

## World Faiths and the Environment – Key Themes

Frances Hume, Interfaith Scotland, March 2021

### 1) Key beliefs of God and humanity's relationship to the natural world

In some faiths, particularly the Abrahamic faiths, God as Creator of the world gives humanity a special role to play in the stewardship of God's creation. Stewardship can be defined as the '*careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care*'.

For **Jews and Christians**, in the book of Genesis: 'The Lord God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it.' There are practical laws in Leviticus regarding the preservation of nature, for example giving the land its own Sabbath by allowing it to lie fallow every seventh year so the nutrients in the soil are not depleted

**Islam** – the prophet Mohamed taught that 'the world is green and beautiful and Allah has appointed you his guardian over it'. Sharia law protects animals from cruelty, conserves forests, and limits the growth of cities. It is said in the Qur'an that Allah invites us to enjoy the fruits of the earth, but to avoid excess leading to waste.

The **Baha'i faith** teaches that the world reflects the qualities and attributes of God and should therefore be greatly respected and cherished.

Some faiths see God being within nature as well as being the Creator of nature. In **Hinduism** all living beings are sacred because they are parts of God and should be treated with respect and compassion. This is because the soul can be reincarnated into any form of life. Trees, rivers and mountains are believed to have souls, and should be honoured and cared for.

**Pagans** believe that nature is sacred and that everything that lives contains a small spark of the divine. Divinity is present within every part of the cosmos, including all living beings, all the relationships between them, and all the processes of life.

### 2) The interconnectedness, interdependence and value of all life

For **Pagans** life in human beings is in essence, the same as the life in the animals and plants with whom we share this earth. Every molecule in our bodies once formed part of other life forms and will do so again after we die.

For **Buddhists** we are a part of nature and not set apart from it. This requires respect for all sentient beings, not merely human beings. The health of the whole is inseparably linked to the health of the parts. The **Jain** faith teaches that all of nature is bound together and says that if one does not care for nature one does not care for oneself.

**Jewish** sages compared the death of a tree to the departure of man's soul from his body: 'When people cut down the wood of a tree that yields fruit, its cry goes from one end of the world to the other'.

### 3) The ethical imperative to care for the planet

In his Encyclical Letter in 2015, 'Care for our common home', Pope Francis confirms climate change as a moral issue, pointing out that the poor suffer the most from consequences of improper care of the environment even though they have contributed the least to climate change.

A central teaching of the **Jain** faith is 'Ahimsa' – non-violence. Ahimsa means more than not hurting others, it means not intending to cause harm, physical, mental or spiritual, to any part of nature, an attitude of compassion towards all life.

**Pagan** ethics places a strong emphasis on empathy, respect, responsibility and reciprocity in our relationships to all of life rather than to human beings alone. For Pagans environmentalism is a religious duty.

**Sikhs** cultivate an awareness and respect for the dignity of all life, human or otherwise. Such respect is fostered where one first recognises and nurtures the divine inner spark within oneself, then sees it and cherishes it in others.

### 4) Implications on our lifestyle

An important **Jain** principle is not to waste the gifts of nature, and even to reduce one's needs as far as possible.

Most **Hindus** are vegetarian because of this belief in the sanctity of life. The virtue of a simple life has always been prized in Hindu society. Hinduism stresses that true happiness comes from within not from outer possessions. Life's main purpose is to discover the spiritual nature and the peace and fulfilment it brings.

**Buddha** taught people to live simply and appreciate the natural cycle of life. Craving and greed only bring unhappiness, since demands for material possessions can never be satisfied and people will always demand more, so threatening the environment. This is why the real solution to the environmental crisis begins with the individual.

For **Sikhs**, a simple life free from conspicuous waste is the ideal, a life that stresses mastery over the self rather than mastery over nature. Many Sikhs are vegetarian. Sikhism teach that humans create their surroundings as a reflection of their inner state, and hence the increasing barrenness of the earth reflects a spiritual emptiness within humans. The solution according to Sikhism can be found in prayer and the spirit of humility before the divine will of God.

### CENTRAL THEMES OF FAITHS

- 1) *Careful and responsible management, protection and preservation of the earth's resources*
- 2) *Respect for all life*
- 3) *The interconnectedness of all life*
- 4) *Avoiding over consumption by taking the needs of all lives – human, animals and plants - into account*