

Quotations and Stories on the Environment from Other Faiths

Most of the materials and lesson suggestions in this booklet are taken from Christian sources and, of course, a booklet of a similar size could be written for each of the major faith communities. Here we have simply reproduced a very limited number of quotations and stories from the different traditions, in particular the Creation Stories, which you may wish to work with in the same way as has been suggested earlier with the Christian faith materials. The stories, in particular, may form useful introductions to discussions on Eco-issues.

Hinduism

There are several Hindu Creation Stories – this is just one of them:

This is not the first world that has ever existed and it will not be the last, there have been many worlds, and there will be many worlds. The innumerable worlds and universes are made by the Lord Brahma who is Creator. Each universe is maintained by the Lord Vishnu who is the Preserver, and destroyed by the Lord Shiva. From the destruction Lord Brahma creates new life, and the cycles of creation, preservation and destruction continue for ever.

After the old universe is destroyed there is nothing left except a great ocean and floating on the ocean is the great snake Ananta carrying the Lord Vishnu. From the navel of Lord Vishnu a great lotus flower grows, and from the lotus flower steps Lord Brahma. Lord Brahma becomes lonely, and he begins to break off parts of himself – from his own body he creates people, animals, even insects, so that everything which is made is made of God himself. The universe lasts for just one day, but one day in the life of Lord Brahma is thousands of millions of years to those of us on the earth. At last Lord Brahma sleeps, and as he sleeps Lord Shiva destroys the world once more. Only chaos and water exist once again, but then Lord Vishnu appears once more on the waters, from him Lord Brahma appears and the newest cycle of creation begins.

There are many Hindu creation stories, but each one encapsulates the same message – that everything comes from God, is made from God, and in the end it returns to God.

The idea of everything being part of a cycle is a key one in Hindu belief. Within the larger cycle of the life of the universe, every soul is on a cycle of reincarnation and after each death is reborn into a new body. The form that body will take (animal or human) being governed by how the last life has been led. Only by living a good life can the soul escape these great cycles and return to the Supreme One before the destruction of the world.

Because everything is part of God, all living things are of equal value to a Hindu, and all life sacred. Most Hindus therefore avoid killing animals and are vegetarian because of their respect for all life. This is especially seen in their respect for the cow, which gives them milk, yoghurt, curds, ghee for lamps, dung for fuel and urine for building as well as bullocks pulling the plough – a live cow is far more useful than a dead cow which can only be eaten once! Care for the cow has thus become an important symbol of the care which mankind should exercise for all other animals.

Also from Hinduism:

Everything in the Universe, living creatures, or rocks or waters, belongs to the Lord. You should therefore take only what is really necessary for yourself, your quota. You should not take anything else, because you know to whom it really belongs.

Isa Upanishad

Islam

The Muslim Creation Story:

Before even time existed there was Allah. And Allah said “Be”, and as he spoke the earth and the heavens came into being, he made all the creatures of the earth – the creatures which walk, the creatures which fly and the creatures which swim. He made the angels, and the sun, moon and stars, he made the whole universe. And Allah sent the rain which poured down upon the earth, and out of the soil came grapes and corn, olives and palm trees, fruits and grass.

Then Allah sent the angels down to the earth and they brought back seven handfuls of soil. Each handful of soil was a different colour. Allah took the seven handfuls of soil and made a model of a man. He breathed life and power into the man and he sprang into life. This was the first man, and Allah called him Adam.

Allah took Adam to live in Paradise and out of his side he created Eve. Allah taught Adam the names of all the creatures, and commanded the angels to bow down before Adam – but one of the angels, Iblis, refused to do this, because man was made of earth but Iblis and the other angels were made of fire. Adam and Eve lived in a beautiful garden in Paradise. Allah had taught them they could eat whatever they wanted in the garden, except the fruit of one tree which was forbidden to them. But Iblis, the Evil One, tempted them to disobey Allah and eat the fruit., and Allah threw them out of Paradise for their disobedience. Allah also threw Iblis out of His presence for the evil he

had brought about – and in revenge Iblis vowed that he would forever tempt Adam and his descendants to do wrong.

Yet despite all this Allah is a God of mercy. The earth was created to give food, warmth, drink, beauty and shelter to humans, and it still does. It is a good world and has been created to serve people. Those believers who submit to the will of Allah (Muslims) and do his will, will be taken to live for ever in Paradise.

The story of Creation is found in the Qur'an, and is explained by Muhammad in the Hadith. It demonstrates how all things were made from the will of Allah. As man is made from seven colours of earth, this demonstrates that Allah is the Lord of all people, of whatever race and colour. Mankind contains Allah's spirit which has been breathed into him – no other living creature has this – he is Allah's most important creation, because even the angels are supposed to bow down before him. Mankind was created to live in Paradise, but lives upon earth because of Adam and Eve's disobedience. However, the earth is still good, it is here to be enjoyed, but also to be taken care of as part of Allah's creation. The world is ours in trust, and we must take care of it for Allah who is its rightful owner. Thus it is the duty of people to take no more from the earth than is needed – Allah does not approve of those who waste the bounty of the earth – even if you are sitting by a river of water you should not take more water than you need. It follows that animals should only be hunted for food, never for pleasure, nor should they be made to behave unnaturally or their communities destroyed to please man (circuses, kept in cages). As Allah's representatives we have no right to misuse or abuse the world. The title used to describe man as Allah's Trustee or Deputy is Khalefah.

Also from Islam:

A man walking along a path felt very thirsty. Reaching a well, he descended into it, drank his fill and came up. Then he saw a dog with its tongue hanging out, trying to lick up mud to quench its thirst. The man said "this dog is feeling the same thirst that I felt." So he went down into the well again, filled his shoe with water, and gave the dog a drink. So Allah thanked him and forgave him his sins. The Prophet (Muhammad) was asked, "Messenger of Allah, are we rewarded for kindness towards animals?" He said: "There is a reward for kindness to every living animal or human."
Saheeh Muslim

All creatures of God form the family of God and he is the best loved of God who loves best His creatures.
Muhammad

Judaism

The Jewish Creation story can be found in Genesis chapters 1 –3. As the Jewish Torah has been incorporated into the Christian Bible the two stories are identical, although many other traditional stories have grown up around the Creation story to explain it more fully.

The story shows that for the Jews the beginning of all things is God. The days of creation should not be taken literally as 24 hour periods, but the overall story shows the steady growth of created things, from formlessness, through light and dark through to animals and humankind. Human beings are seen as God's most important creation, for whom other things were made for food. Man and woman live in the perfect Paradise, but lose it through disobedience, and as a result suffering, disease, misery and death come to the earth – this was not part of the original design. But God was prepared for this lapse of humankind and the Torah shows the way to help people repent and return to God. The perfect creation will come once more too, when the Messiah, the promised saviour, is sent by God to earth.

All the great Jewish festivals have an agricultural base (Passover, Shavuot, Succot) and Tu B'Shevat is celebrated worldwide by Jews as a day for planting trees.

Also from Judaism

A wise rabbi was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a tree. The rabbi asked him, "How many years will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" The man answered that it would take seventy years. The rabbi asked "Are you so fit and strong that you expect to live and eat its fruit?" The man answered, "I found a fruitful world because my forefathers planted for me. So I will do the same for my children."

Midrash

Buddhism

Buddhists do not believe that the world is created and ruled by a God. *"There is neither annihilation nor becoming. The whole world has neither come into existence nor does it go out of existence."* (Santideva) As something cannot be created out of nothing, the matter out of which this universe is made is a continuation of universes that existed before ours – infinitely.

Mankind is part of nature, and you cannot draw a line between people and the rest of the world as everyone and everything are affected by the cycle of natural processes. Humanity and nature are so bound together that what happens in one affects the other, they are interdependent. Modern people are so intent on pleasure and obtaining wealth that they exploit nature to excess – something Buddhism totally condemns. Buddhists are therefore keen protectors of the environment. They will recycle materials whenever

possible and refrain from anything that harms any other sentient life form, even insects. Most Buddhists practise vegetarianism.

The Buddha and his disciples regarded natural beauty as a source of great joy and aesthetic fulfilment. They saw close contact with nature as important in helping Buddhists progress on their spiritual journey.

Also from Buddhism:

In a very hot land, the king had a beautiful garden, the gardener was kept busy all day looking after the fruits and flowers, doing the weeding and, most importantly, the watering. One day the gardener wanted to take a day off to attend a great festival service. He knew if he left the garden all day his plants would shrivel and die in the noonday heat. Then he had a clever idea – he went and talked to the leader of the monkeys who lived in the garden. He reminded him of how much the monkeys enjoyed the garden too, and asked him, just for today, to look after the garden and carry out the midday watering of the plants. “But be careful” he said “water is very precious, don’t waste any will you?”

The monkeys were very pleased to be given such a great responsibility, and eager to get things just right. “Now remember” said their leader “ we know we must not waste water, so the best thing we can do is to pull up the plants and look at their roots. The plants with large roots will need to be given more water than the smaller ones.”

The monkeys did their job very carefully – they pulled up every plant and inspected it before they watered it. Of course, when the gardener returned he found that all his beautiful plants were dead or dying, and he could not save them. “Why have you pulled up my plants?” he shrieked. “We were doing what we were told” said the monkey leader “ we were trying to save water for you.” The gardener knew it was his own fault – he should not have left the garden in the care of the monkeys, because they really did not know enough about gardening. They had meant to be helpful, but because they did not understand how plants grew, they had destroyed what they were looking after.

Are people the “monkeys” in the “garden” of earth?

