

Guest Introduction

The Role of Religions in Times of Ecological Crisis

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This issue of the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* is engaged with the theme of crisis. By way of introduction, I would like to offer some brief observations on the climate crisis from the perspective of comparative theology, both in terms of theory and practice, from the perspective of engaged scholarship.

My awareness of environmental difficulty stems from childhood: seeing strip-mining in Ohio; noting the burning of the Cuyahoga River between Akron and Cleveland; realising the near proximity of Love Canal to my family; and reading about the warming of the earth due to the greenhouse effect, as well as the deleterious presence of lead in the human body, and pesticides and herbicides in the food chain. Simultaneously, my childhood was marked by nature immersion: learning to swim in Lake Ontario (before the detection of dangerous coliform levels); wandering the fields and forests, and swimming in the ponds and lakes of western New York—first in the fruit belt of Orleans County, and then in the Genesee Valley. Afterschool outdoor reveries were supported throughout my teens with formal daily zazen practice and weekly silence with the Religious Society of Friends. Eventually, I trained in Patañjala Yoga, studying and practicing under the guidance of Gurāṇi Añjali Inti, originally from Calcutta, India. The Yoga system integrates ethics and awareness. It promotes an integration between issues of concern and human action.

The quality of human life has become imperilled by greed-fuelled technology, hard and soft. Our hard technology requires massive extraction of mineral resources from the earth. It has created thousands of artificial chemicals, designed to enhance human comfort. We now can stay warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and move about with abandon. However, we have learned that



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our heating and cooling and transportation modalities, to the extent that they rely upon fossil fuels, are literally choking the very humans who designed them. Our soft technology has flooded the mind, eyes and ears with images that often stray far from reality. Overwhelmed with the terror of detective shows, the allure of salacious images, and the destabilising proliferation of misinformation, many humans have lost their centre, falling into anxiety, stress, and depression. Feelings of fear and insecurity now pervade the life-state of many, particularly the young.

To be aware of these perilous situations is paramount. We must acknowledge the harms caused by our technologies. Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and J. R. R. Tolkien all called out the dangers of fast transport. Gandhi took the critique further, calling for the overthrow of all colonialism, not only mercantile, but also emotional and psychic.

Conscientization, a term coined by Paolo Freire, can and must lead to grass roots organising. As we learn the ills of racism, intolerance, hatred, and unbridled consumerism, we must act. Gandhi critiqued colonial power structures. Rather than remaining subservient to British economic policies, Gandhi called for boycotts and strikes that, over the period of several decades, brought about freedom for India and Pakistan. Though the political and historical details can be instructive and must not be ignored, the singular, core tool implemented by Gandhi can inform contemporary needs: a call for *svarāj* or self-power. Indian cotton, shipped from India, provided the raw material for the fabrics manufactured in England that were then exported back to India. Salt mined with British technology was sold to the Indian people, heavily taxed. Gandhi organised a daily spinning campaign so Indians could create their own cloth, and salt marches to the ocean where they produced their own salt. An excellent translation of the term *svarāj* is “sovereign”, capturing the sound and sense of the original Sanskrit term. More specific than the terms “freedom” and “liberation”, this word returns power to the people. We must become freed from the shackles of technologies and media that cause bondage and harm.

How then might religions help reverse the current problems plaguing the outer and inner environment? The prophetic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) have a long history of speaking truth to power, grappling with injustice, and moving toward a common good, often through legal mechanisms. The Paris Accords set forth parameters through which remedies may be found for the climate crisis. *Laudato Si'* and other religious documents provide an ethical framework which can help inspire the implementation of these goals. Similarly, the contemplative practices of Yoga and meditation can serve as base for taking corrective action in the realm of food, consumer choices, and legislative activism.

The Yoga training of Gurāṇi Añjali placed keen attention on environmental issues, calling out the difficulties of pollution, as seen in the refrain of one of her songs: “The Earth Is Burning!”. The practice of Yoga employs the cultivation of opposites (*pratipakṣa-bhāvana*) as corrective action. As students of Yoga, we were urged to interrogate our complicity in needless consumer activity and

to strategise alternatives. We developed an alternative economy of sorts, including the creation of a restaurant (Santoshā Vegetarian Dining), an art gallery, and a bookstore. The training itself included building a new relationship with the elements through the sixth limb of Yoga: concentration (*dhāraṇā*). We directed our attention—twenty minutes in the morning, and again at night—first to earth for a month, then to water, fire, air, and space in sequence, for a total of five months. Life changing connections and insights emerged, including the knowledge that our bodies cannot be separated from the food and water and heat and breath that nourish and sustain us. We must protect this sacred space, inner and outer.

In many ways, the environmental problems that confront humanity require a return to simple appreciation of the rhythm of life itself. Mental and emotional health are essential for humans to thrive and flourish. Religions throughout history and across cultures have offered advice and guidance for overcoming difficulty and trouble. Religious communities provide a gateway into a sense of meaning, integrating the human narrative with the story of the earth. Religious communities can also influence policy and legislation. The Forum on Religion and Ecology convened a series of conferences at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions in the late 1990s, drawing more than 600 scholars from more than a dozen of the world's faith traditions, exploring avenues through which the voice of religions may contribute to the ecological conversation. This work remains vital, continuing at all levels and in all traditions around the globe. As seen in the work of the Forum, we can learn a great deal from scriptural texts and religious traditions. A quote attributed to Gandhi perhaps summarises it best: "Live simply so that others may simply live."