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English Section

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, by Thich Tri Quang (1996), translated by BINH ANSON

Buddhism and Environmental Protection
Thich Tri Quang

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Environmental protection is one of the urgent problems facing mankind today. That concern has been manifested in the the World Environment Day on 5 June 1996. All scientists, economists, philosophers, researchers through newspapers, television, radio, etc. analysed and were alarmed on the seious adverse impacts of toxic substances on the living environment of human, animals, and vegetation. It is ironic that man is the one who pollutes his own health, and kill the life of all beings in this Earth. The risk threatening our ecology is not minor. It leads to many mearures to prevent or minimise the pollution, of world-wide scale, including the ten important International Coventions to protect the environment.

The awareness of protecting life and living environment has been generated in recent time. However, in Buddhism, it is one of the main basic laws which was set out by the Buddha some 25 centuries ago for his students to follow.

In fact, Buddhism represents the way of compassion. The Buddha manifested a complete compassion and is respectfully seen as the compasionate protector of all beings. He taught that for those who wishes to follow his Path should pratice loving-kindness, not to harm the life of all beings - not only to protect mankind, but also to protect animals and vegetation. With his perfect wisdom, He saw all beings in the universe were equal in nature, and in this phenomenal world, lives of all human and animals were inter-related, mutually developing, ans inseparable.

However, men have seen themselves as the smartest species of all beings. They have misused and abused their power and selfishly destroyed these species of animals, those forests and mountains, natural resources, ... and finally reaping the results of destroyed living environment of their own. All those damages and destructions to the ecology up to an alarming level are originated from the unwholesome and greedy mind of mankind. While the animals are seen as low-level beings, however fearsome as tigers and wolves may be, they never detroy the nature as badly as done by human. Only human who cause the most devastating destruction in the Earth.

The external environment is seriously polluted because the internal environment in the mind is seriously damaged. The bottomless greed has pushed mankind to satisfy excessive and unnecessary demands, and take them into endless competitions, leading to self-destruction and environmental damage. Contrasting to the unwholesome and greedy mind is the spirit of simple living and contentment by those who practise the Buddha's teaching.

Living in contentment does not mean the elimination of desire of knowledge and truth, but to live in harmony with all beings and with nature. On that basis, those who understand the Buddha's teaching will limit their selfishness, to live in harmony with nature, without harming the environment. They will see what should be explored and to what level, what should be protected for future use by the next generations and other beings. Excessive greed to possess everything for themselves, or for their own group, has make men becoming blind. They are prepared to fight, make war, causing deaths, disease, starvation, destruction of life of all species, gradually worsening the living environment. By all means, they try to maximise their profits, without being concerned of the negative impact of unplanned exploitation leading to depletion of natural resources, discharge toxics into the air, water, earth, leading to environmental pollution, destroying the ecological balance.

For thousand years, the Buddhist forest monateries have manifested a harmonious living with nature, being established in the mountains, in the forests. Tranquil life in the forest helped Buddhist practitioners to improved their inner mind, and at the same time, they also worked for the protection of animals living in the area. With loving and tolerant heart, the Buddhists live with natural vegetation, wild animals in the forest in harmony and for mutual survival. Men used oxygen partly discharged by trees, live by their shadows, and in return, men looked after the trees. Wild animals may come to eat crops planted by the temple without running the risk to be killed. The harmonious living of Buddhism is completely different from the competitive, opposing living and fighting against the nature as seen in the West and also in an increasing number of countries in the East, which tend to destruction for selfish gains.

Today, we can still see the landscape of a number of temples and meditation retreats in Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, ... located in native forests, with green vegetation, clean and refreshing ponds and lakes, clean air, and a variety of species living in peace. These are locations which attract people from all directions coming to enjoy the nature, finding peace of mind, getting away from noisy and polluted places.

I think it is still not too late for all religions, all strata of the society and all nations to come together, jointly participate in the protection of the environment for all living species, based on the harmonious model which Buddhism always advocates.

Thi'ch Tri' Qua?ng
(July 1996)

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Note: Ven. Thi'ch Tri' Qua?ng is a Buddhist monk and Chief Editor of Gia'c Ngo^. Buddhist magazine in Vietnam

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Thai Ecology Monks

Abstract Particularly over the course of the 1990s, monks in Thailand have started to take an active role in protecting the environment. Known informally as environmentalist, or ecology monks (phra nak anuraksa), this small but visible percentage of Thai Buddhist monastics feel compelled to address environmental issues as part of their religious duty to help relieve suffering. Seeing a direct connection between the root causes of suffering (greed, ignorance, and hatred) and environmental destruction, ecology monks consider environmental activism to be well within their purview as Buddhist monastics. Drawing on Buddhist principles and practices, ecology monks have adapted traditional rituals and ceremonies to draw attention to environmental problems, raise awareness about the value of nature, and inspire people to take part in conservation efforts. Ceremonies such as tree ordination

rituals (buat ton mai), in which trees are blessed and wrapped in saffron robes to signify their sacred status, are part of a larger effort to foster a conservation ethic rooted in Buddhist principles and bolstered by Buddhist practices. Monks such as Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakun, Phrakhru Manas Natheepitak, and Phrakhru Prajak Kuttajitto have organized a wide variety of grassroots conservation initiatives, including tree ordinations and planting ceremonies, the creation of wildlife preserves and sacred community gardens, long-life ceremonies for ecologically threatened sites or natural entities, and initiatives in sustainable community development and natural farming. Ecology monks have taken stands against deforestation, shrimp farming, dam and pipeline construction, and the cultivation of cash-crops. Phrakhru Pitak, one of the most active ecology monks, has formed an umbrella non-governmental organization called Hag Muang Nan Group (Love Nan Group) to coordinate the environmental activities of local village groups, government agencies, and other NGOs in his home province of Nan. As respected leaders of Thai society, monks have a crucial role to play in transforming environmentally destructive attitudes and policies. Similarly, the centrality of the temple in Thai village life makes the conservation efforts of rural monks especially effective; thanks to ecologically-minded abbots, forest monasteries in Thailand harbor some of the last remaining natural forests.

Religion Buddhism
Geographic Location Thailand

Duration of Project Late 1980s–Present

History Although evidence of environmental activism on the part of individual monks can be traced back to at least 1975 when Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakun began to promote forest protection in his home village of Kew Muang in the northern Thai province of Nan, the phenomenon of "ecology monks" seems to have emerged most clearly in the late 1980s. In 1988, Phrakhru Pitak formed the Kew Muang Conservation Club in his home village and soon broadened his conservation efforts to other villages as well. In 1989, he coordinated environmental trainings and forest treks for more than 200 novice monks. Phrakhru Manas Natheepitak, the abbot of Wat Bodharma, adapted the traditional monk ordination ritual to sanctify trees in the late 1980s as part of a successful effort to halt logging near his forest temple in northern Thailand. With the success of Phrakhru Manas's forest protection campaign, the practice of ordaining trees has spread. In 1989, Phrakhru Prajak Kuttajitto began ordaining trees in the Dongyai Forest of northeastern Thailand. In 1991, a large gathering of monks and laypeople ordained trees in the southern province of Surat Thani to prevent the decimation of a rainforest. Later that year, Phrakhru Pitak performed his first tree ordination ceremony in Kew Muang, along with an adaptation of the phaa paa ceremony in which lay people accrued merit by offering tree seedlings to the monks instead of the traditional offerings of money or goods. That same year, Phrakhru Pitak formed the Hag Muang Nan Group. In 1993, he helped organize a ritual blessing of the Nan River, which led to the creation of a fish sanctuary in a certain segment of the river. Since then, other ecology monks have performed similar rituals and created at least nine more fish sanctuaries along the river.
Mission Statement None Listed
Partner Organizations None Listed

Long-Term Goals None Listed
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Additional Research Resources None Listed
Contact Information None Listed

Last Updated: 08/16/04

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Introduction

The environmental crisis is one that is well documented in its various interlocking manifestations of industrial pollution, resource depletion, and population explosion. The urgency of the problems are manifold, namely, the essential ingredients for human survival, especially water supplies and agricultural land, are being threatened across the planet by population and consumption pressures. With the collapse of fishing industries and with increasing soil erosion and farm land loss, serious questions are being raised about the ability of the human community to feed its own offspring. Moreover, the widespread destruction of species and the unrelenting loss of habitat continues to accelerate.

Clearly religions need to be involved with the development of a more comprehensive worldview and ethics to assist in reversing this trend. Whether from an anthropocentric or a biocentric perspective, more adequate environmental values need to be formulated and linked to areas of public policy. Scholars of religion can be key players in this articulation process. Moreover, there are calls from other concerned parties to participate in a broader alliance to halt the loss of species, topsoil, and natural resources. It is our hope to expand this alliance of scholars and activists by creating common ground for dialogue and creative partnership in envisioning and implementing long range solutions to some of our most pressing environmental problems. This is critical because the attitudes and values that shape people's concepts of nature come primarily from religious worldviews and ethical practices. The moral imperative and value systems of religions are indispensable in mobilizing the sensibilities of people toward preserving the environment for future generations.

One of the greatest challenges to contemporary religions, then, is how to respond to the environmental crisis which some believe has been perpetuated by the enormous inroads of materialism and secularization in contemporary societies, especially those societies arising in or influenced by the modern West. Others such as the medieval historian Lynn White have suggested that the emphasis in Judaism and Christianity on the transcendence of God above nature and the dominion of humans over nature has led to a devaluing of the natural world and a subsequent destruction of its resources for utilitarian ends.1 While the particulars of this argument have been vehemently debated, it is increasingly clear that the environmental crisis presents a serious challenge to the world's religions. This is especially true because many of these religions have traditionally been concerned with the paths of personal salvation which frequently emphasize other worldly goals and reject this world as corrupting.

How to adapt religious teachings to this task of revaluing nature so as to prevent its destruction marks a significant new phase in religious thought. Indeed, as the historian of religions, Thomas Berry, has so aptly pointed out, what is necessary is a comprehensive reevaluation of human-earth relations if the human is to continue as a viable species on an increasingly degraded planet. In addition to major economic and political changes, this will require adopting worldviews that differ from those which have captured the imagination of contemporary industrialized societies that view nature as a commodity to be exploited. How to utilize the insights of the world's religions is a task of formidable urgency. Indeed, the formulation of a new ecological theology and environmental ethic is already emerging from within several of the world's religions. Clearly each of the world's religious traditions has something to contribute to this discussion.

The Call and the Response

It is, however, with some encouragement that we note the growing call for the world's religions to participate in these changes toward a more sustainable planetary future. There have been various appeals from environmental groups and from scientists and parliamentarians for religious leaders to respond to the environmental crisis. In addition, there has been a striking growth in monographs and journal articles in the area of religion and ecology. Several national and international meetings have also been held on this subject. For example, environmental groups such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have sponsored interreligious meetings, such as the one in Assisi in 1986. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in North America has established an annual Environmental Sabbath and distributes thousands of packets of materials for uses in congregations throughout the United States and Canada. The Parliament of World Religions, held in Chicago in 1993 and attended by some 8,000 people from all over the globe, issued a Global Ethics of Cooperation of Religions on Human and Environmental Issues statement. International meetings on the environment such as the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders have been held in Oxford (1988), Moscow (1990), Rio (1992), and Kyoto (1993). These included religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama as well as diplomats and heads of state such as Mikhail Gorbachev, who hosted the Moscow conference and attended the Kyoto conference to set up an International Green Cross for environmental emergencies. Since 1995 a critical Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) has been convening conferences and publishing books on this topic in England. In the United States, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRP) has organized the Jewish and Christian communities on this issue. The time is thus propitious for a broad investigation of the contributions of particular religions to solving the ecological crisis, especially by developing a more comprehensive environmental ethic.

Goals of the Conferences

It is within this context that a series of conferences on "Religions of the World and Ecology" were held at Harvard University. The aims of these conferences were to provide a forum for reflection on:

Reconceptualizing attitudes toward nature by examining perceptions from religions of the world with attention to the complexity of history and culture.
Contributing to the articulation of functional environmental ethics grounded in religious traditions and inspired by broad ecological perspectives.
Identifying the institutional grounds for systematic changes to be effected within religious traditions for long-term transformation regarding attitudes toward the environment.
Stimulating the interest and concern of religious leaders as well as students and professors of religion in seminaries and universities.
Linking the transformative efforts of the world's religions to larger international movements working toward global ethics for a humane and sustainable future.
Joining with those in ecological sciences, public policy, economics, business, health, education, and media who wish to reinvent industrial society.
The conferences, then, had several key objectives, namely to stimulate original research and thinking, to encourage further educational initiatives, and to promote

outreach in relation to religious institutions and policy centers with common concerns for environmental awareness and preservation. One of the primary goals of these conferences was to link scholars in the academic study of religion with the people, proposals, and institutions that are implementing ethical change with regard to the environmental crisis. More than 1,000 scholars and activists participated in the series creating an important network for future cooperative endeavors.

Venue

The Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at Harvard Divinity School was an ideal setting for such a series of conferences. Dedicated to the study of the world's religions in their varied forms, it has supported the research of both graduate students and post graduate fellows since its founding in 1959. There are numerous scholars of religion in North America and abroad who are beginning to engage this new field of study, research, and practical outreach. They welcomed the opportunity to come to Harvard to enter into discussions of common environmental concerns. Moreover, the implications of these discussions for religious institutions and public policy centers are of enormous significance.

The Culminating Conferences

Three culminating conferences were held at the conclusion of the ten-part Harvard series. The first was at the American Academy of Arts and Science in Cambridge, Massachusetts from September 17–20, 1998. The second was a press conference and symposium at the United Nations (UN) on October 20, 1998 and the third was a conference at the American Museum of Natural History in New York on October 21, 1998.

The culminating conferences aimed to create the grounds for further partnership of religion with other key sectors working toward implementing sustainable policies and practices to ensure the well-being of future generations. Clearly religions have a central role in the formulation of worldviews that orient us to the natural world and the articulation of ethics that guide human behavior. The size and complexity of the problems we face require collaborative efforts both among the religions and in dialogue with other key domains of human endeavor.

Religions, thus, need to be in conversation with sectors—science, economics, education, and public policy—that have addressed environmental issues. Environmental changes will be motivated by these disciplines in very specific ways: namely, economic incentives will be central to adequate distribution of resources, scientific analysis will be critical to understanding nature's economy, educational awareness will be indispensable to creating modes of sustainable life, public policy recommendations will be invaluable in shaping national and international priorities, and moral and spiritual values will be crucial for the transformations required for life in an ecological age.

Thomas Berry has observed that assisting humans by degrading the natural world cannot lead to a sustainable community. The only sustainable community is one that fits the human economy into the ever-renewing economy of the planet. The human system, in its every aspect, is a subsystem of the Earth system, whether we are

speaking of economics or physical well-being or rules of law. In essence, human flourishing and planetary prosperity are intimately linked.

The culminating conferences, thus, had as one of their overall objectives, the establishment of common ground between disciplines for long-term solutions to environmental problems. Religions come as partners to these discussions, not as definitive agents of moral authority. To create a broader context for reformulating effective public policies on environmental issues it will be helpful to set in motion three ongoing strategies. The first strategy is to place disciplines in dialogue with one another respecting the different approaches and examining the values embedded in each discipline. The second strategy is to create the grounds for disciplines to work in partnership toward common environmental concerns by recognizing the need for interdisciplinary cooperation on issues of sustainability. The third strategy is to form alliances for future collaborative projects that will mobilize both the ethical transformations and practical policies needed for reinventing industrial society on a sustainable basis.

During the culminating conference at Harvard, reports by specialists in each of the traditions were presented and subsequently published in Earth Ethics 10, no. 1. In addition, panel discussions involving selected participants from the sectors of science, education, economics, and public policy were held at the culminating conference. The intention was to set the stage for future alliances between religion and other disciplines so as to motivate individuals, communities, and institutions toward long-range environmental changes. At the culminating conference at the UN on October 20th an ongoing Forum on Religion and Ecology (Forum) was announced to pursue these strategies.

Forum on Religion and Ecology

The remarkable interest generated by the three year series on “Religions of the World and Ecology” has called for some further thought on how to build on the concerns and commitments sparked by participants of these conferences. A strong sense that religions need to play a role in helping to solve the environmental crisis has emerged from these conferences. Yet religious voices need to be thoughtfully nuanced and morally persuasive so as to be effective in further discussions with both religious adherents and policymakers. The issues facing us in this environmental crisis are too pressing and complex for mere rhetorical appeals or simplistic answers. Here we suggest some ways to build on the energies and ideas of the conference series and to bring this emerging alliance to its next stage, a Forum on Religion and Ecology. The Forum will focus on three strategic objectives:

Research

To ground a field of study in religion and ecology within the academic context.

Education

To publish and disseminate curricular materials for classroom use and to make available information that will be useful to religious communities, seminaries, and other related institutions.

Outreach

To foster the religious voice in policy issues concerning the environment. The Forum hopes to encourage the intersection of religion with key sectors such as science, education, economics, and public policy.

Such a forum will have various component parts which will serve to integrate this movement on both a theoretical and practical level over the next several years. The Forum will function as an umbrella to draw together key movements, individuals, and institutions working in this area. Partner organizations include the Harvard University Center for the Environment, the Harvard-Yenching Institute, the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, and the Department of Religion at Bucknell University.

Publications and Outreach

The conference proceedings are being published by the Center for the Study of World Religions. The first four volumes, Buddhism and Ecology, Confucianism and Ecology, Christianity and Ecology, and Hinduism and Ecology, are now available through Harvard University Press. A synthesizing volume analyzing and highlighting what has been learned from the series and what ethical resources from the world's religions will contribute to sustainable practices, will also be published.

Because this is such a new field of study and there are few monographs available, these volumes are critical publications that begin to define areas for further research and courses development. Consequently, the series will be available in both hard back editions for libraries and scholars as well as paperback editions for undergraduate and graduate students. We are especially eager to encourage graduate students by suggesting areas for further research.

It is our hope that in addition to a scholarly volume resulting from each of the conferences we may be able to encourage publications in religious journals or bulletins intended for a wider audience. For example, the journal, Worldviews: Environment, Culture, and Religion, has been an important avenue for publishing articles on this topic. There are numerous venues for such discussions in and among particular religious denominations. We believe the conferences and publications will be of interest to students and teachers in seminaries as well as religious leaders and lay persons. For educators, materials will be developed emphasizing the role of religion in environmental issues for secondary schools and college level classes. Summer workshops for teachers regarding the integration of religion into environmental education will also be developed.

The project has sparked other initiatives including conferences on "World Religions and Animals," held at Harvard University in May of 1999, the "Epic of Evolution and the World's Religions" held at the Whidbey Institute in Washington in July of 1999, and the "Cosmology of Science and the Cosmology of Confucianism" held at the Whidbey Institute in July 2000. In addition, a lectureship and award in honor of Thomas Berry, one of the leading spokespersons in this field of study has been established. Recipients of this award have included Mary Evelyn Tucker (1998), Brian Swimme (1999), and Tu Weiming (2000).

Finally, the Forum participated in international efforts to develop an Earth Charter that was presented to the UN in 2002. This Charter was to be the preamble to

"Agenda 21" and other UN agreements adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The process of formulating and adopting such an Earth Charter requires the input of the world's religions. We have been working closely with the ongoing drafting process for the Earth Council based in Costa Rica.

To more effectively implement the project's goals, more than sixty organizations and individuals in religion, economics, education, science, and public policy have already announced their willingness to affiliate with the Forum. These include:

Religion—Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge (TEMEC), a strategic initiative to introduce environmental concerns into seminary education, coordinated by Dieter Hessel and Richard Clugston
Economics—The Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES), led by executive director Robert Massie
Education—University Leaders for a Sustainable Future at the Center for Respect of Life and Environment; the Center for Environmental Research and Conservation at Columbia University; and Second Nature, a non-profit organization that provides environmental education curricula to colleges and universities
Science—Mary Barber, Ecological Society of America; Niles Eldredge, American Museum of Natural History; Ursula Goodenough, Washington University; Robert Lange, Brandeis University; Robert Pollack, Columbia University; Brian Swimme, California Institute of Integral Studies; and Edward O. Wilson, Harvard University
Public Policy—Donald Brown, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection; William Moomaw, the Global Development and Environmental Institute at Tufts University; Dennis Piragis, Harrison Program on the Future Global Agenda, University of Maryland; Stephen Rockefeller, Earth Charter Drafting Committee; Timothy Weiskel, Harvard University Seminar on the Environment.

Funding for the Conference Series on Religions of the World and Ecology
The organizers wish to acknowledge the generous support of the following foundations and individuals:

The V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation
T he Aga Khan Trust for Culture
Association of Shinto Shrines
Nathan Cummings Foundation
Dharam Hinduja Indic Research Center at Columbia University
Germeshausen Foundation
Harvard Buddhist Studies Forum
Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies
Harvard Divinity School Center for the Study of Values in Public Life
Jain Academic Foundation of North America
T he Albert and Vera List Foundation
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Laurance Rockefeller
Sacharuna Foundation
Surdna Foundation
Theological Education to Meet the Environmental Challenge
The Winslow Foundation
Thomas Berry Foundation

Endnotes

1 Science 155 (1967): 1203–1207.
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This article was originally published in Earth Ethics 10, no.1 (Fall 1998).

Last Updated: 08/17/04