First, their wisdom and their standing in communities. The faiths are the oldest human institutions and therefore the most ‘sustainable’. They know, from hundreds or thousands of years of guiding humanity, how to effect change in such a way as to carry people with them. The major faiths have perfected the appearance of being unchanging while subtly changing the whole time. Of course a few versions of every faith shout, threaten, try to scare or intimidate and make people feel guilty in order that they can push them to do what they want. But then so do many of the environmental movements. Conversely, the vast majority of faiths help people to make sense of their world and help them to become more compassionate within that understanding. Forget the nonsense about faith only being interested in the Next Life. Virtually every education system, health system, place of refuge has its roots in the work of the faiths over centuries, caring for, educating and helping the poorest of the poor.

Second, the faiths are trusted in ways that no government, international agency such as the UN, or NGO is. In most parts of the world, people will listen to their religious leaders first. Therefore, if you want to reach people it has to be in partnership with those they trust the most. I have seen so many environmental programmes cozy up to governments or – even worse – multinationals, only to be betrayed by them and for the scheme to be discredited in the eyes of the people. Think of the vain hopes placed at huge expense to almost every major environmental organisation in lobbying for and working with the national governments that went to the Copenhagen COP in 2009. Not only were they betrayed but they were actually evicted from the display hall.

Third, the faiths are involved in what one can best describe as the business of religion. They own outright about 8% of the habitable surface of the planet, and a further 15% or so is considered sacred (mountains, rivers, cities, pilgrimage routes) and therefore better protected than other areas. They run or are involved with around 50% of all schools (in Africa, according to UN figures, this rises to 64%), and these schools are usually the ones in the slums and in the rural areas. They have huge media networks, from newspapers through TV and radio to websites.

The faiths constitute 14% of the total capital market. They feed millions of people – for example, the Sikhs in India feed 30 million people every day. They are significant producers of goods from their farms and forests and they are significant purchasers. Which is why around the world they are now concentrating on the ecological management of these assets, from developing education programmes for their schools to creating tree nurseries (in Africa, the leading Christian, Muslim and Hindu traditions recently made the commitment to raise, plant and nurture over 70 million trees); from working with the Forest Stewardship Council on their forest holdings to developing environmental management for sacred sites (for example, the Green Pilgrimage Network is greening the Hajj and helped create China’s first green pilgrimage city at the Daoist sacred site of Louguan); from developing faith-consistent food purchasing programmes (for example, the Quakers in the UK) to faith-consistent investment programmes (such as Islamic banking in Indonesia).

But perhaps the most significant thing the conventional environmental movements can learn from this quiet revolution is the importance of celebration. So much of the standard way environmental issues are raised is about denial, giving up, stopping doing and about the ensuing guilt if you don’t. Don’t fly, don’t drive, don’t do this, don’t do that. And of course that has to be a part of the message. But the faiths have known for a very long time that fasting is important but you cannot ask people to fast all the time. This is why we have our Lent, or Ramadan, or Pansa. But then we party – Easter, Eid al-Fitr and Wesak, for example.

In a recent meeting about an environmental education toolkit for East Africa faith-based schools, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation team leader pointed out the difference between the standard environmental education toolkit and this new faith-based one. “The usual one starts with telling the children how dreadful everything is and what has gone wrong. Our one – for Muslim and Christian schools – starts by saying thank you to God for creating such a fabulous, beautiful, complex and exciting world. Only then do we turn to our responsibilities and the problems that have come to trouble this wonderful world, knowing we are not alone.”

Because, if we do not celebrate, why should we want to bother at all?

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