

# PLACE OF THE SACRED IN SHAPING ECO-PERSPECTIVES

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## 1. Introduction

A casual glance at *The Hindu Survey of the Environment 2008*<sup>1</sup> would reveal in summary the challenges humanity faces in India on the issue of conservation of natural resources, bio-diversity, and the environment. Waste management and pollution control remain a challenge for years despite the Central Pollution Control Board and several organizations like *Greenpeace*<sup>2</sup> undertaking campaigns and offering parameters to minimize and to manage waste. Electronic trash and biomedical refuse are ever increasing, resulting in infections and other hazards. The climatic change and the growing earth warming is a widely researched fact due to higher carbon emissions from human activity. Harnessing the power of the sun, like in solar energy, is becoming revolutionary in lighting billions of lives. Wetlands and water banks, which provide innumerable services to local communities, are under threat; further, evidences indicate that solutions to protect coastal ecosystems are far from satisfactory. Needless to say, sustainable transport future may land us in undertaking fewer, shorter trips, greater use of public transport, number of walking and cycle trips. Problems abound on the issue of Genetically Modified crops, its health and other risk factors, conservation of forest and wild life, extinction of

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<sup>1</sup>The Hindu, *The Hindu Survey of the Environment 2008*, Chennai: Kasturi & Sons Ltd., 2008.

<sup>2</sup>*Greenpeace* is an independent global campaigning organisation that acts to change attitudes and behaviour, to protect and conserve the environment, and to promote peace by catalyzing energy revolution, defending the oceans, protecting the world's ancient forests, creating a toxic-free future, campaigning for sustainable agriculture, etc. Greenpeace is present in 40 countries across Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific. Greenpeace has been campaigning against environmental degradation since 1971, exposing environmental criminals and challenging governments and corporations when they fail to live up to their mandate to safeguard the environment and the future. See, <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/about>.

rare species, etc. States and non-governmental organizations engineer solutions to these problems with little success.

## 2. Environment vis-à-vis Religion: Crossing Boundaries

Can religion offer anything substantial in this regard? The purpose of this article is to show that humanity has the will and power to divert from its suicidal path, provided it becomes religiously and morally sensitive, listening to the primordial Words and acting on them. Some people argue that religions cannot offer solutions to problems which are political or economic in nature. True, as long as human beings do not listen to themselves, their conscience! All religious scriptures are bound by time and space and, indeed, no religious scripture is free from political or economic contexts and interpretations. Des Jardins says: “It is impossible to find an important environmental issue that does not cross boundaries between the sciences, economics, public policy, law, medicine, engineering, and so forth.”<sup>3</sup> In a similar way, it seems that it is impossible to pick up issues, whether environmental or political or economic or public life that do not cross boundaries between them and religion.

As “society’s conscience and moral sentinel,” religion has “a legitimate interest in secular affairs and cannot be excluded from their conduct... [It] keeps an eye on the general quality of collective life, to alert few citizens to its disturbing trends, and to summon them to their basic values and ideals; and the best way to attain that objective is to persuade, to inspire, to criticize, and occasionally to agitate.”<sup>4</sup> Religions do have a capacity to motivate human beings for inward looking and to guide them when especially they are at a crossroads. As Sullivan points out, we cannot ignore religion because religion explores the “essential wellsprings of human motivation and concern that shape the world as we know it. No understanding of the environment is adequate without a grasp of the religious life that constitutes the human societies which saturate the natural environment.”<sup>5</sup> They could be a force for evil, but could also be a force for good, for better social and environmental life.

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<sup>3</sup>Des Jardins Jr., *Environmental Ethics*, Belmont: Wadsworth, 1993, 5.

<sup>4</sup>Bhiku Parekh, “The Voice of Religion in Political Discourse” in *Religion, Politics, and Peace*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999, 72, 80-81.

<sup>5</sup>Lawrence E. Sullivan, “Introduction” in *Jainism and Ecology: Non-violence in the Web of Life*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press for the Center for the Study of World Religions, 2002, x-xi.

Religions do offer the needed confidence and guidance among people, especially in times of difficulties and turmoil, problems and challenges of life. Granting that religions have a private as well as a public role to play, it is also a fact that all that is said by religions stay as said well and for good, exhorting humans to follow them conscientiously. Many a time, religion remains sheltered in the rusty cave of human heart, be purely personal and sentimental, or perhaps an interesting domain merely for philosophical speculations, discussions, and arguments. “Religion will evaporate into arid philosophy,” warns Cardinal Arinze, “if it did not grapple with concrete situations that people face in their ordinary day-to-day living.”<sup>6</sup> Even if religions did this, it is also a fact that no one religious community is capable of handling problems of life in general and environmental problems in particular. There is a strong need for believers to draw inspiration from their own wells, their sacred Words, in order to explore the possibilities of a collective engagement. John Taylor, a Buddhist scholar and Environmentalist, believes that when people from different faith traditions work together, their differences often appear in a new light, so much so that the differences become less important than the *common ground or common visions*.<sup>7</sup>

Shared practical work can break down not only religious prejudices and barriers but ethnic and social barriers too. The goals and the methods of such a dialogue are suggested by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. They enumerate the goals of such a meeting of religions on ecology as follows. (1) To identify and evaluate the distinctive ecological attitudes, values, and practices of diverse religious traditions, making clear their links to intellectual, political, and other resources associated with these distinctive traditions. (2) To describe and analyse the commonalities that exist within and among religious traditions with respect to ecology. (3) To identify the minimum common ground on which to base constructive understanding, motivating discussion, and concerted action in diverse locations across the globe; and to highlight the specific religious resources that comprise such fertile ecological ground, i.e., within scripture, ritual, myth, symbol, cosmology, sacrament, and so on. (4) To articulate in clear

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<sup>6</sup>Francis Cardinal Arinze, *Religions for Peace: A Call for Solidarity to the Religions of the World*, London: Doubleday, 2002, 11.

<sup>7</sup>John Taylor, “Towards Right Living: Interfaith Cooperation for Equitable and Sustainable Development” in *Ecological Responsibility: A Dialogue with Buddhism*, ed. Julia Martin, New Delhi: Tibet House & Sri Satguru Publications, 1997, 167-168.

and moving terms a desirable mode of human presence with the earth; in short, to highlight means of respecting and valuing nature, to note on what has already been actualized, and to indicate how best to achieve what is desirable beyond these examples. (5) To outline the most significant areas, with regard to religion and ecology, in need of further study; to enumerate questions of highest priority within those areas and propose possible approaches to use in addressing them.<sup>8</sup>

They also critically state in a summary form the perspectives of different religious traditions on Nature, along with our obligations and responsibilities to it:

The worldviews associated with the Western Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: They are dominantly human-focussed morality, largely anthropocentric, nature is viewed as being of secondary importance. This is being reinforced by strong sense of the transcendence of God above nature. On the other hand, the covenantal tradition of the Hebrew Bible draws on the legal agreements of biblical thought which are extended to all of creation. Sacramental theology in Christianity underscores the sacred dimension of material reality, especially for ritual purposes. Incarnational Christology proposes that because God became flesh in the person of Christ, the entire nature order can be viewed as sacred. The concept of humans as vice-regents of Allah on earth suggests that humans have particular privileges, responsibilities, and obligations to creation... There are numerous traditions in Hinduism which affirm particular rivers, mountains, or forests as sacred. In the concept of *lila*, the creative play of the gods, Hindu theology engages the world as a creative manifestation of the divine. Later Mahayana schools of Buddhism, such as Hua-yen, underscore the remarkable interconnection of reality in such images as the jewelled net of Indra, where each jewel reflects all the others in the universe. Likewise, the Zen gardens in the East Asia express the fullness of the Buddha-nature (*tathagatagarbha*) in the natural world. Socially engaged Buddhism has been active in protecting the environment in both Asia and the United States. The seamless interconnection between the divine, human, and natural world that characterizes Confucianism and Taoism has been described as an anthropocosmic worldview...

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<sup>8</sup>Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "Series Foreword," in *Jainism and Ecology*, xxi.

To be in harmony with nature and with other humans while being attentive to the movements of the Tao (Way) is the aim of personal cultivation in both these traditions. Most indigenous peoples have environmental ethics embedded in their worldviews. The religious views at the basis of indigenous lifeways involve respect for the sources of food, clothing, and shelter that nature provides. Gratitude to the creator and to the spiritual forces in creations is at the heart of most indigenous traditions.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Human (Sensitized) Being: The Best Steward-to-be

I have highlighted in the following pages a few specific sacred texts<sup>10</sup> that might be helpful to those who believe that religion has relevance in moulding human minds and hearts on issues related to our habitat, the living and the non-living.

Every religion portrays human being as the *summum bonum*, the *best* of all creation because of the transcending character, spiritual vision, intelligence, and creativity. “Blessed is human birth; even the dwellers in heaven desire this birth: for true wisdom and pure love may be attained only by man,” says *Srimad Bhagavatam* (11.13). After all, man (and woman) is created in the *image of God*, according to Christian scriptures (Genesis 1:26). *Aitareya Upanisad* narrates the story of creation, in which the whole world emanates from the Self. After creating the Puruṣa with all its limbs, mouth, nostrils, skin, navel, phallus, etc., the natural world, fire, wind, water, sun, moon, regions, plants and trees, etc. enter the Puruṣa, each according to its place, becoming his speech, breath, navel, heart, sight, hearing, hairs in the skin, phallus, and so on. Finally, the Self thought, “How could these guardians exist without me? By what way shall I enter them? If, without me, speech is uttered, breath is drawn, eye sees, ear hears, skin feels, mind thinks, sex organs procreate, then what am I?” Then, the Self said: ‘Let me enter the guardians.’ Whereupon, opening the centre of their skulls, he entered. The door by which he entered is called the door of bliss (AU 1.1-3.12). The idea that the human person contains the whole of creation is supported by other scriptural texts as well: “The whole of existence arises in me...” (*Havejra Tantra* 8.41). “All that the

<sup>9</sup>Tucker and Grim, “Series Foreword,” in *Jainism and Ecology*, xxiii-xxv.

<sup>10</sup>Sacred texts are taken from Andrew Wilson, ed., *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts* (A Project of the International Religious Foundation), New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993.

Holy One created in the world He created in man” (*Talmud*, Abot de Rabbi Nathan, 31). “Man is the product of the attributes of Heaven and Earth, by the interaction of the dual forces of nature, the union of the animal and intelligent souls, and the finest subtle matter of the five elements,” quotes a Confucian text (*Book of Ritual* 7.3.1-7). The Jain scriptures say that one who knows the inner self knows the external world as well. One who knows the external world knows the inner self as well. (*Acarangasutra* 1.147). Each person is the microcosm of the whole universe.

Scriptures, which give the *supreme* place to human being among all created realities, also reveal that human being, who is capable of being saved, enlightened, and of achieving the highest goal of life, is, in reality, the lord of spirits. Human being could easily outshine the angels in glory and surpass them in wisdom: “When a man walks on the highway, a company of angels goes before him, proclaiming, ‘Make way for the Image of the Holy One!’ reveals a Judaic text (*Midrash, Psalm* 17.8). “Even the spirits are in obeisance,” says a Daoist text, “for a person in concord with Unity, everything prospers; to one who has no personal interest” (*Chuang Tzu* 12). Buddha says that saints and sages, and even ordinary believers “who are intent on meditation, who delight in the peace of renunciation,” are held “most dear by gods” (*Dhammapada* 181). Such mindful and perfect ones could command respect, reverence, and assistance from the heavenly spirits. They have extraordinary powers even to rebuke and cast out evil spirits in the name of God.

Such a position given to human being has also landed him in trouble! In Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), human beings are created as God’s *vicegerents*, granting the blessings of dominion over created things: “Do you not see that God has subjected to your use all things in the heavens and on earth, and has made His bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, both seen and unseen?” (*Qur’an* 31.20). God blessed them, and God said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28). “Thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honour. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet” (Ps. 8:3-6). The expressions such as *dominion*, *subdue*, *all things under his feet* would lose their spirit if they were understood literally as *domination* and *subjugation* of created things at their own expense. Rather, human ingenuity, creativity, and progress are to be understood in the harmony of things, life, and

environment. It is for this reason, the same scriptures also point out to the idea that the whole universe is created only for the sake of the *righteous* man (*Talmud, Shabbat 30b*), who would not *forget its source* and not *deviate from their determined pattern*.

Now the trouble starts! The natural world, the community of living, laments over the sinful actions of human beings as though in *groaning travails!* (Rom. 8:19-22). *Anguttara Nikaya* rightly points out to the reasons for this phenomenon: “Since folk are ablaze with unlawful lusts, overwhelmed by depraved longings, depressed by wrong doctrines, on such as these the sky rains down not steadily. It is hard to get a meal. The crops are bad, afflicted with mildew and grown to mere stubs. Accordingly, many come to their end” (i.50). Hosea, the Old Testament prophet, proves why “the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.” He reads out the controversy with the inhabitants of the land: “There is no faithfulness or kindness, there is no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder” (Hos. 4:1-3). In one of the Avestan texts of Zoroastrianism, the soul of an ox complains: “For whom did you create me? Who made me? Fury and violence oppress me, and cruelty and tyranny. I have no shepherd other than you: then, obtain good pastures for me.” And the Wise Lord replies saying, “No master has been found, no judge according to Righteousness” (*Yasna 29.1-9*). The soul of the ox and his mate pray again to God, who replies that the ox has been put in the power of the breeder and the herdsman.

The sin of ego-centrism,<sup>11</sup> which expresses traits like acquisitiveness, excessive possessiveness, the urge to hoard and acquire things more than needed, the impulse to outdo others, envy, and jealousy, has corroded the very relationship between the humans and the natural world. The blame lies on *God’s vicegerents* in their *proper stewardship!* They need to recognize that the natural world is given to humans *as a trust* to be tended, maintained, and made fruitful. Proper stewardship manifests itself in many ways such as creating a safe environment, proper management of natural resources, agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, and forestry, and in acts of kindness to animals in distress. There is a reference to Noah and the

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<sup>11</sup>Padmasiri de Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1998, 38.

kind of stewardship he tended towards animals in the Ark. It is said that “for twelve months he did not sleep by night or day, because all the time he was busy feeding the animals” (*Midrash, Tanhuma, Noah* 15a)

Indeed, there are passages that sensitize the humans to show extraordinary concern to nature and to animals: “Buy captive animals and give them freedom” (*Tao’s Tract of the Quiet Way*). “At the openings of anthills, please have trustworthy men!” (Nagarjuna, *Precious Garland*, 249-50). “Never does a Muslim plant trees or cultivate land ... except for (but that is) a charity on his behalf” (*Hadith of Muslim*). “For six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield; but in the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat” (Exodus 23:10-11). “When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them” (Deuteronomy 20:19). “The destruction of vegetable growth is an offence requiring expiation” (*Pacittiya* 11).

*Anguttara Nikaya* narrates a sad story of a thoughtless person on account of whom the banyan tree, lavished with fruits, did not bear fruit any more: “Rajah Koravya had a king banyan tree called Steadfast, and the shade of its widespread branches was cool and lovely. Its shelter broadened to twelve leagues... None guarded its fruit, and none hurt another for its fruit. Now there came a man who ate his fill of fruit, broke down a branch, and went his way. Thought the spirit dwelling in that tree, ‘How amazing, how astonishing it is, that a man should be so evil as to break off a branch of the tree, after eating his fill. Suppose the tree were to bear no more fruit.’ And the tree bore no more fruit” (iii.368). “The Doctrine of the Mean,” a Confucian text, says that only those *who are absolutely sincere* can form a Trinity along with Heaven and Earth (22).

#### **4. Reverence for Life and Sanctity of Nature**

Is anything, then, basically wanting in human freedom, will, and judgement? Every religion speaks of the sanctity of nature because nature *belongs to God* and it is *made of God*, a healthy pantheism to support our argument: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). God is both its origin and its destiny and He has not neglected any creature, whether crawling on earth or flying in air (*Qur’an* 6.38). Considering that these creatures are *nations like ourselves*, one has to regard heaven as one’s father and earth as one’s mother, and all things as one’s brothers and sisters (*Shinto’s Oracle of the*



*Kami of Atsuta*). No harming can, therefore, be done to any creature even though their consciousness may not be manifest. As human beings experience joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, so also are these creatures of different forms, says the Jaina *Acarangasutra* (1.28-161).

Hence, the *human ethic proper* must have provisions to revere life and sanctify nature; it must be an *ethic of Non-violence!*<sup>12</sup> The Jain and Buddhist traditions generally focus on this. “One should not injure, subjugate, enslave, torture, or kill any animal, living being, organism, or sentient being. This doctrine of non-violence is immaculate, immutable, and eternal. Just as suffering is painful to you, in the same way it is painful, disquieting, and terrifying to all animals, living beings, organisms, and sentient beings” (*Acarangasutra* 4.25-26). In a similar fashion, Buddha admonishes his disciples: “Let creatures all, all things that live, All beings of whatever kind, See nothing that will bode them ill! May nothing of evil come to them!” Incidentally, vegetarian way of life is motivated from this ethic. “How can a *bhiksu*,” asks Buddha, “who hopes to become a deliverer of others, himself be living on the flesh of other sentient beings? Pure and earnest *bhiksus* will never wear clothing made of silk, nor wear boots made of leather for they involve the taking of life. Neither will they indulge in eating milk nor cheese because thereby they are depriving the young animals of that which rightfully belongs to them” (*Surangama Sutra*). Hence, there is a greater need to cultivate a critical attitude to one’s lifestyle and livelihood, born out of reverence towards created things, towards nature and the environment.

Nature needs to be *let free*. With a sense of humour, Taoism distinguishes a horse from a man: “A horse or a cow has four feet. That is Nature. Put a halter around the horse’s head and put a string through the cow’s nose, that is man” (*Chuang Tzu* 17). The cleverness in human beings seems to have taken advantage of the beauty and power of nature, whereas it needs to be praised and worshipped as the source of life and sustenance. No sacred text is more apt to subscribe to this point than the

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<sup>12</sup>For more details, read the author’s articles, “Implications of *Ahimsa* on Ecology: A Jaina Perspective” *Jain Journal* 28, 2 (October 1993), 93-100; “Significance of Jain philosophy for Preserving Life and Environment” *Eco-Dynamics of Religion: Thought for the Third Millennium*, ed. Augustine Thottakara, Bangalore: Journal of Dharma & Dharmaram Publications, 2000; and “Give away Violence, Preserve Life: Contemporary Call of the Sramana Religions,” *Journal of Dharma* 25, 2 (April-June 2000).

long prayerful reading of *Bhumi Sukta* (in praise of the Mother Earth) from the *Atharva Veda*: “May those born of thee, O Earth, be, for our welfare, free from sickness and waste. Wakeful through a long life, we shall become bearers of tribute for thee. Earth, my Mother! Set me securely with bliss in full accord with Heaven. Wise One, uphold me in grace and splendour” (12.1).

Eventually, those who have attained the spiritual heights are acknowledged to have developed in their personal lives such noble attitudes toward nature: loving kindness to all forms of life, least hurt even to the least of creatures, vegetarian way of life, restraining from unwholesome speech or action, etc. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, being “aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others to kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.”<sup>13</sup> Padmasiri de Silva enumerates the eight-point deep ecology platform:

- (1) The flourishing of human and non-human life on earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life-forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
- (2) Richness and diversity of life-forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on earth.
- (3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
- (4) Present human interference with non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- (5) The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
- (6) Significant change of life as condition for the better requires changes in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures.
- (7) The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality rather than adhering to a high standard of living.
- (8) Those who subscribe to the above points have an obligation, directly or indirectly, to participate in attempts to implement necessary changes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Thich Nhat Hanh, et al., *For a Future to be Possible*, Berkeley: Parralax Press, 1993, 13.

<sup>14</sup>de Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, 128-129.

I believe that *our own sacred wells* take us to a Deep Ecology, the characteristics of which are found in a holistic, non-anthropocentric approach to life and environment. Such a Deep Ecology appreciates and respects richness and diversity of all forms of life and non-life.

## 5. Conclusion

The sacred texts I have indicated from various religious traditions bring out the significant interaction between the living and the non-living from ancient times, and constantly remind “our overriding faith in unlimited natural resources...”<sup>15</sup> They grimly reflect on our egoistic, accumulative, and competitive tendencies that jeopardize our relationship with one another, with the earth and its diverse forms of life. They are occasions for human beings to develop an attitude of peace, gratitude, and fine-tuning with nature, proposing a new way of seeing and living. Hence, our immediate concern is our *ethical* behaviour to the non-human world, which is often considered a grade lower than ourselves and, hence, could be exploited without limits. It is a fact that the natural world is more often used for our own gratification and for other scientific reasons, forgetting that “nature has intrinsic value.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>de Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, 1.

<sup>16</sup>de Silva, *Environmental Philosophy and Ethics in Buddhism*, 17.