The Quiet Revolution

Martin Palmer explains how faiths have become key in helping to protect the living planet

I recently had to help a group of young people, mostly from the Occupy movement worldwide, think through how to hold a conference without falling into the usual trap at such events of meaningless language and posturing. We were particularly vexed by the issue of language and the now almost complete uselessness of terms such as ‘sustainable development’ or the deeply anthropocentric materialist term ‘ecosystem deliverables’.

So we came up with an idea. Many of you will know the BBC Radio programme Just a Minute, where people have to speak for one minute on a given subject without repetition, deviation or hesitation. So we agreed that this would be how we would run the conference. Nobody would be able to use the same term twice in any one talk, speech, report back to a plenary or any of the other usual things. The challenge of having to find other words to express ideas we no longer actually think about – such as the two cited above – would be fascinating to watch.

I mention this because to a very great extent the conservation/ecology world has created a language, even a mythlogology, that largely excludes people rather than including them. And this is a major reason why we are not as successful as we once thought we might be.

Amongst those we could be working with but have largely excluded are the world’s major faiths. Yet despite the fact that their perspectives, their land ownership and their influence have been ignored and not even seen as valid by the bulk of the conservation/ecology movements, they have quietly been getting on with protecting our living planet – so much so that they now constitute the largest environmental movements in the world.

Admission of the arrogance that leads to the exclusion of faith has been well expressed by Carl Pope, former executive director and chair of the Sierra Club – one of the largest conservation organisations in the US. He said: “I was part of the generation that made the choice – the horrendous strategic blunder – of situating ourselves outside the institutions of faith. Now we have a chance to repent of, and reform from, that error.”

Back in 1986, the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, who was at that time the International President of WWF, worked out that if the future was about changing hearts and minds then there were only two forces that have ever positively changed human society. These are the arts and religion – and in many cases the two were synonymous. This is why he initiated what the UN now calls “potentially the largest civil society movement in the world” – the involvement of the faiths in environmental action.

When the 1986 meeting took place in Assisi, Italy (the birthplace of St Francis), there was only one religious environmental programme in the world – the Buddhist Perception of Nature project working with Tibetan refugees and Thai monks and nuns. Today there are hundreds of thousands of religious environmental programmes in countries all around the world. Very few have ever had any link with the major environmental movements, and – perhaps more tellingly – very few have ever felt these movements had anything they needed. Quietly, at every level from small villages in Mexico to megacities such as Shanghai, the faiths have developed their own environmental movements, programmes and action.

This has built upon certain key aspects of the faiths.