

Reflections on Climate Change

ROD DUNCAN, ALAN RACE, HERBERT BRONSTEIN,
SACHIN NANDHA, AND GUSHARAN THANDI

“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 the Earth’s climate.

A BAHÁ’Í RESPONSE

ROD DUNCAN

Bahá’í Star: original art.
Gary E. Stewart



We stand at a unique moment in human existence. It was only a few decades ago that the human race acquired the capacity to annihilate itself through nuclear war. And in this decade we have come to a certainty that continuing to pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere will derange the equilibrium of the global climate. These are not age old problems taken to a new degree. They are fundamentally new. They are global.

Writing in the nineteenth century, Baha’u’llah, the founder of the Baha’i Faith, wrote: “The wellbeing of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.” This unity has outer, material, and organisational aspects. It also has an inner, ethical, spiritual aspect. The solution to the global problems we now face must include both.

If the problem of climate change were restricted to one city, if that city produced all the greenhouse gasses and the pain of climate change were to be visited on it alone, the citizens would undoubtedly do all in their power to find a solution. Every individual and every household would make the necessary changes in lifestyle because all would know the terrible consequences of inaction.

Similarly, if the problem were confined to one nation, the government and the people of that nation would work together to solve it. Laws would be passed. Lifestyles would be changed.

Rod Duncan is a novelist, screen-writer, poet, teacher of creative writing, and member of the Baha’i community of Leicester, UK.

Alan Race, of St. Philip’s Center, Leicester, is Editor in Chief of Interreligious Insight.

Herbert Bronstein is Senior Rabbi Emeritus of North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois.

Sachin Nandha is founder of the Institute for Global Change, which aims to facilitate public debate on how education can properly enhance human capacities and equip people for holistic living.

Gursharan Thandi is a member of the Sikh community of Leicester and a representative of the Leicester Council of Faiths.

But the problem of climate change is global and the nations have so far failed to act with the unity required to solve it.

Achieving a degree of material, organizational unity sufficient to combat global climate change will require new institutions and a new way of thinking. The Baha'i writings call for the establishment of an international legislature and a comprehensive code of international law adequate to combat the global problems we now face. In the words of Baha'u'llah: "The Earth is but one country and mankind its citizens." But that alone is not enough. Indeed, without an inner unity it would be impossible. This inner unity requires us all to widen the circle of our loyalty beyond our race, beyond our nation and even beyond our religion. It calls us back to the fundamental meaning of the word "religion" – to bind together.

In this day the highest manifestation of religion should be our being bound together as one human family, unified in all our rich diversity.

Of course, there are those who say that human nature is incorrigibly selfish and that we will therefore never be sufficiently united to resolve these issues. Paradoxically, this belief tends to push people towards a paralysis of will and itself becomes an obstacle to progress. On this the Baha'i writings point towards hope. Just as the human race has progressed in the past, widening circles of loyalty from the tribe to the city state, from the city state to the nation, so, Baha'u'llah states, will we progress again, towards a realisation of

the organic oneness of the entire human race.

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

ALAN RACE



Christian Cross; photo, Cetta Kenney

It is often said that the Christian Bible begins in a garden (Eden) and ends in a city (new Jerusalem). If the movement from garden to city is a metaphor for the journey from simplicity to complexity, from countryside to urban environment, then in relation to climate change we have a problem. For while there is no returning to the countryside-garden innocence of pre-industrial human living, the urban-city has become so compromised as an image of human flourishing that we are left scrabbling around for an image that might be worthy of a future worth inhabiting.

Yet the garden lives on in the city and the city invades the garden. The question is one of balance: how to celebrate the city without the romanticism of the garden and how to honour the garden without losing the vitality of the city. I believe that this balance can be achieved by contemplation of three guiding values: mutuality, interconnect- edness and responsibility. Let me take each in turn.

First, mutuality. A new phrase has been coined in Christian circles during

the environmental campaigns of recent years – climate justice. We think of justice as a relationship between human beings within and between communities, establishing access to the world's goods and services and sharing their benefits. In the light of struggles for justice between cultural, ethnic and religious groups, nationally and internationally, we are learning that the same struggles are inherent in the dynamics of human-made climate change. The rich world has produced the carbon and the poor world bears the negative consequences with their loss of livelihood and sustainability. To be set free from the ravages of climate change is a cry for justice. The language of justice at the heart of all Christian liberation theologies has entered the environmental lexicon and is binding all of earth's communities in relationships of mutual accountability.

Second, interconnectedness. In the light of cosmological and evolutionary sciences the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is undergoing major re-evaluation. The extension of creation backwards in time and sideways in space entails that human consciousness is part of a story which we have hardly begun to comprehend. A belief in creation, anyway, was always more about an intuition that the world is not its own explanation, and that we are part of something much larger than we might imagine, as it was about a beginning point in time. That 'larger' is underlined now by the sense of interconnectedness of which climate change has made us dramatically aware. The theme of the whole created order giving praise to God is a

spiritual way of capturing this sense of interconnectedness. God's beauty, truth and goodness – spirit and wisdom, if you prefer – are reflected in all life and not just in human life. To reconnect with a basic attitude of praise might go a long way towards moderating our baser exploitative instincts and policies in relation to the earth itself.

Third, responsibility. The basis for this lies in the notion of stewardship. In the rush to blame all dualisms (egs. separations of God and World, of persons and nature, of economics and compassion) for our current climate change dilemmas, let us not dismantle that sense of self-transcendence, with its joys and its tragedies, which is also part of human experience. We are one with all life, but also self-consciously aware of the flow of all life. This is the origin of our responsibility for how the earth is treated, how we think of our place within it, and how we should behave accordingly. A hurting world deserves being listened to and climate change is its cry for recognition. Would it be too much to call up compassion as our appropriate ethical response to the hurting earth itself? Stewardship entails much more than simply 'managing' from some supposed point of superiority in a hierarchy.

Both garden (basis of life) and city (flourishing of life) deserve their place in a balanced view of responding to climate change. The 3-fold cord of mutuality, interconnectedness and responsibility will surely be part of any new human future which may emerge from the coming transformations brought about by climate change.

A JEWISH RESPONSE

HERBERT BRONSTEIN



*Jewish Star; photo,
Cetta Kenney*

We are all seeking the resources of the spirit in our confrontation with climate change, a chaos-monster of our own making, which has been tipping our earthly home into a possible downward spiral of potentially inexorable deterioration.

We turn to an ancient parable: “God says to Adam (“Humankind”): ‘I have made many worlds before this one. This one is especially good and beautiful. Take care to protect it and preserve it because, if, through you, it comes to ruin, there is no one to repair it after you. And besides, you will be responsible for the passing of many, many thousands of my creatures. (*Kobelet Rabbah on Eccles. 7.14*).’”

This homily-nugget is found in an 8th century CE collection of sermons on verses from Ecclesiastes. In this case the verse is: “Who can (is to) repair that which has been distorted?”

Some say that climate change is either not taking place or, if it is, it is an aspect of nature’s cycles with which human activity has nothing to do. Science disagrees with this viewpoint. Just as in the parable, the vast majority of scientists in the world tell us that we must accept responsibility and accountability for climate change and thus, the well being and healing of nature. The

ancient rabbis had a phrase: “We are partners with God in the work of creation, in *Tikkun Olam*, the preservation and repair and perfecting of this our earthly habitation. The massive destruction of forests in Thailand, in Brazil, in the American Pacific Northwest, the forests which both absorb CO₂ and produce oxygen, the killing of the forests in Colorado by invasive beetles, the melting of glaciers and the polar ice caps, the loss of many species are all part and parcel of the effects of climate change. The threat to this beautiful earth is so great as to require nothing less than the response of multitudes of the children of Adam, humankind, world-wide.

The first century Palestinian sage, Rabbi Joshua the son of Hananiah provides another parable which complements the first: “Two men are in a boat out on high waters. One begins drilling a hole in his side of the boat. The other, frightened, remonstrates: ‘What in the world are you doing!?’ the other answers bluntly: ‘This is my side of the boat!’” Our society is captive to a privatistic hyper-individuality, each person out for himself, for his own personal gain, with an accompanying atrophy of “the sense of the other”. An oil refinery, for example, dumping toxic effluents into a Great Lake claims “this is my side of the lake. I own this property.” But we are in the same boat and ancient Scriptures says that the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof....You are merely sojourners on it.” The earth is not just a resource for private gain or a dump for private refuse.

And this brings us to the third

and last archetypal story: Moses on the mountain receives the moral law. But down below the people are worshipping the Golden Calf. When we look to find the source-causes of climate change, we often find the worship of the Golden Calf, the greed for material gain. And everywhere we find opposition to plans or programs or laws which mitigate the negative affects of climate change again we often find the Golden Calf. Or we find the ignorance or misinformation promoted by worshipers of the Golden Calf.

Science and technology give us the tools needed to stop climate change and reverse its negative effects. What we need is a spiritually ethically based consciousness and values to build a worldwide coalition of energy and will to put those scientific tools to use.

On the Jewish High Holiday of the New Year which celebrates the creation of the world, we are given a metaphor. Imagine a large scale of balances; on one side are put all the single good deeds of all of humans and on the other side of the scale, all the destructive deeds of all human beings. One deed of one person can tip the scale to one side or the other. The well being of the world is in the balance. Every life preserving act we do counts for the perfecting of creation. Whatever wasteful, destructive or heedless act can tip the scales of climate change to more destruction.

The Prophet Isaiah put it: “Not for chaos, destruction, did God create the world. For habitation God formed it! (Isaiah 45.18).”

A HINDU RESPONSE

SACHIN NANDHA



Hindu Om; photo Cetta Kenney

The Vedic traditions of Hinduism offer imagery that values the power of the natural world. Scholars of the Vedas have held forth various texts and rituals that extol the earth (*bhu*), the atmosphere (*bhuvah*), and sky (*sva*), as well as the goddess associated with the earth (*Prthivi*), and the gods associated with water (*Ap*), with fire and heat (*Agni*), and the wind (*Vayu*). They have noted that the centrality of these gods and goddesses suggests an underlying ecological sensitivity within the Hindu tradition. In later Indian thought, these Vedic concepts become formalized into the Samkhya denotation of five great elements (*mahabhuta*): earth (*prthivi*), water (*jal*), fire (*tejas*), air (*vayu*), and space (*akasa*). The meditative and ritual processes of Hinduism entail awareness of these constituents of materiality. Daily worship (*puja*) employs and evokes these five powers.

Hinduism has long revered the tree. Early seals from the Indus Valley cities (c. 3000 BCE) depict the tree as a powerful symbol of abundance. References to India's trees can be found in a wide range of literature, particularly in epic and poetic texts. India has a long history of forest protection, from the edicts of Asoka, to the individual work of various

Rajas, to the modern Chipko movement, wherein women have staved off forest destruction by surrounding trees with their own bodies.

Rivers have been and continue to be an integral part of Hindu religious practice. More than fifty Vedic hymns praise the Sarasvati, a river (now dry) associated with the goddess of learning and culture. The Ganges River which flows through northern India likewise is referred to as a goddess originating from the top of Siva's head in the Himalaya Mountains, giving sustenance to hundreds of millions of modern Indians. Traditionally, the rivers of India have always been considered pure. Modern industrial contaminants and human wastes have fouled the rivers, though Ganges water still plays an important role in India's ritual life.

Hinduism offers a variety of cosmological views which may or may not situate the human in the natural world in an ecologically friendly manner. On the one hand, the agrarian and often near-wilderness images of India found in the Vedas, Upanisads, and epic texts present a style of life seemingly in tune with the elements. The Samkhya and Tantra traditions affirm the reality and efficacy of the physical world. On the other hand, the Advaita Vedanta tradition asserts that the highest truth involves a vision of oneness that transcends nature and, in a sense, dismisses the significance of the material world by referring to it as illusion or *maya*.

One model of Hindu spirituality encourages physicality through yoga practices that enhance the health of

the body and the vitality of the senses. Other spiritual paths advocate renunciation of all sensual attachments to the world. However, even within the paths that relegate worldly concerns to a status of secondary importance, the doctrine of Dharma emphasizes a need to act "for the sake of the good of the world". Particularly in regard to such issues as the building of dams in the Narmada River Valley, this requires taking into account social ecology or the need to integrate environmental policy with the daily needs of tribal and other marginalized peoples.

The current worldwide ecological crisis has come to our attention during the past four decades and its effects have been felt within South Asia more recently. As the region copes with decreasing air quality in its cities and degraded water in various regions, religious thinkers and activists have begun to reflect on how the broader values of Hindu tradition might contribute to fostering greater care for the earth. Gandhi's advocacy of simple living through the principles of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and holding to truthfulness (*satyagraha*) could give some Hindus pause as they consider the lifestyle changes engendered by contemporary consumerism. Most of the Hindu population lives within villages that, barring natural disasters such as flood or drought, are self-sustaining and use resources sparingly. However, as the population of South Asia increases, and as the modern lifestyle continues to demand consumer goods, the balance of sustainability can shatter. With appreciation and acknowledgment of the five

great elements, with a new interpretation of social duty (*dharma*) expanded to include the ecological community, and with remembrance of its ethic of abstemiousness, the Hindu tradition can develop new modalities for caring for the earth.

According to Hindu religion, “*dharanath dharma ucyatē*” – that which sustains all species of life and helps to maintain harmonious relationship among them is *dharma*. That which disturbs such ecology is *adhharma*. Hence we can say:

*As the unwise act attached to
action, Bharata,
so the wise should act unattached,
intending to maintain the world ...*

A SIKH RESPONSE GURSHARAN THANDI

Sikh Symbol: original Art
Swami Tapasnananda



As Sikhs, our ties to the environment around us is very important and, in a sense, it is spiritual. The

histories of our Gurus tell us tales of the places where they sat in meditation, in deep forests and high upon mountains and beside rivers. There is something magical and transcendent about praying in nature’s spaces – the connection and the feeling of oneness is very apparent – a life that suggests mastery over oneself rather than over nature.

Two of our fundamental beliefs are service to the community and equality between people, values which encourage a spirit of co-operation and sharing of resources equally. This is seen in our community kitchens which are maintained by voluntary service. Many farmers in the Punjab grow their crops organically because they feel that the earth must be respected and treated well. Water is a primary link between human beings and nature.

Ten years ago, Sikh communities around the world celebrated the inauguration of “The Cycle of Creation”. Sikhism follows three hundred year cycles – the most recent of which ended in 1999. In 1699, a time of terrible persecution of the Sikhs, the coming cycle was named “The Cycle of the Sword”. The three hundred years that followed were certainly dominated by armed struggles. But the Cycle of creation, which we have just entered, has already led to dramatic changes in environmental practices by Sikh Gurudwaras.

It has also led to a launch of a new initiative called EcoSikh. This is the Sikh community’s contribution to the United Nations Alliance of Religions and Conservation (UNARC) Seven Year Plan project, whose aim is to help the world’s major religions create long term plans to improve their relationship with the environment. The plans, in which each tradition celebrates its unique relationship with the environment and puts its teachings on ecology into action, were launched at a major event at Windsor Castle, UK, in November 2009, and were used to

inform the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen the following month.

The EcoSikh Five Year Plan is a historic decision of commitment by Sikh communities around the world to make our children's future greener. It contains many far-reaching ideas for improving eco practices at different levels – individuals, Gurudwaras and links with the wider community. For example, the fact that all Gurudwaras run a *langar* (communal kitchen) involves them in the production of food on a massive scale. If the whole system of sourcing, purchasing, preparation and cooking became a self-consciously green process this would make a substantial difference to the way energy was being used. And such self-conscious attention to detail

would make a wonderful statement to wider society that changes for the better can be made.

The Eco Sikh Five Year Plan contains many ambitious proposals – for instance, for mass educational work around the world on how eco principles are reflected in Sikh understanding, and for twinning projects to help share and embody best practices.

Sikhism teaches us that we create the environment around us and that our surroundings are a reflection of our inner state. The increasing barrenness and the desolation of our planet reflect a spiritual emptiness within us. The solution, according to our Gurus, lies in prayer and caring for the world around us – the very principles of eco-theology laid down by Guru Nanak Devji.