

No retreat



Xiaoxin He/ARC



Van, Hlek Sopheap/ABE



José Nicolae/Nazca Pictures

Entering a religious community is often seen as retreating from the world. But increasingly nuns and monks are engaged in fighting for the planet.

In July 2006, a new ecologically friendly Daoist temple opened on China's sacred Taibai Mountain. The Taibai Tiejia temple in Shaanxi Province, which also serves as a centre for environmental education, replaces one lost by nuns and monks during the Cultural Revolution.

Daoists believe that everything is composed of two opposing but interdependent primal forces or energies: yin, symbolized by water, corresponds to night, darkness and feminine energy; yang, symbolized by fire, is masculine and corresponds to day. When they reach harmony, the energy of life is created.

Respect for this equilibrium prohibits Daoists from exploiting nature, and enjoins them to respect and learn from it. So the new temple – built in partnership with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), supported by the Dutch Ecological Management Foundation, and WWF, the global conservation organization – aims to help educate the world about the environment through this philosophy of balance.

It is just one of the many religious communities around the globe that, far from living isolated lives of prayer and study, work for the Earth. 'Most congregations of religious orders were founded to give moral consideration to people who are marginalized in society,' explains Mary Bilderback, a member of Religious on Water (ROW), an organization of environmentally concerned American Roman Catholic nuns. 'We are now aware that all creation deserves moral consideration.'

ROW started in 1999 when six religious communities got together and learned about tidal dynamics and coastal issues – and about the role that faith can play in ecological action.

'What happens to water will determine the future of the human and Earth communities in which we live and minister,' says Sister of Charity Carol Johnston. Together with conservation group Clean Ocean Action, ROW has collected thousands of signatures calling for legislation to protect the New Jersey coast and prevent pollution of its waters.

On the other side of the world, members of the Buddhist Sangha (community of nuns and monks) throughout Cambodia recently formed the Association of Buddhists for the Environment, which promotes the preservation of forests, wildlife and wetlands and other natural resources. It constructs water management systems, installs compost bins, and plants and maintains trees and vegetable gardens. People's respect for the nuns and monks encourages them to change environmentally damaging ways.

Greek Orthodox nuns of the Solan community in France are also getting their hands dirty. They cultivate vines and orchards in their 10 hectares of forest, managing it sustainably. They felled selected trees and then planted new saplings so that it is full of trees at different levels of development, and it can sustain the community's fuel needs. The nuns are committed to achieving food and energy self-sufficiency by farming organically and using wood and solar power.

All this suggests that faith and ecology can be as harmonious as yin and yang.

