Spirituality and our Responsibility to Save the Planet

Dr. Marie Fernandes

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it
the world, and all who live in it;
for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.
Psalm 24 New International Version (NIV)

The earth is our home, given to us as a divine gift of God and it is our responsibility to care for it and leave it habitable for future generations to come. Sadly, we have set about to systematically destroy it over the centuries. Nature cannot be trifled with and we will have to pay a heavy price for this devastation of land, air and sea.

The English Metaphysical poet John Donne wrote:

I am a little world made cunningly
Of elements, and an angelic sprite;

C.A. Patrides in analysing this poem observes that "man was habitually said to be the microcosm or 'abridgement' of the universe'. Just as the Universe is said to be made up of four elements – earth, water, air and fire, man too is made up of these four elements. If we understand this basic principle we will soon realize that the measure in which we nourish and care for these elements, we not only do a service to ourselves but also ensure our own survival.[1]

The Aboriginals also believe that there is a symbiotic relationship between man and the natural world where what is good for one is good for the other. They believe, when everything is in balance, what is good for the earth will be good for us as human beings too. Aboriginals believe that they are living, breathing, thinking physical manifestation of their land – a thread in the pattern of creation. Dr. Winch is convinced that if the land is in bad repair, then so are the people. If the rivers dry up and become polluted, then this can be equated with the body's lifeblood; and it means that life cannot be sustained.[2]

Land is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. The land is not just soil or rocks or minerals, but a whole environment that sustains and is sustained by people and culture. For Indigenous Australians, the land is the core of all spirituality and this relationship and the spirit of 'country' is central to the issues that are important to Indigenous people today. In an era of global environmental challenges we all need to listen to the voices that offer a way of seeing and relating to the land that will allow the earth not only to survive, but also to thrive. They cultivated land, but in a way different from the white man. According to aborigine Tom Dystra, "We endeavoured to live with the land; they seemed to live off it. I was taught to preserve, never to destroy".[3]

In early times too human beings were rooted in their neighbourhood, in the *Agropolis.* This was mainly an agrarian economy and the produce came from the land or places in the vicinity. With Industrialization things soon changed and people deserted their village to move to the *Metropolis*. The city largely depended on transportation of goods and services from all over – land, air and sea hence the *Petropolis* came into being. [4]

Due to man's culture of consumption and excessive materialism we have slowly but surely destroyed much of our green cover with trees being cut down, more fossil fuels, minerals and metals mined from the earth, people spending more money on consumer goods - from richer food and larger homes to televisions, cars, computers and air travel. We are already witnessing the harmful effects of this systematic ravishing of the earth, through heatwaves and deserts expanding at three miles a year, multiple ice shelves collapsing and glaciers retreating in the Alps.

In the 2009 documentary *The Age of Stupid*, **a cautionary tale,** begins with the Big Bang occurring 13 billion years ago and then goes forward in time. There is a montage of images up to the present time and then stops at the year 2055: the world is void of people. Sydney, Australia is on fire. Las Vegas, Nevada is underneath sand. There is no snow on the mountain ranges, tremendous flooding everywhere, and no ice in the Arctic. The ending of the film features the archivist asking, "Why didn't we save ourselves when we had the chance? Because we didn't think we were worth

saving?" And then the camera zooms out to a view of the Earth with the caption: 'The End?'[5]

As long ago as a late 1600s, societal shifts in Europe began to lay the groundwork for the emergence of consumerism. Expanding populations and a fixed base of land combined with a weakening of traditional sources of authority such as the church and community social structures, meant that a young person's customary part of social advancement – inheriting the family plot or apprenticing in a father's trade – could no longer be taken for granted. People sought new avenues for identity and self-fulfilment, and the acquisition and use of goods became popular substitutes.[6]

Meanwhile entrepreneurs were quick to capitalise on these shifts to stimulate purchase of their new ways, using new types of advertising, endorsements by prominent people, creation of shop displays, "loss-leaders" (selling a popular item at a loss as a way of pulling customers into a store), creative financing options, even consumer research and the stroking of new fads. For example, one 18 century British pottery manufacturer, Josiah Wedgwood, had sales people drum up excitement for new pottery designs, creating demand for new lines of products even from customers who already had a perfectly good but now seemingly outdated, set of pottery.[7]

Still, traditional social mores blocked the rapid advance of a consumerist mindset. Peasants with extra income traditionally would increase land holdings or support community works rather than buy new fashions or home furnishings - two of the earliest consumer goods. Workers whose increased productivity resulted in greater pay tended to favour more leisure time rather than the wealth that a full day at increased pay might have brought them.[8]

But over time the emerging consumerist orientation was internalised by a growing share of the populace – with the continued help of merchants and traders – redefining what was understood as natural. The universe of "basic necessities", grew, so that by the French Revolution, Parisian workers were demanding candles, coffee, soap and sugar as goods of prime necessity even though all but the candles had been luxury items less than hundred years earlier.[9]

By the early 1900s a consumerist orientation had become increasingly embedded in many of the dominant societal institutions of many cultures – from businesses and governments to the media and education. And in the latter half of the century, new innovations like television, sophisticated advertising techniques, transnational corporations, franchises, and the Internet helped institutions to spread consumerism across the planet.

Arguably the strongest driver of this cultural shift has been business interests. On a diverse set of fronts, business found ways to coax more consumption of the people. Credit was liberalised, for instance, with instalment payments, and the credit card was promoted heavily in the United States, which led to an almost 11 fold increase in consumer credit between 1945 and 1960. Products were designed to have short lives, or to go out of style quickly. And workers were encouraged to take pay rises rather than more time off, increasing their disposable incomes.[10]

Considering the social and ecological costs that come with consumerism, it makes sense to intentionally shift to a cultural paradigm where the norms, symbols, values, and traditions encourage just enough consumption to satisfy human well-being while directing more human energy to work practices that help to restore planetary well-being.

In the 2006 interview, Catholic priest and ecological philosopher Thomas Berry noted that "we might summarise our present human situation by the simple statement. In the 20th century, the glory of the human has become the desolation of the earth. And now, the desolation of the earth is becoming the destiny of the human. From here on the primary judgement of all human institutions, professions, and programs and activities will be determined by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, foster a mutually enhancing human- earth relationship.[11]

Examples of a spiritual bond between man and nature can be traced in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, a 12th century saint. He was born on October 4th, 1181 in Umbria, Italy. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant and he lived a life of luxury. Later, while imprisoned after a battle, he had a life-altering spiritual experience which led him to a change of heart and change of life.

Decreed the Patron Saint of the Environment/ Ecology and of Animals, Francis' latter life was not only an unblemished model of religious devotion, but an exemplary paragon of harmonious existence on Earth. He was a friend to man and beast, an admirer of the sun and of nature, and a peacemaker in every sense of the word. Francis was not merely at peace with his fellow man — he was at peace with all living things, everything beautiful that his eyes could behold. He wrote hymns of praise to his God for the creations he felt so blessed to behold, and he wrote poems to his "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon," even repeatedly praising his "Sister Death" upon his deathbed — as he felt so much at one with creation.

He was deeply committed to the well-being of the environment and of all of creation. He lived with animals. He rejoiced amongst nature. He preached to the birds to remind them to praise their Creator for the blessings they had. He tamed a wild wolf and made it one of his many pets. Yet, he understood the plight of nature and the circle of life, albeit brutal at times. Despite, this he felt that his Creator would not create evil, and hence, everything around him was good and accordingly, should be treated with courtesy and kindness and generosity, from the earthworm to the lamb, the cicada to the wolf. It is perhaps because they recognized his genuine sincerity towards their existence that the animals felt so drawn to him as well.[12]

Francis prayed in nature and discovered more about God and himself through the practice of contemplative prayer in nature. Today with all our modern comforts and conveniences, we tend to be alienated from the earth and from ourselves. St. Francis spent up to half of each year praying in different places amongst nature and the wilderness, living in hermitages, caves, under lean-to's, and on mountainsides, interspersing this with preaching to animals and plants as well as to people. Through these experiences and the recognition of his own relatedness to nature as part of creation, he himself was helped to grow more fully into the mystery of God, his beliefs liberating him to become more fully alive.[13]

Our present Pope Francis chose Francis of Assisi as his role model to imitate and live his 'Lady Poverty' in reality, deliberately choosing an austere way of life; exhorting others to follow suit, so that there is enough for all in the world. Pope Francis conducts his personal life in an unassuming and compassionate way, living

in a simple apartment rather than in a luxurious Papal apartment, and by taking the minibus rather than the Papal limousine.

Pope Benedict the XVI was called the 'Green Pope' (Newsweek 2008), as he promoted Francis' Spirituality of relationships by caring for the planet. 'Learn to sustain the planet before it is too late," he said. He placed 2700 solar panels on the roof of Paul VI Auditorium, created a new Vatican Climate Forest in Hungary's Bükk National Park, installed high-tech solar collectors, and announced seven new sins that need repentance. The fourth sin is, "Thou shall not pollute the environment," besides many other green activities.[14]

When Pan Yue Vice Minister of China's Ministry of environmental protection, wanted to advance environmentalism he often reached for an unusual tool: China's spiritual heritage. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism which he believed were powerful weapons in preventing an environmental crisis. In October 2008 a group of Taoist masters met to formulate a response to climate change, with initiatives ranging from solar powered temples to a Taoist environmental network. Inspiration came from the tower's concept of the unit yang interplay of opposites to create balanced whole, which infuses the climate crisis between end and meaning. "The carbon balance between earth and sky is off-kilter," explains a UN official who attended the meeting, interpreting the Taoist view. '"It is … significant that the current masters of Taoism in China have started to communicate precisely to this ancient yet new vocabulary.[15]

The Chinese Taoists are not alone in their activism. Baha'is, Christians Hindus Jews and Muslims – encouraged by a partnership of the United Nations and the alliance for religions and conservation (UK non-profit) – developed seven your climate and environment plans that were announced in November 2009, just before the start of the U.N. climate conference in Copenhagen. The plans at the latest religious efforts to address the sustainability crisis of our time, including climate change, deforestation, water scarcity and species loss. By greening their activities and uncovering or the emphasising the green dimensions of sacred texts, religious and spiritual groups are helping to create sustainable cultures.[16]

Religious activism on behalf of the environment is now common – in some cases, the point of becoming widespread, organised and institutionalised. Three examples from the realms of water conservation, forest conservation, and energy and climate illustrate this broad-based impact.

First His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew ecumenical leader of more than 300 million Orthodox Christians, founded Religion, Science and Environment (RSE) in 1995 to advance religious and scientific dialogue around the environmental problems of major rivers and seas. RSE has organised shipboard symposia for scientists, religious leaders, scholars, journalists and policymakers to study the problems of the Aegean, Black, Adriatic and Baltic Seas; the Danube, Amazon and Mississippi Rivers and the Arctic Ocean.[17]

In addition to raising awareness about the problems of specific waterways, the symposia have generated initiatives for education, cooperation, and network building among local communities and policymakers. Sponsors have included the Prince of Wales; attendees include policymakers from the United Nations and World Bank; and collaborators have included Pope John Paul II who signed a joint declaration with Patriarch Bartholomew on humanity's need to protect the planet.[18]

Second, "ecological monks" – Buddhist advocates for environment in Thailand – have taken stands against deforestation, shrimp farming, and the cultivation of cash crops. In several cases they have used a Buddhist ordination ritual to ordain a tree in an endangered forest, giving a sacred status in the eyes of villagers and spawning a forest conservation effort. One monk involved in tree ordinations has created a non-government organisation to leverage the monks' efforts by coordinating the environmental activities of local village groups, environment agencies, and other interested organisations.[19]

Third, Interfaith Power and Light (ILP), an initiative of the San Francisco-based regenerative project, helps US faith communities green their buildings, conserve energy, educate about energy and climate, an advocate for climate and energy policies at the state and federal level. Led by Rev Sally Bingham, an Episcopal priest, IPL is now active in 29 states and works with 10,000 congregations. It has developed a

range of innovative programs to help faith communities green their work and worship, including Cool Congregations, which features an online carbon calculator and which in 2008 awarded $ 5000 prizes to both the congregation with the lowest emissions per congregant and the congregation that reduce emission by the greatest amount.[20]

These and other institutionalised initiatives, along with the thousands of individual grass roots religious projects at congregations worldwide from Baha'i environmental and solar technology education among the rural women in India to Appalachian faith groups' efforts to stop mountaintop mining and the varied environmental efforts of "Green nuns" suggest that religion and spiritual traditions are ready partners, and often leaders in the effort to build sustainable cultures.[21]

The modern global eco-crisis is a strong signal that "environmentally at least all established ethics are inadequate", in the words of ethicists Richard Sylvan and David Bennett. More ethical systems today are indifferent to the steady degradation of natural systems and need to be reformed or replaced. Ecological ethics is a complimentary ethical system that gives a natural world a voice in ethical discourse.[22]

According to Patrick Curry, "A specifically ecological ethic is eco-centric (perceiving and protecting value in all of nature) not "anthropocentric" (restricting value to humanity alone). It recognises that humans are only a part of life on Earth, that humans need the rest of the planet and its inhabitants vastly more than they need humans, and that there is an ethical dimension to all human relationships with the planet. Indeed a truly eco-centric ethic recognizes that in certain situations, the need or rights of Earth or its other inhabitants take precedence over purely or narrowly human ones. Developing an ecological ethics will require the help of the world's spiritual and religious traditions, which are highly influential in shaping the ethical sensibilities of a large share of humanity"[23]

In all this we discover that we have to get back to nature and rediscover our oneness with all of creation. Our early ancestors forged a strong link with the Universe. All our religions invite us once again to respect and care for the world we live in and make a conscious effort to change the way we live and adopt a simpler lifestyle as a means of sustaining our planet.

End Notes

1 John Donne, The Complete Poems of John Donne. Ed. C. A. Patrides. (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1985)

2 Joan Winch, "A Feeling of Belonging", Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation. Eds**.** Sally Morgan, Tjalaminu Mia and Blaze Kwaymullina (North Freemantle: Freemantle Press, 2010)

3 Aborigine Tom Dystra, www.downunderonline.com/australia_holiday_aboriginal_culture.htm

4 Brahmanand Mohanty**,** *Sustainable Urban Energy: A Sourcebook for Asia***,** United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN HABITAT), Nairobi, Kenya, 2012[5] Stephen Schneider **and** Michael Wehner**. Reviews of *Age of Stupid***http://www.climatechangeeducation.org/art/feat/age_of_stupid/reviews/synopsis_2.html

6 Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History. The Global Transformation of Desire*. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 25-36.

7 Stearns, 15-24

8 Stearns, 34-35

9 Stearns, 20-21

10 Erik Assadourian, "The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures", *State of the World 2010. A Year in Review.* Eds. Linda Starke &Lisa Mastny. (London: Earthscan, 2010)

11 Berry quote from interview with Caroline Webb, 2006, video at www.earth-community.org/images/BerryIV_Subtitles.mov

12 Claudia Herrera Hudson http://myhero.com/hero.asp?hero=assisi

13 St. Francis - A Guide for Nature Lovers & Ecologists http://www.praying-nature.com/site_pages.php?section=Guide+for+Nature+Lovers)

14 Mudita Sodder RSCJ *The Green Saint*, **The Examiner.** Vol. 165. No 39. Sept 27- Oct 03, 2014. p-6

15 Stephen Scharper, "Faiths May Hold the Key to Green China." *Toronto Star,* 7 July 2009, Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Pan Yue's Vision for Ecological Civilization," blog, *Sustainable China*, at www.sustainablechina.info/2008/12/08/ a meeting with pan.yue.

16 Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and the U.N. Development Programme. *Guide to Creating Your Seven Year Plan* (Bath, U.K. ARC, August 2008)

17 Religion, Science and the Environment, www.rsesymposia.org

18 Religion, Science and the Environment, www.rsesymposia.org

19 Susan M. *Darlington*, "Practical Spirituality and Community Forests: Monks, Rituals and Radical Conservatism in Thailand". In Anna L. Tsing and Paul Greenough,eds., *Nature in the Global South.* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2003)

20 The Regeneration Project. www.theregenerationproject.org

21 Baha'i. www.barli.org/training.programmes.html#45; Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 2007)

22 Richard Sylvan and David Bennett. *The Greening of Ethics From Human Chauvinism to Deep-Green Theory* (Cambridge, MA: White House Press, 1994)

23 Patrick Curry. A Global Ecological Ethic, University of Kent. Canterbury, UK . www.worldwatch.org