

[Can India's Timeworn Dharma Help Renew a Careworn World?](#)

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Swami Vibudhesha, Dr. Karan Singh and Others Join Prince Philip At Windsor Castle to Network Global Earth-Friendly Awareness

Nine years ago, His Royal Highness, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh- President of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF)-launched the implementation of an inspired plan to save the world-the natural world that is. He invited leaders of all the great faiths to join him and fellow conservationists in Assisi, Italy, the birthplace of the official Catholic patron saint of things environmental, St. Francis, to brainstorm the embattled issues of Worldwide ecology, daring to discern how unearthy religion could be of practical assistance in the struggle to restore Earth's imbalance. Representatives from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism responded to his call. This year he called again for an April summit to assess progress thus far.

By Rakesh Mathur, England

Since that auspicious 1986 meeting, Hindus have assumed a very important role in matters of ecology. Largely because of a number of initiatives established by concerned leaders like Dr. Karan Singh and Swami Vibudhesha, it has become increasingly apparent to many within the conservation movement that information and scientific study alone will not stop the destruction of the natural environment. A change of heart, or a rediscovery of insights into how we should live, has become necessary. Hence, the divine teachings of Hinduism as well as those of the other great world religions were beckoned with humble sincerity to come down to earth and help save it.

Over 100,000 religious communities, including church congregations, mosques,

temples and synagogues, have become profoundly involved in conservation activities as a result of the Assisi events and the network thus created. The response has been more widespread than anyone could have foreseen in 1986.

The host of the most recent 1995 event, which actually began with a preliminary meeting in Japan in April, was again Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. The aspiration of the summit was to inspire religious leaders to motivate their followers who in turn would accomplish desired goals through the political process. Hinduism Today conducted on-the-spot, in-depth interviews with delegates from each of the religions represented at the conference, excerpted here to give voice to them all.

Jainism

The main force behind this meeting was Dr. Laxmi Mal Singhvi, High commissioner for India in the United Kingdom. During an exclusive interview conducted in Hindi embroidered with Sanskrit, Dr. Singhvi charted out the success of this strategically important summit and said a few words on behalf of the Jains:

"Between the third and ninth of April, 1995, we first met in Tokyo on an invitation of Teruaki Kawai of Museum of Art Foundation International. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Sikh and Taoist religions came prepared with in-depth and introspective suggestions concerning how their respective faiths might participate in the protection of the environment worldwide. We tried to link points of common interest, and in Windsor Castle in May we chalked out an action plan to work together. At the close of this summit, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, a new foundation, was launched to carry out this work. This foundation will oversee a common program to link the conservation of the natural world with the religious beliefs of the people. Each faith has presented an action plan for the environment over the next nine years.

"In the summit, I not only represented Jainism, but also all Indic religions. I said that our only point of departure from the Abrahamic religions was on the issue of the domination of nature. Those of the Indic religions asserted a partnership with nature. Unlike the Christians, we said we did not believe in dominating or conquering nature but believed instead in a trusteeship with nature. They said they believed in its domination. We had a long discussion about that.

"Fortunately, we were able to compromise in having tolerance and responsibility towards nature. We agreed on the word 'stewardship' to express this compromise.

"In the UK, Jain business people have established an award for the most significant contribution to environmental care by Jain businesses."

Hinduism

"I am involved in education, environment and interfaith concerns," says Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Temple of Understanding and member of Interfaith Worldwide. "I feel that all these three fields not only require each other but also are connected with each another. The Interfaith movement is quite new. It is trying to bring together the twelve major religions. I was born in Kashmir where there is a Muslim majority. I went to a Christian school, and I am a Vedanti who believes in the ultimate unity of all religions-moving with everyone but converting none. Vedanta holds high esteem. Each religion looks up to Vedanta and cherishes in it the urge to respect the earth.

"WWF has decided to call upon religious leaders, which is a healthy sign. We need as many allies as possible. It is a worthwhile attempt. Once public opinion is aroused the political process will follow."

Buddhism

"Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential," said Lama Yeshe Losal, Abbot and Retreat Master of Samye Ling. "By living simply, one can be in harmony with other creatures and learn to appreciate the inter-connectedness of all that lives. Once we treat nature as our friend, then we can see the need to change the attitude of dominating nature to one of working with nature. We see ourselves as being an intrinsic part of all existence rather than being in control of it.

"The Holy Island Project's aims are to bring harmonious co-existence between mankind and nature to an exemplary practical enactment. As a part of the overall tree planting program, we also plan to re-establish the Monk's Orchard, a walled garden near the site of a former monastery. This orchard would be stocked with age-old varieties and help ensure the continued existence of non-commercial genetic stock, which is outlawed by the European Commission. Sponsored tree planting is one of Holy Island's major projects."

Sikhism

"We want to take this message to our followers, that if we do not take care of nature then perhaps we are not true believers," asserted Kehar Singh of Jathadar, Akal Takht. "We believe that if one is to approach God, he must be in love with nature. Since religious leaders have influence and direct communication with their followers, their words carry a lot of meaning to the ordinary people. When people become aware of the importance of nature through religion, then politicians must respond to the pressures that will result from the public. Like Christians, we believe in the supremacy of man over nature, but unlike Christians we believe that it is a trusteeship, that we have not to destroy nature but to take care of it. In the East, we have always been careful about nature."

Judaism

"I was in the first meeting of Assisi in 1986, where I led the Jewish delegation," asserted Professor Arthur Hertzberg, vice-president of the World Jewish Congress and leader of the Jewish delegation. "In the last nine years, there has been an enormous amount of progress. The religions of the world now agree that the environment should be defended. The Bible informs us that the earth is not subject to man's absolute ownership, but is rather given to man 'to use and protect.' The classic Jewish attitude toward nature is a direct consequence of the belief that the universe is the work of the Creator. The politicians are going to hear the concern of the Jewish leaders and see our example. In Israel, millions of trees have been planted. Deserts have been irrigated. I disagree vehemently with the Christian idea that man should have dominion over nature which has created so much chaos and imbalance in nature. We do not rule the world, we serve it."

Christianity

"I am an Anglican but leading a secular organization which is involving various religious organizations on conservation issues," says Dr. Robin Pillew, Director of the WWF-UK, co-sponsor of the summit and member of Alliance of Religion. "We believe very strongly that if we are going to win a battle to conserve nature, we have to address those issues which are of greater interest to the people. So WWF is looking at how we can provide the material benefits through more enlightened use of resources on a sustainable basis, but also how we can meet the aspirations, hopes and beliefs of the people. Concerning the environmental movement, the politicians tend to respond to the interests and wishes of the people rather than their leaders. So, we see that by building a greater involvement among the people, we can start to change the politics.

"Anglicans until recently have preached that animals do not have souls. I do not look toward Anglican scripture to provide inspiration or insight for me on how to behave in environmental issues. Yes, it is true that the Christian notion of man's dominion over nature has caused much conflict and destruction of nature. Christians have made man look at himself as being separate from nature. Anglicans also believe this, which is why WWF is working with them to form a new perspective."

Islam

"There are several Islamic principles which, when taken individually, seem to have little bearing on conservation," proclaimed Professor Muhammed Hyder, University of Mombasa. "Together, however, they add up to a clear concept of the Islamic view on conservation. The first Islamic principle which relates to conservation is that of the Oneness of Allah or Tawheed. It is the primordial testimony of the unity of all creation and the interlocking grid of the natural order of which man is intrinsically a part. Yet another principle which underpins Islamic commitment to the conservation of nature and natural resources is the principle of divine ownership of all that exists on earth and in the heavens-animate and inanimate."

Taoism

Speaking through interpreters, Chinese Taoists Xie Zong Xing, Zhang Ji Yu, Zeng Chuan Hui and Zho Xia Omin conveyed the essence of Taoism as being perhaps more inherently relevant to conservation than that of any other religion. Their insights are paraphrased below:

The Tao has been a primary component of traditional Chinese culture from its inception. The Tao is the way of Heaven, earth and humanity. The Tao took form in the grandmother goddess who came to earth to enlighten humanity. Her message was to let everything grow in its own course without interference. Taoism looks upon humanity as the most intelligent entity in the universe, capable of creating great help or great harm. With the deepening world environmental crisis, more people are coming to realize that the Tao can offer a valuable compliment to the more universally accepted understanding that the problem is one of technology. Such an awareness can be used to counteract the shortcomings of prevailing values.

In an Italian hamlet near Venice called Noale, another international meeting was taking place. It was called the World Congress on Meditation and Prayer, and its chief guest and Indian representative was the distinguished Sri Sri Sri Thiruchi Swamigal of Bangalore, Karnataka District. The congress was organized by Swamiji's Italian follower, Mario Attombri. The purpose of the three-day congress was to discuss the establishment of worldwide peace through prayer and meditation. Sri Thiruchi Swami spoke on the last day of the congress: "The main purpose of all religions is the same: We all want peace, but this can be achieved only by reforming the individual. The way for the individual to obtain this peace is through the blessings of a guru. Then only will he be able to distinguish right from wrong." Sri Thiruchi Swami believes that this conference will change the mental condition of people everywhere and plans to follow it up with workshops during the following months conducted in his native residence of Bangalore, India. Most of the people who attended ranged from age 35 to 55 and came from all over the world. The Mayor of Noale also took part in the conference. Elsewhere in Europe, Swamiji is personally supervising the construction of an extension to the Murugan Temple of East London.

Correspondent Sri Rakesh Mathur was born in Allahabad, India. He has lived in Europe for the past 15 years and is making film documentaries on bilateral issues between Europe and India.

Sidebar: Let's Get Organized!

Swami Birudhesha Teertha, Acharya of Madhvacharya Vaishnavas, Udupi, Karnataka, says. "I represent Vedic Hinduism. Religious leaders-not political leaders-command the conscience of the masses. By educating people, we can persuade politicians to be more responsive. According to my philosophy, every human being should contribute to conservation and should endeavor to maintain ecological balance. Christians do not believe that plants and animals have a meaningful life. Their thinking has caused a kind of imbalance in nature. The Upanishads say that life depends on life for existence. The solution to the present day crisis is to enlighten people, masses and politicians. This summit has been successful in doing that, but to what end? These energies should now be used." He summarizes this in a 10-point program:

1. An awareness of the ecological imbalance should be taught.
2. Debate and essay competitions should be arranged on ecology.
3. Controlled through the United Nations (UN) once a year for nine years, a ten-minute prayer for ecological balance should be performed in all countries of the world.
4. A special office should be created in the UN to oversee preservation of ecological balance world-wide.
5. All governments should be asked to inspire organic farming.
6. All governments should be asked to increase the number of dairy cattle and look after them well.

7. Ample grazing lands should be maintained worldwide.
8. Governments should be requested to invest more of their wealth in the research of non-conventional energy sources.
9. People in all countries should be provided with non-pollutant means of living daily life.
10. A prestigious award like the Nobel Prize should be established and awarded to the country which contributes the most toward ecological balance.