

## **Spirituality and the Environment**

There are both practical and spiritual dimensions of the way we relate to the world of nature. Is there an overriding philosophy that guides our personal theology and action?

In the West, Christian scriptures have deeply influenced people's ways of thinking about the environment. But people draw different interpretations. These range from the idea of human dominion, to that of human responsibility, to the idea humans share no special place in nature.

Lynn White in his 1967 essay argues Christianity is highly anthropocentric (more so than other religions), and creates a dualism (separation) of mankind and nature. He links Christianity to exploitation (Genesis 1:26, 28) and environmental degradation. Some theologians are critical of classical Christian dualism, and propose a return to the idea of mankind in unity with nature. Others point to the idea of 'stewardship' drawing on Genesis 2:15 and passages in Leviticus and Exodus, and as an expression of the call to social justice.

So we find Christian outlooks anchored firmly on both sides of the debate. There is the Evangelical Environmental Movement that in 2002 sponsored the slogan 'What would Jesus drive?' At another extreme, Millenarianists (popularized by the 'Left Behind' series) are convinced the Last Days are nigh and environmental concern is not on their agenda.

Some suggest Judaism originated the idea of separation of mankind and environment, in rejecting older animist religions that worshipped the cycles of nature. However, Judaism has always been grounded in the rhythms of life, land and harvest. Judaic scholars see God as both creator and sustainer, and often argue 'dominion' implies 'stewardship'.

Islam also places mankind at the head of nature, but with an obligation to care for the environment. The Koran gives specific rules for environmental practices. Despite the internal struggle within Islam, with a history of great empires and commitment to science and reason, juxtaposed against a current fundamentalism, Islam maintains a belief in the unity of mankind and nature.

In Hinduism and related Jainism, the idea of stages of reincarnation is a powerful connector of human and all other forms of life.

Buddhism has a view of inter-connectedness, where health of the whole depends on health of the parts. It has therefore a strong ethical foundation for supporting human relationships with nature.

The so-called Eastern religions tend to support a sustainable non-materialist lifestyle. Helminski suggests both Islam and the West need to share a return to voluntary simplicity and humane values.

In all cases, sustainability requires full engagement of the human spirit.

(Reference: 'God, Humanity and Nature' by Ethan Goffman, 2005)

Peter Robinson