 1.

The ancient legend tells that once upon a time, an evil serpent lived in the sacred Yamuna River that flows across the center of India and into the Ganges. The serpent's foul breath blasted the crops growing along the river and its polluting body fouled the water, injuring all life. The people started to weep and the creatures of the river started to cry out, and eventually their distress reached the ears of the Lord Krishna. He sped to the river and – after a dramatic three-day battle-killed the serpent and freed the waters and the people from its evil influence.

In the 1990s it became evident that the Yamuna was reaching dangerous levels of pollution. Hindu communities were able to draw upon this legend and use it to awaken local awareness of the problem. They stated that the pollution was the return of the evil serpent in a new and more ugly form. Today, they said, Krishna needs human beings to be his hands in the battle against the serpent-and it is humans who must work together to eliminate pollution in the sacred river. Once again, it is the specific Krishna nature of the story and the insight into tackling this very real environmental issue that has made this possible.

The importance of images and beauty

Another skill – secret if you like – of the great religions is their understanding of the role of art. They see it as a necessity, not as a luxury, and as a way of explaining ideas and roles that cannot be explained in words. Every great faith uses art not only to explain itself but also to explain glory. Even Islam, which forbids the depiction of any living creature (including angels and of course God) on the grounds that it constitutes idolatry, has inspired the most exquisite architecture, architecture that – by using geometry as a sacred art form – is a symbol of unity.

To create and treasure something lovely, something that has drawn upon the best craftspeople, the finest materials, and the most loving attention, is a testimony to that which the human spirit can achieve. This is why it is so problematic that recently, and particularly in the West, a variety of lowest-level utilitarianism has taken hold in many groups that design structures for the poor and dispossessed. Why should these people not have places and experiences of beauty? Indeed, perhaps they are the ones who need them most.

Here is a powerful story about beauty, heard from a Christian aid worker based in Bangladesh. He knew of a family living outside Dhaka whose village

had been badly hit by floods. They had absolutely nothing left and several of the five children were sick. The father was given emergency money by an international charity, but a day later charity workers were horrified to see him and his entire family emerging from a matinee showing at the local cinema. They challenged him and asked him why he didn't spend their money on food, clothes, or some other "necessity"? Why had he wasted it? The man replied that he knew his family would never have enough to eat or wear and would be struggling for the rest of their lives. But for one glorious afternoon they had been able to let all of that go and enjoy the sight of romance and color and escapism and adventure. That, he said, would feed their spirits when their bodies were hungry.

The great religions realized a long time ago that beauty is not a luxury but a necessary celebration of both humanity and the Divine. This is why when reforming groups (who insist on a puritanical and legalistic reading of their traditions) rise up, they first tend to target things of beauty. This is because these things bear testimony to a world vision from their faith that is too wide for the purist and too exciting for the legalist.

Yet this vision of beauty in faith is one that many groups are beginning to appreciate. For example, for some years the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been a sponsor of an initiative called Art for the World. The agency's director, Walter Fust, explains:

> *"Over the past five years, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation has sponsored a series of three exhibitions by Art for the World. That may surprise some people and prompt them to ask: Isn't Swiss development cooperation intended to meet the urgent basic needs of poverty-stricken people? For example, isn't clean drinking water more important than painting and sculpting?*
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> *The questions are justified. Our partners in the South would reply that [humanity], as everyone knows, does not live by bread alone. As a wide-ranging study by the World Bank has shown, culture, even for people living in extreme poverty, is no luxury. In fact, in many respects it is central to their lives.*
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> *What impresses me about Art for the World is how it has succeeded in mastering the skill in balancing between contemporary and sometimes elitist art and social engagement. For years, Art for the World has*

represented values which are also important for the SDC: dialogue between cultures, tolerance and a spirit of solidarity."[27]

In the rather puritanical world of many development agencies that (unlike the SDC) seek to make the world better only on their terms, the notions of beauty, storytelling, and fun don't have much of a look-in. Yet working with such forces can be exciting, constructive, and ultimately effective. If we do not remember that our world is beautiful as well as functional, why should we care enough to save those parts of it that are not immediately useful to us?

I want to look at two examples of faiths that have expressed the essence of their beliefs through art. The first is Orthodox Christianity, which has a powerful explanation of the role of iconography.

An Orthodox icon

The Orthodox model assumes that each aspect of creation – the heavens, the rocks, the wilderness, the stars, and humanity in its diverse forms and beliefs – has its role to play in caring for the Creator. This is powerfully summed up in the Vespers hymn that is sung on the evening of Christmas Day, with its description of the Virgin Mary giving birth to Christ in a cave. The hymn follows the Orthodox version of the Nativity,[28] with all the elements of the natural and human world giving offerings to God in his incarnation as a vulnerable child:

What shall we offer Thee, 0h Christ,
Who, for our sake, was seen on earth as man?
For every thing created by Thee offers Thee thanks.
The angels offer Thee their hymns;
The heavens, the star;
The Magi, their gifts;
The shepherds, their wonder;

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[27] Art for the World (Geneva: Art for the World, 2001), 15.

[28] According to the non-biblical second-century text "The Book of James," Mary and Joseph were some eight miles outside Bethlehem when Mary realized she was about to give birth. Putting her in a cave in a mountain, Joseph hurried on to Bethlehem to find a midwife. When he returned he found Jesus had already been born.

The earth, the cave;
The wilderness, the manger;
While we offer Thee a Virgin Mother,
0h pre-eternal God, have mercy upon us…

It is a model of diversity that the Orthodox Church has now explicitly extended to the role that all of us have in protecting life on earth, each offering our own (different) strengths and abilities. Politicians, economists, scientists, clergy, leaders, journalists, students, workers, parents: each of us has a distinct role that no one else can play in quite the same way.

Since the mid-1990s, Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (who is First Among Equals of all the patriarchs of Orthodox Churches around the world), has organized an extraordinary series of floating seminars on conservation, based on exactly this model. These unprecedented meetings – held on the great seas and rivers that surround the traditional heartlands of Orthodoxy, including the Black Sea, the Aegean, and the Danube – have brought together political leaders, scientists, the media, religious leaders, economists, and others to talk about major issues like water pollution. Together these men and women have discussed, planned, thought, reflected, lectured, and prayed, in what for many participants has been a revealing and life-changing experience of partnership and celebration of diversity.

It is a vision of our place and role in nature, which encompasses rather than seeks to control, and which does not only accept but actively welcomes pluralism rather than trying to make everyone think the same way. This model is encapsulated in Orthodox icon paintings, which are physical embodiments of the Church's teaching that it is only through material things that God's beauty can be appreciated.[29] As the UK-based icon painter Brother Aidan explains: "The intention is to introduce you to reality, not to imitate nature. It is to show you not what you see, but what is real."

So the figures of saints often go beyond the frame to show how there are no real boundaries, and buildings tend to have a strange perspective – you can see left and right and up and down, which is meant to represent the way God "sees" the whole world at once. Taking natural pigments like ochre and lapis lazuli and malachite and beautifying them by using them in art is a simple expression of the Orthodox teaching that creation – including

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[29] "I shall not cease reverencing matter, by means of which my salvation has been achieved . . ." (St. John of Damascus, On Holy Images, 1.16).

humanity – was created pure but not perfect and the purpose of being born is to reach your true potential.[30]

Icons make a powerful model by which the conservation movement, with all the richness and diversity of its input and membership, can view itself. Imagine putting together a partnership of diverse groups, interests, and beliefs, as if you were creating an icon – an icon that offers everyone the chance to be more by working together than they can be by themselves. It is a challenging but also an achievable image.

A Buddhist mandala

Another way of using religious art to help us think about partnership and pluralism is to look at a Buddhist mandala (see Figure 2). These paintings are models of reality based upon Buddhist insights into the human mind. They draw you in, layer upon layer, from the outside of the painting, which represents where we stand now, toward the Buddha-nature (reality if you like) at the center of the painting.

On the way you travel across different worlds and layers of meaning, from the sensual through the reflective to the extraordinary emptiness at the center. On this journey, you are asked to encounter the diverse levels of meaning, existence, purpose, and intention that surround us all – and which we so rarely stop to explore. They are like layers of skin wrapped so tightly around us that we cannot see them. The mandala takes us pictorially and psychologically into an exploration of these, peeling the layers off until we come to the heart of things.

The icon and the mandala have provided two of the greatest cultures of the world with the means to make sense of the seen and the unseen worlds. Although throughout the world (starting, arguably, with the West) we are forgetting how to see things symbolically, for many people these kinds of models are better and more helpful images than pie charts or diagrams of organizational structures.

In the past there has been a problem when stories and visions of what is beautiful or right have clashed. Religion has often been at the forefront of such conflicts because many of the faiths assume that their vision is the only true one, or at the least, the only appropriate one for their people and their

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[30] Victoria Finlay, Colour: Travels through the Paintbox (London: Sceptre, 2002), 25-26.

lands. The point here is that all of us – whether we call ourselves religious or secular-need to see the world differently. At present we see only fragments and because we tend to defend the vision of our fragment as the truth, we find it hard to relate to other people's visions.

Quiet and special places

Another "secret" of the great religions is their ability to provide quiet places – or at least special places – in the communities that observe them. Think of a Shinto garden, a village churchyard, a lofty mosque, a neighborhood synagogue, or a Buddhist temple. Many religions have traditions of "sanctuary" in these quiet places, and many of the most successful religion and conservation projects are ones that recognize the power of these places and extend it.

These include, for example, the Living Churchyards project mentioned in chapter 3, in which more than six thousand English and Welsh churches developed management plans for their graveyards that allowed nature to flourish. By not cutting the grass often, by leaving monuments to crumble naturally, and by providing facilities like bat boxes, nesting boxes, and even wetlands, the churches created wonderful habitats for a range of wild species. Some of these living churchyards have displays showing the increase in the number of species as a result of these policies. Here the local communities, including many people who are not churchgoers, can make a difference. Many churches have church primary schools, and these often play a crucial role in working with the churchyards and educating not only the pupils but their parents as well in the importance of sanctuary for a wildlife that is increasingly under threat.

In Yunnan Province in southwest China there is a lake called Dianchi, which conservationists have labeled a "hotspot" of freshwater biodiversity. In the 1950s it was recorded as having twenty-four indigenous fish species, at least eleven of which were endemic, as well as dozens of endemic crustacean and mollusk species. However, since that time these have been under threat – partly because the water quality has been declining with dangerously high levels of phosphorus and nitrogen, partly because of competition from the thirty or so introduced species of fish, and partly because of the threats from corresponding new diseases and parasites. By 1994 there were possibly only seven endemic and five other indigenous fish species left.

The decline could have been even worse, had it not been for the local Buddhist temples. Four of the rarest endemic fish species[31] have probably only survived because of the unconscious sanctuary that the temples have offered. The sacred springs near these temples – with powerful names like Black Dragon Pool, Blue Dragon Pool, and Dragon Pond – have been kept clean, with fishing forbidden. And it is here that these rare species continue to live. The temples have in effect practiced a sort of passive conservation for centuries, thus enabling the survival of the species through protection of their habitat.

In the past few years, provincial, state, and international governments have set up the Yunnan Environment Project in conjunction with the World Bank,[32] various international agencies including ARC, and most importantly the local office of the Buddhist Association of China. The Buddhists' role as the historic but passive guardians of the lake has now been recognized. But more than that, now that the Buddhists have themselves recognized what they have done, they have been able to turn their passive protection into an active program of protection and education. And the springs that in some cases are the only known sites for some species are now actively valued.

This is an example of the inherent role of religious sites in China, where partnerships with secular agencies are able to develop in ways that the Buddhists themselves would not necessarily have considered. The Buddhist Association of China elsewhere in China has proved to be very responsive to the conservation message.

Missionaries and pilgrims

Many secular organizations, including the World Bank, WWF, and the United Nations, talk about their staff going "on mission" or explain their policies in "mission statements." In doing so, these organizations may be perpetuating one of the greatest mistakes of the religions, one that the faiths themselves

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[31] Sinocyclocheilus grahami grahami, Schizothorax grahami, Discogobio yunnanensis, and Yunnanilus pleurotaenia.

[32] The project is taking advantage of a major World Bank-financed project that has been serving to improve water quality conditions in the lake, and applying a biodiversity dimension to its infrastructure, policy, and regulatory measures by restoring natural habitats and other activities that will conserve as many as possible of the highly range-restricted endemic species.

have tried to change. Virtually all the founders of the major religions spoke about the spiritual life as being a journey or a pilgrimage. This model has shaped the major faiths, and pilgrimage is central to every single world religion. Think of the Hajj, which every able-bodied Muslim should undertake at least once in his or her life. By insisting that everyone dress the same and walk together, the Hajj emphasizes everyone's equal standing before God. Or consider Christianity, with its ancient centers of pilgrimage. The Church made every country sacred so you did not have to go to Jerusalem; you could go, for example, to Santiago de Compostela, Canterbury, or the great Mexican shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Many religions forgot this tradition of traveling humbly and have launched great missions whose hallmark has been an intense desire to change the lives of those whom they missionize. But this model has increasingly been rejected by the major faiths in favor of a return to the encounter of travellers, pilgrims, and personal witnesses to the power of religion.

What if the new missionary movements of the secular world – the environmental movement, the development community, and international agencies – talked of pilgrimage rather than of mission? What if their staff thought of walking humbly to other countries and relying upon the traditions of hospitality just as pilgrims do? What a psychological difference that would make and what a role model for the people in those countries.

In its Sacred Land Program ARC has drawn together from the experiences of all the major faiths seven separate stages of pilgrimage. These are ideas, not rules, and explore how any journey can become a pilgrimage.

The first stage involves thinking about being a pilgrim rather than just traveling from A to B. The second is about recognizing that journeys are entities in themselves and they can – if you allow them – take on a life of their own. They are not just a means to an end. The third stage of pilgrimage is becoming aware of the people with whom you are travelling and of why you are together, discovering what each of you brings as well as being honest about some of the tensions. The fourth is about understanding the story that has brought you there: your story. In the fifth stage you lose your role as an observer and become part of the landscape and part of somebody else's story.

The sixth stage is to actually look at what you are passing through, and the seventh and final stage is to recognize that at the end of the journey you should be different from the person who set out.

If every business meeting, every overseas trip, and every project were to use these ideas, they would be so much more effective and enjoyable.

Cycles and celebrations

Ramadan and Eid. Lent and Easter. Pansa and Wesak. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Ashwin and Divali .[33] Every religion has cycles of reflection followed by celebration: fasts are followed by feasts. The major faiths have all structured annual cycles that help carry people through the year, making the monotony of everyday life manageable and celebrating the changes of the natural seasons. They know that you cannot make people repent, fast, or reflect the whole time. You have to let them have a good time as well – or what is the point?

This has proved to be one of the most important insights that the faiths are offering to the secular world as well as to their own followers. Many NGOs, agencies, and other worthy groups present a consistently gloomy picture of the world in the hope that shock tactics will produce compassion or repentance. They usually don't. We are now confronted with the phenomenon of compassion fatigue. The faiths also have tough things to say about being human and the shortcomings and shortfalls of human society. They call for repentance, conversion, salvation, and liberation from the elements of human behavior that are destructive. But they also know how to have a good time.

Unless you can offer a vision of the wonder of living, why should anybody bother to change? Around the world the religious involvement in environmental and development work has found a special role for this understanding of how and why humans find motivation: celebrations of what is good, encouraging, and exciting in the way the world is developing have proved enormously popular. Not just with the religious communities but with the wider public.

For example, the Environmental Sabbath in the United States is a weekend-long Muslim-Jewish-Christian (and increasingly Sikh-Hindu-Buddhist) celebration through prayer, music, action, sermons, drama, and silence. It rejoices in the achievements of the past year and sets out the challenges for the year to come. As a result of the public commitment to ecology by the

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[33] See Glossary.

present Ecumenical Patriarch and the leadership he has given to the other Orthodox Church leaders, September 1 has since 1993 been a day of prayer and action in every Orthodox Christian community worldwide, with special services, hymns, and music.

The month-long fast of Ramadan has for centuries been a time when Muslims reflect on their relationship to God and their reliance on His bounty. It was therefore a natural time of the year to develop an explicit environmental message that drew out for the contemporary world the significance of this ancient time of reflection. In Indonesia, as part of a World Bank and ARC joint project, Muslim scholars and community leaders are developing a series of meditations for each day of Ramadan, weaving contemporary environmental information with traditional Islamic texts, and suggesting specific actions to help preserve the environment. At the end of Ramadan comes the glorious festival of Eid where the wonders and bounty of God are celebrated. What more appropriate end to a time of environmental reflection?

New ideologies have always understood the power of festivals but have rarely succeeded in tapping it effectively. In the late eighteenth century the French revolution created a whole new calendar of secular festivals. Neither the calendar nor the occasions lasted more than 10 years. In the late 1980s various environmental groups attempted to establish annual Earth Days, but these have not been fully accepted, partly because they don't particularly mean anything.

For a festival to succeed it needs to be grafted onto something deeper, with a period of preparation leading to the celebration. The remarkable thing about festivals is that they can be traced back in time. Easter, for example, builds upon the tradition of celebrating the coming of spring and new life, a tradition that predates Christianity by thousands of years – and indeed the word "Easter" refers to the deity Eostre whose rebirth was celebrated in ancient Celtic rituals.

An interesting story about these problems is that of the millennium celebrations in Britain. Two very different projects reflected different worlds and values in a most telling way.

At a government level, 2000 was marked by the creation of a giant dome at the Greenwich meridian containing a series of supposedly popular exhibitions on the themes of time, history, and the future. It was a disaster. The costs were huge – nearly £1 billion, which could have built five new hospitals, and of which only around £120 million were recouped. The expected crowds

never materialized and the ephemeral nature of this supposed monument to two thousand years of Christian history is an all too powerful example of the transient nature of contemporary culture.

At the other end of the scale is perhaps one of the most successful British millennium projects, and one that should still be visible at the turn of the next millennium. In 1999 the UK Conservation Foundation came up with the idea of taking cuttings from yew trees that were alive at the time of Christ (whose birth provided the reason after all for there being a millennium celebration). There are several hundred of these trees scattered across Britain, almost all within the sacred confines of churchyards. It was hoped that several hundred churches would take up the gift of a yew sapling to commemorate the millennium. But in the end more than eight thousand saplings were distributed to as many churches, and huge crowds, way beyond expectation, packed cathedrals and local churches for the blessing of these tiny plants. In a thousand years' time, one in twenty of these yews could well be still alive. And in the next hundred years the majority of these trees will provide shelter and habitat for species in churchyards, and act as a memorial to the local enthusiasm for both nature and the sacred, which was such a hallmark of this splendid project.

The discarded husk of the Millennium Dome and the thousands of new yew trees across the face of Britain illustrate the difference between putting on a show that a government decided was good for the people and creating a story that others can share. One was a project literally without roots that was afraid to be honest about the reason for the celebration – the birth of Christ. The other chose one of the most powerful sacred trees of ancient Britain-and said let's celebrate through it.

I return to the image that began the book-of a messenger rushing in sweaty and full of amazing, terrifying news that the end of the world is nigh, and of a tranquil gardener listening carefully, but getting on with planting a sapling before going to find out the truth. In a way the international agencies, environmental lobby groups, and governments, with their various Three-, Five-, or Ten-Year Plans, are the messengers. The insight of the faiths is that although these messengers might be speaking the truth, it is in the end probably more useful to finish planting the tree first.

Because even when everything seems to be crumbling we have to believe that life on earth will go on. And we have to help make it happen.