

How Hyndburn Works

Hyndburn Inter Faith Forum



Faith & the Environment

Quick Guide 2b (i)

The Hyndburn Inter Faith Forum hosted an event at Great Harwood in June 2009 which investigated the links between faith and the environment. Speakers from the Lancashire Council of Mosques and Christian Aid delivered talks on how their religious teachings cover the environment and how it is important for religions to work to support the environment.

Following this successful event this guide has been developed to provide a greater understanding of how faiths and the environment are intertwined and how different religions view the importance of the environment.

COMMON THEMES

The worldviews represented here share similar views and concerns, with some slight differences in detail, but overwhelming agreement on principles and the need for practical action:

- All see a continuity between human life and the natural world, with humans sharing responsibility for nurturing it
- All share a wonder and love of the natural world to be celebrated
- Pollution, recycling, the abuse of technology, excessive consumerism and consumption, are all problems we should join together to tackle
- Most would see a greater focus on the spiritual aspects of life as having positive consequences for attitudes and action
- Diversity, and variety of form and purpose, are important to our world

STEWARDSHIP of the EARTH: A MUSLIM VIEW

Islam, like other faiths, proclaims the importance of humanity's stewardship over nature. The threat of climate change is of particular concern to Muslim activists today, for both practical and theological reasons. Arguably, ecological commitment needs no specifically religious impulse; there are of course many greens not connected to a particular faith, yet eco-Islam, like other spiritual ecologies, diversifies the movement and causes us to consider the big issues. Ecology ought to be about more than fixing some energy saving light bulbs and recycling paper napkins, for it surely prompts profound questions about humanity and the rest of God's creation.

Islam – rich in poetic, meditative and compassionate narratives – has long been linked to ecology; and recently Tariq Ramadan coined the phrase "spiritual ecology". He argues that it is humanity's role to manage the world on the basis of respect for creation: not only because the Earth does not belong to us, but because more deeply and spiritually, creation is in itself an eternal and continual praise to God.

There are dozens of verses of the Qur'an that call on believers to reflect on the wonders of nature and to consider the perfect and beautiful balance in which God maintains the natural world. The Prophet Muhammad said "Truly God is Beautiful and loves all Beauty." In the Qur'an, men and women are described as God's vicegerents (khalifa) on Earth. God created nature in balance (al-mizan) and mankind's responsibility is to maintain this equilibrium through wise governance and sound personal conduct. Our aspirations in this world must be in tune with what is best for our world. Exceeding the limits will only bring about our collective downfall.

Earth matters tremendously. Our planet is beautiful, miraculous and possibly unique in the universe. The simplest answer of how to be green is very easy and requires no expert knowledge or complex skills. Here's the answer. Consume less. Share more. Be respectful. And you will enjoy life.

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STEWARDSHIP of the EARTH: A CHRISTIAN VIEW

The relationship between humans and the Earth which is often presented is one of stewardship. That we are stewards of creation brings in fundamentally the notion of responsibility, first to God as the one whose stewards we are - we are to look after the Earth, not as we please, but as God wants it looked after. Second, we have responsibility to the rest of creation as ones who stand in the place of God.

A helpful picture of stewardship is found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition in the story of creation in the early chapters of the Bible. Adam and Eve were placed in a garden, the garden of Eden, 'to work it and take care of it' (Genesis 2.15 NIV - note the word for 'work' is often translated 'serve'). We are presented with a picture of the Earth as God's garden and humans as its 'gardeners'.

What does our work as 'gardeners' imply? Here are four things:

1. A garden provides food and water and other materials to sustain life in all its forms and human industry. Note that the Genesis story not only mentions food and water but also mineral resources (Genesis 2.12).
2. A garden is to be maintained as a place of beauty. The trees in the Garden of Eden were 'pleasing to the eye'. As we contemplate creation, we experience a sense of awe and wonder at its scale, intricacy and magnificence (cf. many Psalms, especially 104 and 148). Millions of people each year visit gardens which have been specially designed to show off the incredible variety and beauty of nature.
3. A garden is a place where humans can be creative. We are created in the image of God (Genesis 1.26) which implies that we, like God, are to be creative. Humans have learnt to use their scientific and technical knowledge (e.g. to generate new plant varieties) coupled with the enormous variety of the Earth's resources to create new possibilities for life and its enjoyment.
4. A garden is to be kept so as to be of benefit to future generations. Much of our planning and planting of gardens clearly has future generations in mind! We all want to pass on to the next generation a better Earth than the one we inherited.

How well do we humans match up to ourselves as gardeners caring for the earth? Not very well, it must be said; we are more often exploiters and spoilers rather than gardeners. Some Christians have misinterpreted the 'dominion' given to humans in Genesis 1.26 (AV) as an excuse for unbridled exploitation. However, the Genesis chapters, as do other parts of scripture, insist that human rule over creation is to be exercised under God, the ultimate ruler of creation, with the sort of care exemplified by this picture of humans as 'gardeners'.

Source: <http://www.jri.org.uk/brief/christianchallenge.htm>



Much talk but little action

Many of these principles of stewardship of the 'garden' are included at least implicitly in much that is written about the environment.

The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 was the biggest international conference ever with upwards of 25,000 attendees; millions of words resulted from its conventions and resolutions.

Awareness of environmental issues has become much more apparent. We are not short of statements of ideals or of desirable action. What seems generally lacking, however, are the capability and resolve to carry them out. Lots of talk but comparatively little action.

We are only too aware of the strong temptations we experience - both personally and nationally - to use the world's resources to gratify our own selfishness and greed.

Enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed

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DISTINCTIVE VIEWS:

The Christian contribution emphasises:

Churches and congregations are 'going green' and are leading environmental action and campaigns. The links between the modern environmental movement and the traditional concept of the earth as God's creation and gift. The dangers of a (partial) view in parts of the Bible of the Earth as made for human benefit. The dangers of industrialism and capitalist greed in diverting us from God's good, simple earth. The need for partnership between religions and scientists to work together for action.

The Humanist contribution also focuses on:

The interconnection of the human and the natural world
Human welfare and happiness is inseparable from sustaining the world for our descendants
Not believing in God, humanists have to take responsibility for the problems caused by the misuse of science
Science also has the power to heal (pollution) and create (new forms of energy)

The Muslim contribution also emphasises creation:

The enormous diversity, and variety of form and function in the world is God's plan
Everything on earth - human and natural - is to be valued and cherished as God's
The Qur'an teaches us to contemplate, use wisely and nurture the whole of the natural world
Use of the earth's resources means stewardship, for other species as well as ourselves
Waste and pollution are forbidden, and there is modern Muslim scholarship on the use of toxic products and harmful methods

The Buddhist contribution emphasises:

The word Buddha means to wake up - to the way things are connected - us and nature
Not subject and object thinking, which tempts us to see nature as 'out there' which causes conflict and suffering
Achieving one-ness through the '5 precepts' - frees up energy from greed or conflict and help us realise one-ness
Mahanaya Buddhism emphasises supporting life and nature: 'engaged Buddhists' are those who take direct positive action, on environmental and other issues
Awe at the wonder of the earth enables us to think what we are willing to give up to care for it

DISTINCTIVE VIEWS:

The Jewish contribution emphasises:

The Genesis stories of creation emphasise the glory and order of the natural world
Adam is told not to spoil the world - the environment is a basic human responsibility
The Talmud has a special law against wastage - recycling is a duty
Jewish business ethics include care for where and how our possessions are sourced and made
Even if the task seems impossible, we shouldn't despair, but keep trying

The Hindu perspective emphasises:

Hindu philosophy emphasises that the universe is a projection of a spiritual underpinning defined as Brahman.
Hence the earth is revered as an expression of divinity.
The main peace invocation invokes peace not only for the living kingdom but for whole creation, animate and inanimate.
The universe is not seen as resource for man's consumption but a continuum of the spiritual world

The Sikh contribution draws links with Punjabi origins:

Farming, use and re-use of organic substances and care for the earth are basic to Sikhism
The Earth is both a mother and a sacred creation, and its resources are holy and to be shared with all
The earth is also a sacred place and should be worshipped as God's creation
It should also be a place for right action - for peace, justice and distribution according to need
Sustainable ecology means living in harmony with the earth

Source: All faiths - <http://www.afan.uk.net/print/book/export/html/1402>

Climate Change and Faith Perspectives

The earth is sacred for all regardless of your race, creed, culture or belief. Nature is the source of all living beings, a balance between all organisms, plants and creatures.

Recent global natural disasters such as the Tsunami, earthquakes, extreme weather conditions such as hurricanes have left much humanitarian loss, disrupted habitats and may drive many plants and animal species to extinction.

The PROSPECTS Foundation is Hyndburn's community owned environmental charity and is something of a unique and wonderful organisation. They support a network of PROSPECTS Panels around the borough as well as schools and community groups to help them develop projects which aim to improve the natural environment.

If you want to get involved in local environmental projects contact:

The PROSPECTS FOUNDATION

Tel: 380176

www.prospectsfoundation.org.uk

Faiths4Change - People in partnership working for the social economic & spiritual transformation of local environments

Most people want to change the world for the better. Faiths4Change aims to facilitate residents of faith and goodwill to work in partnership to do this for themselves and their communities.

World religions share common ground in their commitment to serving communities and caring for the earth & all of its inhabitants. Faith communities are often historically rooted in local neighbourhoods and have considerable resources of land, buildings, people, expertise and relationships. Most faith communities use their resources to provide many volunteer led services to all members of the community regardless of their faith.

Local residents often care passionately for their community and are keen to see it flourish. Residents serve as volunteers actively ensuring their neighbourhood thrives or that local people are part of solutions working alongside partners such as Local Authorities and voluntary sector groups.

Faiths4Change has a Development Fund which provides small grants to enable partnership projects to take place. Projects enable people to work together, gain skills and enhance their neighbourhoods socially, environmentally and economically.

Ultimately, Faiths4Change aims to enable residents to take an active role in shaping their communities for the better in England's North West, building sustainable relationships and environments in our diverse rich inner cities and towns.

Contact: Faiths4Change Tel 0151 705 2111

Email: faiths4change@liverpool-sanglican.org

Contact Lancashire Council of Mosques for a copy of the: 'Mosque Sector Environmental Policy'

The Climate Change Fund - contact Lancashire County Council on 01772 531257

www.hyndburncommunitynetwork.org.uk

Hyndburn Community Network

Suite 4, HV&CRC (Old St James School), Cannon Street, Accrington BB5 2ER

Tel: 01254 232426 Email: info@hyndburncommunitynetwork.org.uk