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# **The role of the faith communities in tackling climate change**

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## **History of faith communities and the environment**

The Church has a strong history of tackling injustice through its work in the fight against poverty, the promotion of fair trade and equitable and sustainable development. Now, climate change has become the most prescient threat to the wellbeing of all of humanity, and in particular to the poorest and the most vulnerable in society. That makes it the new social justice issue for faith communities across the world.

The notion of taking responsibility and caring for creation began to emerge as a central social concern for the Catholic Church in the late 1980s. Around the same time, in 1986, a concern for people's relationship with nature was highlighted at the Assisi Interfaith Conference brokered by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), which resulted in the Assisi Declaration. This contained statements from the world's five great faiths - Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism about their role in conserving nature.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II dedicated his annual World Day of Peace message to warning of the dangers of irreversible damage caused by the greenhouse effect:

“In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources....today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone.”

- Pope John Paul II (1989)

Many faith groups were actively involved in the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and played a similarly prominent role in its ten-year anniversary event, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in Johannesburg in 2002.

## **Climate change - a moral and ethical issue**

As Al Gore has stated: "Climate change is not just a planetary emergency but a humanitarian one". Through the work of the Nobel Prize-winning scientists of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we know with some certainty that it is very likely to have been the carbon intensive activities of the industrialised countries over the last 150 years that are the primary cause of the rapid changes in our climate. We also know that it will be the least developed countries, the ones least able to adapt, which will suffer most from the effects of climate change. The possibility of high levels of migration is also a very real threat to global stability. As pressure increases and essential resources like

freshwater are depleted, national and international tensions will increase, creating the potential for conflict.

If, in the past, the climate change debate has tended to be dominated by the language of science, this was significantly changed with the publication of the Stern Review in 2006, which extended the discussion to its economic effects. Its headline conclusion was that it will be much less costly to take action now and tackle climate change than dealing later with the consequences of failing to act. However, neither economic nor scientific analysis alone will tell us how to place a value on the earth and its resources and protect the lives of future generations. Such issues will only be resolved by actions that stem from a value system, making climate change a profound moral and ethical issue. As the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Max Planck wrote in his essay *On Religion and Science*, "Man needs science in order to know; religion in order to act." In the joint Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)/WWF publication, *Sustainable Development and UK FaithGroups: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*, SDC chairman Jonathan Porritt notes that there has been too little dialogue around the moral and ethical case for issues arising from the sustainable development agenda, saying: "Issues such as climate change, social and environmental justice all hold a moral case based on an inherent commitment to greater parity and social justice, within

and between generations and countries." SDC/WWF (2005)

### **Stewardship of the earth**

Christian concern is rooted in the Biblical ethic of caring for the poor and in the theological understanding that the earth belongs to God. So the moral and ethical argument originates in the religious concept of stewardship - an essential element within global faith systems, not only in the Christian tradition. Creation narratives offer a comprehensible notion of what stewardship means, and outline the privileged position of human beings, their responsibility for the earth and all those creatures on it.

Human stewardship of the creation manifests a respect for the Creator and so care for the earth is not just a contemporary catchphrase for congregations from all faiths, but a fundamental requirement of those faiths. Professor Emeritus at California State University, M.B. Amer, states in his essay on global warming: "Protection of the natural environment is an Islamic obligation. All activities causing irreversible damage to the environment are forbidden in Islam."

The notion of stewardship is also a fundamental component of Buddhism. A sense of responsibility deeply rooted in compassion lies at the heart of Buddhism's ecological ethic. "The world grows smaller and smaller, more and

more interdependent ...today more than ever before life must be characterized by a sense of universal responsibility, not only human to human but also human to otherforms of life." (Nash, N., 1987)

Similarly, Christian creation spirituality emphasises the importance of caring for our planet, moving beyond stewardship to see humanity as interdependent with all of creation. A Christian whose thought was inspired by this philosophy was Albert Schweitzer who wrote: A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as well as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help. Schweitzer (1939)

### **Recent activism by faith communities**

Church development agencies such as Trócaire, Christian Aid and Tearfund have all had a long and distinguished role in mobilising grassroots activity through their global networks on issues such as land, poverty, debt, trade and aid. Now, it is becoming increasingly clear to the Church and other faith communities that environmental issues cannot be separated from what have traditionally been their concerns; they have a vital role to play by incorporating climate change as an over arching priority for their work.

Nationally, Christian church leaders have written and spoken about ecological concerns. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) was created to

promote joint working and avoid duplication on key social, political and economic areas of interest. CTBI is also a member of the Environmental Issues Network (EIN), at which environmental representatives of the different Church denominations meet three times a year to share their experiences.

More recently, Pope Benedict XVI in his 2007 New Year Message said: "Humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology and human ecology. Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human co-existence, and vice versa... if development were limited to the technical-economic aspect, obscuring the moral religious dimension, it would not be an integral human development, but a one-sided distortion which would end up by unleashing man's destructive capacities."

- Pope Benedict XVI (2007)

In recent years, the Church of England has made environmental sustainability and climate change central issues both at home and overseas. This is most notably visible in its national strategic campaign "Shrinking the Footprint", which is aimed at reducing the Church's energy consumption. It seeks to challenge, encourage and support the whole body of the Church to shrink its environmental footprint by lightening its energy load. This practical action is reflective of the sentiments expressed by Rowan

Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, when he stated: "For the Church of the 21st Century, good ecology is not an optional extra but a matter of justice. It is therefore central to what it means to be a Christian."

The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) was established in the mid-1980s specifically to address practical environmental issues and problems on the ground. Using Islamic religious teachings, it discovered theological and moral bases for an environmental ethic present in Islam's sacred textual traditions: "Allah entrusted man with the guardianship of the Earth. We have to fulfil that ancient trust now, before it becomes too late."

Since that time the Foundation has undertaken research and disseminated information, produced teaching materials, provided training on practical and theoretical subjects, and set up an experimental centre focussing on land use and organic farming and also the development of alternative technologies such as solar technology, water wheels, waste recycling and wind power. A community-based group has grown out of the work of IFEES - the London Islamic Network for the Environment - which aims to make the message real at the grassroots level through local events and campaigns where participants have the opportunity to become involved.

### **Linkages between sustainable development and faith communities**

Faith communities have many characteristics that make them crucial partners in conveying the essential messages around sustainable lifestyles. As respected and trusted members of their communities, they can make use of their influence on the behaviour of others and lead by example, with their continued presence over generations providing local stability and continuity. The Catholic Church and the world's faith communities have the opportunity to assist and foster universal values centred on a sustainable way of life.

The SDC/WWF publication, *Sustainable Development and UK Faith Groups: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*, reveals how sustainable development shares many associations with religious belief. There is a natural fit between the convictions and beliefs of religious faiths and the principles and practices of sustainability:

- Faith groups place value on qualities such as kindness, compassion, altruism and personal responsibility. Similarly, sustainable development sees a successful future requiring more co-operation, inclusiveness and compassion.
- Faith communities comprise a unified global network of followers who share strong associations and

an interdependence. At the heart of sustainability is the interconnection and interdependence of all living things in an ecosystem and the consequence of our behaviour on nature's support systems, which in turn impacts on our own ability to survive and prosper. In *The Hidden Connections*, Fritjof Capra digs a little deeper into these relationships: "Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness. When the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole." (Capra, 2002)

- Respect for life stems from the belief that the world is a gift for which faith followers should give thanks. Thus, we have the notion of stewardship - the responsible use and safeguarding of natural resources for today and the next generation, as a natural behaviour to follow. Likewise within sustainable development, limiting damage to the natural world is of primary importance, ensuring that today's decisions and actions do not negatively affect future generations.

- Awareness of the injustice of social systems which allow for the unequal gap between wealthy elites and the millions of impoverished people is shared by many faiths. Social equity is equally at home in the principles of sustainable development.

### **What contribution can the faith communities make?**

Religion is a particularly strong shaper of the worldviews of many of the world's people...the participation of religious groups in advancing sustainable development is such a hopeful sign. *Worldwatch* (2004)

At a time when people are becoming increasingly aware of social and environmental problems but feel powerless as individuals to act with any impact, religions can offer their followers a way to become a part of something more powerful than themselves whilst also providing them with support in the face of fear and denial.

The political potential of faith communities to mobilise millions by connecting the pressing issue of climate change to the larger narratives and belief systems that they represent is immense. Faith communities are a tremendous resource for mobilising people for the transition away from unsustainability, especially if there is significant moral and religious justification for it. As such, there is

consensus that faith communities are well placed to take a leading role in building an unrelenting lobby group that will have the power to encourage us to make changes in the way we live, work and travel.

The World Council of Churches has asked its delegates to develop a more coherent approach to the challenges of globalization, with a focus on life in dignity in just and sustainable communities.

WCC (1998) With their global reach, religious and faith communities can bring the full weight of their moral authority to bear on behalf of the poor and the vulnerable through advocacy and education. They can transform advocacy into action by engaging their religious communities as effective actors and motivating their followers to act in a more sustainable fashion.

Churches can begin this process of leading by example through reducing their carbon footprint. Alongside its own campaign, "Shrinking the Footprint", the Church of England has joined with government and others in a parallel initiative Together.com, which encourages people to make small changes in a bid to achieve large results. Governments can try to persuade individuals to make changes but the impacts of messages coming from trusted organisations, like the Churches, can

sometimes be far greater. They are best placed to work as partners with other organisations in advocacy and project support and consult with scientific, economic, political and technical expertise on climate change within an ethical framework. In the present day, religious congregations are looking ever more closely at their self-images to make themselves relevant to their communities. So, Churches can undertake a suite of practical steps:

- Make the concept of caring for the environment a fundamental component of all education and training programmes.
- Teach about the experiences of people in other parts of the world, who often live simpler lifestyles.
- Promote the idea that a high quality of life is not synonymous with our own model of wealth and its intrinsic over use and waste of resources.
- Design Church and faith community property and land to provide habitats for plants and animals.
- Adopt the four principles of Reduce, Refuse, Reuse and Recycle.
- Promote active involvement in community initiatives aimed at

sustaining and renewing the environment.

- Preach on relevant topics such as the concern for action on global environmental issues.

On the eve of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in August 2002, Pope John Paul II issued a statement calling for "an ecological vocation, which in our time has become more urgent than ever". He went on: in a world that is increasingly interdependent, peace, justice and the protection of creation must be the fruit of the common effort of all in pursuing the common good together. It is clear that the Church and Christians everywhere, should be to the fore in trying to usher in this new, ecological age.  
- Pope John Paul II, 2002

### **The interfaith dimension**

The faith communities are faced with an opportunity to play a vital role in speaking to a fundamental aspect of the challenge of sustainable development - the spiritual dimension of our relationship with the earth - that to date has received little attention. Exploration of this spiritual dimension opens a doorway to an interfaith dialogue, a dialogue whose importance goes beyond issues of environment and development to a search for a common ground among all faiths, a common ground based on a

shared commitment to the relationship that each of us has with nature and with an earth which has provided spiritual and material sustenance since the dawn of human history.

Earthcare Interfaith Network (1989)

The efforts of individual religious communities are made dramatically more powerful through multi-religious cooperation, interfaith coalitions and initiatives on the issue of climate change which in itself can be a powerful force in becoming a stronger uniting influence.

Although many individual faith communities can draw upon their traditions and act through their own networks and institutions there is a potential to accomplish much more if different faiths act together with one voice to speak out against environmental injustice. A shared commitment to this issue could provide a vital collective goal amongst the faith communities that could offer a secure foundation from which it may be possible to move towards building a deeper consensus around our relationship to the earth and towards each other.

The most senior leader of Orthodox Christianity, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, commonly known as the Green Patriarch for his environmental activism, invited Sunni, Shi'ite, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, and Shinto leaders to an interfaith forum in Greenland in September 2007 in a bid to

focus global attention on climate change. "Preservation of the environment, promotion of sustainable development, and particular attention to climate change are matters of grave concern for the entire human family", said Bartholomew at the conference opening.

"It is very, very key for as many voices from as many fields as possible to come together to present a common effort", said Cardinal McCarrick, Pope Benedict XVI's official representative at the forum. Mr Ball, an influential Baptist minister, said the event had considerable symbolic importance. "The image of all the religious leaders on the boat with the Ecumenical Patriarch says that we recognise this and that it's time for us to get busy, and for all hands to get on deck", he said.

Based in the UK, the Alliance for Religion and Conservation (ARC) and WWF's Sacred Land Project, which originally stemmed from the 1986 Assisi conference, have successfully united many faiths across Britain and further afield. Launched in 1997 by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, the project reveals the sacred potential of people's local landscape, reviving old and creating new sacred sites. Sacred Land in Britain has prompted Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and secular communities to enjoy inner-city and community gardens, holywells, pilgrimage trails, trees and woodlands.

## **Conclusions**

As the impacts of climate change become ever more visible, it is now time to ask ourselves whether we are ready as individuals, as members of society and as members of the faith community to accept our ethical and moral duty to undertake the responsibility of tackling climate change.

Individual faith communities worldwide have the opportunity to come together to become a powerful multi-religious force to identify the links between human-generated global warming and worldwide poverty and develop a just response. This co-operative effort from the faith communities could offer a strong framework in which both these characteristics of injustice may be adequately addressed.

A change of thinking and behaviour is required and the world's faith communities are in a position to be the catalyst for that change. Although articulated differently, every faith has a mandate to serve the other faiths and care for creation. The faith communities have a duty to incorporate the ideas around care for creation into their agenda and operations. A practical way forward as outlined in the joint SDC/WWF publication *Sustainable Development and UK Faith Groups: Two Sides of the Same Coin?*, addresses the relationship between the sustainable development community and the faith community: "The

sustainable development community has a clear role to play in engaging more deeply with faith communities to tease out the shared agenda and achieve the mutual benefits of working together. Policymakers and practitioners may have little direct experience of faiths outside their own and must be sensitive about and receptive to new values and ways of working."

An ecological reformation is required where by ecological concerns should become a part of the faith agenda along with human rights, racial, gender and economic justice. Ecologically modified doctrines should "reinterpret basic doctrinal themes in ways that integrate ecological insight and value and reconceive Christian ethics to encompass human relationships with other beings in the biosphere." (Nash, J.A., 1996). By doing so, faith communities can promote social action around the adoption of sustainable livelihoods whilst encouraging governmental responsibility to undertake sustainable policy decision-making processes.

"It really boils down to this: all life is inter-related. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."  
- Martin Luther King (1963)

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