

UNITED RELIGIONS

# INITIATIVE

Building Global Interfaith Co-operation

*Even in a single leaf of a tree,  
or a tender blade of grass,  
the awe inspiring Deity  
manifests itself*

*Shinto  
Urabe-no-kanekuni*

**Religion & the Environment**  
*A Relationship of Trust*

**Faith & Politics**  
*An Extreme Ideology*

**The Spirit of Places**  
*Meditating on Nature*

Issue 12 Spring 2004

A Forum of many Faiths each retaining their own unique identity

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### Aim:

The aim of *Initiative* is to open windows on world religions, beliefs and practices in the hope that this will foster understanding and thus reduce religiously motivated violence.

### Statement:

Whilst the contents of this magazine will be in accordance with the Purpose and Principles of URI there will be freedom of expression.

### Contributions:

We invite you to contribute articles, poems, letters, illustrations and responses so that *Initiative* reflects the religious communities it serves. Editorial guidance can be obtained from Heather Wells, PO Box 110, Lancaster, LA2 6GN Email: hf\_wells@yahoo.co.uk

**Theme:** Issue 13 Religion and the ethics of bio-technology

### Front Cover:

**Paintings:** *After the deluge* by Adam Boulter

### Principles of URI

- 1 We are a bridge-building organisation, not a religion
- 2 We respect the sacred wisdom, spiritual expression and indigenous tradition of each religion.
- 3 We respect the differences among religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions.
- 4 We encourage our members to deepen their roots in their own tradition.
- 5 We listen and speak with respect to deepen mutual understanding and trust.
- 6 We give and receive hospitality.
- 7 We seek and welcome the gift of diversity and model practices that do not discriminate.
- 8 We practice equal participation of women and men in all aspects of the URI.
- 9 We practice healing and reconciliation to resolve conflict without resorting to violence.
- 10 We act from sound ecological practices to protect and preserve the Earth for both present and future generations.
- 11 We seek and offer cooperation with other interfaith efforts.
- 12 We welcome as members all individuals, organisations and associations who subscribe to the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 13 We have the authority to make decisions at the most local level that includes all the relevant and affected parties.
- 14 We have the right to organise in any manner, on any scale, in any area, and around any issue or activity which is relevant to and consistent with the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 15 Our deliberations and decisions shall be made at every level by bodies and methods that represent fairly the diversity of affected interests and are not dominated by any.
- 16 We (each part of the URI) shall relinquish only such autonomy and resources as are essential to the pursuit of the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 17 We have the responsibility to develop financial and other resources to meet the needs of our part, and to share financial and other resources to help meet the needs of other parts.
- 18 We maintain the highest standards of integrity and ethical conduct, prudent use of resources, and fair and accurate disclosure of information.
- 19 We are committed to organisation, learning and adaptation.
- 20 We honour the richness and diversity of all languages and the right and responsibility of participants to translate and interpret the Charter, Bylaws and related documents in accordance with the Preamble, Purpose and Principles and the spirit of the United Religions Initiative.
- 21 Members of the URI shall not be coerced to participate in any ritual or be proselytised.

**Website:** [www.uri.org.uk](http://www.uri.org.uk)

Photo: Michael Lewin



Yesterday, Sunday 25th April, the migrating swallows returned from Africa, heralding the spring and reminding me of the cyclical nature of life. What, I wondered, would ever prevent them from returning to their place of birth! The stimulus to migrate is inborn, an instinct that is passed from one generation to the next. It must be based on the belief and trust that here they will find food and habitation, and a place to breed and nurture their young. I live on Morecambe Bay, on the North West Coast of England, an area of outstanding natural beauty, with the wonderful configuration of mountains, water and coastline. The sunsets can be breathtaking. Yet amidst all this beauty is the awesome power of nature, a force that revealed itself in all its strength recently in the tragic deaths, on a freezing February night, of at least twenty Chinese cockle-pickers. From a relatively remote part of China, these people did not speak English and sadly, were unaware of the incredible speed with which the tidal waters flood the sands, rising to a depth of up to 9 metres, and they drowned. I believe, however, that the pickers were not only victims of their own ignorance, but also of the greed and negligence of those responsible for their welfare who were aware of the dangers. Ultimately, the simple fact is that knowledge on its own is not enough, it must lead to action before tragedy occurs, both in exploitation of humankind and in the wider context of the planet. Our keynote writer Martin Palmer cautions that for more than thirty years people with power and influence have been in possession of the facts, yet the environmental crisis is still with us. If it were simply a matter of information, knowledge and skills, he says, then we would already be heading out of danger. Our thematic writers allude to the relationship of trust that must exist between humankind and the planet, and, like them, I cannot help but feel that we are failing in this responsibility on many counts. As custodians of the planet we owe it to future generations to act now before it is too late.

*Heather Wells*

## Birdsong

I listen with reverence to the birdsong cascading  
 At dawn from the oasis, for it seems to me  
 There is no better evidence for the existence of God  
 Than in the bird that sings, though it knows not why,  
 From a spring of untrammelled joy that wells up in its heart.

*An Arab Chieftan*

Cited: 1000 World Prayers compiled by Marcus Braybrooke  
 2005 O Books

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**Imagine** you are busy planting a tree, and someone rushes up to you to say that the Messiah has come and the end of the world is nigh. What do you do? The advice given by the rabbis in a traditional Jewish story is that you first finish planting the tree, and only then do you go and see whether the news is true. The Islamic tradition has a similar story, which reminds followers that if they happen to be carrying a palm cutting in their hand when the Day of Judgment takes place, then they should not forget to plant the cutting.

There is a tension in the environmental world between those who wish to tell us that the end is nigh and those who want to encourage us to plant trees for the future. In 1992, for example, we were all told, in any number of press statements before the event, that the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro was “the world’s last chance to save itself”. And indeed many major reports emerging from environmental bodies paint a picture of terrifying, impending destruction - in a sincere desire to shock people into action.

Year after year, these groups have been gathering information that shows beyond reasonable doubt that parts of our living planet are slowly but surely being diminished, polluted, fished out, hunted to the edge, built over, cut down, erased, or - as it is most chillingly expressed - simply “lost.” It is increasingly clear, and still shocking, that human activity has assisted (if not created), among other things, the increase in global warming; the destruction of many core species of the seas (cod are almost extinct through careless over fishing); the destruction of entire forests within a single generation; and the accelerating spread of deserts. Around the world, hundreds of organizations chart, report, and analyse the declining health of our world and urge urgent action on anyone who will listen. Such groups often fall back on the vivid language of biblical or Vedic (Hindu) accounts of the end of the world - apocalyptic imagery that encapsulates our deepest terrors more graphically than any chart or statistical breakdown can ever do.

If the environmental crises facing the world today were simply a matter of information, knowledge, and skills, then we would be heading out of these dangers. For more than thirty years the world’s major institutions, scientists, and governments, and some of the largest non-governmental organizations, have compiled and analysed details of how we are abusing the planet. Since 1972, huge conventions have brought these people together to discuss the state of the world. Each year the World Conservation Union (IUCN) publishes its Red Data Books, chronicling the loss of species and habitats in great

*We see,  
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what we think,  
and what we think  
is shaped by our  
cultures, faiths,  
and beliefs.*

# An Environmental pilgrimage

detail. Today we can discuss the issues of global warming in very specific terms. Charts show the destruction of tropical forests; the loss of crucial habitats around the world is described in books and papers and films.

Yet the crises are still with us. The simple fact is that knowledge on its own is not enough. As the two stories at the beginning of this preface show, all this information has to be set within a wider framework to make much sense. Take, for example, the famous case of the destruction of tropical rainforests. At the first major United Nations meeting on the environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, scientists and environmentalists made powerful presentations on the fact that many countries were selling their rainforests for cash (for reasons of poverty as well as opportunism), and only at the end finding they were left with eroded and impoverished soils. The people presenting the case assumed that their audience would share their concern at this loss, and stop the deforestation. But that was not the framework within which everyone was listening. A number of politicians and business people went home to their developing countries and informed their superiors that apparently there were groups who would pay good money for all that rainforest - and the rate of destruction of the rainforests rose perceptibly after Stockholm.

Both politicians and environmentalists had the same data. But they had different assumptions, different values, and different frameworks.

Ultimately, the environmental crisis is a crisis of the mind. And likewise, appropriate development is ultimately an appropriate development of the mind. We see, do, and are what we think, and what we think is shaped by our cultures, faiths, and beliefs. This is why one of the more extraordinary movements of the past few decades began to take shape. For if the information of the environmentalists needed a framework of values and beliefs to make it useful, then where better to turn for allies than to the original multinationals, the largest international groupings and networks of people? Why not turn to the major religions of the world?

In 1986 this is exactly what the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) International did when it invited five major faiths - Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism - to Assisi in Italy to explore how they could work on environmental issues. It was so successful that in 1995 His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, then president of WWF International, launched a new international organization, the Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC). By 2000 six more faiths had joined the Alliance - Baha’ism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism - bringing the total to eleven, with ARC working in just under sixty countries. Its role is to help major faith bodies develop environmental programs and projects, in association with secular bodies as diverse as WWF, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the World Bank.

At the heart of this work lies a conviction that the way forward for the world must be different from that which pertains in so



much of the best-intentioned organizations.

Many secular organizations - including the World Bank, WWF, and the United Nations - talk about their staff going "on mission" or explain their policies in "mission statements." This is nothing new. But in doing so, these organizations may be perpetuating one of the greatest mistakes of the religions, one that the faiths themselves have tried to change. Virtually all the founders of the major religions spoke about the spiritual life as being a journey or a pilgrimage. This model has shaped the major faiths, and pilgrimage is central to every single world religion.

Many religions forget this tradition of travelling humbly and have launched great missions whose hallmark has been an intense desire to change the lives of those whom they missionize. But this model has increasingly been rejected by the major faiths in favor of a return to the encounter of travellers, pilgrims, and personal witnesses to the power of religion.

What if the new missionary movements of the secular world - the environmental movement, the development community, and international agencies - talked of pilgrimage rather than of mission? What if their staff thought of walking humbly to other countries and relying upon the traditions of hospitality just as pilgrims do? What a psychological difference that would make and what a role model for the people in those countries.

In its Sacred Land Program ARC has drawn together from the experiences of all the major faiths seven separate stages of pilgrimage. These are ideas, not rules, and explore how any journey can become a pilgrimage.

The first stage involves thinking about being a pilgrim rather than just travelling from A to B. The second is to recognize that journeys are entities in themselves and they can - if you allow them - take on a life of their own. They are not just a means to an end. The third stage of pilgrimage is becoming aware of the people with whom you are travelling and of why you are together, discovering what each of you brings as well as being honest about some of the tensions. The fourth is about the story that has brought you there: your story. In the fifth stage you lose your role as an observer and become part of the landscape and part of somebody else's story. The sixth stage is to actually look at what you are passing through and the seventh and final stage is to recognize that at the end of the journey you should be different from the person who set out. If every business meeting, every overseas trip, and every project were to use these ideas they would be so much more effective and enjoyable.

I return to the image that began this article - of a messenger rushing in sweaty and full of amazing, terrifying news that the end of the world is nigh, and of a tranquil gardener listening carefully, but getting on with planting a sapling before going to find out the truth. In a way the international agencies, environmental lobby groups, and governments, with their various three, five, or ten-year plans, are the messengers. The insight of the faiths is that although these messengers might be speaking the truth, it is in the end probably more useful to finish planting the tree first.

**Because even when everything seems to be crumbling we have to believe that life on earth will go on. And we have to help make it happen.**

*Martin Palmer*

Secretary General of ARC

For further information see: [www.arcworld.org](http://www.arcworld.org)

## Poem

We have forgotten the names  
We ignore the places  
And the face of God  
Lies unrecognised  
In the fallow fields  
of our desecration

Become the flower  
of the rock's memory  
Be heard as the groan  
Of the high mountains of the world  
And in the curve  
Of the straight line  
Behold your God.

**Prue Fitzgerald**



# The living Earth

This magazine enables us, together, to explore the common ground between the world faiths. 'Common ground' is a useful metaphor - a word, image or idea that enables us, by understanding a meaningful similarity, to comprehend something more profound - one of our truest ways of understanding the world. We stand on the ground, walk across, feel at home on it. The 'ground of our being' is the foundation on which we base and shape our lives. We 'orient' ourselves, 'find our place' by relating with the ground on which we live. So what is the common ground between the many ways in which we approach or attempt to understand the divine, the sacred? I suggest that, common to all our perspectives, is the knowledge that we live in a world that is created by divinity.

Whatever there may be beyond this planet and universe, the web of living organisms that we are part of, the living skin of Earth, is evidence of our creator's nature. For all of us, Earth is the primary revelation of the sacred. Though there may be other channels of revelation, our membership of the community of living beings on Earth provides our first, our most immediate knowledge of the divine. The beauty, the complexity, the inter-relatedness of creation indicates what God - the sacred - the divine is like.

I want to explain some of the thoughts of a man, not widely known, the

*For all of us, whatever our beliefs, Earth is the primary revelation of the sacred*

centenary of whose birth occurs this year. His name is Gregory Bateson and I believe that he discovered a view of the living world and of our appropriate attitudes to membership of it that is vital for our future. He grew up in academic Cambridge, studied zoology ("I've been a biologist all my life"), made anthropological studies of native peoples in New Guinea and Bali, married Margaret Mead, became a U.S. resident, worked in intelligence during World War II and then made successive and important contributions to the new discipline of cybernetics (systems theory), clinical psychology, family therapy, animal communication and learning. He became aware (in the 1960's) of our growing ecological problems, developed his central theory of 'mind' as existent in all the living systems of the world, outspokenly opposed nuclear weapons and came, before his death in 1980, to see the totality of the 'mental' systems of the living Earth as "the sacred".

Bateson's hope was that an understanding of the unity of all the systems that are the living world might allow us to regain what he came to call "the grace" that the non-human animals still have. They relate directly to the world without language and without conscious purpose. They share the grace and humility that creative artists still have access to. Bateson learned to see the beautiful, the aesthetic, as "the hall-mark of the sacred". Engagement in aesthetic process, as creative artist or 'appreciator' of art (and 'art' means poetry, music, drama, dance and 'natural history' as well as painting and sculpture) enables us to recover our lost sense of unity with the living world, our integration with the rest of life on the planet. The key to comprehending this is Bateson's understanding of 'mind'.

Bateson claims that mind exists everywhere in the living world. This is difficult to accept. We are conditioned to think that minds exist only in

Image: 'The power of growth' by Judith Bromley

Dr. Charlton is an active member of GreenSpirit ([www.greenspirit.org.uk](http://www.greenspirit.org.uk)) and is an associate member of the Iona Community. He is currently working on a book following extended academic research into Bateman's thought. For further info email: [n.charlton@greenspirit.org.uk](mailto:n.charlton@greenspirit.org.uk)

# Earth as sacred

humans or physical brains. We have thought, for centuries, that 'mind' is a non-material 'substance' which somehow communicates with the bodies of people, but that nothing else has a mind. Bateson claims that wherever there is a system of sufficient complexity in the living world, there is 'mind' or mental process. The 'mind' is the relating between the material components of the system. If information is communicated and there is response, a mind is working. Hence, there are minds at every scale. Human mind is a special (but not unique or superior) case. The world is a single intermeshing hierarchy of processes which are 'mental' in kind: "comparable to thought".

These 'mental processes' do not require consciousness, which is a small part of mental activity, even in humans. Only part of our knowing reaches the 'screen of consciousness', the bulk is unconscious knowledge shared by all the organisms in the world. Perception does not require consciousness either. It includes many types of responsiveness: all the many ways in which organisms or systems can register and respond to 'news' or informational stimulus reporting change or difference. The processes which produce healing in organs, growth in organisms, development in societies or balance in large ecosystems are all "minds". Bateson asks us to understand that our mental going on is the same sort of process as the systemic activities in a cell (opting perhaps for division or death), a healing organ (rebuilding its symmetry), a forest ecosystem (moving towards a new balance of species), a herd (defending or killing a weak member), a human society (learning the humility of interconnectedness) or the whole Gaian process as it maintains the conditions for life on this planet. Mind or intelligence is found throughout the living world; evolution itself is an immense process of learning and memory.

Bateson saw "purposive consciousness", our tendency to go for what we want by the shortest path, as our most pathological feature. We want more carrots per acre but there is a problem with carrot-fly so we spray the fields with DDT, which kills off many of the birds. Next year there are few insect eating birds so the problem is worse, the insects become resistant to the insecticide, we spray more poisons and eventually there is human illness - and so on. It is our greed which makes us unfit to live in the Earth community. We rely only on our consciousness - a small part of our minds - rather than our far wider greater-than-conscious mentality which holds the wisdom we have gained during evolution and throughout our experience. Engagement with the beautiful in 'nature' and in art re-enables that wider, wiser mental process. When we spend time in a wood, lying in the grass or with non-human animals, make poetry or music, paint or garden, we regain systemic wisdom. If we learn to use this wisdom it may permit us to remain on Earthplanet as members of its living community. Bateson's daughter

wrote that Gregory came to see "the integrated fabric of mental process" - the totality of the systemic minds that comprise the living world - as, itself, "the sacred":

*"... The principle way he knows that has allowed men and women to approach this (but not necessarily the only way) has been through religious traditions, vast, interconnected, metaphorical systems. Without such metaphors for meditation, as correctives for the errors of human language and recent science, it seems that we have the capacity to be wrong in rather creative ways - so wrong that this world we cannot understand may become one in which we cannot live."*<sup>1</sup>

Our task is to learn how to use religious process, to recognise the divinity immanent (or 'inscendent') in the living world, to enable the members of all faiths to see and treat the Earth as itself divine. We need, for example, to extend our ideas of 'justice' beyond the human.

We are, necessarily, groping, unsure, uncertain of how such a vast task can be approached. Bateson understood this:

*"We are in extraordinary confusion at this very moment. Our beliefs are undergoing rapid change at a pace comparable to the rate things were changing in classical Greece in, say between 600 and 500 bc, or again in the beginning of the Christian Era. Ours is a strange and exciting world in which the very premises of language are in question. What is the language of the heart?..."*

*The old beliefs are wearing thin and there is a groping for new. It is not a matter, you see, of being a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Jew. We do not yet have another answer to the old problems... We have to have in mind not an orthodoxy but a wide and compassionate recognition of the storm of ideas in which we are all living and in which we must make our nests - find spiritual rest - as best we can."*<sup>2</sup>

Bateson's message is that we live in sacred interrelation - with all people and also with all organisms, because the systems of relating are themselves holy. The total interacting of sunlight, climate, weather, geological

processes, seas, mountains, jungle, grasslands, deserts, swamps, forests, rivers, seas, animals (including humans), plants, algae, bacteria and the smallest of microscopic beings is "... the sacred...call it god if you will." This offers a basis for mutual understanding between people of every faith. It shows the necessity of co-operation and proposes a single moral imperative - to revere the Earth and all her systemic relationships because they are holy, divine, sacred.

...revere the Earth and all  
her systemic relationships  
because they are holy,  
divine, sacred

**Dr. Noel Charlton**

1 BATESON, G. and BATESON, M. C., *Angels fear: towards an epistemology of the sacred*. (British edition: *Angels fear: an investigation into the nature and meaning of the sacred*.) New York: Macmillan, 1987; London, Melbourne, Auckland and Berglei (South Africa): Rider (Century Hutchinson), 1988, p. 200.

2 Ibid. pp. 178-179.

# A religion of life

My earliest memories of going to the temple are of my brothers, sisters and I being crammed into one car and being taken somewhere to do our prayers. I don't think it was ever explained to me fully why we were visiting such places but we went along happily and I can remember looking forward to playing with the other children when we got there. I remember the excitement of knowing that while my parents were off doing their prayers I was free to run around and play hide and seek with the other children. I was never forced to do anything or perform any strange rituals, but at the end we always had the pleasure of looking forward to delving into the *Prasad* once it had been offered to god.

I was never offered any explanations of Hinduism, in those days it was assumed the children would grow up following the parents footsteps in terms of their religious beliefs. But growing up in a predominantly white area, and surrounded by Christians, I increasingly became confused when asked: "what religion are you?" I used to attend a youth fellowship meeting once a week and while there I was encouraged to go to church on Sunday for prayers and hymn singing. I was also a good singer so I was encouraged to become part of the choir. All the while my parents never batted an eyelid. I became more and more involved with church activities and became a member of the Boys Brigade which also encouraged visiting the church regularly. On the one side there was the religion of my parents, which was never explained to me, and on the other side there was Christianity which was giving me teachings, guidance and support on a regular basis. Split beliefs are never an easy thing for a young soul at the best of times but having a complete split down the middle made me feel a little confused about what I was supposed to believe.

Being a regular church-goer made me favour Christianity as my preferred belief, however I would always go to the temple with my parents whenever they went. After all I didn't want to miss out on the luscious celebrations of *Navratri* and *Dussera!* They were times when I would get to see my family and friends and be able to do the traditional dances with

them, do our worship together, and have fun while remembering our gods.

Images and beliefs in god were also confusing for me. At home I was surrounded by the many images of God. Not just normal images but strange pictures of a snake God, a monkey God, Gods with many arms, and even Gods with many heads. On the other side I was told there was only one God, and that I had to follow in the footsteps of Christ. I ended up having no solid belief in either of the religions and gave no commitment to either. I went to the church when I had to and I went to the temple when my parents chose to go. Sometime later we moved to London and things became simpler as there was much diversity available to me. Temples were closer and I was surrounded by people my age of the Hindu faith. Being surrounded by this made all the difference as there were people I could relate to when it came to the different aspects of the culture.

After settling down and becoming more accustomed to the Hindu religion, I was fortunate enough to attend classes where I could learn my mother tongue. At these classes I became close to several girls my own age who taught me so much about Hinduism and its many diverse cultures. I once over heard the teachers referring to me as "Krishna" and the girls were referred to as my "Gopis"!

In abundance I straddled life with a heavy heart because I could not believe in just one religion or faith group. I did however make the effort to learn of other faiths and find out what pearls of wisdom they could bestow on me. With that I decided not to label myself "A Hindu" or "A Christian" but to associate myself with the religion of life. It was a choice I made which lifted me and gradually that heavy heart had dissipated.

Religion is a beautiful thing and Hinduism has played a huge part in shaping me into the person I am today. It kept me on the straight and narrow when there was no one around to guide me. I have derived much from Hinduism. It will always remain in a special corner of my heart. It remains something that I will always look to as one of my sources of wisdom.

Split beliefs are never an easy thing for a young soul

Relationship of Trust

If the **Earth**

were only a few feet in diameter,  
floating a few feet above a field somewhere,  
people would come from everywhere to marvel at it.

People would walk around it,

**marvelling** at its big pools of water,

its little pools and the water flowing between the pools.

People would marvel at the bumps on it,

and the holes in it,

and they would marvel at the very thin layer of gas surrounding it  
and the water suspended in the gas.

The people would marvel at the creatures  
walking around the surface of the ball,

and at the creatures in the water.

The people would declare it **precious**

Because it was the only one,

and they would **protect** it

so that it would not be hurt.

The ball would be the greatest wonder known,

and people would come to behold it,

to be healed,

to gain knowledge,

to know **beauty**

and to wonder how it could be.

People would **love** it,

and defend it with their lives,

because they would somehow know

that their lives,

their own roundness,

could be nothing without it.

If the Earth

were only a few feet in diameter.

Author not known.

# A CHIPPAWA Thanksgiving Prayer



## *O Brother Sun! O Sister Moon!*

O Brother Sun, who brings us light and heat, who gives life to this our Turtle Island to all growing things, to our brothers and our sisters, the two-legged and the four-legged ones and the life within the waters, we thank you, and we greet you.

*May you continue to bless us with your days*

O Sister Moon, who brings light to our dark nights and shines to guide our way who marks the times and seasons of this our turtle island, we thank you and we greet you.

*May you continue to bless us with your light*

*Turning to the East to begin a the sun-wise circle*

*We turn to the white place of winter,  
which brings the snows and the ice,  
the wild goose and the cold winds which clean and purify,  
the short days and the hardness for the earth and for the living  
of our brothers and sister, the two-legged and the four-legged...  
and we give thanks for these great gifts.*

*We turn to the place of  
the setting sun and the  
dark night,  
to the time of sleep, and  
to the place where the  
ancestors watch over us  
and the departing  
spirits begin their long  
journey,  
which we also must  
take...  
and we give thanks for  
these great gifts.*



*We turn to the place of  
the rising sun,  
which gives us birth and  
the blessings of life and  
spirit,  
the days and the spring  
seasons...  
and we give thanks for  
these great gifts.*

*We turn to the place of the high sun,  
which brings us the heat and food of summer,  
the warm winds and the gifts of family and children...  
and we give thanks for these great gifts.*

*Contributed by Jan Mughrabi,  
Baha'i Faith, Torbay, Devon*

Based on a prayer offered by a Clan Chief at a Peace Pipe ceremony held at sunrise beside Green Lake, Wisconsin October 1989. The term turtle island means world or land.

# more action...

In the second paragraph of the Shema (Deut. 11: 13-21), we read that should we love and serve God completely then we will be rewarded with ample crops and will be allowed to flourish. If, however, our hearts stray then the sky will be shut up, the land will cease to be fertile and we will quickly be destroyed. The 21st century inhabitants of planet earth finds themselves half-way in between. There is enough food to go round - it's just that much is dumped to keep prices high, and much is poorly distributed. Conversely, the planet is undergoing catastrophic changes that will most likely destroy many peoples' lands and lives. But how did we get into this limbo position?

Did we stop loving and serving God, or is the deal in Deuteronomy flawed? Certainly many readers of the text find this kind of simplistic deal between man and God fairly offensive - the Midrash of God holding Mount Sinai over the Israelites, threatening to destroy them if they decided not to accept the Torah, comes to mind. Is God really like that or is this the way the Torah tries to explain the occurrence of natural disasters? We know that organised religion was not the main player in Israelite society that we would like to think it was - archaeological excavations of common Israelite idolatry attest to this fact. Have we always turned astray then?

It depends entirely on our theology. For thousands of years, Judaism has picked up different views on God from surrounding societies and has blended them together, making God all the more difficult to understand. When we mixed with the Greeks, God became all-powerful and all-knowing to an extent that had not been described in the Torah. When we mixed with medieval apologetics, God became incomprehensible and distant. When we mixed with modernity, God became less supernatural and more of a personal guide. How can you turn away from something that constantly changes - from an idea that is virtually all-encompassing?

The answer is in the text. To love God is not enough - it continues that we must serve God. Judaism is not a religion of faith but of action - love of God is expressed through deed, not through emotion or belief. Our turning astray was in allowing religion to become mere sentiment, to become a foothold into the past to give our lives more meaning, instead of being the dynamic force for change that it should be. The Torah is described as a *Tree of Life*, but only to those who hold onto it. Looking at the tree is not enough, marvelling at it and appreciating it is not enough, we have to physically cling to the tree - we have to follow its thoughts and beliefs wherever possible.

...mere sentiment is never enough

And the Torah is a text that teaches us that ethics are societal as well as personal. If we wish to cling to the *Tree of Life* - indeed to life itself - then we have to act now, because mere sentiment is never enough. Talking about global warming is irrelevant if one fails to reduce pollution or waste. Worrying about the future generations is useless unless accompanied by actions to help make their lives more tolerable.

The ways to help are innumerable - reduction of waste, reduction of pollutants, political lobbying and donations to environmental charities such as the Noah Project are just some of them. The twentieth century was one of much talk and little action... let us make our generation the one that changed the balance so that we and others can literally cling to the tree of life.

Neil Amswych

# ...less talk

On the 21st of March the Zoroastrian festival of *Jamshedi No Roz* celebrates the annual renovation of the world. It is a spring festival paralleling nature's renovation of creation after winter, a time for reflection and looking ahead to the resurgence of life all around.

At this festival, a ceremony of thanksgiving, a *Jashan* is held to *Ahura Mazda* for the goodness of creation. The *jashan* ritual symbolizes the seven good creations of *Ahura Mazda* and their immortal spiritual guardians, the *Amesha Spentas*.

The heady fragrance of incense and the lulling tone of the ancient Avestan prayers seem to waft the memory back to the era of the prophet Zarathustra, who, some 3,500 years ago, taught his followers to worship *Ahura Mazda* through the goodness of creation.

This festival is dedicated to *Jamshed*, who according to tradition was the kingly protector of *Ahura Mazda's* newly created world. Under his protection the golden age of long ago

# renovated mind renovated world

*Those who would take  
over the earth  
And shape it to their will  
Never, I notice, succeed.  
The earth is like a  
vessel so sacred  
That at the mere approach of  
the profane it is marred.  
They reach out their fingers  
and it is gone.*

*Tao Te Ching*

flourished. This was a time before suffering and death was known, a time where evil was preparing to attack *Ahura Mazda's* good creations. *Jamshed* having been forewarned by *Ahura Mazda* of such an event built an underground world (*var*). He studied the ceiling of this world with replicas of the sun, moon and stars. He filled earth furrows with pure spring water, which in turn nurtured the plants and animals. Humanity enjoyed good energy and goodwill towards each other of an indescribable kind. The days were as bright and joyful as the nights were illumined and peaceful. Darkness and discontent were yet unknown.

While the world outside was being relentlessly abused and attacked by the evil spirit (*Angra Mainyu*), all was well within the realm of *Jamshed*. He protected all life from pain and his people knew only of the joy of life and celebrated a perpetual *Jashan* in praise of *Ahura Mazda*.

But alas! What *Jamshed* failed to realize was that *Angra Mainyu* could also pollute the unwary good mind and *Jamshed* fell prey to arrogance. As he indulged his affliction, his vanity grew and his memory of *Ahura Mazda* faded and his kingly glory soon disappeared. His kingdom became engulfed in such turmoil that the desire to live was less than the desire for untimely death.

To this day the folly of *Jamshed* acts as a reminder for humanity to beware evil. The revival of the glory of *Jamshed's* golden age is the yearning in the heart of humanity.

Only by good thoughts (*humata*), good words (*hukhta*) and good actions (*huvarashta*) can the ultimate renovation (*frashokereti*) of the world be reached.

Tina Mehta

# living in moderation

The word “environment” conjures up many images about the current state of the earth and its future. For some people, the environment is viewed romantically, with scenes of sunrises, mountains, grasslands, flowing streams, and deep oceans, while others view it more as a resource to service the needs and desires of human beings to drive our global economy. As both a scientist and a follower of the Bahá’í Faith, my personal view of the environment is fundamentally one about humanity’s relationship with God as our creator, since our very survival on earth is completely dependent upon his will to let us exist in the first place. A central teaching of the Bahá’í Faith is the inherent oneness of humanity, which naturally suggests to me that all people on earth deserve to have their same basic needs met regardless of where they live: adequate food and clothing, clean water and air, and enough usable land and natural resources to maintain stable and healthy societies. At the same time, we still need to balance that drive with protection of the heritage that God has given us, both for the benefit of future generations and for his other creatures who cannot give voice to their needs for survival. How we strike that balance now ultimately determines where our future lies for many decades to come.

According to Bahá’u’llah, prophet-founder of the Bahá’í Faith, the beauty of the natural environment is a sign that confirms God’s existence and presence in our lives:

**By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the**

**standards of Thine omnipotence.<sup>1</sup>**

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá’u’llah and head of the Bahá’í Faith after his father’s passing, likened the earth to that of the human body, and that the laws governing the universe and the physical environment reflect a deep sense of interconnectedness and perfect balance.<sup>2</sup> He further said:

**Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. In other words, the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness.<sup>3</sup>**

However, Abdu’l-Bahá also notes that nature by itself lacks a sense of “intelligence” or “will” and is subject to the actions of human beings,<sup>4</sup> which implies that we have a tremendous responsibility to preserve the earth for future generations. This requires that we exercise moderation in all human actions,<sup>5</sup> and show appreciation for the material wealth that we enjoy, since according to Bahá’u’llah:

**Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men.<sup>6</sup>**

As we embark on the next century and struggle with today’s issues with



the environment, it seems clearer now than ever before that we need to make use of this sort of wisdom to preserve our future. Bahá’í communities worldwide, both alone and in co-operation with international agencies like the United Nations, have worked in this direction with over 1300 service projects mostly located in the developing world to promote development while also protecting the environment.<sup>7</sup> These projects particularly support local peoples’ perspectives and aim for both self-sufficiency and a holistic treatment of the underlying problems. One recent initiative in central India helps villagers by providing parabolic mirrors to cook their food with solar energy, preventing the need to deplete their forests for firewood, while also saving them time and energy to develop themselves further.<sup>8</sup> With innovative measures like this one, the possibilities for overcoming the pressures to preserve the environment while ensuring global prosperity seem attainable in the not-too-distant future.

*Dinesh Singh*

1 Bahá’u’llah, *Prayers and Meditations* by Bahá’u’llah, sec. CLXXVI, p. 272.

2 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, sec. 137, p. 157.

3 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet translated from the Persian.

4 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, rev. ed., p. 3.

5 Bahá’u’llah, *Tablets of Bahá’u’llah Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 69.

6 Bahá’u’llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, rev. ed., p. 44.

7 Excerpted from *The Bahá’í’s*, a publication of the Bahá’í International Community (1992).

8 “In India, a program for rural women emphasizes training as the key to effective use of solar cookers,” from *One Country: The Online Magazine of the Bahá’í International Community*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, October-December 2002.

# An appointment of trust

As God's viceregent on earth mankind has been given a 'Trust' to protect nature, not to exploit it. We are the custodians of our planet, and, as such we not only have a far-reaching potential but also an enormous responsibility. We are accountable for our actions and for the trust placed upon us. In our everyday lives as Allah's servants, we can take responsibility on a small scale by being mindful of our own immediate environment. We can be consciously modest in our demands, not waste energy, water and food, and care for animals and plants.

The whole awe-inspiring universe worships the Lord, and all animals and plants have their own *Dhikr* (remembrance of God). We humans may not be aware of this, but according to the Qur'an every creature praises and reveres the Lord in its own way. Since we alone have the gift of cognition and the duty to be trustees of our environment, we are honour bound to show reverence towards the whole of Creation, as a sign of veneration for our Lord and in recollection of the promise we made to Him in pre-eternity. Cruelty towards His creatures, or their misuse for selfish aims does not cause mankind to grow in stature - to the contrary.

Megafarming (causing pollution of earth and water); killing dolphins and whales; using the former to detect mines in the sea; creating cruel nets which kill and maim God's creatures; using sound waves under the sea for military purposes, thereby disturbing the beautiful inhabitants of the deep; killing animals for their fur; oil slicks caused by negligence and the desire for gain - the sufferings of plants and animals on a large scale are endless. Air pollution; global warming; microwaves in the atmosphere; gene-manipulated food and manipulation of weather through destructive beams: these are all signs of man trying to play the Creator. Irreparable damage

(At His behest) the sun and the moon run their appointed courses;

(before Him) prostrate themselves the stars and the trees.

And the skies He has raised high,

and has devised (for all things a measure),

so that you (too, O men,)

might never transgress the measure (of what is right).

In the Name of God the Merciful and Compassionate

'Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create A viceregent on earth." They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make Mischief therein and shed blood?- Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises And glorify Thy holy (name)?"'

The Holy Qur'an, Surah 2, Verse 30<sup>1</sup>

is caused, not only to our planet but also to ourselves. We are confronted with this stark reality every day, through the air we breath, the food we eat, the water we drink.

Nature religions like those practised by indigenous people in America and Australia show a deep, intrinsic respect, love and honour for our earth. These people relate to a living universe, where everything, even the tiniest creature, has its place. In the same way a great Sufi saint of Islam, Abu Yazid Al-Bistami (9th Century Christian era), finding ants in his garment, realised he had picked them up many miles away. Knowing they had no hope of making a new home far away from the thousands of ants in their own society, he travelled back to shake them out onto the anthill where they belonged. There are many such Sufi tales, demonstrating their care not to harm the small creatures which scurry about us without our paying attention. The Prophet Muhammad (upon him be peace) practised kindness to animals at a time when animal rights were not even discussed. His compassion towards animals and consideration for plants are well-documented.

Why does our so called progressive and 'civilised' society increasingly produce inventions which endanger the pristine beauty and majesty of our planet? The wasteful disturbance of nature in our time does not bear thinking about. Considering the pollution of the earth, skies and waterways by factories; destruction by wars, terrorist acts and the general heedlessness of a ruthless strata of society trying to extract as much profit as possible, can we be proud of our position as God's deputy on earth? We have been commanded to find the signs of Allah around us and to act accordingly. Beauty, peace and the quality of life would be

beyond description if we only observed God's precepts and kept the natural balance of His Creation.

Holy Qur'an Surah 55, verses 5-8.<sup>2</sup>

**Umm Hanie' Rebler**

Special Envoy for Interfaith Dialogue and Women's Relations for the Deutsche Muslim-Liga Bonn e.V. CC (German Muslim-League Bonn CC)

<sup>1</sup> The Holy Qur'an, Text, Translation and Commentary by Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

<sup>2</sup> The Message of the Qur'an, Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad.

Restoring mutually supportive relations between humans and the earth – and with other religions – are, I believe, the defining issues of this century. Religious reconciliation of humans and the earth is a matter of life or extinction.

Christians respect the earth community as God's community, within which people have special responsibilities. The Christian Old Testament portrays humans as enjoying 'dominion' to rule, occupy, and serve the earth. Dominion means people, God's image, are like client servant kings, with duties and responsibilities in a garden earth which is not our own. Psalm 8, which Jesus quoted in Jerusalem, describes people not as worshipping other animals as in Egypt, but as leading them, beginning and ending with the refrain, 'O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth'.

Another important psalm is psalm 72 which describes the 'good' king as securing a healthy climate and earth. Wild animals, as in the peaceable kingdom bow before the good king, God's image now 'democratised' in all people. As sacral kings people are not separate from fellow creatures who are our brothers. 'One from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother' (Dt. 17.15).

Christians love the earth, its seas, rivers, soil, plants, animals, and climate because God created 'all things' through his Word. That creating Word, in Jesus, entered our earth infleshed, embedded, interdependent with other earth beings, as one of us. The Incarnation, the infleshing of the Creating God, has massive significance for Christian and earth relationships. An eighth century writer, crystallising biblical and early Christian teaching, John of Damascus, reminds us that in Jesus God enters and effects our earth through a woman: *'Let the whole creation celebrate and sing of a holy woman who gave a holy birth. Thanks to her the Creator has changed all nature into a better state, by the intervention of humanity. Because if humanity, which combines spirit and matter, is the bond of all creation visible and invisible, the creating Word of God, in uniting Himself to humanity, is united by her to the whole creation.'*

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, becoming a craftsman and working in a family field to help feed his family. Here he mingled with seeds, soil, rain, plants, olives, figs, vines, stock, and hens with chicks. Later he used examples from Nazareth life to illustrate his parables. He was baptised by John in the River Jordan, thereby effecting all the earth's waters. His birth and baptism are included in the one redemptive act that climaxed on the cross and in resurrection in the garden, a new creation, new Eden, which includes us all. The thrust of Jesus' preaching,

in word and practice, is, in words he taught us, 'Thy kingdom come'. God's kingdom is a metaphor for that future in which all creation will be in peace, under God the Father, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

People are microcosms of the universe macrocosm, that is we contain in our humanity all the other creatures that have ever been, from stardust to dew. In Jesus God's creating Word therefore is comprehensively united to our universe. Jesus risen fills the earth. The earth is the fullness or 'pleroma' of God. The

human Jesus is the cosmic Christ. Therefore we reverence and respect the earth creatures around us. They too are included in the cosmic Christ and in the kingdom. To hurt the earth, to abuse the climate through unnecessary fossil fuel burning, such as car and air travel and food miles, is wrong. 'To hurt the earth is a sin', says Metropolitan John of Pergamon. Earth abuse, pollution, defiantly rejects God in his creatures. To bring our planet to

the edge of mass extinction, as our societies, including reputedly Christian governments, have done, may be what Jesus called the sin against the Holy Spirit.

Because Jesus in his humanity includes the whole earth community, the whole earth shares our future. 'What is united with God is saved', wrote Gregory of Nazienzen in the fourth century. When Jesus stretched out his arms on the cosmic cross he included the heights and depths and breadth of the earth and universe to which the cross points. As human creatures, embedded in the earth, inseparable from the rest of the earth community, we remain related to other earth beings in our future, which we call heaven.

What then about Christian practice? In brief, Christians should be the best friends of the earth, because the earth, for which we are responsible, is God's earth. In Jesus the God of heaven and earth enters our earth, identifying with our earth community, and, as risen, has reconciled not only humans but the whole earth in a cosmic redemption. As the French theologian Jean Bastaire says:

***Christians should not be dragged along at the rear, as too often is the case, but stride in the vanguard of lovers of the earth.***

Edward P. Echlin

# God's earth community

# A meditative journey into nature

Master Ikkyu advised that before the intellectual study of buddhist texts, and endless chanting of the sutras, a student of Zen should learn how to read the love letters sent by the snow, the wind and the rain.

It was a crisp, bright morning, mud under foot, as I went rambling through the Suffolk countryside.

I descended a grass slope and made my way through a spinney to suddenly find before me, a meandering river that stretched right into the heart of Constable landscape. I paused for a few moments and started to read a nature trail board by its willow-laden bank. Suddenly the printed words 'weeping willow' came alive for me and filled my imaginative senses with delight and wonderment. I recalled the remark that Dylan Thomas once made, in one of his published letters, where he said that he had come across the word 'Drome' and instantly thought it to be one of the finest sounding words in the English language.

Buried deep, in that quiet countryside, far from the urban landscape of city streets, high rise buildings and traffic noise, my mind kept on going over the sounds of 'weeping willow', 'weeping willow', 'weeping willow', and I felt the connectedness that Dylan Thomas felt, to be something rather special. I felt a connectedness to rather special words, in a rather special place...

The information on the board stated that: *'Broken twigs (from the willow trees) float down stream and root easily in the mud to form new trees'*. I reflected on the word 'easily' and became somewhat startled at the thought of broken twigs, random, wasted fragments of nature, giving birth again 'easily' to new life. How miraculous this natural worlds of ours is, I pondered, as I headed slowly downstream. Suddenly an image came to me of a flotilla of broken twigs flowing down the river. I could see some journeying onwards, driven by the currents of the river, into weirs, pools and eddies. I could also see others filtering into the riverbank, becoming embedded in the mud. In time, I thought, some of these will grow into saplings, then into mature trees that will eventually shed their small twigs into the river as well, to continue a never-ending cycle of life. How truly inspiring nature is, I reflected. A self-creating, self-renewing, ecological wonder of such magnificence that my mind still cannot come to terms with it.

The Buddha in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, draws our attention to the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life. Nothing, in the known universe, is seen to be separate. Everything connects and interrelates in a profound, unified way. So when damage is inflicted in one particular area, the impact, ultimately spreads to affect other areas. Now, substantial amounts of mainstream, ecological research is supporting and verifying this Buddhist teaching, at a theoretical and empirical level, so can we continue to run the risk of ignoring it? Can we continue to support and sustain consumer-driven societies when they cause so much environmental destruction? Can we carry on ignoring earth-friendly strategies of living that nurture and nourish better ways of managing natural resources? The Buddha instructed us to pay attention, to be ever wakeful to the world around us, and our place within it. Now, as in no other time in history, this has become an imperative. The depletion of the earth's resources, that we are currently witnessing, cannot continue at its present rate. We must pay attention, commit ourselves to change, before it is too late...

My ramble through the Suffolk countryside very much brought home to me the idea of how precious and inspiring nature is. It is so precious and inspiring, that we must, as its custodians, safeguard it at all costs. We must work in any way that we can to nourish and sustain it for future generations. We must challenge and change our thoughts of separation that keep us from our role as protectors of this miraculous gift. A gift of which, as the Buddha recognised, we are all an intricate part.

Master Ikkyu, in the opening quote, recognised that it is our hearts that need engaging more, not our minds, and that is a lesson that we must ALL learn. A lesson that could very well save us.....

*Journey well, journey mindfully.....*

*Michael Lewin*

# VISIBLE *devotion*

## Editor's Note:

In her role as Chair of the Social Affairs Committee of the Muslim Council of Britain Shibban Akbar frequently receives questions relating to Muslim beliefs and practices. In light of the article published in issue 11 of *Initiative* 'Ban the Croissant! Secular and Religious Rights', which focused on the issue of the banning of religious symbols in State-run schools in France, Shibban has given us permission to publish the following piece, in questionnaire format, relating to Islamic dress. HW

### Q. Why do you think the ban on the hijab happened in French schools? Is it likely to happen in Britain?

A. I think the ban has happened in French schools because France has not yet embraced multiculturalism and has a certain arrogance of its own notion of what is culturally appropriate. Also France is largely a secular society. Secularism is that sort of 'ism' that has the propensity of becoming rigidly fundamental and oppressive in its principles, policy and implementation.

There are certain quarters that will certainly try for it to happen in Britain, but I think not. On the whole the British way is very different from the French way.

### Q. Some people maintain that the wearing of the hijab has a divisive effect on the relationships between school children. Do you agree?

A. No. Those who are the right age to wear the hijab and choose to wear it must be allowed to wear it.

Are there any rules for what hairstyle a female pupil should or should not have? Would a certain hairstyle have a divisive effect on relations between school children? If hijab in school causes such an effect then parents and teachers have an essential role to play in tackling the negative vibes, attitudes and perceptions. Children often learn what they pick up from the adults who surround them.

### Q. How far do you think British schools should go in making room for religious customs?

A. I am afraid the tone of your question implies that British schools will be doing Muslims a great favour and in return we should be eternally grateful to them. Inclusion and making adjustment to others' needs are much more than fitting in to the political correctness debate. It is about a progressive way of thinking that we should all embrace. We should open our minds rather than keep them tightly shut. The religious customs that Muslim pupils may be/will be required to observe during the school hours should not cause hindrance to anybody else's custom or lifestyle. Therefore it will be reasonable for British schools to make room for the religious observances of the pupils.

It always baffles me how the hijab, which is a symbol of decency, is the focus of so much hatred and criticism. I would say that nudity and indecent clothing evident in public life have a damaging effect on relations between "responsible" adults, and yet society seems to be quite at home with such decadence.

### Q. If the purpose of the hijab is to retain a woman's modesty and to divert attention from her sexuality so that she can be regarded solely for her mind, how do you view the many women who wear colourful hijabs, beautifully made up, sporting tight jeans and a pair of high heels? Is this behaviour not digressing from the intentions of covering one's head?

A. Well, a Muslim woman cannot win, can she? Islamic modesty does not require one to be devoid of fashion and style and a sense of aesthetics. A Muslim woman's wardrobe can be as stylish and as varied as she wants it to be whilst she fulfils the requirements of the Islamic dress code. A hijabed woman is not required to be an androgynous entity! If her femininity allows her to express herself in smart clothing

then she should not be criticised for it. One has to be dressed fit for the occasion.

You mention tight jeans and high heels. Tight jeans are not recommended and if too tight would obviously defeat the purpose of the hijab. Perhaps the wearer was not aware of the complete dress code or was careless about it.

I cannot see how high heels would compromise a person's modesty. Modesty is also a state of the mind, although a Muslim woman may not meet with the approval of all those who perceive her. And with regards to diverting attention from her sexuality, she may take all the necessary precautions to be clothed "appropriately" and yet not be spared from the predatory glances of certain men. (Such men should practice having hijab over their eyes). Besides, I don't believe a woman will always be regarded solely for her mind by everyone, however much she is covered up. The tension between the sexes is a biological reality and part of our everyday life and manifests itself in different ways. It takes strength of character to look at an attractive woman with a degree of detachment and praise the Lord for bestowing such beauty on her!

### Q. Do you consider Islamic dress to be the most visible example of religious devotion?

A. No at all. It all depends on how much attention you want to pay to Muslims who are going about their everyday business of life. Women of other faiths cover their heads - Sonia Gandhi, who is presently running in the Indian elections, is an Italian woman of Catholic background married into an Indian Hindu family, and she always has her head covered when making public appearances. Her late mother-in-law Mrs Indira Gandhi used to wear a head covering in most formal occasions as the Prime Minister of India.

Curiosity and also prejudice does amazing things to us. You can have the perspective of Gulliver or you can have the perspective of the Lilliputians!

Many Muslims wear clothes that are similar in style to those of Christian Nuns, Sisters and Priests and Orthodox Jewish men. Let's not forget Buddhist Monks who wear an orange/bright yellow colour habit and the large crosses that are worn in certain Christian denominations. Now I leave it to you to decide what you think is the most visible example of religious devotion.

### Q. What improvements in Islamic rights would you feel would benefit Islamic communities?

A. It will be a long list, but briefly Muslims should have the freedom to participate in all domains of their life as active subjects rather than be restricted to being passive followers where they will only be given certain rights and concessions. I find indulgence very patronising. We should all aim for an egalitarian society that observes more than mere tolerance.



Shibban Akbar

# Will the British National Party go away if Christians just ignore them?

The British National Party (BNP) is asking for your vote. “Help us to win back Britain for the British” is their current slogan. The BNP definition of “British” is rather unusual. It excludes anyone whose ancestors arrived in the UK after 1948. It does not include the Irish people who rebuilt the infrastructure of Britain after the Second World War; the Afro Caribbean people who came to work in our public services, transport and hospitals; the Indians and Pakistanis who were invited to work the night shift when the textile industry was in fact dying, or the Asians from East Africa who having built British colonies, found no place in them after independence. The BNP definition of British is in effect racially exclusive. Whatever policy clothes the BNP adopts, the core doctrine of this party is a white Britain. Ironically in Lancashire the time has probably arrived, or is very close, when most of the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the County were born here. These people are not recognised as British by the BNP.

*Could it be that a  
Christian silence would  
deny extremists the  
“oxygen of publicity”?*

The party is Islamophobic, indeed it has attempted unsuccessfully to recruit Sikhs and Hindus to its campaign against Islam. It has been argued that Christians should just ignore the BNP. Recently I heard the mayor of one Lancashire Borough complaining about the publicity which the BNP attracts, and in the same breath speaking of it as a problem for her neighbouring Borough. A double denial. Could it be that a Christian silence would deny extremists the “oxygen of publicity”? Will it be that the BNP will anyway collapse in the future from internal feuding, say after a leadership challenge? (Where after all is the National Front of the 1970’s?)

I do not think that Christians in general should ignore the BNP because:

1. it has a racially discriminatory basis
2. it has taken to picking on Muslims
3. it scapegoats some of the most vulnerable people in our society

All three of these are contrary to the practice of faith in Jesus Christ.

Church leaders in particular should not ignore the BNP. If sympathy is to be found for the Party in any of the faith communities of the UK, it is in the ranks of the churches that it is most likely to be present. It is clear that some church members voted for BNP candidates in the council elections last year, because in Lancashire a few church members even helped the Party to organise. As mentioned elsewhere the BNP does invite faith community support. In particular it is capable of wrapping itself in “Christian” or “Family” clothes as well as the Union Jack.

I do not expect that the BNP will go away all that quickly if it is ignored. **I believe its policies appeal to three sorts of voter.**

① Those who live on the margins of our towns, on estates where almost no one would live if they had the choice to live elsewhere. The local facilities, economic prospects and educational opportunities are poor. It is not widely recognised that the people who suffer most from the crime and violence generated in such areas are those who live there. It is hard for local politicians to admit that there is a problem. It seems like civic disloyalty or political failure to do so. Few council officers live in estates like this, indeed they commonly work in the town centre, do not live in the Borough they serve, and hardly ever see the estates on the fringe of the town. These areas are normally ignored. This explains why the BNP gains seats in places that we do not otherwise normally hear about.

The BNP are a symptom that there is a problem. There is a justice issue for Christians to address. The trouble is that the BNP then provides the wrong diagnosis and the wrong solution to the problem.

Middle class flight and virtually segregated housing compound this. Lancashire has more local authority wards where “ethnic minorities” are a majority than anywhere in England outside Birmingham and London; more than neighbouring Manchester far more than Bradford. Lancashire has the three local authority wards with the highest proportion of Muslims in any ward in the UK. It wasn’t planned like this. It happened. But local authorities are not now planning integrated communities. This does not make for healthy communities. There is racial tension between the inner urban areas and the outer estates. It is hard for people on the forgotten estates to admit that residents of inner urban areas are also poor, and that they might have common cause at the town hall. There is competition for the resources.

**2** The second reason that people vote BNP is fear about a real or supposed threat to their way of life and environment. The housing market in some areas of Lancashire is collapsing. Many terraces, built a hundred years or more ago to house mill workers, are at the end of their lives. The result is that for some people in East Lancashire their biggest asset, the house they worked for or inherited, is virtually worthless, not worth repairing. Dissatisfied? Vote BNP.

**3** The third reason that people vote BNP is out of a sense of white superiority. In a word, racism. Comfortable middle class intellectuals with a secure income are quite capable of supporting the BNP.

I am pleased to say that throughout Lancashire - Burnley, Blackburn, Pendle and Nelson for example - there are a number of initiatives to encourage Christians to resist this racism and scape-goating by the BNP. The British National Party’s politics are very damaging. The party exacerbates the social problems we already have and causes new problems. The BNP is aiming to become a national movement. There will be elections on June 10th 2004, I do not think that Christians should be silent or inactive.

We should not overestimate the BNP, nor should we ignore it. Its appeal is insidious, divisive and dangerous. If we faced a terrorist attack on one of our major cities or shopping centres many voters could be attracted to the facile political slogan “Britain for the British”. As a nation we live in dangerous times.

*Dale Barton  
Churches Together in Lancashire  
Inter Faith Development Officer.  
Member of Lancashire Forum of Faiths*

**And yet we know:**

**Hatred, even of meanness**

**Contorts the features.**

**Anger even against injustice**

**Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we**

**Who wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness**

**Could not ourselves be friendly.**

From the poem: *To Those Born Later*  
by Bertolt Brecht  
translation from the German by:  
John Willett, Ralph Manheim & Eric Fried  
in Poetry 1913-1956 Methuen 1987

For me music is the inner language of my soul. When I practice music I have no outside communication. The inner communication of the heart is all I need. Music is my pathway to a blissful world of spirituality surpassed only by silent meditation, which is nourishment for the soul but its spiritual gifts cannot be expressed in words. I believe that an eloquent expression of the spiritual bliss attained through meditation can be perfectly found in music.

I am indebted to my gurus and maestro's in the field of music and spirituality. And especially to my revered grandmother who was the first person in my life who spoke to me about spirituality, mythology, art and religion from when I was barely five years old. She explained to me many things, such as the concepts of yoga, karma, the condition and monitoring of the soul and the virtues of human capacities. The appreciation and recognition of these things is a family tradition, my late grandfather was a scholar who could speak of anything under the sun. However, Indian classical music is not part of our family tradition and you will be surprised to know that people made fun of it when I started liking the slow and meditative pace of classical pieces. Indian classical music makes my soul move. When I try to listen now to Western music my body may move to the rhythm and beat, but my soul does not experience bliss.

Born and brought up in Bombay, the greatest influence in my childhood interest in music was my uncle, who was a keen enthusiast. It was through his engagement as a player of the *tabla* that I was introduced to the nuances of rhythm, raga and rhapsody in a traditional way and eventually became a student of the *tabla* myself. I have been privileged to have studied under the celebrated Ustaad Allah-Rakha Khan, his disciple Anuradha Pal and, at the present time, Pandit Nayan Ghosh, a world renowned master of the *tabla*, *sitar*, *surbahar* – a stringed instrument more than 2,000 years old – and the *pakhaway* –

which is considered the father of the *tabla*. I am also fortunate to study the *sitar* with Ustad Abdul Halim, whom I consider to be one of the greatest virtuosos of this beautiful instrument.

My father created a room in which I could practice my music day and night, but expressed a desire for me to be an Engineer. I am now a student of Electronics Engineering, at Cardiff University, but I have to take time out from these academic studies to ensure that I practice my music and compose something new every day. As far as composing rhythm is concerned, its all about permutations and combinations of various syllables that one learns, and it is similar to applying formulae to make new scientific inventions.

The person I am today has been shaped by these experiences, my exposure to Indian classical music, ancient scriptures, literature, the maestros who taught me and the love and support of a close family, with its many talented, successful and caring members who have groomed me – in one way or another. All of these things have helped me spiritually and mentally, and also improved my attitude to life and people in general. It has given me the maturity to understand the finer aspects of life.

*Notes are the mother  
and rhythm is the father  
of a personality,  
and everything in this world  
has music in it.*

Puneet Shah



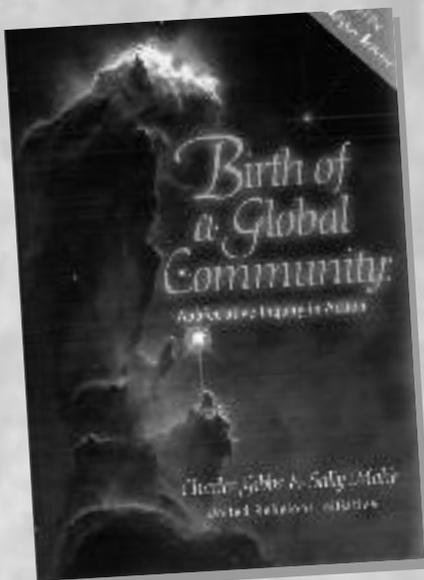
Puneet is a member of the Jain community and can trace origins to the ancient city of Oshia, Rajaschan.

Book Review

## Birth of a Global Community: Appreciative Inquiry in Action The Story of the United Religions Initiative (URI)

*By Charles Gibbs and Sally Mahe*

Lakeshore Communications Inc. Bedford Heights, Ohio. • Paperback 2004



This book is a helpful record of the first decade of United Religions Initiative (URI) from the 1995 50th UN Anniversary Celebration at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, through the creative vision of Bishop William Swing to the present movement with over 200 Cooperating Circles around the globe. Its vision is well illustrated by the cover of the book – a photograph from NASA, 'Birth of a Star'. Beyond the basic history the book carries a story of patient organising, fund raising, and details three techniques that could be used to advantage by almost any organisation.

The preface introduces us to the first technique, which the authors call "the

*extraordinary midwife*" of URI. This "midwife" is not a person, but a method called *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI). "As midwife, *Appreciative Inquiry* led a growing global community on its trust walk of cocreation...(it) is rooted in the simple and profound act of appreciation..." to learn more about this technique I recommend that you check the website: [www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)

The second technique came from Dee Hock, the founder of Visa International: *Chaordic organizing*. "This new approach intended that organizations replicate more of nature's way of being, and depend on core principles, self governing independent parts..." URI is therefore not governed from the top down. Rather, each regional group

# art & Spirituality

The Art & Spirituality Network is a small artist-led organisation that runs retreats and workshops designed to help us explore our spiritual lives through making art and expressing our creativity. Many of the programmes draw from the wisdom and imagery of a wide diversity of faith traditions. The Network has been organising events all over the UK for over ten years. For further information please contact:

**Adam Boulter**  
**Tel. 07957286360**  
**email: adam.boulter@virgin.net**

## Young leaders required for Barcelona

*Josh Borkin and Ryan Shaw, youth track coordinators for this year's Parliament of the World Religions, in Barcelona write:*

Building interreligious understanding and cooperation has become an increasingly essential part of teaching the world's religions to young people. The fourth Parliament of the World's Religions, to take place from 7-13th July 2004 in Barcelona, Spain, presents young people with a unique and exciting opportunity to experience a broad variety of the world's religious and spiritual traditions in a safe and inclusive environment. In that spirit, the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR) invites you to identify young leaders from your community who could be representatives to the Parliament event in 2004. Please contact Josh or Ryan on [ryan@cpwr.org](mailto:ryan@cpwr.org) [www.cpwr.org](http://www.cpwr.org)

## URI Encounters

### Building Bridges Nelson, Lancashire

Are holding Interfaith Meetings throughout 2004 on the theme:

***The value of human life from the point of view of four major world faiths: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism.***

Remaining dates:

- Tuesday 18th May - Christianity - Speaker: Rev. Malcolm Stonestreet, Chief Executive of URI-UK **Venue:** *Wilson Room, Town Hall, Nelson*
- Thursday 1st July - Hinduism - Speaker: Madhubala Pandya, Chair of Blackburn and Darwen Interfaith Council. **Venue** *Nelson Library, Nelson*
- Tuesday 28th September - Islam - Speaker to be advised. **Venue** *Wilson Room, Town Hall, Nelson*
- Thursday 25th November - Conclusion - Speaker: James O'Connell, Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies, Bradford University. **Venue** *The Wilson Room, Town Hall, Nelson*



All meetings: 7-9pm  
 light refreshments will be served.

## Women's Interfaith Encounter

***"Millions of women work day in day out to promote peace. They care for survivors, help with reconstruction and initiate a new culture of peace. To represent these millions, it is our aim that a thousand women shall collectively receive the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts in pursuit of peace...."***

Elana Rozeman from Israel (member of Women's Interface Encounter) has forwarded news of this initiative to mark the work of women peacemakers around the world. She refers us to the website: [www.1000peacewomen.org](http://www.1000peacewomen.org)

is encouraged to self-develop from the basis of the core Purpose and Principles.

The third technique is the structure of cooperating circles which function as self-directed groups, most of them using the AI technique.

In ten years, URI has become one of the major global interfaith organizations, and it is perhaps the most successful involving young adults. This book gives good lessons in how to create an effective interfaith movement, and is a fine addition to the study of global interfaith movements detailed in Marcus Braybrooke's *A Pilgrimage of Hope*.

The opening of the book tells us that, "In 1937, about ten years before his assassination, Mohandas K. Gandhi made a plea for a new mode of relationship between people of diverse faiths." Gandhi called not just for tolerance or non-violence, but for appreciative interchange: "a reverence for other faiths". As the book nears its end, a poem by Joan Erikson invites us to be part of this wider circle of "reverence for reverence":

To hope means to take a playful leap into the future...  
 To dare to spring from firm ground,  
 To play trustingly, invest energy, laughter.  
 And one good leap encourages another.  
 On then with the dance.....

**Richard Boeke**

Summer School: Ammerdown

**Sunday August 15th - 22nd**

## Three Faiths Summer School

Creation and Ecology:

A Jewish/Christian/Muslim Celebration

In association with United Religions Initiative.

We shall celebrate the wonder and diversity of creation through song, dance, art and meditation. We shall study and learn together the stories from our traditions about how our world began, as well as what our faith has to teach us about today's environmental concerns. At the end of the week we shall join together in Friday prayers, Shabbat rest and Sunday worship. **Dr. Tina Beattie** is a freelance writer and lecturer in Christian Studies at the University of Surrey. She has a particular interest in women's issues and Liberation Theology, and she is involved with interfaith dialogue. **Michael Hilton** is a Reform Rabbi and writer who has led several Summer Schools at Ammerdown, and is author of *The Christian Effect on Jewish Life*. **Sheikh Bashir Dultz** is President of the German/Muslim League, Bonn. Contact [centre@Ammerdown.org](mailto:centre@Ammerdown.org)

Cost **£270**

I spent most of my childhood in rural North Yorkshire and was allowed to roam the hills behind the Vicarage that was my home. I grew up feeling 'at one' with the countryside around me, being particularly drawn to the wild flowers, learned their local names, and regarded them as friends to look for and greet as they re-appeared each year. Later, after art college training and then some years of teaching, I found that I was able to make a living out of what I had always loved to do - painting the landscapes and flowers that I know so well, a celebration of these hills and dales.

As part of the process of sitting for hours in the landscape, that connection with the natural world has deepened. I came to take that close relationship for granted, thinking that everyone was equally aware that our lives are enmeshed inseparably with planet earth. In the last few years I have learned the value of my own experience, and have come to understand how much is lost in the day to day lives of many and how important it is to stay connected to our natural environment.

In my teaching I mainly aimed to help people to really see what is before them. However, as time went on the experience of art based activities as a spiritual process began to increasingly influence all areas of my teaching and work. In addition, for over 30 years, the practice of Yoga and meditation have gradually become an important part of my daily spiritual discipline, and I believe that until I have experienced in my body the information I have in my mind I cannot truly 'know' it in my soul. I feel passionately that a deep experiential knowing of our interconnectedness with the earth, and 'Spirit in all things', brings us closer to God and further towards a more harmonious living with all of Creation; and that the meditative processes of creative activity can help us to reach that state of awareness.

A few years ago I felt led to draw together all the different threads that had woven themselves into my life, and began to look for ways to share with others the understandings I have been privileged to gain. I developed workshops where my aim is to involve the participants in spiritual, meditative and creative processes as a response to the natural world. I hope to encourage a deeper awareness of our place and participation in the whole of creation, of that of God in all things. The activities I offer include a combination of

# The Spirit of places

drawing, painting, clay, meditation and simple bodywork (walking, grounding, relaxing, breathing and stretching). In 2001-2002 I was awarded a Joseph Rowntree Quaker Fellowship, which enabled me to take these events to venues all over Britain. I designed each day or weekend on the season of the year and the immediate environment, be it city, countryside or coastline, meeting people where they are and within the gift of the present moment.

I have been closely involved in the development of Bainside Arts, which is based in what was a redundant barn next to our Quaker Meeting House. Here we offer courses in arts and crafts to encourage others to experience for themselves the joy of creative activity: helping to release that creative energy that lies within each one of us, and that connects us to the Divine, the Great Creator.

My painting now varies from my more traditional studies of landscape and flowers to more abstract watercolours 'from the soul'. In my new work I try to express my inner experiences: the spirit of places I have visited, of meditation and yoga postures. 'Namaste': the spirit in me greets the spirit in you... I paint in order to explore the relationship between what lies within me and the world around. When painting I often find myself adopting a posture that mirrors the shape and feel of my subject matter. The process becomes one that dissolves the barriers and differences between us.

*Judith Bromley*

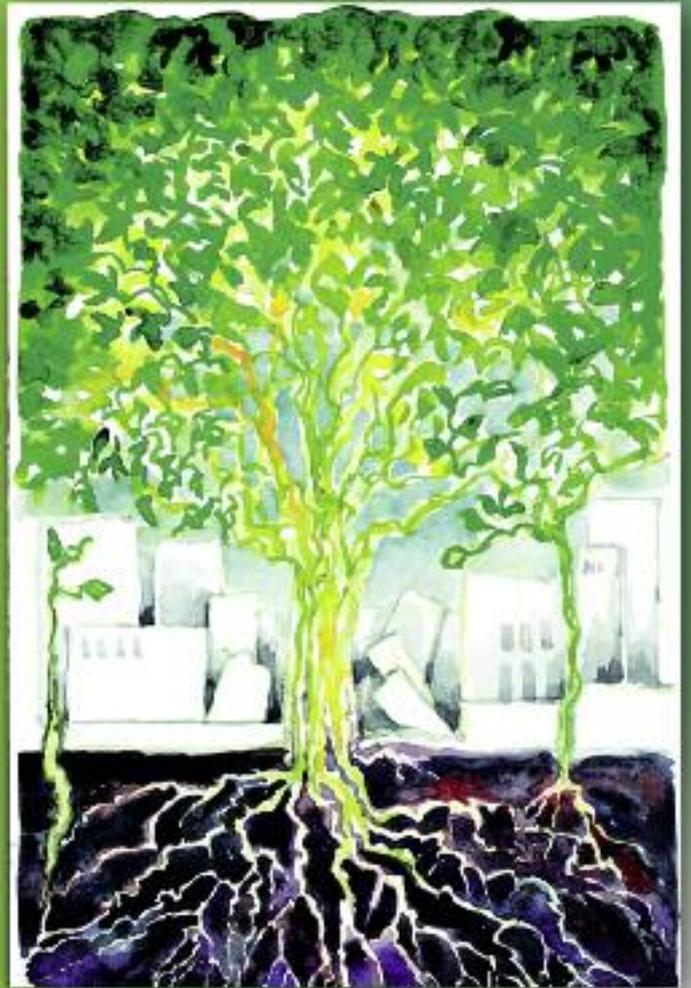
*'Today I've come to paint the bracken. It appears to be bashful and shy as it pushes out of the ground, bowed right over in a loop. Each shoot seems to be hiding its head in its hands, protectively. As I paint the fronds uncurling one by one, I am reminded of human figures in a multitude of expressive postures. 'Arms' gradually spread open wide, 'head' straightens up, and the last bit to unfurl is the 'hand and fingers', the fist.*

*'I have recently been thinking a lot about misunderstanding and how, through words and body language, we can sometimes give out and receive the wrong messages from one another. Looking at this community of bracken, each individual appears to describe different stresses and strains, each showing different reactions to adversity. I see gestures that resemble shock, self-protective aggression, modesty, beckoning, brave open arms stretched wide. Some look ready to pounce, there are grins, grimaces, and others look dragon-like with horns. The full grown plants with arms, hands and fingers outstretched, help to protect and shelter the less well developed. Some grow close together, embracing only each other.*

*'I realise, as I paint them, what a responsibility we have - not only to care for each other in trouble - but to recognise what effect our reactions to our own inner pain can have upon others. With arms open wide we can be receptive, though vulnerable; but we cannot hold out a helping hand to others if our fists are still clenched from our own distress.*



*Golden and idigo light meditation*

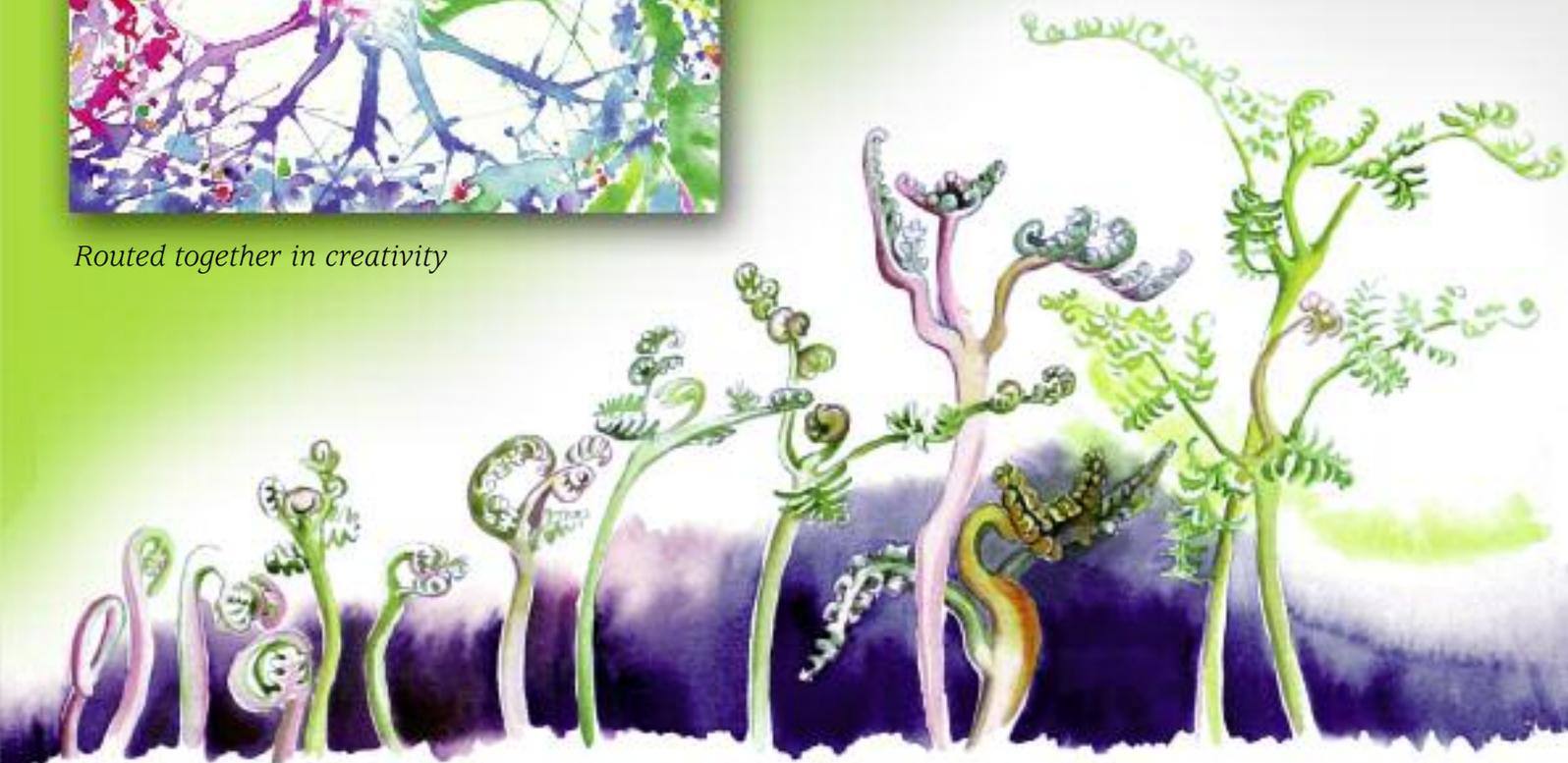


*The power of growth*



*Routed together in creativity*

*Bracken like little people*





Light pollutes,  
spoiling the darkness,  
spilling the earth's  
self generated illumination  
into the sky confusing  
the creatures of the day  
and denying to our imagination  
the infinitude of stars  
the mystery of the universe,  
when diamonds sparkle  
in the velvet night,  
and we know that we  
are small and slight  
and count for nothing,  
unless our God  
remember us.



# COMMUNITY FUND

*Lottery money making a difference*

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## LIGHT POLLUTION

Poem: Alan Horner

*First published in the Epworth Review*

## RESURRECTION

Painting: Adam Boulter