

November 2008

Ethics, Religions and Climate Change

By Siddhartha*

Al Gore, former Vice-President of the United States and the joint-winner of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Peace, is by all accounts a mainstream American politician. Yet his film on the environment crisis, 'An Inconvenient Truth', has been watched by millions of people, some of whom have since turned eco-radicals. One of the examples Gore uses in the film to describe the ecological plight of the planet is the divergent response of a frog to a pot of boiling water. The frog jumps away to safety when it is brought near a container of boiling water. If the same frog is put into a pot of luke warm water that is then progressively heated, the frog does not notice the change since the increase in the temperature is too gradual. The frog acclimatises itself to the increasing heat. Eventually the water gets so hot that the frog either dies or is rescued. "Are we human beings similar to the frog that is unaware of the process of slow death it is going through?" is the question the narrative wishes to drive home.

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** provides that humans have rights to life, liberty, and personal security. This, of course, enjoins duties in others to refrain from interference with these rights. Climate Change is already interfering with the basic rights of millions of people. This has evoked the issue of Climate Justice. Can the world silently allow vulnerable and poor communities to experience floods, water and food shortages, increase in temperatures and even face the threat of extermination when these communities are not responsible for the release of massive green house emissions that have led to this dangerous impasse?

The different religious traditions have progressively become conscious about the dangers of Climate Change and the need to alert their communities and create awareness that may lead to appropriate action. Climate Change is a frightful reality, religious leaders acknowledge; they are hoping to lend their support to the chorus of growing voices that seek to explore mitigation and adaptation strategies that may make the impact of Climate Change less painful.

Religious organizations in many parts of the world are trying to bring about policy changes on Climate Change through lobbying at local, national and international levels as well as taking part in Climate Change negotiations.

One Buddhist commentator, José Kalapura, has said: "**The Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential.** By living simply one can be in harmony with other creatures and learn to appreciate the inter-connectedness of all lives. The simplicity of life involves developing openness to our environment and relating to the world with awareness and responsive perception. It also enables us to enjoy without possessing, and mutually benefit each other without manipulation."

Buddhist thinkers Sulak Sivaraksa and Aubrey Meyer have reworked the *four noble truths* as follows:

- Climate change is a reality. It is the source of flooding and drought, desertification and loss of land.

- Climate change is caused by over-consumption of fossil fuels, loss of soil, and excessive herds of livestock. Individual over-consumption in the global North is an expression of greed and a fear of loss. Fear and greed are root causes of all suffering. Capitalism thrives on individual fear and greed.

- The climate we have to change is the climate of greed and fear, in which consumerism and profiteering can thrive.

- To overcome suffering, start at home, with yourself. Ask yourself: Where can I cut down my consumption? How can I repay my carbon debt to my children's children? Plant trees. Don't fly. Eat local and organic foods.

Islamic principles such as tawhid (unity), amana (entrustment) of the Earth, and khalifa (the stewardship of humankind) offer the potential for the development of an Islamic eco-spirituality. Muslim environmentalists claim that they are seeing the growth of a new awareness around climate change in some of their communities.

The Koran considers other living species to be "peoples or communities" (*ummas*; Sura 6:38). Creation itself is seen in all its diversity and the whole of creation praises God for its existence. (Sura 59:24; compare with 64:1).

"With Him are the keys (to the treasures) of the Unseen that no one knows but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, freshly green or withered, but it is (inscribed) in a clear record" (Sura 6:59).

In recent years climate change is beginning to be discussed in Hindu religious circles. Ancient texts like the Vedas praise the earth (*bhu*), the atmosphere (*bhuvah*), and sky (*sva*). We also celebrate the goddess associated with the earth (*Prthivi*), and the gods associated with water (*Ap*), with fire and heat (*Agni*), and the wind (*Vayu*). Every Indian knows about the five great elements (*mahabhuta*): earth (*prthivi*), water (*jal*), fire (*tejas*), air (*vayu*), and space (*akasa*). The ritual processes incorporate all these dimensions on a regular basis. What is, of course, necessary is the consciousness to connect these dimensions with environmental engagement. However, a few groups have begun relating sacred practices, texts and festivals to environmental concerns.

I would like to give our own example to combat climate change from the perspective of people's spirituality and religion. I live at Fireflies Ashram, surrounded by villages where the inhabitants are Hindus. We have a temple in the ashram dedicated to the Hindu goddess Sita Devi. According to popular history this well-loved goddess was found as a baby in a furrow on the earth. As a young woman she was married to the well-known Hindu deity Lord Rama. When the time for her final departure had come, the earth reverentially opened and received her. In recent times we have started the practice of celebrating Sitadevi's festival on World Earth day, on April 22nd. In the consciousness of the village people, Sitadevi is identified as Earth Mother and there are discussions taking place on how we humans can behave responsibly towards the environment.

For some years now many Christian churches see the human role on the earth as one of stewardship, and not of mastery. The theologian Paul Jewitt states that God made the world and "we live in the world as his tenants".

Leonardo Boff, the well-known Latin American theologian, attempts to situate social and political liberation within an ecological framework. Boff concerns himself with 'the oppressed sons and daughters of **the earth**'. The oppression and exploitation of the poor are related to the exploitation of nature.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines stated in 1988: "We reap what we sow; the results of our attitude and activities are predictable and deadly. Our small farmers tell us that their fields are less productive and are becoming sterile. Our fishermen are finding it increasingly difficult to catch fish. Our lands, forests and rivers cry out that they are being eroded, denuded and polluted. As bishops, we have tried to listen and respond to their cry. There is urgency about this issue, which calls for widespread education and immediate action. We are convinced that the challenge which we have tried to highlight here is similar to the one which Moses put before the people of Israel before they entered their promised land: 'Today I offer you a choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life and then you and your descendants will live' (Dt 30:19-20)."

Some of the important ethical issues that Climate Change activists and religious leaders raise are:

1. Future generations, and unborn children, will face the brunt of the consequences of Climate Change. We are the perpetrators but our children and grandchildren will pay a huge price.

2. The countries that pollute most, and contribute hugely to climate change, are not the ones who will suffer most. In other words, the rich who emit greenhouse gases are committing an injustice on the world's poor. (The per capita emission level of greenhouse gases in the USA is 22 tons while Bangladesh has a very modest per capita emission level of 200 kilograms. There is considerable fear that Bangladesh will go underwater in the next few decades as a result of sea levels rising from global warming. The rich countries, and emerging economies like China, pollute enormously and poor countries like Bangladesh may face extinction, for no fault of their own).

3. Many of those who are most effected by Climate Change are the ones least able to protect themselves. It is crucial that international efforts are made to protect those in poor countries who are vulnerable to disease, water shortages, failure of agriculture, etc.

4. To reduce the impact of Climate Change the wealthy countries must lead through example by cutting emissions of green house gases, fighting deforestation, promoting energy alternatives related to wind, sun, etc.

In conclusion, we cannot arrest Climate Change without a change in our lifestyles. If lifestyles and political orientations change our growth models will also undergo transformation. Some religious leaders have described Climate Change as a fundamental failure of our market-oriented world where quick profits overtake ethical concerns concerning the health of our planet. If our present day growth models are synonymous with the creation of Climate Change then we must urgently search for other models of production and distribution.

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