

Alliance of Religions and Conservation
Religions and the environment: The Assisi Declarations and after.
Students' notes for Lesson 1

Religion & the environment 1 – the Assisi declaration

Opening discussion:

- What's going wrong with the environment?
- How does the way people treat our planet make things worse for nature?
- Is this wrong?
- Should religious people care about this more than others? Why?

The Assisi Declarations

"It didn't seem a particularly bright idea at the time - it was pretty obvious. If your religion tells you ... that the Creation of the world was an act of God, then it follows naturally that if you belong to the church of God then you ought to look after His Creation." **HRH Prince Philip on his reasons for convening the Assisi conference in 1986**

By the 1980s scientists were beginning to identify the ways in which the world's climate seemed to be changing. People had started to talk about 'ecology' and 'environmentalism', understanding that the natural world was a system that needed to be kept in balance. There was a growing political pressure about green issues.

In 1986 Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, was International President of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) – a worldwide organisation concerned about the environment. He invited religious leaders representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism to come together in Assisi, Italy, birthplace of St Francis of Assisi (the Catholic saint of ecology).

In the course of a week each leader looked into the sacred teachings of their own religion to clarify what they said about the relationship between humanity, nature and God (or spirituality). At the end of the week they each produced a statement expressing what they had found. These became widely known as The Assisi Declarations because this was the first time the different religions had drawn up statements about their respective attitude to the environment. While the declarations differ greatly from each other, all share the common thread that humanity must respect and care for the natural world as a spiritual duty.

*Notes on faith and conservation developed by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) for religious education teachers.
Further resources available from ARC's website www.arcworld.org*

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Group Exercise

Your group will have a sheet of information about one of the Assisi declarations. What do you think it says about the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature?

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| Q1: Does this religion consider that the human race has a special status in the eyes of God? | |
| Q2: If the human race has a special status what powers does this give them with regard to the natural world? And what responsibilities? | |
| Q3: If humanity has a different status what relationship with nature does this confer? | |
| Q4: If the human race does not have a special status then how should they relate to the rest of the natural world? | |
| Q5: If humanity is of an equal status with nature what might be our importance in the natural world? | |

In your group: make a drawing or diagram to show how humanity relates to the rest of nature and divine power (or God).

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| Q6: What does this religion have to say about the rights and wrongs of exploiting the world and its resources? | |
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