

THE GROWING ROLE OF RELIGION IN ENVIRONMENT

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There is no longer any doubt that the global environmental crisis could be essentially a moral and religious problem. Many questions are becoming very urgent at this moment of unprecedented danger to the global environment. There is evidence that human development without a spiritual basis leads to distorted behaviour. The results are known: anthropocentrism, nationalism, racism, dualism between human culture and nature, to have instead of to be. All these elements are connected to environmental problems. Only the greatest spiritual awareness and moral responsibility would stop our fall and self-destruction.

In several countries, public and religious groups have been sensitised to these problems. For example, the US National Religious Partnership for the Environment is an organisation which is putting into effect a great program for global sustainability and justice, intended to deepen moral commitment to changes in personal behaviour of over 100 million Americans.

The Judeo-Christian tradition is often criticised for generating a view of the Universe that sharply separated God and Nature, and resulted in encouraging attitudes of conquest and exploitation of the environment. But, these attitudes are gradually changing, a fact that has not yet become widely known. For example, in 1986, the First Interfaith Environmental Dialogue, involving prominent representatives from five world religions, took place in Assisi. In 1988, Pope John II and the Dalai Lama of Tibet met in Rome to discuss "world peace, spiritual values and protection of the Earth's natural environment."

A radical transformation should occur in human values and behaviour. This has to involve the deepest understanding of the religious and spiritual way of life, which will involve the whole personality, transcending the Ego and involving all of Nature. The real experience of Nature as "sacred" is of greatest importance. This goal can be achieved if religions, environmentalists and the general public co-operate. To move the environmental sensation, feeling and behaviour radically ahead, it is necessary to address the spiritual domain of all peoples. In Slovakia this domain is seldom utilised. It seems that environmental consciousness is not supported by the spiritual/religious life experience. Studying the Scriptures and "green" spiritual literature shows that while religions have a positive approach towards nature, misinterpretations of the holy texts lead to a confused understanding of the human role on Earth.

Many why, who, what, or which questions have led to the construction of a special questionnaire. A set of 21 questions, covering religious attitudes towards nature, ecological feelings, personal environmental behaviour, and a good will and ability to propose measures for improving the environmental status, was prepared and tested. The questionnaire is anonymous and the set of questions did not differentiate between religion, sex or age of the participants. The complete set of questions is as follows:

1. Is religion for you an inspiration or an obstacle on the way to an environmentally-friendly lifestyle?
2. Do ecologists and religious people have something in common? If yes, what?
3. Do you have some hope for our planet?
4. Do you feel some responsibility for the environmental crisis?
5. What would you say to religious people if you were an ecologist?
6. What would you say to ecologists if you were a religious person?
7. What happened to our attitude towards Nature?
8. What has to be changed?
9. Why are most people passive concerning their environment?
10. Is there some way to exit this vicious circle?
11. Who is responsible for the current state?
12. Is there really a crisis of moral values and religious faith which impacts ecological behaviour?
13. What are the responsibilities and possibilities of small parishes and religious communities?
14. Do you think that vegetarianism could help in solving ecological problems?
15. Would you be able to produce less household waste?
16. Is your household part of a waste separation programme?
17. Do you agree with the assertion that our civilisation is "the civilisation of disposable things?"
18. Do you save electric energy in your household? If yes, how?
19. Where would you be able to save energy?

20. If you were Minister of Environment, what would you do first?

21. What does it mean to be a steward of the Earth?

Nearly 400 copies of the questionnaire were distributed among interested persons on three special occasions: (a) July 5, 1995, during the Anniversary Conference of the Centre of Human Development in Bratislava; (b) August 9, 1995, among participants of the International Conference "Tolerance 95" in Bratislava; and, (c) among members of the NGO, Humanity and Health for All, in Zilina, Slovakia. The questionnaire was distributed on July 5th and the deadline for responding was August 31, 1995. The total number of responses used in the survey was 56. Average response rate was 14%.

The first 6 questions were similar to those M. Tuhacek had asked during a meeting of ecologists and Christians in the Czech Republic, in 1994. The results were published in 1994, in the journal *Posledni Generace* (The Last Generation) 6:22-24. The number of respondents was nearly the same, 57, so there was a very good basis for comparison. The results were very interesting, yet not surprising. There were no statistically significant differences between the Czech group and the Slovak group in the answers to the first four questions. Differences were found only in the verbal expression of the respondents' opinions; sometimes the answers were negative or pronounced in a more or less philosophical way. This paper does not present a detailed evaluation of all the questions. It focuses on the results of the 9 most interesting and inspirational ones, shown in the following tables and short commentaries.

Question 1: Is religion for you an inspiration or an obstacle on the way to an environmentally-friendly lifestyle?

	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic
inspiration	37	32
both	12	3
obstacle	1	1
neither	-	9
should be inspiration	2	2
other	4	9
total	57	56

Question 2: Do ecologists and religious people have something in common?

	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic
yes	47	45
no	2	1
they should have	4	3
other	4	6
total	57	56

Question 3: Do you have some hope for our planet?

	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic
yes	46	45
no	1	1
other	10	10
total	57	56

Question 4: Do you feel some responsibility for the environmental crisis?

	Czech Republic	Slovak Republic
yes	36	37
no	11	12

partly	5	5
no answer	5	1
other	-	1
total	57	56

Question 9: Why are most people passive concerning the environment?

Answers included: (a) competition for money and materialism; (b) absence of inner freedom; (c) passivity makes the abnormal seem normal; (d) people are stressed, hunted down and feel powerless, so they are not interested in solving environmental problems; (e) poor education; (f) we want to have, not to be; (g) egoism; (h) lack of time, sensitivity, spirituality and feeling; (i) other "values."

Question 12: Is there really a crisis of moral values and religious faith which impacts ecological behaviour?

yes	25
no	5
no answer	3
yes, but positive	4
other	19

Question 13: What are the responsibilities and possibilities of small parishes and religious communities?

Many respondents appreciated, indeed, the role of small communities and small parishes. The role of the leader was stressed. In addition, 9 respondents answered I do not know and 5 answered no.

Question 20: If you were Minister of Environment, what would you do first?

The answers were very special, comprehensive and also witty, with great individual wisdom. In each case they were particularly inspirational for the government and especially for the Department of the Environment.

Question 21: What does it mean to be a steward of the Earth?

The last question was very religious. The majority answered *responsibility*.

A careful analysis of the questionnaire and the interviewing of many important religious people, mainly during the conferences cited, have shown that the majority think that the next steps for saving the Earth and human civilisation should be taken by turning to a new spirituality, with the help of religion. In our country, this entails Christian religions, but also the careful study of eastern religions and eastern philosophy. On the other hand, many answers and discussions indicated that there are many people who are not familiar with the causes of environmental problems. Many people do not see any solution to environmental problems - they feel powerless and bewildered.

The results of this project have been published in the afore-mentioned environmental journal *Posledni Generace*. The topic and the basic questions were also discussed with many religious and civic leaders during other international conferences and events.

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