



China Committee for Religions and Peace

OVERCOMING ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION THROUGH A GREEN GROWTH ECONOMY: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

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May I begin by thanking again the China Committee for Religions and Peace (CCRP) for this opportunity to reflect on religion and its role in addressing the climate emergency. This continues the CCRP-sponsored ecological seminar held here in Beijing in September 2018 with a visit to a lighthouse environmental restoration project in south-eastern China. This commitment will continue into the October 2020 Asian Assembly in Tokyo of the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP) (also known as Religions for Peace Asia), when China will facilitate Commission IV on the *Development and the Environment in Diversifying Societies: Challenges for an Inclusive, Peaceful Asia*.

The realities of the changing climate are already evident in the Asia-Pacific region, having a particularly destructive impact on the small Pacific Island nation states such as Kiribati and Tuvalu and the South-East Asian countries of the Mekong Delta. Over the past two years, there have been major floods in Kerala as well as Iran, floods and heatwaves in Japan, cyclones impacting on the frontline Pacific Ocean state of the Philippines and drought and bushfires in Australia. These disasters cost lives and impact upon livelihoods and assets. Climate-related disasters are likely to increase in the Asia-Pacific region as seen in the UNESAP's August 2019 *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report*.

In this paper, I want to provide the theological background to the world's major religions in their attitudes to nature and environmental degradation. Then I want to examine the vexed issue of development and the environment, mainly through the eyes of the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESAP) and its green growth economy approach. Finally I want to examine the task of combatting environmental crime while throughout the paper reflecting on the role of religious leadership.

The Role of Religion in a Healthy Society

In the emerging global era, we live in a very religious world with 84 per cent of the world's population having a religious affiliation according to the Pew Religious Research Center. And research continues to demonstrate that religion, on balance, adds to personal well-being and national

social wealth and social capital. According to psychologists, authentic religion is about believing, bonding, behaving and belonging. Its beneficial personal and community outcomes have been empirically demonstrated by the social sciences. A healthy society needs healthy religion, and in the governance and management of religion and religious diversity, the State has a responsibility to protect the right to religious freedom and to intervene when bad religious practice is producing harm such as religiously inspired terrorism. The right to religious freedom and practice is not an absolute and unfettered right, but it is a relative right. Central to the religion-state relationship is quality religious leadership. In the playing out of this relationship, quality religious leadership is one of the keys to successful outcomes whereby the spiritual needs and aspirations of the people are met and religious communities contribute to national welfare and social cohesion.

Religion and the Attitude to Nature

The various anthropological frameworks (e.g. Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck) that describe the deep-seated cultural value orientations that differentiate societies suggest that there are three fundamental attitudes to nature, namely, (i) subjugation to nature (ii) harmony with nature and (iii) mastery or control over nature. Most religions, especially nature religions, reflect the subjugation attitude in fearing and trembling before the dangers and hazards that nature can inflict upon humanity such as earthquakes, cyclones, tornados, bushfires, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, floods, landslides and droughts as documented in the 2015 *Natural Hazards Risk Atlas*. Religious responses vary from explanations in terms of the revenge of the evil spirits, the wrath of God against humanity's sinfulness to an acquiescent acceptance of the damage and destruction done.

Taoism

In Asian cultures with their rich pools of wisdom, love of and harmony with nature is central. The major Asian traditions insist that the increasing threat of natural hazards shows that nature is not in harmony. We see this in Taoism, for 'humanity follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Tao and the Tao follows what is natural'. In working to achieve this harmony, human beings should cultivate the way of no-action and let nature be itself. If the pursuit of development and profit runs counter to the harmony and balance of nature, people should restrain and curb themselves. Insatiable human desire will lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources. To be too successful is to be on the road to defeat.

Confucianism

The rich 2,500 year-old Confucian tradition which is re-emerging in new ways in contemporary Chinese thinking sees the solution to the world's environmental problems in terms of uniting the trinity of heaven, earth and humanity in an alternative worldview. For example, China through its five-year plans is moving away from its huge dependence on coal which has fuelled 70 per cent of its past energy needs to a growing commitment to renewable resources. Modern Confucians have in 2013 produced a *Confucian Statement on the Environment*. It proposes the self-cultivation of virtue, responsibility and a caring attitude in every person. "Nature is an unending process of transformation rather than a static presence, and as such is a source of inspiration by which we understand the dynamism of Heaven. As the first hexagram in the Book of Change symbolizes, Heaven's vitality and creativity are without ends and we humans must emulate its ceaseless vitality and creativity".

Buddhism

According to Buddhism, changeability and impermanence are central features of nature and of living - nothing is static. According to the *Agganna Sutta* which contains the Buddha's discourses to two Brahmin monks, the world passes through alternating cycles of evolution and dissolution, each of which lasts for a long period of time. Hence, suffering is at the very centre of Buddhist thinking with its Four Truths about Suffering, but Buddhism believes that, while change is inherent in nature, humanity's moral decline accelerates the change process and results in changes that are adverse to human well-being and happiness according to the five sets of precepts: physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws and causal laws. The One Earth Sangha led the effort in the lead-up to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference to issue *The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change*.

The Buddhist leaders declared the climate change crisis to be 'the greatest challenge that humanity has ever faced', adding that 'human activity (is) triggering environmental breakdown on a planetary scale'. As the root problem, 'the compulsion to consume is an expression of craving, the very thing the Buddha pinpointed as the root cause of suffering. They thus emphasized the moral dimensions to reversing climate change.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a religion which is very near to nature, asking its followers to see the divine in every object in the universe. The Mahabharata (109, 10) says, "Dharma exists for the welfare of all beings. Hence, that by which the welfare of all living beings is sustained, that for sure is dharma". At the 2009 Melbourne Parliament of the World's Religions, which was the occasion for a special gathering of global Hindu leaders, the *Hindu Melbourne Declaration* proclaimed, "The Earth is my mother, and I am her child", adding that "a radical change in our relationship with nature is no longer an option...We cannot destroy nature without destroying ourselves". In 2015 in the lead-up to the Paris Climate Conference, the second *Global Hindu Declaration on Climate Change* was issued. It called for meaningful action to slow and prevent climate change that is scientifically credible and historically fair in the transition to 100 per cent clean energy.

Islam

The Qu'ran states that "Mischievousness (fussad) has appeared in land and sea because of the deeds that the hands of men have earned, that God may give them a taste of some of their deeds in order that they may turn back (from evil)" (Qu'ran 30, 41). Whilst the World Muslim Congress has not made any formal statement, in 2015 a conference in Turkey led to the *Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change* which led to the formation of the Global Muslim Climate Network.

The declaration crafted by five leading Islamic scholars called on the world's 1.6 billion Muslims to play an active role in combatting climate change pointing to the example of the Prophet (pbh) who banned the felling of trees in the desert and established protected areas for the conservation of plants and wildlife. The Islamic leaders pointed to the scientific consensus to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere and the need to set clear targets and monitoring systems. They called upon well-off nations and oil-producing states to phase out their emissions by 2050 and to have a zero emissions strategy. It also called on the business sectors to reduce their carbon footprints by committing to 100 per cent renewable energy sources. As well, there have emerged calls for a 'green jihad', and the concept of *zohd* or degrowth, that is, living lightly on earth in a green lifestyle.

Christianity

Within Judaism and Christianity, there has always been a reverence for creation beginning with the creation stories in the Book of Genesis, the first Book of the Bible. Christian Orthodox began its initiatives that date back to the 1970s and the 1980s, and September 1st was designated as a pan-Orthodox day to offer prayers for the preservation of the natural creation. Since his election in 1991, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has become known as the Green Patriarch, defining environmentalism as a spiritual responsibility. In 1997, a symposium on the Black Sea was held and subsequent symposia have focussed on the Danube, the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, the Amazon Basin, the Arctic Circle and the Mississippi River. The Patriarch has drawn attention to the word ‘ecology’ which is derived from the Greek word meaning ‘home’ or ‘dwelling’. “The world is indeed our home. Yet it is also the home of everybody, just as it is the home of every animal creature and of every form of life created by God. It is a sign of arrogance to presume that we human beings alone inhabit this world. Moreover, it is a sign of arrogance to imagine that only the present generation enjoy its resources”.

In his 2015 Papal Letter or Encyclical, *Laudato Si: Care for our Common Home*, Pope Francis insists the world must ‘hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’. He severely criticizes both consumerism with its throw-away culture and irresponsible development because he believes humans no longer see God as the creator of time and space and the universe. The Pope laments environmental degradation and global warming, calling for ‘swift and unified global action’. But he admitted that it would not be easy to achieve consensus. He condemned the use of highly polluting fossil fuels, especially coal and oil. He blames apathy, the reckless pursuit of profit, excessive faith in technology and political short-sightedness. In combatting the climate crisis, the developed nations are morally obligated to assist the developing nations. The recent Amazonian Synod in October 2019 in Rome condemned the destruction of the Amazon’s rain forests.

Judaism

In 2015, 425 US rabbis signed a *Rabbinic Letter in the Climate Crisis*. They called for a new sense of eco-social justice that includes the healing of our planet. “For about 200 years, the most powerful institutions and culture of the human species have refused to let the Earth or human earthlings have time of space for rest”. In their view, the Earth is overworked, “precisely what our Torah teaches we must not do”. They concluded that “our ancient earthy wisdom taught that social justice, sustainable abundance, a healthy Earth and spiritual fulfilment are inseparable.

In summary, the major religious traditions to a greater or lesser extent advocate harmony with and care for nature. As the ecological crisis has developed, religious leaders have not been slow to react. Their responses are to emphasize degrowth and advocate simpler lifestyles. Deep in their respective wisdom traditions are not only their respect and reverence for evolving nature but their joint warnings about the over-exploitation of the earth’s natural resources. Many religiously-based organizations such as GreenFaith have emerged to press forward with life-affirming agendas and plans for action. But their environmental ethical frameworks need to incorporate the notion of development and growth.

A Green Growth Economy: Development and the Environment

Environmental sustainability cannot be separated from economic and social growth and the eradication of poverty. The challenge is to transform the climate crisis into an opportunity that generates ‘a double dividend of higher economic growth necessary to reduce poverty with lower environmental impact by improving the efficiency of resource use and increasing investments in

human and natural capital' in the words of the UN's ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific). It advocates for a Green Growth approach to overcome the current economic, social and environmental inequities. Its March 2019 report, *Accelerating Progress: An Empowered, Inclusive and Equal Asia and the Pacific*, suggests that the area has three pivotal challenges:

1. Climate change and its potential to develop inequality
2. The urgent need to boost domestic resource mobilization and
3. The need to strengthen social accountability and civic engagement

It presents a framework for four intersecting elements: rights and justice, norms and institutions, resources and capabilities, and participation and voice.

Central to any strategy in the Asia-Pacific Basin is the city, especially pertinent to Asia. The last decade has seen a very historic tipping point – for the first time in human history, more people are living in cities than in rural areas. By 2050 70 per cent of all people on this earth will live in urban areas. Asia is presently home to half the world's urban population, and to 66 of the 100 fastest growing urban areas, of which 33 are in China alone. While most growth will occur in cities and towns, there is also the fact of the megacities (10+ million people) – there are currently 21 with 10 in Asia: Tokyo (36.5M), Delhi (21.7M), Mumbai (19.7M), Shanghai (16.3M), Kolkata (15.3M), Dhaka (14.3M), Karachi (12.8M), Beijing (12.2M), Manila (11.4M) and Osaka-Kobe (11.3M).

If we take the perspective of children, according to UNICEF's 2012 *Report of the State of the World Children* which focused on *Children in an Urban World*, more than a billion children live in urban areas, many enjoying the advantages of urban life. But there are too many who are living in marginalized urban slums, vulnerable to violence and exploitation as well as to injuries, illness and death. Too many children are denied such essentials as clean water, electricity and appropriate health care. The key question is: how do we make our cities more liveable and more sustainable? How can we harness the new knowledges and the new technologies to make the cities cleaner, richer and less dangerous, more connected and more cohesive? Religious communities are now centred more in cities than in villages yet how do they work to improve urban living? How are local religious leaders to be educated about the climate emergency and how to lead their peoples to simpler lifestyles and green places of worship?

In its most recent report in October 2019, *The Future of Asian and Pacific Cities: Transformative Pathways towards Sustainable Urban Development*, ESCAP argues that the cities of 2030, 2050 and 2100 will be very different from today in terms of their demographic composition, their implementation of technology and their wider ecological contexts. It praises the citizens of Wuhan in China for ecologically transforming the Jinkoe landfill, said to have been Asia's largest garbage dump, into a garden site that could host an International Garden Expo.

The report documents four development challenges, namely, natural resource management, climate change, disaster risk and rising inequalities, and outlines the four aspect of future city-building: urban and territorial planning, urban resilience, smart and inclusive cities and urban finance in terms of fifteen strategies.

In urban and territorial planning, these strategies include integrating sustainability and quality-of-life targets, identifying urban regeneration and growth strategies that spur sustainability and investment and, at the local government level, working with citizens for technological investment.

To increase urban resilience, the strategies are to scale up nature-based solutions and resilient infrastructure, assist the urban poor and the informal economy to become change agents, develop mechanisms for breaking down the silos between national, state and local authorities, utilize big data sources to connect cities and regions and improve local technological literacy.

In creating smart, inclusive cities, it recommends improving city governance to make better and more integrated planning decisions, encouraging technology businesses to be more civic-minded, developing smart investment plans and create viable funding mechanisms to facilitate cross-sector partnership and business-matching platforms.

In finding the necessary urban finance, scale up public-private partnerships and community schemes for housing solutions and building people-centred urban infrastructure and introduce congestion-charging and environmental user fees to improve urban air quality.

One perspective describes a green economy in terms of six sectors: renewable energy, green buildings, sustainable transport, water management, waste management and land management. The Global Commission on Adaptation, formed in 2018, has focused on the need to invest in early warning systems, climate-resilient infrastructure, improved dryland agriculture, mangrove protection and in making water resources more resilient.

Religion and Environmental Crime

As we have seen, all authentic religious traditions have been concerned with personal and communal morality. Pope Francis has recently spoken about environmental sin at the conclusion in October 2019 of the Amazon Synod which brought together the Churches of the eleven countries that are part of the Amazon Basin to address the issue of the destruction of the rainforests which are one of earth's most important 'lungs'. Much earlier, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew affirmed, "We have traditionally regarded sin as being what people do to other people. Yet, for human beings to destroy the biological diversity in God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by contributing to climate change, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, land and air – all these are sins".

Environmental crime is now recognized by the G8 countries, Interpol and various UN bodies though it is confined to illegal wildlife trade, smuggling of ozone-depleting substances, dumping and illicit trade in hazardous waste, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and illegal logging. However, according to the Oxford Research Encyclopedia on environmental crime, environmental crime clearly relates to the natural environment with its individual ecosystems, flora and fauna but it can also impact on human health as well as polluting water, air and soil.

In conclusion, it is not the task of religious leaders and religious thinkers to develop the detailed plans for the various sectors of a green economy. But, as our short discussion on environmental crime has highlighted, it is their task to be aware of these aspects of green thinking, incorporating them into their environmental ethical frameworks. Their moral authority which reaches right down to the grassroots of every society can influence the thinking and the behaviour of their religious followers, especially in their schools and universities but also in their urban and rural local communities. Then religion will be rightly seen as part of the solution, not part of the problem.