



Green Pilgrimage as a model for faith based action

Address delivered by Martin Palmer on September 8, 2013 to the Song Shan Forum on Chinese and World Civilisation, Song Shan, People's Republic of China

The religious environmental movement is now into its second generation. From early starts in the 1980's, such as the Assisi Meeting hosted by WWF International in 1986 when five major faiths made key statements, through pioneering projects such as the Buddhist Perception of Nature in Asia, the US National Religious Partnership on the Environment and the UK Living Churchyards programmes, the religious environmental movement is now considered to potentially be the largest civil society manifestation of environmental concern and action.

It was WWF that pioneered this movement as an action focused movement founded upon theological, philosophical and pragmatic studies by the faiths themselves. Since 1995 and under the guidance of His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation has been the major organisation brokering practical partnerships on the environment for the faiths with key secular agencies such as the UN or World Bank. ARC has also worked with the different faith traditions to develop theological studies which were action orientated. For example our joint programme with Oxford University and the Bhumi Project on the Vedic – Hindu – Scriptures and their understanding of humanity's place within the cosmos. Or the exploration of the notion of sacred land and forests which we have undertaken in partnership with the Jinja Honcho – Association of Shinto Shrines of Japan.

The rise of a whole new section of academic studies pioneered by Mary-Evelyn Tucker and John Grim is a powerful indication of how this partnership between religion and conservation has captured the imagination of so many groups and individuals. Currently ARC is the subject of over a dozen Masters and PhDs.

What has been a problem has been the often-piecemeal approach to environmental issues by faiths as they slowly gear up to make faith consistent their practice with their beliefs.

Many faiths have done something on energy; some have worked on investments; a few have developed full blown educational programmes; many have created a new festival day for the environment; many have focused on sacred sites and landscapes;

some have worked on food issues; others have worked on issues of social justice and ecology – and so forth. What has been lacking has been a wider framework within which all these noble efforts can be put side by side and then expanded to encompass a much more holistic vision and programme of faith based action.

This is what our joint programme with UNDP – Long term plans for a living planet - and one of the outcomes of that programme, the Green Pilgrimage Network have created.

In 2007 when ARC and UNDP launched a joint programme to help faiths create long terms plans for a living planet - which is still running today - we focused on seven areas where we asked each faith tradition to assess their assets, their role and their influence both as spiritual and moral guides and as owners, producers and purchasers of resources. We asked them to reflect not just on their teachings but as importantly on what we call The Business of Religion – what they own, run, buy, sell and manage of the planet’s resources. We asked them to explore seven key areas:

- a. Assets – we asked the faiths, do you own land or forests. What investments do you have? Do you grow or provide food? Do you have clinics, health centres, hospitals, or other such assets?
- b. Education - In partnership with UNEP we have discovered that 64% of all schools in Africa are faith based. (In Kenya 80 percent of schools are faith sponsored) World wide the figure is 50%. We asked therefore, have you embedded your faith’s teachings about the environment into the curriculum? Are the school grounds as ecological as they could be? Do you train teachers in which case can you bring faith based ecology into their training?
- c. Wisdom. – Do you include care of creation in your theological courses? What stories or prayers do you have from your tradition that help us reflect on our place within nature? How faith consistent is your use of resources?
- d. Lifestyles – how can you encourage simpler living? Can you make better use of the resources you use in your place of worship through more careful and thoughtful use of resources?
- e. Media and Advocacy – the faiths are one of the largest media networks in the world with thousands of radio stations, hundreds of TV stations and over a million publications. The printing of the Bible and the Qur’an now touches one hundred million copies per year. How can the media – including increasingly social media such as the Sikh websites – you run further the cause of environmental protection? Can your media be part of an advocacy programme – for example in the way the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims lobbied the Kenyan Parliament to impose stricter punishments on those caught engaging in the illegal wildlife trade?
- f. Partnerships – we know the faiths cannot do this alone. That is why ARC is called the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. So we encourage faiths to seek out appropriate and relevant partners with whom they can work locally, regionally and internationally.

- g. Celebration – every major faith tradition now has a special day or period of the calendar set aside to focus on the environment. Whether that is Creationtide in the Christian churches which runs from Sept 1st to Oct 4th; Tu B'Shevat in Judaism; Sikh Environment Day (the birthday of Guru Har Rai Ji) or the birthday of Lao Zi, this provides a focus for the annual renewal of commitment to environmental action. It also allows us to celebrate successes. The environmental movement is not good at celebrations and has tended instead to seek to depress us with the awfulness of the situation. Psychologically faiths know that you can tell people they are bad some of the time but not all of the time!

The first 31 long term plans were launched in the presence of UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and ARC's founder, Prince Philip in 2009. The second and third launches of long term plans – at Assisi in 2011 and at Nairobi in 2012 has brought the total to sixty. But what is of particular interest is what the initial launch helped create: The Green Pilgrimage Network.

It began because several of the faiths' long term plans had in a common a desire to green their places of pilgrimage. Greening the Hajj- the largest annual Muslim pilgrimage- was part of the aim of the Muslim 7 year plan. Greening Medina was part of the aim of the Muslim 7 year plan. Greening Jerusalem was part of the Jewish long term plan- greening Etchmiadzin was key for the Armenian Orthodox and Greening Amritsar was central for the Sikh plan. Thus emerged the idea of establishing a network of pilgrimage cities and sites that would commit themselves to make their pilgrimages as environmentally sensitive as possible.

In 2011 in Assisi, Italy, this network was launched with cities – both the religious and the secular sides of each city – making the commitment to green their pilgrimages.

What does this mean in practice?

To start with it means it has to be a partnership. For Green Pilgrimage to work, it has to be a programme developed between local religious authorities and the secular authorities. Otherwise it simply will not work. To tackle issues such as water, energy, food and hospitality just from a faith basis will never achieve the levels of transformation that can be achieved when a faith group works with the secular administration.

For example: Louguan city to the south of Xi'an in Shaanxi Province is the first Chinese Green Pilgrimage city. Here the partnership has been between the Louguantai temple – the legendary site where Lao Zi wrote the Dao de Jing – and the Provincial, County and City authorities. This has resulted in \$1.b million being invested in sustainable infrastructure over the last two years to provide organic foods, alternative energy supply, eco-friendly transport and a whole range of religious and ecological programmes for pilgrims and visitors. In Scotland, the two

Green Pilgrimage centres of Luss and the holy island of Iona are now partners with the local authority, Argyll and Bute, in a joint programme to provide green pilgrimage transport, food and accommodation across the entire area – roughly one quarter of the whole of Scotland.

It means not just looking at what happens when pilgrims arrive at their destination but also how they get there in the first place. For example in Islam, the journey to the Hajj – the annual pilgrimage to Makkah – involves entire official ministries in all Muslim countries. Initial explorations of greening the process of getting to Makkah from Indonesia, Nigeria and Malaysia has proved so successful that next year ARC will co-host a meeting of the Hajj ministers from over thirty Muslim countries to work on a green policy for all sending countries.

It means looking at how greening pilgrimage can contribute to local, national and regional commitments by secular authorities on issues as diverse as climate change; water preservation; sustainable housing and waste disposal. In India, in partnership with the largest local government association for sustainability, ICLEI, ICLEI GPN is surveying five cities and looking at how a faith component will complement and aid the secular authorities' targets on climate change reduction as mandated by the Indian Parliament.

It is this vision that has begun to be adopted around the world because, as HRH The Prince of Wales's Special Environmental Advisor Tony Juniper says:

“Being a Green Pilgrimage city or town means far more than just dealing with tourism responsibly: this is an ethos that can have a role in every element of urban decision-making”

To aid this exciting new development in faith based conservation we have developed a handbook – shortly to be translated into Chinese - and it opens with a vision.

-- What would your pilgrim city be like if it were a green, sustainable city?

-- What would your pilgrimage route be like if it were green, sustainable route, in keeping with your beliefs?

Many cities around the world are engaging increasingly with green issues – partly because they are responding in a responsible way to the global environment crisis, and partly because this is what voters are asking for. And partly because planning decisions that are carried out with ideals of healthy air and water, greenbelt areas where wildlife thrive, clean transport systems, well-insulated and beautiful buildings, and a sense of aesthetics which makes people happy where they live, are all long-term decisions that make members of the city leadership and councils proud of what they have done in their working life.

If your city is a pilgrim city – a place where people go in order to be transformed in the rest of their lives – then you have an extra responsibility and an extraordinary opportunity. It is easy today, while making pragmatic cost-led decisions about development, or struggling with issues of bins or schools or prisons or traffic-snarled roads, to forget the element of profound faith that brings many people to your city, and that by harnessing this element you can find some solutions.

Our vision is of pilgrims and the pilgrim cities that receive them becoming models of care for the environment, and leaving a positive footprint on the Earth.

We devised with our colleagues in the many faith traditions the following key steps in designing a Green Pilgrimage.

The first step: A theology

The first step is to explore why caring for the environment has a role in your faith, and therefore why the pilgrim cities in your region or country have a particular reason to be ecologically based. Each faith member group of the Green Pilgrimage Network has therefore committed to draw up a theological statement to share with their followers.

The second step: A declaration of commitment

Once the city and the faith have decided to join the Green Pilgrimage Network, they need to create and sign a document of commitment. This could be a simple commitment for the faith group and the city to work together to make their city a green pilgrim city. Alternatively the city might want to sign a charter designed between the faith and the secular authorities that would reflect the specific issues and needs of that place. Such Charters have for example already been drawn up in Kano Nigeria, in Etchmiadzin in Armenia, in St Albans in England , in Luss in Scotland and in Trondheim in Norway.

The third step: an environmental audit

It is vital to do an environmental audit of your buildings, land, places of worship and practices at an early stage. This gives a clear idea of what faith leaders and civic authorities are already doing, and it indicates quickly where you could have a more positive impact.

A good example would be Interfaith Power and Light in the USA which works with more than 4,000 congregations and faith communities in 38 states to promote energy

conservation. It has a simple Cool Congregations Calculator to help faiths work out their carbon emissions in areas including energy, transportation, purchasing and waste.

The fourth step: a strategic plan

Without a clear plan, many great ideas come to very little. Start by asking the following questions: what do we want to have achieved in five years? In 10 years? In 20 years? For the next generation? Other questions you need to ask are:

- **What does it mean, for us, to be a green pilgrim city or town?**
- **Who will help us?**
- **Where will we look for funding?**
- **What are the next steps?**

There is a wealth of guidance on strategic planning on sustainable urban tourism.

For example: the Canada-based independent tourism expert Rachel Dodds has an influential website, with sample policies, case studies and strategy documents from around the world. It includes a useful checklist of questions for town and city authorities to ask themselves before they draw up a scheme.

To illustrate some of the ways these steps are being undertaken by our newest members who formally joined at the Trondheim meeting in Norway where we also officially welcomed the Confucianist Tradition as the twelfth tradition to join ARC, let me take you through the scale of issues they confront, the nature of the pilgrimages and the plans they are working on already.

(Powerpoint Presentation)

ARC and its partners such as the UN, ICLEI, WWF and the many local, national and regional authorities with whom we work believe that the model of Green Pilgrimage offers a way in which theology and philosophy can be transformed into action; a way in which practical action can have a profound spiritual and moral influence and role; that the partnerships between religious and secular can work at a simple as well as more complex level and build trust where often there has been little trust before; can mobilise through the largest collective human activity pilgrimage, millions of people to reflect, act and pray for a better world – based on their own teachings fused with the innovative skills of the modern environmental movement world wide.

Green Pilgrimage therefore offers perhaps one of the very best ways in which faith based action on the environment can have for those sacred places, a coherence which otherwise would not exist.

We know that over 200 million people travel as pilgrims every year. We know the scale of pilgrimage in pilgrim cities in places like India.

The potential here is for transformation on a multiplicity of levels - transformation of pilgrims who prepare mindfully for pilgrimage; transformation of those destinations as role models, inspiring and bringing about change when a pilgrim returns home.

The potential too in harnessing the relationship between the secular and religious world into working on a mutually beneficial relationship – one of equality and of shared goals. Local authorities need to work on infrastructure in pilgrimage places from waste to water. Faith groups have a theological mandate to be part of that process. Action through GPN gives expression to that faith mandate.

Transformation comes too in joining up efforts - from the huge infrastructure challenges to the small scale individual action- whether the planting of a tree before going on the Hajj or the decision not to buy water in plastic bottles to using a plastic bag. So here we have an empowering, encompassing structure that encourages action on every level - joining the religious and the secular; the personal with the public; the historic with the contemporary.

Martin Palmer
Secretary General of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation
13-09-08

