

# Reflections on the Environment

MARCUS BRAYBROOKE AND JACKIE TABICK

*“Reflections” is an occasional section in Interreligious Insight. Pieces draw on various traditions to unfold an important theme in spirituality, philosophy, or interreligious work. We hope that readers will make their own fruitful connections for dialogue and engagement. This issue offers Reflections on ...*



*Looking; photo, Cetta Kenney*

## Spirituality and the Environment

MARCUS BRAYBROOKE

**I**f we are to do justice to our responsibilities for the environment, we need nothing less than a spiritual revolution. I said this at a World Congress of Faiths ‘Interfaith Celebration of Animals’ event. Then the following day I read these words by Chandra

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Muzzafar of Just International: "The solutions ... require an unprecedented paradigm shift in the way in which we look at ourselves, at others, and at the planet we inhabit."<sup>1</sup>

Care of the environment is central to our concern for social justice. Droughts, which are linked to climate change, are one cause of the current food crisis. The likely rise in sea levels will endanger the poor who live in areas most exposed to flooding. Moreover the richer countries consume more of the world's resources and their carbon footprints are those of giants, if not dinosaurs. These are issues that point beyond themselves to our need to discover or recover a truly spiritual relationship to Nature.

Recently I went to Eilat in the South of Israel on the Red Sea, where there is a coral reef and an aquarium that allows you to go under water and observe the amazing variety of brightly coloured fish. I felt part of the ocean life and recognised again that every creature – "water-beings, fire-beings, plants, animals" (to quote from the Jain scriptures) from the simplest to the most complex share the wonderful gift of Life.

Donald Nicholl, a holy person and spiritual teacher, wrote of his experience one morning climbing down the steep path into the Grand Canyon in America. Seeing the different layers of fossils, he said: "You feel a true kinship with all those beings knowing that you and they trace their existence back to the first moment when life appeared on earth. And then you start to reflect that the very eyes with which you are observing these wondrous evidences are

the result of millions of years of striving for light... We are who we are thanks to the striving and sacrifice of innumerable living beings who have helped to make possible the life we enjoy."<sup>2</sup>

We are part of a chain of being that stretches back for millions of years and we need to recognise our interdependence with all life and our need to respect and care for it. This truth is to be found in all the great religious traditions. It is also affirmed in publications of the United Nations Environment Programme.<sup>3</sup>

Prophetic thinkers, such as Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo, however, go further and have emphasised that the story of evolution is a growth in consciousness, which in human beings becomes self-consciousness. The pattern of sacrifice, of life through death, which in the natural world is involuntary, now becomes a matter of choice. As Jesus said: "He who loses his life will save it."

Are we willing to lay down our lives for others? Too often we refuse and history is the repeated tragic story of killing rather than being killed. But spiritual teachers, such as Jesus who chose the way of the Cross, and the Buddha or Mahatma Gandhi and many others who preached non-violence, teach us that sacrifice is the way to life. The Environmental Crisis is not a problem out there – for World Leaders and the World Bank to solve – but a direct question to each one of us about our own spirituality. Do we reflect in the way we live, in the choices we make, in our awareness of our oneness with people of other faiths and races, in our care for

animals and our respect for nature, this reverence for all life? Are we living icons of the truth that life – all life – is precious, because it is a gift of God?

It is fascinating that mystics who plumb the depths of the Spirit and those who have explored outer space have the same message for us.

Pictures of the earth taken from space have been called a symbol for our age. Astronauts David Brown and Kalpana Chawla, who both died in the Columbia spacecraft disaster, spoke of the magical beauty of our planet as seen from space. “If I’d been born in space,” David Brown said, “I would desire to visit beautiful Earth more than I ever yearned to visit space. It’s a wonderful planet.” Kalpana Chawla said: “The first view of Earth is magical... in such a small planet, with such a small ribbon of life, so much goes on. You get the feeling that I need to work extraordinarily hard along with other human beings to respect that.”<sup>4</sup>

Mystics who have explored inner space proclaim the same message of unity. The French Jesuit and palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, said: “I live at the heart of a single, unique Element, the Centre of the Universe, and present in each part of it; personal Love and cosmic Power.”<sup>5</sup> The American environmental theologian Fr. Thomas Berry has written: “We are earthlings. The Earth is our origin, our nourishment, our support, our guide. Our spirituality itself is Earth-derived.”<sup>6</sup> Duane Elgin, a visionary author, says in his new book that “Mother Universe is nothing other than the infinitely subtle

and creative ocean of aliveness in which we are immersed.”<sup>7</sup>

Awareness of our oneness with all life and with the Source of Being should inspire in us the compassion and energy that will ensure that all people live in peace and that no one goes hungry and that the natural world is protected for future generations and that all beings are valued and their right to life is respected. To share in such a spiritual revolution is today’s exciting and challenging call to all people of faith. As the environmentalist Jane Goodall says: “We are moving toward the ultimate destiny of our species – a state of compassion and love.”<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Chandra Muzaffar, *Just Commentary*, Vol. 8, No 8, August 2008., p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Donald Nicholl, *Holiness*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>See for example, *Earth and Faith*, [www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org).

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Marcus Braybrooke, *365 Meditations for a Peaceful Heart and a Peaceful World*, Godsfield, 2004, p. 380.

<sup>5</sup>Teilhard de Chardin, quoted in “The Cosmology of Religions”, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Berry, quoted in “The Cosmology of Religions”, p. 98. See also, Thomas Berry, “The Spirituality of the Earth” in *Celebrating Earth Holy Days*, Ed. Susan J. Clark, Crossroad, 1992, pp. 69-82.

<sup>7</sup>Duane Elgin, *The Living Universe*, San Francisco, Berett-Koehler, 2009, p. 82

<sup>8</sup>Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope*, Warner Books, 1999, p. 267.