

Overview

More and more, people are looking to links between religion and conservation as a way to make large-scale change for the environment. While these links may seem surprising to some, to others they are a natural fit. Proponents argue that the care for nature – or creation, as seen by many – is a common thread that connects many of the world’s major faiths. They suggest that the movement to connect environmental conservation to religion can be a more effective way to change human behavior than regulations and penalties imposed by governmental agencies. They point to the fact that the majority of faiths have in their beliefs and sacred texts the call for compassion and care for nature. However, one impediment to the connection of conservation and faith-based organization is lack of a precedent for working together. In some cases, faith groups and conservation scientists have exhibited a mutual mistrust and resistance to working together. To overcome this obstacle, organizations (one of which is highlighted below) have been formed to facilitate communication and workflow between these two disparate types of groups. So far their results in persuading people to adopt more environmentally conscious lifestyles have been promising, and they have been able to create change in places that have proven difficult for environmental groups to reach. The relationship between some of the world’s major faiths and the environment are briefly discussed below.

Buddhism

One of the tenets of Buddhism is the idea that all beings are connected. Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and teaches that the idea of separateness is an illusion. The health of the whole is inseparably linked to the health of the parts, and the health of the parts is inseparably linked to the health of the whole. Therefore, harm done to the Earth is also harm done to humans. Another fundamental Buddhist premise is respect for life. In Buddhist teachings no one being’s existence is more important than any other. Furthermore, it is written in Buddhist scriptures that Buddha emphasized the importance of living simply and ridding oneself of craving and greed (and therefore unchecked consumption of resources), which can only bring unhappiness and dissatisfaction. These fundamental concepts in Buddhism provide a solid argument for the importance of valuing nature and reducing activities that harm and disrupt natural processes.

Christianity

Christianity recognizes a tension that exists between humanity’s responsibility to care for God’s creation and the human tendency to rebel against God. Historically, Christians have debated some of the Biblical passages that refer to the relationship between humans and nature, such as:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:28)

And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

Many Christians have argued that the biblical emphasis is on human responsibility as *stewards* of the Earth, not as *owners*. As stewards, they argue, Christians have a responsibility to care for God's creation, such as supporting efforts to generate renewable sources of energy and to discourage destruction and pollution of natural habitat and biodiversity.

Hinduism

Hindu beliefs teach that all living beings are sacred because they are parts of God, and therefore should be treated with respect and compassion. This is due in part because the soul can be reincarnated into any form of life. Hindu teachings are full of stories that treat animals as divine, and most Hindus are vegetarian because of this belief in the sanctity of life. Trees, rivers, and mountains are believed to have souls, and thus should be honored and cared for.

Hindu teachings also emphasize the value of living simply, and stress that true happiness comes from within rather than from material possessions. Some Hindus argue that this means that the quest for amassing material possessions and the consumption of associated resources and energy should not dominate one's life. The exploitation of resources is considered by Hindu teachers to be a distraction from the central purpose of life.

Islam

Islamic philosophy teaches that Allah created humans to act as guardians of his creation. That is, humans do not own nature; rather, it has been entrusted to humans for safekeeping. It is written in the sacred texts of Islam that the prophet Muhammad said:

The world is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his guardian over it.
(Hadith)

Another fundamental concept of Islam is tawheed, or unity. Allah is unity, and his unity is reflected in the unity of humanity and nature. Some Muslims argue that this concept means that humans must therefore maintain the integrity of the Earth and the living beings that inhabit it. They suggest that it is a human responsibility to ensure balance

and harmony in Allah's creation, and that humans will be held accountable for this on a day of reckoning. Furthermore, the Koran states that while Allah invites humans to enjoy the fruits of the Earth, they should avoid excess and waste, "for Allah does not love wasters."

Judaism

The Jewish view of nature is rooted in the belief that the universe is the work of God. Love of God must therefore include love of his creation: the Earth and the living beings that call it home. While nature has been created for humans, it is humanity's connection to nature that restores humans to our original state of happiness and joy. Some Jews argue that a core conservation principle is stated in sacred texts:

Six years shall you sow your field, and six years shall you prune your vineyard, and gather in the produce thereof. But in the seventh year shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest of the land, a Sabbath unto the Lord; you shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. (Leviticus 25:1-5).

It is argued that one of the goals of ceasing all agricultural activity is to improve and strengthen the land. Therefore, Sabbath is meant in part as a return and reconnection to nature.

Furthermore, Jewish teachings prohibit the destruction of anything that may provide a benefit to humans, including animals and plants. Even in time of war, sacred texts forbid the destruction of fruit-bearing trees. Jewish sages compared the death of a tree to the departure of a human's soul from their body:

When people cut down the wood a tree that yields fruit, its cry goes from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible.... When the soul parts from the body, the cry goes forth from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible.

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation

Some people have recognized the potential that religious organizations have to influence conservation efforts and have formed organizations that work to facilitate connections between environmental groups, scientists, and faith-based organizations. One example is the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), founded in 1995 by His Royal Highness Prince Phillip of Britain. Prince Phillip has stated: "If you believe in God, which is what Christians are supposed to do, then you should feel a responsibility to care for His Creation." ARC's strategy is to help faiths realize their potential to be proactive on environmental issues and to help secular groups recognize this and become active partners.

ARC points to many reasons for choosing to work with faith groups. Collectively the faiths own 7-8% of the habitable surface of the Earth. They also contribute to about 50% of all schools and educational establishments around the world and are the 3rd largest investing group in the world. Furthermore, faiths are trusted; they've stood the test of time and are trusted, in part, as a result of that. Faith leaders also don't have to stand for re-election, and as a result can maintain a very long-term view for their actions. In other words, they can think in terms of generations as opposed to 2- or 4-year election cycles.

ARC works with 11 faiths worldwide; 85% of the global population – about 5 billion people - claim membership in one of these faiths. To encourage these faiths to use their influence to have the largest environmental impact possible, ARC focuses on six key areas: land and assets, education, media, health, lifestyle, and advocacy.

As mentioned previously, faith organizations own a substantial amount of **land**, and have influence over a tremendous amount of land that they don't own outright. For instance, faiths can have influence over the management of the land near places of worship – churchyards, forests, and watersheds. They can call for sustainable use and management of those lands and the biodiversity that inhabits it. Faiths also have a large amount of influence on **education**, both within and outside of formal educational institutions. Environmental science and management can be incorporated into those educational activities. In addition, faiths have significant investments in mass **media**, whether through magazines, newspapers, websites, TV and radio programs, etc. These gives them capacity for reaching millions of people. Human **health** and well-being is also a major concern of the faiths, and many faith-based organizations have founded major hospitals around the world. As it becomes increasingly recognized that poor management of the environment can negatively affect human health, religious organizations can be galvanized to change human behavior through their health-related activities. Regarding **lifestyle**, religious communities can have enormous consumer power, impacting the environment by influencing which goods and services that individuals choose to use. Finally, in many parts of the world the faiths receive respect and deference where few others are heard. Therefore, through **advocacy** faiths can play a uniquely powerful role in the development of sound environmental practice and policy.

Examples of projects that link conservation and the faiths

Monk's Community Forest

In 2001, the Buddhist monk Venerable Bun Saluth decided to take action to stop the decimation of forests in northwest Cambodia by illegal logging and land encroachment.

With few resources, the monks of Ben Saluth's Samraong Pagoda effectively protected the forest by establishing patrol teams, raising awareness among local communities, and developing co-management committees with local villagers, actions which significantly reduced forest crime. To accomplish this, the monks developed a "soft" approach to enforcement. Rather than relying on government enforcement of forest protection policies, the monks conducted "tree ordination" ceremonies. In these ceremonies, the monks blessed the largest and oldest trees in the forest, sanctifying them by wrapping their trunks in the saffron robes that traditionally identify Buddhist monks. Essentially, they ordained trees as monks. After this ceremonial process, it became understood that cutting down trees or hunting wildlife within the ordained forest was as serious an act as harming a monk, which according to Buddhist tradition would lead to negative repercussions for the next rebirth cycle of the perpetrator.

Interfaith Power and Light

The mission of the Interfaith Power and Light organization is "to be faithful stewards of Creation by responding to global warming through the promotion of energy conservation, energy efficiency, and renewable energy." IPL believes it is humanity's duty to protect life – which religious people are called to protect – against global warming. Their network includes 14,000 congregations in 39 states across the US. IPL was founded in 1998 and encourages religious communities become better stewards of energy by raising awareness and helping religious organizations reduce their carbon footprints. IPL conducts educational programs such as "Cool Congregations" that help religious communities perform energy audits and inform themselves on ways they can reduce the energy use of their faith-based activities.

Eco-coffins project in South Africa

For many of the world's poor, the cost of funerals is devastating. Often, families must choose between the future well being of their young and honoring their dead in the way their communities deem as appropriate and dignified. In South African locations where deaths due to AIDS are rampant, families are crippled by the costs of burying their loved ones in customary large and elaborate funerals that always involve wooden coffins. Also in South Africa, an on-going conservation effort to restore the water table in the region removes vast amounts of invasive trees, leading to enormous stockpiles of wood. ARC and other groups brokered a partnership between religious communities and conservationists to produce "eco-coffins" from the wood of invasive trees. The eco-coffins allowed families to perform funerals in a way that fit with cultural traditions at a small fraction of the previous cost, "meaning that people are not burying the future of their children in the ground with their relatives", as stated by ARC secretary general Martin Palmer (see more information about the eco-coffins project in the Resources section).

RESOURCES

Alliance for Religions and Conservation website: <http://arcworld.org/>

Talk by Martin Palmer, ARC's secretary general, at the WWF Fuller Symposium:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPWx8DtioRE>

Interfaith Power & Light website: <http://interfaithpowerandlight.org/>

Eco-Coffins project brochure:
<http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/Eco%20coffin%20leaflet.pdf>

Many Heavens, One Earth; video showcasing an interfaith event hosted by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation and the UNDP:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COYtHSpn6KM&feature=player_embedded

Hazon website, a Jewish environmental organization: <http://www.hazon.org/>

The Tributary Fund website, a non-profit working to bring together religious and conservation groups: <http://thetributaryfund.org/>

GreenDeen website, book that highlights what Islam teaches about protecting the planet:
<http://www.greendeenbook.com/>