



# **RELIGION IN AN AGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**



# Background

- The World Commission on Environment and Development acknowledged that to reconcile human affairs with natural laws “our cultural and spiritual heritages can reinforce our economic interests and survival imperatives.”
- But until very recently, the role of our cultural and spiritual heritages in environmental protection and sustainable development was ignored by international bodies, national governments, policy planners, and even environmentalists.



- Many fear that bringing religion into the environmental movement will threaten objectivity, scientific investigation, professionalism, or democratic values.
- This doubt leads some people to a complete rejection of religion.
- Similarly, the recent feminist critique of religion has identified patriarchal biases in virtually all established traditions.
- Historically, religions have taught us to perceive and to act on nonhuman nature in terms of particular *human* interests, beliefs, and social structures.



# The Question

- How has religion shaped our understanding of and our conduct towards nature?
- And how has the environmental crisis challenged and transformed modern theology and spiritual practice?
- Consider, for instance, that many writers have found in biblical writings about “man’s” right to “master the earth” (Genesis 1:28) an essential source for the havoc wreaked by Western societies upon the earth.
- The spread of democracy and the critical intellectual tendencies embedded in Enlightenment philosophy and modern science cast heavy doubt on any particular religion’s claims to absolute truth.



- Ecotheologians have sought to *reinterpret* old traditions: finding and stressing passages in classic texts that help us face the current crisis.
- In fact, the significance of religion is heightened because several of the guiding lights of modernity have become increasingly suspect.
- Faith in science and materialist/liberal democracies has been undermined by the political violence, technological disasters and cultural bankruptcy of the late 20th century.
- Purely secular radical politics have been rendered doubtful by the economic failures and totalitarian political excesses of communism.
- Hence spiritual perspectives can be a source of social direction as well as personal inspiration.



- From the perspective of many world religions, the abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unjust, immoral, and unethical.
- For example, in the ancient past, Hindus and Buddhists were careful to observe moral teachings regarding the treatment of nature. [Even the rulers and kings followed those ethical guidelines and tried to create an example for others]
- But now in the twentieth century, the materialistic orientation of the West has equally affected the cultures of the East.



# The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis

- A marriage between science and technology, a union of the theoretical and the empirical approaches to our natural environment.
- Emergence in widespread practice of the Baconian creed that – scientific knowledge means technological power over nature can scarcely be dated before about 1850.
- For example, when the first cannons were fired, in the early 14th century, they affected ecology by sending workers scrambling to the forests and mountains for more potash, sulfur, iron ore, and charcoal, with some resulting erosion and deforestation.



- Science was traditionally aristocratic, speculative, intellectual in intent; technology was lower-class, empirical, action-oriented.
- The fusion of science and technology, towards the middle of the 19th century, by reducing social barriers, tended to assert a functional unity of brain and hand.
- Our ecologic crisis is the product of an emerging, entirely novel, democratic culture.



# The western traditions of technology and science

- Both modern technology and modern science are distinctively *Occidental*
- The leadership of the West, both in technology and in science, is far older than the so-called Scientific Revolution of the 17th century or the so-called Industrial Revolution of the 18th century.



# Medieval View of Man and Nature

- Agriculture has been the chief occupation even in “advanced” societies; hence, any change in methods of tillage has much importance.
- Early plows, drawn by two oxen, did not normally turn the sod but merely scratched it.
- By the latter part of the 7th century AD, northern peasants were using an entirely new kind of plow, equipped with a vertical knife to cut the line of the furrow – the friction of this plow with the soil was so great that it normally required not two but eight oxen.
- It attacked the land with such violence that cross-plowing was not needed, and fields tended to be shaped in long strips.



# Distribution of Land

- Fields were distributed generally in units capable of supporting a single family.

Subsistence farming is a type of agriculture where a farmer grows food for themselves and their family on a small plot of land, with little to no emphasis on selling or trading goods

- Subsistence farming was the presupposition.
- To use the new and more efficient plow, peasants pooled their oxen to form large plow-teams.
- Thus, distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family but, rather, on the capacity of a power machine to till the earth.



- Man's relation to the soil was profoundly changed. [Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature – Man and nature are two things, and man is master.
- What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.
- Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.
- The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture. [for better or worse, we live in “the post-Christian age.”]
- What did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment?



# Stories of Creation

- Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as nonrepetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation.
- And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image.
- Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.
- Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.
- By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.



- The religious study of nature for the better understanding of God was known as natural theology.
- In the early Church, and always in the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men.
- This view of nature was essentially artistic rather than scientific.
- Western science said that the task and the reward of the scientist was “to think God’s thoughts after him” leads one to believe that this was their real motivation.
- Modern Western science was cast in a matrix of Christian theology.



- Both *science* and *technology* are blessed words in our contemporary vocabulary:

First, that, viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology and, second, that modern technology is at least partly to be explained as an Occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature.

- Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature [who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians]



# Christian worldview

- To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact.
- The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West.
- For nearly two millennia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves, which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.



What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship.

- More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.
- Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious



# Reference

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# Biodiversity Concervation Ethics in Buddhism

- Buddhism views humanity as an integral part of nature, so that when nature is defiled, people ultimately suffer.
- Negative consequences arise when cultures alienate themselves from nature, when people feel separate from and become aggressive towards natural systems.
- When we abuse nature, we abuse ourselves



# Buddhism and Nature Conservation

- The *Jataka*, the richly narrated birth stories of Buddhism, are abundant with poetic appreciations of nature. Passage after passage celebrates forests, waters, and the Earth's wild creatures.
- All Buddhist literature states that the Buddha was born in a grove of sal, lovely straight-backed trees with large leaves.
- The Buddha's further study was in the company of a banyan, and his enlightenment was under the spreading branches of a tree recognized for its special place in human faith even in its scientific name, *Ficus religiosa*. Pipal tree



- The early Buddhist community lived in the forest under large trees, in caves, and in mountainous areas.
- Directly dependent on nature, they cultivated great respect for the beauty and diversity of their natural surroundings.
- Every healthy forest is home for wildlife, so when a monk accepts the forest as his home, he also respects the animals who live in the forest.
- Early Buddhists maintained this kind of friendly attitude toward their natural surroundings and opposed the destruction of forests or their wildlife.



- In the *Sutta-Nipata*, one of the earliest texts, the Buddha says:

Know ye the grasses and the trees... Then know ye the worms, and the moths, and the different sorts of ants... Know ye also the four-footed animals small and great, the serpents, the fish which range in the water, the birds that are borne along on wings and move through the air... Know ye the marks that constitute species are theirs, and their species are manifold.



# Precept of Buddhism

- The first precept in Buddhism is “Do not kill.” This precept is not merely a legalistic prohibition, but a realization of our affinity with all who share the gift of life. A a caring heart that helps others recognize and take action to relieve the suffering of other compassionate heart a general rule intended to regulate behaviour or thought provides a firm ground for this precept.
- The community of monks are forbidden by the *Vinaya*, the ancient rules of conduct, from eating ten different kinds of meat, mostly animals of the forest.
- The Buddha taught his disciples to communicate to animals their wishes for peace and happiness.



# On Water Conservation

- Buddha set down rules forbidding his disciples to contaminate water resources. For example, monks were dissuaded from throwing their waste or leftover food into rivers and lakes, and they were urged to guard the lives of all living beings abiding there.
- In the *Vinaya Pitaka* there are detailed descriptions of how to build toilets and water wells.
- One of the eight good qualities of the ocean is “cleanliness,” and another is that it “must be the abode of various kinds of fish.”



- Buddhism holds a great respect for and gratitude toward nature. Nature is the mother that gives rise to all the joyful things in life.
- *Metta Sutta*: “Thus, as a mother with her own life guards the life of her own child, let all embracing thoughts for all that lives be <sup>yours</sup> thine.” to accept an idea, proposal, or set of beliefs, especially with enthusiasm
- His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet who stands prominently among Buddhist leaders of the world who are farsighted, has repeatedly expressed his concern for environmental protection. “Our ancestors viewed the Earth as rich, bountiful and sustainable,” said His Holiness.



- “We know this is the case, but only if we take care of it.” In one of his recent speeches on the subject of ecology, the Dalai Lama points out that the most important thing is to have a peaceful heart.
- Only when we understand the true nature lying within can we live harmoniously with the rest of the natural world.
- In fact, Buddhism can be meaningful only when it is relevant to our everyday lives and to our environment.
- The Buddhist tradition counsels us to treasure and conserve nature, of which human beings are an active part.



# Reference

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# Hinduism and Nature Conservation

- Religion can evoke a kind of awareness in persons that is different from scientific or technological reasoning.
- Religion helps make human beings aware that there are limits to their control over the animate and inanimate world and that their arrogance and manipulative power over nature can backfire.  
animate means simply alive, while inanimate means not living, not moving around



- Religion can provide at least three fundamental <sup>thing that acts as a chief support</sup> mainstays to help human beings cope in a technological society.

First, it defends the individual's existence against the depersonalizing effects of the technoindustrial process.

Depersonalization is a dissociative phenomenon that causes a person to feel detached from themselves

Realism is the perspective of seeing the world as it is, while idealism is the perspective of seeing the world as you would like it to be

Second, it forces the individual to recognize human fallibility and to combine realism with idealism.

the tendency to make mistakes or be wrong

Third, while technology gives the individual the physical power to create or to destroy the world, religion gives the moral strength to grow in virtue by nurturing restraint, humility, and liberation from self-centeredness

the act of holding something back



# The Sanctity of Life

- The idea of the Divine Being as the one underlying power of unity is beautifully expressed in the *Yajurveda*:

The loving sage beholds that Being, hidden in mystery, wherein the universe comes to have one home;

Therein unites and therefrom emanates the whole;

The Omnipresent One pervades souls and matter like warp and woof in created beings.  
(*Yajurveda* 32.8)



- According to the *Atharvaveda*, the Earth is not for human beings alone, but for other creatures as well:

Born of Thee, on Thee move mortal creatures; Thou bearest them—the biped and the quadruped; Thine, O Earth, are the five races of men, for whom Surya (Sun), as he rises spreads with his rays the light that is immortal. (*Atharvaveda* 12.1–15)



Non-dualistic traditions often assert that ultimate reality is a unified, undivided whole, and any apparent distinctions or separations are illusions

- The earliest Sanskrit texts, the Veda and Upanishads, teach the non-dualism of the supreme power that existed before the creation.
- God as the efficient cause, and nature, *Prakriti*, as the material cause of the universe, are unconditionally accepted, as is their harmonious relationship.



- In the *Gita*, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna: “Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both its origin and dissolution.” (*Gita* 7.6).
- And the Lord says: again “The whole cosmic order is under me. By my will it is <sup>created</sup> manifested again and again and by my will, it is <sup>destroyed</sup> annihilated at the end” (*Gita* 9.8).
- Thus, for ancient Hindus, both God and *Prakriti* (nature) was to be one and the same.



# Doctrine of Ahimsa (nonviolence)

- The Hindu belief in the cycle of birth and rebirth – where a person may come back as an animal or a bird gives these species not only respect, but also regard or treat with deep respect. reverence.
- This provides a solid foundation for the a belief or set of beliefs doctrine of *ahimsa*—nonviolence against animals and human beings alike.
- The Hindu scriptures place strong emphasis on the notion that God's grace can be received by not killing his creatures or harming his creation.



# Respect for Flora

- As early as in the time of *Rigveda*, tree worship was quite popular and universal.
- The *Rigveda* regarded plants as having divine powers, with one entire hymn devoted to their praise, chiefly with reference to their healing properties. (*Rigveda* 10.97)
- Trees were considered as being animate and feeling happiness and sorrow. It is believed that every tree has a *Vriksha-devata*, or “tree deity,” who is worshipped with prayers and offerings of water, flowers, sweets, and encircled by sacred threads.



- The cutting of trees and destruction of flora were considered a sinful act.
- The Hindu worship of trees and plants has been based partly on utility, but mostly on religious duty and mythology.
- Hindu ancestors considered it their duty to save trees; and in order to do that they attached to every tree a religious sanctity.

ultimate importance and inviolability



- *Kautilya's Arthasastra* prescribed various punishments for destroying trees and plants:

For cutting off the tender sprouts of fruit trees or shady trees in the parks near a city, a fine of six panas shall be imposed; for cutting of the minor branches of the same trees, twelve panas, and for cutting off the big branches, twenty-four panas shall be levied. Cutting off the trunks of the same, shall be punished with the first amercement; and feeling shall be punished with the middlemost amercement. (*Kautilya's Arthasastra* III 19:197)



# On Water Pollution

- Water is considered by Hindus as a powerful media of purification and also as a source of energy. For instance, just by the sprinkling of pure water in religious ceremonies, it is believed purity is achieved.
- in Rigveda, prayer is offered to the deity of water: “The waters in the sky, the waters of rivers, and water in the well whose source is the ocean, may all these sacred waters protect me” (*Rigveda* 7.49.2).
- The healing property and medicinal value of water has been universally accepted, provided it is pure and free from all pollution.



- Manu advised: “One should not cause urine, stool, cough in the water. Anything which is mixed with these unpious objects, blood and poison, should not be thrown into water” (*Manusmriti* IV:56).
- Still today, many rivers are considered sacred, among these, the river Ganges is considered by Hindus as the most sacred and respectable.
- Disposal of human waste or other pollutants has been prohibited since time immemorial



# The Bishnois

- The Bishnois are a small community in Rajasthan, India, who practice a religion of environmental conservation. Blasphemy is an insult that shows disrespect, contempt, or lack of reverence for a sacred object, deity, or something inviolable
- They believe that cutting a tree or killing an animal or bird is blasphemy.
- Their religion, an offshoot of Hinduism, was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambaji (who was born in 1451 CE in the Marwar area).



- Jambaji who witnessed severe drought in his young days, thought that if trees are protected, animal life would be sustained (in severe drought), and his community would survive.
- He gave 29 injunctions and principal among them being a ban on the cutting of any green tree and killing of any animal or bird.
- About 300 years later, when the king of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace, he sent his soldiers to the Bishnois area where trees were in abundance.
- Villagers protested, and when soldiers would not pay any attention to the protest, the Bishnois, led by a woman, hugged the trees to protect them with their bodies.



- As soldiers kept on killing villagers, more and more of the Bishnois came forward to honour the religious injunction of their Guru Maharaj Jambaji.
- The massacre continued until 363 persons were killed defending trees. When the king heard about this human sacrifice, he stopped the operation, and gave the Bishnois state protection for their belief.
- Today, the Bishnois community continues to protect trees and animals with the same fervour. [Their community is the best example of a true Hindu-based ritual defence of the environment in India]



- Mahatma Gandhi warned that “nature had enough for everybody’s need but not for everybody’s greed.”
- Gandhi was a great believer in drawing upon the rich variety of spiritual and cultural heritages of India.
- His *satyagraha* movements were the perfect example of how one could confront an unjust and uncaring though extremely superior power.



# Reference

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# The Ecological Crisis: A common Responsibility

- God's first self-revelation to humanity (Gen 1– 3), there is a recurring refrain: “*And God saw that it was good.*” After creating the heavens, the sea, the earth and all it contains, God created man and woman.
- God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman, and only then—as we read—could he rest “from all his work” (Gen 2:3)
- Made in the image and likeness of God, Adam and Eve were to have exercised their dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28) with wisdom and love. Instead, they destroyed the existing harmony *by deliberately going against the Creator's plan*, that is, by choosing to sin.
- This resulted not only in man's alienation from himself, in death and fratricide, but also in the earth's “rebellion” against him (cf. Gen 3:17–19; 4:12).



# A New Life

- Christians believe that the Death and Resurrection of Christ accomplished the work of reconciling humanity to the Father, who “was pleased...through (Christ) to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19–20).
- Creation was thus made new (cf. Rev 21:5).
- Once subjected to the bondage of sin and decay (cf. Rom 8:21), it has now received new life while “we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pt 3:13)



- Thus, the Father “has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery...which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite *all things* in him, all things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9–10).
- These biblical considerations help us to understand better *the relationship between human activity and the whole of creation*. When man turns his back on the Creator’s plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order.



# Respect for Life

- The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of *respect for life* evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution.
- On another level, delicate ecological balances are upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources.
- *Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress.*



# Peaceful Society

- No peaceful society can afford to neglect either respect for life or the fact that there is an integrity to creation.  
the state of being whole and undivided.

## Urgent need for solidarity

The ecological crisis reveals the urgent moral need for a new solidarity, especially in relations between the developing nations and those that are highly industrialized.  
unity / mutual support within a group



- When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of *the search for peace* within society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: namely, that there is an order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations.
- *The ecological crisis is a moral issue.*



# Reference

- “The Ecological Crisis: A common Responsibility”, Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, For the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990, Vatican City