

# THE ASSISI DECLARATIONS

**I**N SEPTEMBER 1986, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) celebrated its 25th anniversary by bringing together, for the first time in history, five major world religions to declare how their faith leads each of them to care for nature.

What resulted were the Assisi Declarations: calls from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Islamic leaders to their own faithful. After Assisi, three more faiths – Bahá'í, Jainism and Sikhism – produced declarations to accompany those of the other religions. Their messages, excerpts of which follow as they were issued, are of tremendous significance for the future of the environment.

In these calls, the interconnectedness of religious and environmental concerns was acknowledged, along with the fundamental importance to all traditions of safeguarding the planet as a common inheritance.

*"We are convinced of the inestimable value of our respective traditions and of what they can offer to re-establish ecological harmony; but, at the same time, we are humble enough to desire to learn from each other. The very richness of our diversity lends strength to our shared concern and responsibility for our Planet Earth."*

Father Lanfranco Serrini, OFM Conv.  
Opening ceremony, Assisi, 1986

## BAHÁ'Í DECLARATION

"Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise." (Bahá'u'lláh)

With those words, Bahá'u'lláh, Prophet-founder of the Bahá'í faith, outlines the essential relationship between humanity and the environment: that the grandeur and diversity of the natural world are purposeful reflections of the majesty and bounty of God. For Bahá'ís, there follows an implicit understanding that nature is to be respected and protected, a divine trust for which we are answerable.

As the most recent of God's revelations, however, the Bahá'í teachings have a special relevance to present-day circumstances when the whole of nature is threatened by man-made perils ranging from the wholesale destruction of the world's rainforests to the final nightmare of nuclear annihilation.

A century ago, Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed that humanity has entered a new age. Promised by all the religious Messengers of the past, this new epoch will ultimately bring peace and enlightenment for humanity. To reach that point, however, humankind must first recognize its fundamental unity — as well as the unity of God and religion. Until there is a general recognition of this wholeness and interdependence, humanity's problems will only worsen.

## BUDDHIST DECLARATION

Buddhism is a religion of love, understanding and compassion and is committed towards the ideal of non-violence. As such it also attaches great importance towards wildlife and the protection of the environment on which every being in this world depends for survival.

The underlying reason why beings other than humans need to be taken into account is that, like human beings, they too are sensitive to happiness and suffering. We should therefore be wary of justifying the right of any species to survive solely on the basis of its usefulness to human beings.

We are told that history is a record of human society in the past. From existing sources there is evidence to suggest that for all their limitations, people in the past were aware of the need for harmony between human beings and nature. They loved the environment. They revered it as the source of life and well-being in the world.

We regard our survival as an undeniable right; as coinhabitants of this planet, other species too have this right for survival. And since human beings as well as non-human sentient beings depend upon the environment as the ultimate source of life and well-being, let us share the conviction that the conservation of the environment, the restoration of the imbalance caused by our negligence in the past, be implemented with courage and determination.

These teachings lead us to the following words by His Holiness the Dalai Lama: "As we all know, disregard for the Natural Inheritance of human beings has brought about the danger that now threatens the peace of the world as well as the chance to live of endangered species.

"Such destruction of the environment and the life depending upon it is a result of ignorance, greed and disregard for the richness of all living things. This disregard is gaining great influence. If peace does not become a reality in the world, and if the destruction of the environment continues as it does today, there is no doubt that future generations will inherit a dead world.

"It is clear that this generation is at an important crossroad. On the one hand the International community is able now to communicate each other's views, on the other hand the common fact is that confrontation far outweighs constructive dialogue for peace.

"We are the generation with the awareness of a great danger. We are the ones with the responsibility and the ability to take steps of concrete action, before it is too late."

*by the Venerable Lungrig Nomgayal  
Abbot, Gyuto Tantric University*

## CHRISTIAN DECLARATION

Because of the responsibilities which flow from his dual citizenship, man's dominion cannot be understood as license to abuse, spoil, squander or destroy what God has made to manifest his glory. That dominion cannot be anything else than a stewardship in symbiosis with all creatures. On the other

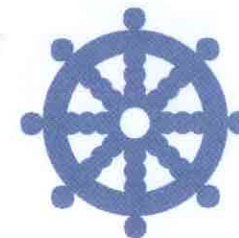
hand, his self-mastery in symbiosis with creation must manifest the Lord's exclusive and absolute dominion over everything, over man and over his stewardship. At the risk of destroying himself, man may not reduce to chaos or disorder, or, worse still, destroy God's bountiful treasures.

For St. Francis, work was a God-given grace to be exercised in that spirit of faith and devotion to which every temporal consideration must be subordinate: uncontrolled use of technology for immediate economic growth, with little or no consideration for the planet's resources and their possible renewal; disregard for just and peaceful relations among peoples; destruction of cultures and environments during war; ill-considered exploitation of natural resources by consumer-oriented societies; unmastered and unregulated urbanization; and, the exclusive preoccupation with the present without any regard for the future quality of life.

Therefore, in the name of Christ who will come to Judge the living and the dead, Christians repudiate:

1. All forms of human activity — wars, discrimination, and destruction of cultures — which do not respect the authentic interests of the human race, in accordance with God's will and design, and do not enable men as individuals and as members of society to pursue and fulfill their total vocation within the harmony of the universe.
2. All ill-considered exploitation of nature which risks to destroy it and, in turn, to make man the victim of degradation.

*by Father Lanfranco Serrini  
Minister General, OFM Conv.*



## HINDU DECLARATION

Not only in the Vedas, but in later scriptures such as the Upanishads, the Puranas and subsequent texts, the Hindu viewpoint on nature has been clearly enunciated. It is permeated by a reverence for life, and an awareness that the great forces of nature the earth, the sky, the air, the water and fire — as well as various orders of life including plants and trees, forests and animals are all bound to each other within the great rhythms of nature. The divine is not exterior to creation, but expresses itself through natural phenomena.

In addition, according to the Vaishnava tradition, the evolution of life on this planet is symbolized by a series of divine incarnations beginning with fish, moving through amphibious forms and mammals, and then on into human incarnations. This view clearly holds that man did not spring fully formed to dominate the lesser life forms, but rather evolved out of these forms, and is therefore integrally linked to the whole of creation.

This leads necessarily to a reverence for animal life. The Yajurveda lays down that “no person should kill animals helpful to all. Rather, by serving them, one should attain happiness” (*Yajurveda* 13:46). This view was later developed by the great Jain Tirthankara, Lord Mahavira, who regenerated the ancient Jain faith that lives down to the present day. For the Jains, *ahimsa*, or non-violence, is the greatest good, and on no account should life be taken. This philosophy was emphasized more recently by Mahatma Gandhi who always spoke of the importance of *ahimsa* and looked upon the cow as a symbol of the benign element in animal life. All this strengthens the attitude of reverence for all life including animals and insects.



The Hindu tradition of reverence for nature and all forms of life, vegetable or animal, represents a powerful tradition which needs to be re-nurtured and re-applied in our contemporary context. India, the population of which is over 80 percent Hindu, has in recent years taken a special interest in conservation.

What is needed today is to remind ourselves that nature cannot be destroyed without mankind ultimately being destroyed itself. With nuclear weapons representing the ultimate pollutant, threatening to convert this beautiful planet of ours into a scorched cinder unable to support even the most primitive life forms, mankind is finally forced to face its dilemma. Centuries of rapacious exploitation of the environment have finally caught up with us, and a radically changed attitude towards nature is now not a question of spiritual merit or condescension, but of sheer survival.

Let us declare our determination to halt the present slide towards destruction, to rediscover the ancient tradition of reverence for all life and, even at this late hour, to reverse the suicidal course upon which we have embarked. Let us recall the ancient Hindu dictum — “The Earth is our mother, and we are all her children.”

*by Dr. Karan Singh  
President, Hindu Virat Samaj*

## JAIN DECLARATION

The Jain ecological philosophy is virtually synonymous with the principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence) which runs through the tradition like a golden thread.

*Ahimsa* is a principle that Jains teach and practice not only towards human beings but towards all nature. It is an unequivocal teaching that is at once ancient and contemporary.

There is nothing so small and subtle as the atom nor any element so vast as space. Similarly, there is no human quality more subtle than non-violence and no virtue of spirit greater than reverence for life.

The teaching of *ahimsa* refers not only to physical acts of violence but also to violence in the hearts and minds of human beings, their lack of concern and compassion for their fellow humans and for the natural world. Ancient Jain texts explain that violence (*himsa*) is not defined by actual harms, for this may be unintentional. It is the intention to harm, the absence of compassion, that makes an action violent. Without violent thought there could be no violent actions.

Jain cosmology recognizes the fundamental natural phenomenon of symbiosis or mutual dependence. All aspects of nature belong together and are bound in a physical as well as a metaphysical relationship. Life is viewed as a gift of togetherness, accommodation and assistance in a universe teeming with interdependent constituents.

## JEWISH DECLARATION

The festivals of the Jewish religion do call upon us to stand before God, in awe at His majesty, trembling before His judgments, but that is not the dominant mood of the Jewish faith. The festivals celebrate, in joy, the cycle of three seasons of nature. The rabbis even insisted that “he who has denied himself any one of the rightful joys of this work is a sinner” (*Baba Kama* 91b). The highest form of obedience to God’s commandments is to do them not in mere acceptance but in the nature of union with Him. In such a joyous encounter between man and God, the very rightness of the world is affirmed.

The encounter of God and man in nature is thus conceived in Judaism as a seamless web with man as the leader, and custodian, of the natural world. Even in the many centuries when Jews were most involved in their own immediate dangers and destiny, this universalist concern has never withered ... Now, when the whole world is in peril, when the environment is in danger of being poisoned, and various species, both plant and animal, are becoming extinct, it is our Jewish responsibility to put the defense of the whole of nature at the very center of our concern . . . Man was given dominion over nature, but he was commanded to behave towards the rest of creation with justice and compassion. Man lives, always, in tension between his power and the limits set by conscience.

Our ancestor Abraham inherited his passion for nature from Adam. The later rabbis never forgot it. Some 20 centuries ago they told the story of two men who were out on the water in a rowboat. Suddenly, one of them started to saw under his feet. He maintained that it was his right to do whatever he wished with the place that belonged to him. The other answered him that they were in the rowboat together — the hole that he was making would sink both of them (*Vayikra Rabbah* 4:6).

We have a responsibility to life, to defend everywhere, not only against our own sins, but also against those of others. We are now all passengers, together, in this same fragile and glorious world. Let us safeguard our rowboat — and let us row together.

*by Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg  
Vice President, World Jewish Congress*

## MUSLIM DECLARATION

Unity, trusteeship and accountability, that is *tawheed*, *khalifa* and *akhrah*, the three central con-





cepts of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam. They constitute the basic values taught by the Qur'an. It is these values which led Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam to say: "Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded," and "If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is charity on his part," and again, "The world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you his stewards over it." Environmental consciousness is born when such values are adopted and become an intrinsic part of our mental and physical makeup.

Muslims need to return to this nexus of values, this way of understanding themselves and their environment. The notions of unity, trusteeship and accountability should not be reduced to matters of personal piety; they must guide all aspects of life and work. *Shariah* [Islamic law] must not be relegated just to issues of crime and punishment, it must also become the vanguard for environmental legislation. We often say that Islam is a complete way of life, by which it is meant that our ethical systems provide the bearings for all our actions. Yet our actions often undermine the very values we cherish. We must judge our actions by them. They furnish us with a world-view which enables us to ask environmentally appropriate questions, draw up the right balance sheet of possibilities, properly weigh the environmental costs and benefits of what we want, what we can do within the ethical boundaries established by God, without violating the rights of His other creations. If we use the same values, the same understanding in our work as a scientist and technologist, economist or politician as we do to know ourselves as Muslims — those who subject themselves to the



Will of God — then, I believe, we will create a true Islamic alternative, a caring and practical way of being, doing and knowing, to the environmentally destructive thought and action which dominate the world today.

*by Dr. Abdullah Omar Nassef  
Secretary General, Muslim World League*

## SIKH DECLARATION

Since the beginning of the Sikh religion in the late fifteenth century, the faith has been built upon the message of the "oneness of Creation." Sikhism believes the universe was created by an almighty God. He Himself is the creator and the master of all forms in the universe, responsible for all modes of nature and all elements in the world.

Sikhism firmly believes God to be the source of the birth, life and death of all beings. God is the omniscient, the basic cause of the creation and the personal God of them all.

From the Divine command occurs the creation and the dissolution of the universe (p 117, *Guru Granth Sahib*). As their creator, the natural beauty which exists and can be found in all living things whether animals, birds, fish, belongs to Him, and He alone is their master, and without His *Hukum* (order) nothing exists, changes or develops.

Having brought the world into being, God sustains, nourishes and protects it. Nothing is overlooked. Even creatures in rocks and stones are well provided for. Birds who fly thousands of miles away leaving their young ones behind know that they would be sustained and taught to fend for themselves by God (Guru Arjan, in *Rehras*). The creatures of nature lead their lives under God's command and with God's grace.