

# The Sacred life of Trees

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all share a similar story which emphasises the importance of trees to each of these great faiths. The version of the story depends upon certain core beliefs, but the Jewish version goes like this:

*If one day you are planting a tree and someone comes running to you shouting that the Messiah has come, first finish planting the tree, then go and see if this is true.*

Every major faith has its stories about the central role of trees, from Yggdrasil, the Norse Tree at the Centre of the Universe, through the trees in the Garden of Eden, and the tree of the Cross to the Bodhi tree under which Prince Siddhartha achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha.

In Islam, a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad says that to plant a tree is an act of zakat – charity – because under its branches birds, animals, insects and human beings can live and thrive.

In Buddhist thought and teaching (based particularly on the Lotus Sutra) the Buddha can take any form to bring about the release of any aspect of nature from suffering – including taking the shape of a tree. Based upon this and in response to the indiscriminate and usually illegal felling of the forests of Cambodia and Thailand, Buddhist monks working in partnership with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), have ordained trees as monks. Wrapped in robes they are of course totally protected and thus the forest within which they stand becomes a sacred and protected area.

The role of faiths with regard to trees is not just mythology and stories. About 5% of the world's commercial forests are owned by faiths as a means of earning income. For example, the Church of Sweden owns around 12% of the commercial forests



A schoolboy at the Ebukoolo Primary School in Emuhaya, Kenya, holds a tree seedling; faith groups in Africa are launching major environmental education plans, including developing school orchards and gardens, as part of their long-term plans on the environment which will be launched in September 2012 at ARC's Nairobi celebration.



Above: In 2010, a group of Buddhist monks in northwest Cambodia won the UNDP-sponsored Equator Prize celebrating outstanding community efforts to conserve biodiversity. The monks patrol 18,000 hectares of community forest, ordaining trees to protect them from illegal logging.

Right: Children plant trees before being confirmed into the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania. Christian, Muslim and Hindu faith groups intend to plant millions of trees across Africa as part of their long-term plans on the environment, due to be launched in September 2012 at ARC's Nairobi celebration.



of Sweden, while the Benedictines in Austria own 28% of commercial forests. About 15% of the world's forests are considered sacred and although the faiths may not own them – for example the sacred forests of the Daoists in China are owned less than 1% by the Daoists themselves – the penumbra of sacredness offers a protection that no national or international law can ever manage.

In other words, around 20% of the world's forests have a direct relationship with faith. This is why the Jinja Honcho (Association of Shinto Shrines of Japan) in partnership with ARC, WWF and other organisations are working on a Religious Forestry Sites programme, developing appropriate forest management for these vital ecological sites. The need to protect and to restore forests is crucial as they not only provide the habitat for most of the species on the planet, absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, provide resources for often the poorest communities to create a livelihood – but they are also beautiful.

Religious or sacred forests are amongst the most significant ecological sites in the world. In Lebanon, the Holy Forest of Harissa on the coast is one of only a handful of traditional Mediterranean oak forests left anywhere on the Mediterranean.

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Protected for centuries because it surrounds the statue of Our Lady of Lebanon and thus revered and owned by the Maronite Church, this was declared a Maronite Protected Environment in 1999. In Japan, the sacred forest of Ise surrounds the most important shrine in Japan. Here every twenty five years the shrine is rebuilt in wood to ensure the next generation knows

how to build in wood. The trees that are used were planted 250 years ago and the ones which will be needed in 250 years time are being planted now. This is the oldest recorded example of sustainable forestry with records going back to 4 BC.

In a world where trees are now largely valued as carbon sinks or for their economic value, the importance of a religious and spiritual understanding is crucial. Without it we reduce the trees to nothing more than

objects of usefulness. Perhaps it is time that through the faiths we recapture our intimate relationship with trees. It was not without significance that when C.S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, wanted to show how *The Last Battle* against evil would be won, it was because the trees came to the battle, and through their strength the battle was won.