

Discovering the sleeping giant

15 people attended Ingo Hanke's talk on 13 April 2015 on the ecological potential of religions. Ingo, a Protestant priest who works in adult education, is increasingly interested in 'creation spirituality'. This short report cannot possibly do justice to the width and depth of what he said, but I have tried to summarise his main points.

The link between religion and ecology is not obvious – it has not received the attention that, for instance, the link between human rights and religion has received since 9/11, when the question of whether violence is inherent in religions has been explored. But people have begun to recognise that ecology can be a bridge between religions. As Garry Gardner pointed out in his 2002 essay, *Invoking the spirit: Religion and spirituality in the quest for a sustainable world*, billions of people worldwide are members of one or other religious group. If religions became aware of their green traditions and recognised their ecological potential, a mass movement could be born – hence the title of this talk, *Is religion a sleeping giant?*

At the beginning of the history of religions, the relationship between religion and the cosmos was unquestioned. Cave paintings recently discovered at Chauvet in France dating from 36 000 years ago are thought to have had a religious purpose and give us a window into the religious feeling of our ancestors. They also reveal a deep respect for animals.

Present-day monotheistic religions have however been criticised by the environmental movement for their anthropocentrism, and the question arises whether the Christian religion in particular is responsible for the crisis.

In contrast to the North American indigenous Lakota tribe, which maintains that this world *is* the paradise that human beings have to take care of, the Judeo-Christian tradition takes a linear view of progress towards a heaven somewhere else and in the future. This tradition also introduced the idea of a polemic between religion and nature, since God's transcendence makes nature a world of objects that we can manipulate.

Environmental experts agree that the main problem of the current environmental crisis is not a lack of technology – we have the technology that could solve it. The main problem is in people's minds. Ken Wilbur and other writers have identified a main task of religion as to push the evolution of man to be able to solve global problems and accelerate the development of human consciousness. Most religions start with the premise that people need to achieve self-awareness of their own shortcomings and aim towards a new mindset, leading to healing and a new and deeper relationship with God.

Buddhism, which has no quarrel with other religions and incorporates aspects of some of them, has much to say about our relationship with the environment and our personal responsibility for developing our minds through self-examination. One of its key tenets is that our inclination to hold onto things in a changing world is the cause of much suffering in our lives. Advertising seeks to persuade us to acquire more attachments to things, in total contradiction with Buddhist teaching, which focuses on the quality of our relationship with other people and the rest of the world, freeing ourselves from all attachments and aiming for a deep awareness of being united with every aspect of the world – a kind of cosmic consciousness. The practice of mindfulness, which is increasingly being adopted by non-Buddhists to develop concentration through meditation, helps to develop awareness of our relationship with the Earth and other creatures. Buddhists also believe in 'karma' which is basically cause and effect, and the ecological crisis is an example of cause and effect. Buddhism teaches that if we don't heal the mind we can't heal the earth.

St Paul in his letters shows that he also is concerned with the evolution of the mind. He is like a life coach, asking what we are doing with the presence of God in our lives. In Galatians (2,20) he talks about having achieved a new inner perspective – his ego is integrated into a bigger consciousness. Modern writers such as Klaus Westermann, Matthew Fox and Jim Marion have further explored the idea of cosmic consciousness.

Jesus left us no written material, but gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit, which encourages us to achieve a higher consciousness, overcoming cultural differences and becoming more sensitive to others and aware of our relationships and links to everything in the cosmos. For Jim Marion, cosmic consciousness equates to Christ consciousness, which was what Jesus called the kingdom of God – a totally new perspective in the perception of oneself and the world where one is aware of a deep unity with every being in the world.

The Jewish tradition is also concerned with the evolution of the mind, although it has a linear understanding of history and focuses on the relationship between God and man rather than man and the Earth. The first commandment, however, (Genesis 2,15) is that man should take care of the garden. The precious world, that God thought was good when he rested on the 7th day, is what we are destroying. However, in contrast to some older faiths, the monotheistic religions have no tradition of holy tracts of land, although they recognise holy buildings. The importance of animals is clear – God presents them all to Adam before He creates Eve (Genesis 2, 18-20). Jewish law contains many rules about the humane treatment of animals. The Jews could not accept the cruelty of the Roman circuses, or hunting as a sport. People who care for animals, such as the shepherd David, are highly thought of, as they are likely also to have compassion for human beings. The book of Job, with its very detailed descriptions of animals, seems to be saying that awareness of the beauty and majesty of creation is important for a deeper understanding of God.

Two important theologians of the middle ages, Thomas Aquinas and Teilhard de Chardin, also stressed the importance of learning about God through studying His creation. Both Judaism and Christianity are concerned with the question of what it means to live a full life. They see a sense of purpose in all of creation and celebrate its wealth of diversity – which means that the death of any species detracts from creation.

Islam does not have so much to say about our relationship with the environment, but Islamic theology includes the following 'green' elements: God is the creator of the world and is present in everything; Creation is perfect – there is no concept of original sin. Man is the representative of God on Earth, and therefore has to take care of it. In contrast to Christianity, science has always been a part of Islamic civilisations.

Ingo concluded that the big questions are how we understand our traditions and how we live with God's power over creation. There may be a conflict between religion and spirituality, which is the dynamic aspect of religion. Traditions need to evolve and become more sensitive.

It was clear from this talk that, if people adhered to the basic principles of their religions, they would take their environmental responsibilities much more seriously than they do. There was ample justification for the description of religion as a sleeping ecological giant, but the issue of how this giant might be awakened still needs to be addressed – perhaps in a future meeting.

There were two main themes in the discussion that concluded the evening – what we can learn from other religions and where religions in general, and Christianity in particular, are going wrong. Some of the points raised:

Most people are passive in their religious practice and don't explore their religion. They learn by

rote rather than enquiry. Most religious leaders are conservative and not explorers. We should explore our faith more deeply – the rise in popularity of meditation, which used to be the preserve of clerics, is a positive sign.

Christianity has focused too much on people's individual sins, giving rise to guilt and fear and causing us to neglect the problems of society and the wider world. The younger generation are more critical and optimistic.

The diversity of religions is a positive thing. There is diversity in nature too because this is more beautiful.

The linearity of the Judeo-Christian tradition has influenced secular understanding of such things as material progress, industrialisation and welfare, while nature tends to emphasise cycles. These two elements have to be brought into harmony. The Old Testament has references to the cyclical aspect, seedtime and harvest, etc. Some religious festivals combine the cycles of nature with points in the evolutionary relationship between God and man.

Popular Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism are in many places having a negative effect. All religions can be used both positively and negatively. The Russian Orthodox Church is very powerful at present.

Christianity focuses too much on heaven. The point of the resurrection is that Christ is resurrected on Earth. Jesus's core message – the Kingdom of God – is not in the Jewish tradition. We should focus on the Kingdom of God coming on Earth.

Jesus wanted not to found a religion, but to inspire people.

Books recommended by Ingo Hanke

by Jim Marion:

Putting on the Mind of Christ: The Inner Work of Christian Spirituality

First sentence: 'For any Christian serious about spirituality, a proper understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven is essential.'

Death of the Mythic God: The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality

by Matthew Fox:

The Coming of the Cosmic Christ

Paperback – 15 March 1990

A New Reformation: Creation Spirituality and the Transformation of Christianity

Paperback – 24 Mar 2006

Original Blessing: Primer in Creation Spirituality

Paperback – 31 Jan 1987

Philippa Seymour