



THE WORLD BANK

DIRECTIONS IN DEVELOPMENT

# Faith in Conservation

*New Approaches to Religions  
and the Environment*

MARTIN PALMER WITH VICTORIA FINLAY



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Martin Palmer *with* Victoria Finlay



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*For Derek, Cecilie, Jeannie and Patrick,  
who in their different ways helped us realize  
that the world is an extraordinary place.*



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# Foreword

The World Bank is committed to the struggle to overcome poverty. At the same time we must protect the biodiversity of the planet. This is an enormous task and one for which the Bank needs as many allies as possible. In the quest for partners who share such goals and who can also bring their own experiences to bear, we need to look beyond the groups with whom the World Bank has traditionally worked.

This is why the World Bank cooperates with the major faiths as partners. In doing so, we follow the example set by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) International. In 1986 the then international president of WWF, HRH The Prince Philip, invited leaders of five of the major faiths to a meeting with leading environmentalists. From this arose a network of faith groups working on ecological and development issues. By 1995, nine religions and thousands of practical projects were involved. In that year, Prince Philip launched a new nongovernmental organization, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), dedicated to assisting and enlarging this work. The World Bank was represented at that launch and has been engaged with ARC ever since.

The reason is simple. The 11 faiths that now make up ARC represent two-thirds of the world's population. They own around 7 percent of the habitable surface of the planet, they have a role in 54 percent of all schools, and their institutional share of the investment market is in the range of 6–8 percent. These are serious stakeholders in development. They are also the oldest institutions in the world and possess wisdom about how to live and how to keep hope alive, which we need to hear and respect. So it is very natural for us to work with religious institutions and leaders. The engagement from all sides is one charged with potential and also energized by differences.

In such a fascinating and varied world, full of possibilities but also pitfalls, it is important to have guides who can help chart the adventure. In this book, Martin Palmer guides us, opening up ideas and possibilities that may well be new to many in the world of development and economics, but which, as I know from personal experience, do work.

James D. Wolfensohn  
President  
The World Bank



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## Preface

Imagine you are busy planting a tree, and someone rushes up 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, they should not forget to plant the cutting.<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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) the increase in global warming; the

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1. The story is from the *Al-Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, written in 1313 and reprinted in 1895 in Cairo. Quoted in M. Izzi Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam* (Cambridge, U.K.: Lutterworth Press, 2000), 104.

2. The statement was made on a number of occasions by Maurice Strong, secretary general of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992.

3. Organizations that have produced such reports include the Club of Rome and Worldwatch Institute, among others.

destruction of many core species of the seas (cod are almost extinct through careless overfishing); the destruction of entire forests within a single generation; and the accelerating spread of deserts. Around the world, hundreds of organizations chart, report, and analyze 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.

Powerfully emotive language is used to make us feel that we are sitting on the edge—that in the words of the Jewish story above, the end of the world is nigh. For example, Maurice Strong, secretary general of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, declared in 2000:

I am deeply convinced that the new millennium we have just entered will decide the fate of the human species. . . . The first three decades of this century are likely to be decisive. Not that we face the prospect of extinction as a species during this period but we will set, irrevocably, the direction that will determine the survival or the demise of human life as we know it. Surely the divine source of all life, which most call God, could not have presented us with a more paradoxical challenge.<sup>4</sup>

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 30 years the world's major institutions, scientists, and governments, and some of the largest nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have compiled and analyzed 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 publishes its Red Data Books, chronicling the loss of species and habitats in great detail. Today we can discuss the issues of global warming in very specific terms. Charts show the destruction of tropical forests, and 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 rain forests. 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

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4. Quoted in *Survey of the Environment 2000* (Chennai, India: The Hindu, 2000), 15.

selling their rain forests for cash (for reasons of poverty as well as opportunism), only to find themselves left with eroded and impoverished soils. The experts 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 rain forest—and the rate of destruction of the rain forests rose perceptibly after Stockholm. This was partly because the meeting had opened some people's eyes to the commercial potential of their forests. 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. The encounter was so successful that in 1995 His Royal Highness Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, who was then president of WWF International, launched a new international nonprofit organization, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC). By 2000 six more faiths had joined the Alliance—Baha'ism, Daoism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism—bringing the total to 11, with ARC working in just under 60 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. As part of the Alliance, each of the faiths has compiled its own statement summarizing its relationship with and beliefs about the environment. These statements are presented in part 2 of this volume.

Prepared with the help of the World Bank, this book shows how religions need to be, and increasingly are, in partnership with the environmental and development movements in order to make this world a better place for all life—or, as the faiths more poetically and perhaps more tellingly call it, all creation.





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## Acknowledgments

None of the work, ideas, projects, or events described in this book would have been possible without the team at the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture (ICOREC) and the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), and it is a delight to be able to honor the work they each have done. In particular, Joanne Robinson, who ever since Assisi in 1986 has been my key colleague in developing the ideas; Jeannie Dunn, my assistant, without whom nothing worthwhile could happen; John Smith, whose pioneering work on Sacred Land runs through this book; Paola Triolo, whose excellent attention to detail has ensured the success of so many projects; Richard Prime, with whom I have discussed so much over the years; Tjalling Halbertsma, whose astonishing work in China and Mongolia has led the way in helping us see the potential of religious involvement there.

We also owe a great debt to those who help ARC to carry on its work. To Brian Pilkington, Chairman of ARC, whose commitment to the work has been greater than any of us have a right to expect; to Ivan Hattingh and Peter Martin, who first saw the possibilities and gave us such freedom to develop the potential; Rob Soutter, whose inspired idea it was to launch Sacred Gifts; our friends in MOA Japan, whose stalwart support for ARC from day one has been a bedrock on which we have built; Tony Whitten at the World Bank, who has been one of our strongest supporters; and of course, James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank, whose excitement at the possibilities has been infectious.

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# Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and the Environment

The world's major religions can represent a powerful voice for environmental stewardship. Faiths can take direct action by leadership in the initiation of conservation projects, and they can seek to persuade their members that each individual has a moral obligation to contribute in some way to ecological conservation.

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What do the world's religions have to say about global development and its impact on the environment? What role can organized religion play in the planet's protection? The authors of *Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and the Environment* explore the ecological worldviews of eleven major world religions and consider how these can help shape effective environmental policy.

At the heart of this book is a discussion of how religions can work with environment- and development-focused organizations, both to provide alternative models of conservation approaches and to develop programs for their own faithful. The world's religions can—through storytelling, celebration, practice, spiritual guidance, activism in their communities, and advocacy worldwide—be powerful and effective partners in a wide range of conservation initiatives. The book includes a collection of the faiths' core statements on conservation, brought together for the first time in this volume.

Martin Palmer and his colleagues have been working with the world's major faiths and conservation organizations for 20 years. *Faith in Conservation* draws on joint projects between the World Bank, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), and WWF International. It will appeal to environmentalists, development specialists, the media, those working with religions, and members of the faiths themselves—indeed, to anyone with an interest in new visions for the planet's future.



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