

The Good Green Word: *What can religious texts teach 21st century followers about environmentalism, sustainability and the role of humankind in protecting the planet?*

By Dr Miriam Pepper, Uniting Church - Project Green Church and Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, www.arrcc.org.au

In the context of today's unprecedented human-caused ecological crisis, religious texts have much to offer. They encourage simple living, the fundamental value of the Earth, the responsibility to treat other beings with compassion, humility in the face of the mystery of existence, and the interdependence between the flourishing of the Earth and human flourishing.

Perhaps one of the most challenging ethics in religious scripture, is the idea that the Earth does not belong to humanity. In a world of ever increasing enclosures of commons, amassment of private property, and environmental exploitation for human gain, this seemingly simple conviction has revolutionary implications.

The six religions presented here have produced texts ranging from many thousands of years ago (in the case of the Hindu Vedas), to several hundred years ago (in the case of the Sikh texts). Irrespective of age, such texts continue to be interpreted and re-interpreted in every age and culture, as people seek to discern their significance for life in their particular contexts.

As such, religious texts are living entities, not static documents frozen in time. It is vital to recognise that proper understanding of their meaning is only fully attainable when the texts are considered as part of their dynamic relationship between the traditions, practices, communities and institutions that together constitute the world's religions.

Selective interpretation or misinterpretation of texts is always a danger. Historian Lynn White Jr. has posited that Christianity "bears a huge burden of guilt" for the ecological crisis. White saw in the Judeo-Christian creation texts a mandate for humans to exert dominion over and to exploit nature. This provided the cultural foundations for scientific and technological developments in western (but not eastern) Christendom many hundreds of years ago which see us living beyond ecological limits today.

Similarly, there are other texts which may lead followers in certain contexts to neglect the Earth – for example by focusing on the spiritual as disconnected from and more important than the material world, or by viewing the limitations of human agency as an inability to turn the ecological crisis around.

These examples demonstrate the importance of deep engagement with the depth of religious tradition when interpreting scripture. This is necessary not so much to negate understandings about the distinctions between humanity and non-humanity, about how the spiritual may differ from the material, or about the confines of human control. Rather, such engagement guards against the dominance of these views over others. The commonality between humanity and other creatures, the unity of the spiritual and the material, and the power of human agency, are also scripturally and religiously based understandings. The Muslim notion of balance in all things, the Jewish tradition of dialectic, and the Buddhist teaching of the middle way, provide examples of how such diversity may be held together. Dialogue with other disciplines – such as science, economics, politics – is also important in the interpretation and application of texts.

Finally, it is not only reflections on ecological obligation and responsibility that religious texts have to offer. They also bring forth celebration in the poetry of story, divine mystery, beauty, and love. In a society where communication on environmental issues may become dominated by the realms of the technical and rational, religious texts bring the power to move and inspire. A growing appreciation of the spiritual depths to be found in all the Earth and cosmos may be a large part of what is required to turn the ecological crisis around.