

REVIEW: JOURNAL OF BELIEFS AND VALUES. 1993.

World Religions and Ecology series, Cassell in association with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF UK):

- *Hinduism and Ecology: seeds of Truth* (Ranchor Prime);
- *Buddhism and Ecology* (M. Batchelor and K. Brown, ed.);
- *Judaism and Ecology* (Aubrey Rose ed.);
- *Islam and Ecology* (F. Khalid with J. O'Brien, ed.); and
- *Christianity and Ecology* (E. Breuille and M. Palmer, ed.)

These are very welcome titles from WWF UK's expanding range of environmental materials with a focus on religious education. In general the books highlight both doctrine and action, providing a future agenda for further development. There are no books with Sikh or Bahá'í perspectives.

Ranchor Prime (*Hinduism and Ecology*) is a Hindu from Leeds, WWF UK's Religious Network Officer who is running a tree planting project in Vrindavan, India - a pilgrimage town devoted to Krishna. His book *is* a well-written mix of teaching, myth, current actions, needs and exhortation. His story *is* one of environmental impoverishment in India, a process in which imperial powers have played no small part. Hinduism has ecological concerns at its heart: yet Prime *is* concerned not only that the west learns from this, but that Hindus themselves take ecology more seriously: "Despite their deeply ecological tradition, most Hindus are surprisingly unconcerned about their surroundings to an extent which often shocks the outsider" (p.22). An important section analyses Gandhi's vision of village economics - focusing on individual responsibility and non-violence as a way of life: "We are all partners in the destruction of nature, because we all agree to benefit from its spoils" (p.61). Hinduism advocates giving and self sacrifice, hospitality and pilgrimage: "pilgrimage is the environmental alternative to tourism" (p.76). The reality of India shows that much has to be done to raise people's awareness to their environment - and the forest planting scheme in the pilgrim town of Vrindavan has not only a practical but a symbolic function.

Buddhism and Ecology offers contributions by twelve well-chosen writers. Buddhist philosophy begins with love, compassion and respect for all life. Karma, the principle of causality, means that we cannot escape from the consequences of our attitudes. We are inextricably bound up with causes outside ourselves and with all nature "denying us any autonomous existence...compassion for others should be as natural and instinctive as compassion for ourselves and our own bodies" (p.ix). To transform our world we must transform ourselves. The second section, on The practice, features Helena Norberg-Hodge's analysis of Ladakh, *Ancient Futures* (Rider) on spirituality as everyday life, recognizing the wholeness of all things. Meditation helps to achieve a state of calm and to dispel delusion. "Non-violent thinking" can help to conquer the individualistic greed of the west ("how can we survive on a planet of ten billion points of infinite greed?", p.74) and "engaged Buddhism" incorporates social action - with examples from Sri Lanka and Thailand. A Vietnamese monk linked meditation and practice: "Meditation's purpose *is* to be aware of what *is* going on in ourselves and in the world". His Holiness the Dalai Lama ends with his Nobel Peace prize lecture: "We must develop a sense of universal responsibility...Responsibility...lies with each of us individually. "

In *Judaism and Ecology*, Rose has collected a range of short articles to supplement his own material. Judaism shows environmental concern, but we should not expect historic texts to exactly fit modern agendas. Two officials of the society for the Protection of Nature in

Israel indicated the high priority given to ecology as nature is an example of God's creative power. Pick analyses "the sources of vegetarian inspiration", placing meat-eating throughout species as part of the sinful era between paradise and the Messianic age - a line of behaviour not without consequences. The ecology of north and south Israel is compared, the boundary between two climate zones. There are examples too of reserves, sanctuaries and ecology groups. The book concludes with practical guidelines for individuals and synagogues.

Islam and Ecology, again multi-authored, ensures that Qu'ran and hadith quotations justify the case. The result is a compelling accumulation of "evidence" providing a very strong environmental case for Muslim readers. Non-Muslim readers are able to see the Muslim mind at work, moving from proof text to issue, and back to proof text. In addition there are powerful sections, such as the unjustifiable use of 100 acres to feed 20 people on meat, when 610 people could have been fed if the ground had been used for pulses (p.16); and the unjustifiable cruelty of intensive rearing of animals (pp.16f). If Muslims accept environmental protection as an ethical duty, they could become a great power for good (p.34). There is a section on Islamic approaches to science, and how this could affect the values expressed by science about the environment. There are useful chapters on rights to natural resources, and a straightforward account of how the ban on usury affects trade and commerce - to demonstrate how unjust and artificial the western system is. People close to the earth are being separated from it, by chain-saw gangs and deserts. We need to "relearn how all things in Allah's creation are interrelated and to realise that we are part of the same" (p.110). The book would benefit from examples of action to complement the doctrinal analysis.

These volumes are invaluable resources for student or general reader. *Christianity and Ecology* is the least satisfactory - negative, apportioning blame to Christianity and to western civilization built upon Christianity. A clear Christian environmental agenda struggles to emerge - and by the time it does, in the last chapter, many readers would have put the book down. Confession can be helpful, but negativity can impede progress. The analysis of Christian teaching is unfocused, benefiting neither the Christian nor non-Christian reader. A chapter on Greek orthodoxy arrives at a doctrinal point worth pursuing - that humans as God's representative on earth are responsible - and alone responsible for preserving God's creation. coupled with the account of the fall, where humans failed to conquer mortality (p.60), the doctrine is not heartening. The view that what it means to be human involves rationality and freedom needs a counterview, that it is a greater human trait to behave irrationally, and deprive others of freedoms: the individual throughout history has enjoyed very little physical freedom. There are chapters on monasticism returning close to the land, with the confession that environmental awareness is a recent insight. The overall impression is that the Christian churches have not yet really begun to address environmental issues, but is making some progress in small ways. Instead of looking back, it would have been better to look forward, projecting Christian ideals onto agendas which have now become very clear and in need of urgent action.

Overall, the series gives a positive impression of the contribution religion could make in future environmental protection. Religions may have in them the seeds of future hope - if only they reshape their agendas to allow principles to address new circumstances where their respective historic traditions do not offer solutions.
Stephen Bigger 1993.

Postscript 2010.

Although the climate-change agenda today is impacting on policy and practice, this mainly focuses on maintaining a comfortable world for humans. Issues about the environment, habitat and wildlife require ethical sensitivity rather than self-interest. The above accounts show a variation in religious response. It is an open question whether religious belief helps or hinders environmental action: the more ethical the religion is, the more it is likely to be helpful; the more literalistic it is, the less it will impact, or even be a negative factor. Much is a matter of definition. If Genesis 1 says that humans should rule the world, does rule imply enlightened governance or sole ownership taking no account of the “ruled” – tyranny or despotism, in fact. Genesis 1 actually advocates vegan eating, and the use of animal flesh and skins is introduced as part of a sinful era, after “the fall”. The ideal of world peace, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, is a dream of spiritual leaders such as Isaiah. Animals may not be likely to do this, but humans at least are able to make choices, and could stop viewing animals only as food. If Genesis 1 tells humans to fill the world, it doesn’t comment about what to do when it is full. If there is insufficient food to feed the human population (and also the wild animal population) properly, then it is full. Bans on birth control become counter productive to the thriving of humans and animals. These issues are still live and a next generation of these kind of books is still needed in the 21st century.

Volumes on Sikhism and the Bahai Faith were not produced then. Sikhs are vegetarians by tradition, with a very strong ethical and democratic doctrine. This has a powerful contribution to make, and a foundation to help to re-educate Sikhs today. The Bahai Faith advocate equality and democracy, and take an ethical stance both to the environment and community action. New books critically assessing the relationship between religions and environmentalism are needed even more today.