

**ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS IN  
ASIAN SCRIPTURES:  
A STUDY FROM THE VEDAS,  
THE UPANIŞADS, THE DHAMMAPADA,  
AND THE BHAGAVAD GITA**

Stephen Chundamthadam

**I** was born and brought up in a traditional Syrian Catholic family in Kerala. The practise of yoga and research in Vedanta philosophy and world religions deepened my understanding of other religious traditions and their scriptures. The *Laudato si* of Pope Francis and my involvement in the ecological activities in De Nobili College, a Jesuit formation house in Pune, India, further encouraged my concern for creation. My ability to engage with cobras and other dangerous animals through a positive attitude of affinity helped me to instruct people how to be friendly with risky animals and creatures. This concern and care for creation encouraged me to organize a one-day seminar on ecology in the Pontifical Institute for students and faculty. After the seminar, when Prof. Barry requested me to write an article on ecology for this edited work, I was enthused and happy.

My reading and research on the topic in the scriptures of Asian religions made me aware of the rich, ancient resources available in this field. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism are well known Asian religions and philosophical traditions, but so too are Judaism, Christianity and

Islam, which also originated in Asia. Along with the geographical commonality, ecological concerns are also common to these religions and their scriptures. Hence, a study of these traditions and their scriptures will bring out valuable insights to support and strengthen our concern for our common home.

Nations, organizations and people are awakening to the cry of nature. This awakening is indeed a consoling trend in the care for creation. The Catholic Church has been in the forefront for a 'global ecological conversion' during the last fifty years. Recently, in 2015, Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, reasserted this need 'for the care for our common home'.<sup>1</sup>

Asian religions and philosophical traditions have also shared great concern for nature since ancient times. There are numerous references to the active presence of the divine in creation in the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Taoist scriptures, so these people were careful not to destroy nature. Some of these traditions consider the elements of earth, air, fire and water as holy. In the Vedas, a god corresponds to each of these elements. Along with the worship of these gods, Hindus took care of nature and the elements.

Most Asian religions developed an ethics of life based on the respect for Earth. In an editorial of *New Scientist* magazine in 1970, the editor, following the thinking of historian Lynn White Jr, made



*Stephen Chundamthadam with a viper enjoying the human touch at De Nobili College, Pune, Maharashtra, India, 2012.*

1 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*.

a call for a new ecological ethics: ‘We have to achieve such an ethic by abandoning classical Western forms of ethics and applying those of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the peasant cultures of Asia’.<sup>2</sup> In this spirit, my article explores the concern for the preservation of the nature from an Asian perspective.

### *Ecology in the Vedas and the Upaniṣad*

#### *The Primeval Principle*

There are several references to the worship of the divine in nature in the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, Sūtras and other sacred texts.<sup>3</sup> According to the *Brāhmaṇas*, God (*Prajāpati*) heated himself intensely by asceticism to create the world.<sup>4</sup> The Primeval Being, in the *Nāsadiyasūkta*, created the world out of himself.<sup>5</sup> The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* states the Great Being Brahman made the world:

He (the self) wished, ‘Let me be many, let me be born’.  
He undertook deliberation. Having deliberated, he created  
all this that exists. That (Brahman), having created (that),  
entered into that very thing... Truth became all this that  
there is. They call that (Brahman) Truth.<sup>6</sup>

That (Brahman) itself is the fire, That is the sun, That is  
the air, That is the moon, That is also the starry firmament,  
That is the Brahman, That is the water, That is Prajāpati.<sup>7</sup>

2 Quoted by John Passmore, *Man’s Responsibility for Nature*, 2nd ed., London: Duckworth, 1980, p. 4. Editorial, ‘Towards an Ecological Ethic’, *New Scientist*, vol. 48, no. 732, 31 December 1970, p. 575. In 1967, Lynn White Jr. had expressed a similar view regarding the contributions of Asian religions. Lynn White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’, *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, 10 March 1967, pp. 1203–1207.

3 Based on their literary style, the Vedas can be divided into four genres: 1) *brāhmaṇa*, guidelines for preparation of sacrifices; 2) *mantra*, hymns used during sacrifices; 3) *āraṇyakas*, forest commentaries; and 4) *Upaniṣads*, philosophical discourses.

4 *Śatapata Brahmana* (6.1.1, 6.3.35–36). Sayanacharya (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 2002).

5 *Ṛg Veda*. X. 129. 3-4.

6 *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.6, trans. by Swami Gambhirananda, *Eight Upanisads*, vol. I p. 343–44.

7 *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad*. 4.2, trans. by Swami Tyagisananda, Madras: Ramakrishna Math.

The Vedas and the Upaniṣads consider the ‘Primeval Principle’ as one out of which everything else originated. In the beginning, this One Existence thought to himself, ‘Let me grow forth’. Thus, out of himself he projected the universe and entered into every being. All that is, has itself in him alone. Of all things, he is the subtle essence, which is Brahman. So, there is an inseparable relation between the creator and the created. Both are inseparably connected with each other in the level of consciousness.

### *Consciousness is Brahman*

The Vedic seers saw the *Ultimate Reality* as ‘one without a second’, but they accepted a plurality of entities in the empirical level of existence. Just as human consciousness remains undivided, even when engaged in a number of activities, so too the Ultimate Reality remains undivided in the midst of many of expressions of its essence.

This Reality is called *Brahman*, which is equated with consciousness. One of the great sayings in the *Upanishad* asserts that *consciousness is Brahman*. This pure consciousness is reflected in every being in this universe without losing its oneness. Brahman is the foundation of everything and inseparably connected to everything in the universe. Brahman, in the beginning, was one without a second, but later became many. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, Varuṇa taught his son Bṛḥgu that Brahman is ‘that from which all these beings originate and having originated by which they live, that towards which they move and into which they merge. Know that is Brahman’.<sup>8</sup>

The seers, through knowledge and detachment, experience the all-pervasive Reality and merge with it in contemplation.<sup>9</sup> The entire universe is pervaded by the Reality; a wise man who realizes this will consider one’s own self as not distinct from the self of all other beings, and such a person will not feel sorrow or hatred.<sup>10</sup> Equal vision is the sign of true liberation. A truly liberated person will look at every being with equal vision, including material objects.<sup>11</sup>

8 *Taitt. Up.* 3.1.1; 2.2; also *Kaivalya Upaniṣad.* 19, 6.9.

9 *Muṇḍaka Up.* 3.2.5.

10 *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*, 1; *Bhāgavada Purāṇa*, 2.2.41, 2.2.45. *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* 6. *Isa. Up.* 7.

11 *BG* 6.29.

*Earth: the Mother and the Foundation*

Asian religions and philosophical traditions seek to maintain an intimate relationship between humans, Earth and God, the creator. In the Vedas, the relationship between the Earth and humans is like the relationship between a mother and her child. Two hymns in the Vedas directly address this association – the hymn of ‘The Mighty Earth’ in the *R̥g Veda* and the ‘Hymn to the Earth’ in the *Atharva Veda*.<sup>12</sup> The latter addresses Earth as the *Primeval Mother* and protector of all. She is kind and fulfilling:

All creatures, born from you, move round upon you.  
 You carry all that has two legs, three, or four.  
 May the creatures of the Earth, united together,  
 Mother of plants and begetter of all things,  
 Firm far-flung Earth, sustained by Heavenly Law,  
 Kindly and pleasant is she. May we ever  
 Dwell on her bosom, passing to and fro!<sup>13</sup>

The ‘Hymn to Earth’ addresses Devi Vasundhara, Mother Earth, and describes Earth (*vasudha*) as an extended family (*kudumba*) of humans and animals and all life. In this way, the totality of creation is seen as kin that originated from and is preserved by the Primeval Mother. The Vedic seers pray: ‘Your hills, O Earth, your snow-clad mountain peaks, your forests, may they show us kindness!’<sup>14</sup> The author asks pardon for the exploitative tendencies of humans: ‘May Earth who bears mankind ... yield up for me a thousand streams of treasure, like a placid cow that never resists the hand’.<sup>15</sup>

This hymn is one of the most touching spiritual narratives of ancient India. It affirms the responsibility of humans to protect, preserve and nurture Earth like a mother to her child. By taking care of the Earth, humans take care of their very own foundation. In the traditions of India, the Earth is considered a living organism that sustains and protects life,

---

12 The ‘Hymn to the Earth’ in the *Atharva Veda* is also known as *Bhūmisūkta* or *Prthivī Sūkta*.

13 *Bhūmi Sūkta*, *Atharva Veda* XII.1.15–17, translation is taken from Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997, pp. 122–130.

14 *Bhūmi Sūkta*, *Atharva Veda* 12.1.11, *The Vedic Experience*, p. 128.

15 *Atharva Veda*, XII.1. 45.

and so she is loved as ‘mother earth’ and is venerated as ‘goddess earth’. Most tribal people in India perform *puja*, a ritual ceremony, before they undertake any kind of work with the earth.

### *Welfare of All in the Bhagavad Gīta*

In the Bhagavad Gīta, the most important Hindu scripture, Krishna tells Arjuna:

Of all manifestations, I am the beginning, the end, and the middle’.<sup>16</sup>

I am equally present in all beings’.<sup>17</sup>

A Yogi is the one who sees the Self in all beings and all beings in the Self and such a person will never leave my presence. Whatever actions an enlightened person does, he/she will do it for the Lord; because he is the lord of the Universe.<sup>18</sup>

Lord Krishna identifies himself with the elements of the universe and as the beginning, middle and end of all life.<sup>19</sup> Chapter 11, also known as the ‘Vision of the Cosmic Form of the Lord’, states that all beings emanate from Brahman, as well as the heavenly bodies, like the Sun and the Moon. Although the chapter contains little reference to nature, its sense of integral unity is the foundation of the Vaisnava theory of the inseparable relationship between world, soul and Brahman.

The Gīta teaches equal vision (*samadarśana*) towards everything. A cow, a dog, an elephant or an ordinary person are all the same to a liberated person.<sup>20</sup> Such a person is engaged in promoting the welfare of all living beings (*sarvabhūtahiteratāh*). A liberated person sees God everywhere and everything in God.<sup>21</sup> God is immanent in this universe, enlightens the entire universe, and is depicted as the light of all lights

---

16 *BG* 10.32.

17 *BG* 9.29.

18 *BG* 6.29–31.

19 *BG* 10.20.

20 *BG* 5:18.

21 *BG* 6:30. Likewise, in his spiritual exercises, St. Ignatius speaks about seeing God in all things and all things in God. Sp. Ex. 236.

(*jyotiṣām jyotiḥ*).<sup>22</sup> This awareness of the presence of God in the heart of every living being will make one compassionate and loving. An enlightened person is not affected by the dualities of life, such as pleasure or pain, honour or disgrace, and remains detached in cold or heat, happiness or misery (*sthitaprajña*) – such a person receives a friend and an enemy with equanimity.<sup>23</sup>

Human existence is the highest form of life in the process of evolution. According to Hindu belief, even gods (*devas*) have to be born again as human beings in order to get liberated. Human existence is seen as a special gift of God, a unique opportunity to achieve salvation. Paradise was the actualization of the special status of humans, where they experienced closeness with God and with other created entities.

#### *Animals and Creatures are our Companions*

In Sanskrit literature, there are references to close relationships between man/woman and plants/trees. In the *Shakuntala*, the classical work of Kālidāsa, when the heroine bids goodbye, deer and other animals are struck with grief, while plants bend their heads in sorrow, and the surrounding natural world remains mute and sad. This story shows how plants, trees and nature were seen to be inseparably connected to humanity in ancient Indian society.

The relationship between humans and animals can affect both of them deeply. When the master or mistress of a house is happy, angry or sad, pet animals and birds partake in their feelings. The same is the case with wild animals. If you send out positive and compassionate vibrations to them, they will respond positively. Once, a tribal youth was our guide in the forest. As we took a curve along the trail, we came face to face with a herd of wild elephants with a baby in front. The elephants became restless and alert, surrounding the baby, and the male came forward threateningly. Our guide told us to be calm and quiet. He cautiously moved forward and showed some signs to the elephants. After watching us for a while, they slowly moved away, closely guarding the baby. There are many such stories about animals, birds and fish in the sea showing kindness and help towards humans.

---

22 BG 13:17.

23 BG 6:7, 9; 12:18.

Humans, in general, are afraid of tigers, snakes and other such animals because of painful, sometimes fatal, encounters with them. We have developed negative thoughts and fear towards them. Animals sense this negative energy and feel alienated from humans. Alienation leads to disharmony, which causes enmity and aggressiveness. Peaceful and friendly co-existence is possible, as tribal people who live in the forest know. The *Munisūkta* of the *R̥g Veda* describes the characteristics of a *muni* or *keśin*, who is in friendship with the gods as well as with wild animals, nature and plants.<sup>24</sup> Lord Krishna tells Arjuna, in the *Bhagavad Gīta*, that one who sees him in everything and everything in him will not be lost.<sup>25</sup>

### *Ecology in the Buddhist Scriptures*

Buddha had great respect and regard for everything in this world. All are *Dhamma* in the words of Buddha. *Dhamma* is an all-inclusive concept in the Buddhist tradition; it includes everything in this universe, from a speck of dust or a blade of grass to the planets and heavenly bodies.<sup>26</sup> All are interconnected and interdependent. Humans, though of greater merit to attain nirvana, should not disrespect and belittle the role of nature and other creatures. Buddha, in a conversation with his disciple, Maha Moggallana, clearly articulated his concern and care for the creatures in the earth.<sup>27</sup> In *Kutadanta Sutta*, Buddha cautions his disciples not to harm creatures, even in performing religious ceremonies:

In this sacrifice, Brahmin, no bulls were slain, no goats or sheep, no cocks and pigs, nor were various living beings subjected to slaughter, nor were trees cut down for sacrificial posts, nor were grasses mown for the sacrificial grass, and those who are called slaves or servants or workmen did not perform their tasks for fear of blows or threats, weeping and

---

24 The Munis, girdled with the wind, wear garments soiled of yellow hue (2); The Muni, made associate in the holy work of every God (4); Treading the path of sylvan beasts, Gandharvas, and Apsarases, He with long locks, who knows the wish, is a sweet most delightful friend. *R̥g Veda* 10.136 trans. by Ralph Griffith. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1995) p. 636.

25 *BG* 6.30.

26 *Dhammapada* 6.4; 14.16; 16.9; 19.4; 20.7.

27 *Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta-vighana*, para. I, quoted in Martin Batchelor, 'Even the Stones Smile', in *Buddhism and Ecology*, eds. Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, Delhi: Motilal Banardidass, 1994, p. 12n28.

in tears. But those who wanted to do something did it, those who did not wish to did not: they did what they wanted to do, and not what they did not want to do. The sacrifice was carried out with ghee, butter, curds, honey, molasses.<sup>28</sup>

Buddha was highly appreciative of the forests, where arahants live: ‘Whether in village or in forest, in vale or on hill wherever Arahants dwell, delightful, indeed, is that spot’.<sup>29</sup> Shantideva, the Buddhist sage of India (8th century CE), considered the natural environment as most conducive for spiritual growth, and Milarepa, the great yogi-saint of Tibet, preferred living alone in the wilderness in tune with the nature and creatures.

In the *Dhammapada*, which is the most important scripture in Buddhism, Buddha extensively used lessons related to nature, earth, animals and trees to instruct his disciples.<sup>30</sup> Buddha is believed to have been born under a tree in Lumbini (Nepal), he got enlightenment under a Bodhi tree in Gaya, and he attained nirvana under a sal tree in Kusinara in Uttar Pradesh (North India). His death bed was surrounded by disciples as well as animals. His mother had a dream of a white elephant entering her womb before her conception, a mythical snake, Mucilinda, protected him from thunderstorm while he was in deep meditation, He tamed a furious elephant by the name of Nalagiri, which had been released to kill him. His first sermon was in a deer park in Sarnath, near Varanasi in North India, he healed a goose wounded by his cousin Devadatta. Non-violence (*ahimsā*) to humans, animals and other creatures is one of the fundamental teachings of Buddha.

Buddhism, along with Jainism, was one of the religions which developed animal ethics in the ancient times. Unlike the Jain scriptures, Buddhist scriptures do not specifically include the vegetative kingdom in their purview of non-violence to creation. However, *Suttanipāta*

---

28 Ibid, p. 13n29.

29 Dhammapada 7.9.

30 Buddhist scripture is known as *Tripitaka* (Sanskrit) or *Tipitaka* (Pali), meaning ‘three baskets’. *Sutta Pitaka* (Discourse), *Vinaya pitaka* (guidelines for disciples) and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (doctrinal teaching) are the three sections. Theravada Buddhism accepts these three as the most authoritative scriptures, whereas Mahayana Buddhism, along with these three, accepts some of the most important commentaries as part of the scripture. Most of the surviving texts are in Pali.

includes herbs and trees among the animate beings.<sup>31</sup> Buddhist hermits were encouraged to live in solitary places (*Theragāta*) in the company of animals, trees and creepers because such an atmosphere is considered as the most conducive place for spiritual perfection leading to nirvana.

The doctrine of dependant co-origination (*pratitya-smutpāda*) asserts the interdependence of everything that exists in this universe. Sarvastivada, a Buddhist school of later origin, explains the existence of different worlds of sentient, insentient and material beings based on the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Although the Yogacara school of Indian Mahayana Buddhism rejected the world as unreal and accepted only consciousness as real, East Asian Buddhism accepted individual entities as part of the whole and the world as real. Ecological Buddhism, an off-shoot of engaged Buddhism, supported by the interdependence of reality, reinterprets Buddhist doctrines and practises in the light of present environmental issues. American Buddhist environmentalists proposed five basic principles, i.e., interdependence, non-harming, mindfulness, non-dualistic views and detachment from self in order to address environmental issues from a Buddhist perspective.<sup>32</sup> Service to humans and to creation is of great importance to Buddhist environmentalists.

### ***Jainism and Ecology***

The five great vows and the subsidiary vows of Jainism ensure an ecologically attuned lifestyle and ethical code of conduct. Indian scholar Laxmi Singhvi is of the opinion that ‘Jainism is fundamentally a religion of ecology and has turned ecology into a religion. It has enabled Jains to create an environment-friendly value system and code of conduct’.<sup>33</sup> Jain cosmology is profound and inclusive in comparison with the modern understandings of the universe.

Loka (the universe): Space is infinite but only a finite portion is occupied by what is known as the universe. Everything within the universe, whether sentient (*jiva*) or insentient (*ajiva*), is eternal. Jains preach and practice

---

31 *Suttanipāta* v. 600.

32 Bron Taylor, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, vol. I, London: Continuum, 2008, p. 242.

33 Aisha Abdelhamid, ‘Jainism’s Tattvartha Sutra Verses on Creation’, 17 January 2015, on *Eden Keeper*, URL: <[edenkeeper.org/2015/01/17/jainisms-tattvartha-sutra-verses-creation/](http://edenkeeper.org/2015/01/17/jainisms-tattvartha-sutra-verses-creation/)>, accessed 26 January 2017.

the principle of the duty of every human being to promote universal well-being (*sarva-mangalya*).<sup>34</sup>

The innumerable beings in this universe consist of earth bodies, water bodies, fire bodies, air bodies, vegetable bodies, and mobile bodies. These beings include the smallest bacteria, insects, worms, birds, the largest animals, and human beings. Jains believe that all these beings, as well as metals and material objects, have souls, so should not be dealt with recklessly.<sup>35</sup>

As a highly evolved form of life, human beings have a great moral responsibility in their mutual dealings and in their relationship with the rest of the universe. It is this conception of life and its eternal coherence, in which human beings have an inescapable ethical responsibility that make the Jain tradition a cradle for the creed of environmental protection and harmony.<sup>36</sup>

### *Parsi Understanding of Ecology*

*Yasna* is one of the three sections in the sacred scriptures of the Zoroastrians known as *Zend Avesta* or *Avesta*. The other two are *Yashts* and *Vendidad*. *Gathas* are the sections believed to be composed by Zoroaster himself but that were later inserted into the larger part of the scripture, *Yasna*.<sup>37</sup>

Accordingly, Truth (*asha*) and Lie (*druj*) are the two fundamental principles of Parsi theology. Although human beings are created free of offense, good and evil are the result of human choice.<sup>38</sup> Those who choose good follow Ahura, while those who follow evil will be the supporters of Ahriman.<sup>39</sup> The supreme Lord was generous to humans

---

34 L.M. Singhvi, *ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

37 The translation of the *Yasna* that I refer to is from the *Sacred Books of the East*, edited by Max Muller and published by Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi: 1965.

38 Y 30.3–4.

39 The Wise Lord Ahura Mazda created both the Holy Spirit and the Evil Spirit, but the Holy Spirit chose to be good and the evil spirit chose to be wicked. *Yasna* 47.2-4. Although Mazda is the supreme Lord, He is not the cause of evil in this world. According to this understanding, the origin of evil can be traced back to the freedom

by providing them with the three blessings – Immortality, Righteous Order, and the Kingdom of Welfare.<sup>40</sup>

So, humans, in return, are expected to express their gratitude to the Lord and lead an ethical life through good thoughts (*humata*), good words (*hukta*), and good deeds (*hvarshata*).<sup>41</sup> Parsis give high priority to ethical living and moderation in life. Ethical values were closely connected with an ideal social life as envisioned in the Avesta, where there was no oppression, injustice or cruelty, even to animals:

‘Good life in rich pastures and security against the blood-thirsty men of lies;’ ‘the luck-bringing cow was created for man, not to be neglected, but to graze upon peaceful pastures’. The aristocrats are the hereditary foes of the peasants, and they are also the prophet’s opponents. Zarathustra fights for the cause of the oppressed peasant class; and this social reform – which is at the same time the transition from the way of life of the nomad to that of the agrarian and thus of the settler – is carried out in the name of the God, Ahura Mazda, who wills not violence, robbery, and suppression by the nobility but justice and hence a proper ordering of the society.<sup>42</sup>

### ***The Doctrine of Karma and Interconnectedness of Creation***

The doctrine of karma and rebirth is one of the fundamental principles in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. A soul, based on its actions in the present life, will be born as an animal or any other creature. These religious traditions accept that there is soul in every living being, while Jainism acknowledges that there is also soul in plants, trees and even in

---

of choice both in the case of the primeval spirits and in the case of human beings. In Christian theology, angels and the first parents sinned by exercising the freedom given to them, which gave rise to evil in this world: ‘Hear ye then with your ears; see ye the bright flames with the (eye) better mind. It is for a decision as to religions, man and man, each individually for himself. Before the great effort of the cause, awake ye (all) to our teaching’. Y. 30.2. See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. I, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 310.

40 *Yasna* 34.1.

41 *Yasna* 34.2; 45.8.

42 Gustav Mensching, *Structures and Patterns of Religion*, trans. Hans Klimkeit, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1976, p. 24.

material objects. Accordingly, the followers of these spiritual pathways should take action based on concern for the others, because there is soul in everything. Take only what is needed for your sustenance, not for greed, is the advice of the *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*.<sup>43</sup> The law of karma and rebirth in Hinduism tell us that each one of us is responsible for his/her actions and atonement is the only way to get back to our original purity of soul. Thoughts, words and actions are to be controlled and desires are to be completely overcome before one is to be liberated.

### ***Alienation in the Realm of Elements***

Western philosophical tradition presents four basic elements of the universe – earth, air, fire, and water. The Indian tradition adds one more, i.e., *ether*, which makes five elements (*pañcabhūta*). When these five elements are properly balanced and united, all is harmonious. If there is an imbalance in any of these elements, it will affect the person and the cosmic rhythm. In Taoism, there is a principle called *wu wei*, which means the ‘way of nature’. Nature in Taoism includes everything in this universe, and each has its own way. Human responsibility is not to interfere in the way of the nature, but to cooperate with it. Then nature will be gracious and kind to humans.

In Christian tradition, an evil ‘act’ (thought, word or action) against ‘mother earth’ is considered an act against one’s own body, as well as all other living beings. Humans were created out of earth.<sup>44</sup> After death, our bodies become part of the Earth. This process of creation and dissolution shows the intimate connection between humans and Earth. Any evil act against the Earth creates disharmony, not only in our relationship with the Earth but also within our own body as an extension of the Earth.

An evil act of polluting air and ether is an act against God and His vital presence in the form of ‘life breath’ (*prāṇa*). God breathed into the nostrils of Adam and he came to life.<sup>45</sup> The spirit of God is alive and active in the world in the form of vital energy. When a person pollutes air and ether s/he is obstructing the free flow of the vital force – the

---

43 Pankaj Jain, ‘Teaching and Researching Religion and Ecology’, *Tena tyaktena bhūñjitha, Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* 1.

44 *Genesis* 2.7a.

45 *Genesis* 2.7b.

power of God pervading the universe, which causes disharmony.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the vital energy within us also gets alienated.

Water is the purifying and life-giving principle. Life originated and developed in water.<sup>47</sup> Water preserves life in the world. Polluting water is equivalent to poisoning our own body. When we sin against water, the element of water within us gets alienated and causes disharmony within us and in the universe. The fire element in us keeps us alive and active, food is digested, and energy is created within our cells, which gives us power to act. Fire keeps the universe active. Heat energy from sun and other heavenly bodies keeps the earth and living beings alive and active. Over-exploitation of energy is a sin against the element of fire. People those who consume too much energy and deprive others of their subsistential portion of energy are disrupting the harmony of fire within them and in the universe.

Hinduism accepts that the human body is composed of these five elements and each of the senses is related to one of the elements. The nose is related to earth, tongue to water, eyes to fire, skin to air, and ears to space. This bond between our senses and the elements is the foundation of our human relationship with the natural world. For Hinduism, nature and the environment are not separate entities; they are an inseparable part of our existence. Our life and actions in relation to creation has ethical implications which will determine our next mode of existence.

### ***Disharmony and Alienation***

In the primordial Judaeo-Christian epic of *Genesis*, Paradise was an experience of harmony for Adam and Eve in the early part of their life. They had peace and happiness, which radiated to their surroundings. They were in close friendship with nature, animals and birds. Eve was an inseparable companion of Adam, and both were intimately united with God and creation.

But after they disobeyed God, they felt alienated from each other. They became aware of their sinful nature, evil tendencies and inordinate

---

46 This appears in Judaism, Christianity and Hindu belief. Genesis 1.2b, *Iśāvāsya Upaniṣad* 1.

47 *Genesis* 1.20.

desires – the desire to be like God.<sup>48</sup> Adam developed an attitude of control and domination. Instead of a loving and concerned relationship, man developed a desire to dominate and control other living beings and nature. This experience is the experience of humanity in general.

Judeo-Christian tradition, which is the basis of the Western approach to creation, believes that the world and creation are for humans, so humans can conquer them and exploit them for their need. This conquering aspect is very much reflected in the modern worldview and value system. But Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si*, following the example of Francis of Assisi, encourages us to love all creation. Nature being the first book of revelation, ecological conversion is primarily a spiritual experience of love.

### ***The Ecology of Common Home in Christian Theology***

Francis of Assisi, the patron of ecology, addressed all of creation as brothers and sisters: ‘The realization that everything comes from the same source filled Francis with greater affection than ever and he called even the most insignificant creatures his brothers and sisters, because he knew they had the same origin as himself’.<sup>49</sup> Pope John Paul II refers to Francis’ celebrated ‘Canticle of the Creatures’ (1225 CE) as ‘one of the most beautiful hymns of creation in the Christian tradition’.<sup>50</sup>

Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,  
especially Sir Brother Sun,  
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.  
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;  
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,  
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,

---

48 *Genesis* 3.5.

49 St. Francis of Assisi, *Writings and Biographies*, 4th Revised Edition, Bangalore: Asian Trade Corporation, 1987, p. 692.

50 Pope John Paul II, ‘Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace’, 1 January 1990, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, <[https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html)>, accessed 2 June 2017.

through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.  
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
 who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.  
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
 through whom You light the night,  
 and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.  
 Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
 who sustains and governs us,  
 and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.<sup>51</sup>

Catholic educator Keith Warner OFM calls it ‘most notable text about nature’. Quoting ecological theologian Ilia Delio OFM, Warner says that it reveals the contemplative experiences of God that Francis had in creation and his fraternal relationship with the elements, especially with animals.<sup>52</sup> Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, wrote that ‘... the book of nature is one and indivisible’, it includes every aspect of human life, so ‘men and women who believe in and proclaim the Gospel ... have a responsibility toward creation...’.<sup>53</sup>

Pope Francis took his name because of his great admiration for Francis of Assisi: ‘Francis was a man of poverty, who loved and protected creation’.<sup>54</sup> According to Pope Francis, protection of the environment is the responsibility of everyone, which means protecting all creation. Protecting creation means respecting ‘each’ of God’s creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means

---

51 There are many sources for the ‘Canticle of the Sun’, cf. ‘Canticle of the Sun’, Ignatian Solidarity Network, <<https://ignatiansolidarity.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Canticle-of-Brother-Sun-and-Sister-Moon.pdf>>, accessed 2 June 2017.

52 Keith Warner, ‘The Moral Significance of Creation in the Franciscan Theological Tradition: Implications for Contemporary Catholics and Public Policy’, <<https://webpages.scu.edu/ftp/kwarner/Fran-MoralSig.pdf>>, accessed 28 January 2017.

53 Pope Benedict XVI, ‘*Caritas in Veritate*: On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth’, 29 June 2009, par. 108, *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, <[http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html)>, accessed 2 June 2017.

54 Donal Dorr, ‘The Fragile World: Church Teaching on Ecology Before and by Pope Francis’, *Thinking Faith*, a Journal of the Jesuits in Britain, 26 February 2014, <<https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/%E2%80%98fragile-world%E2%80%99-church-teaching-ecology-and-pope-francis>>, accessed 2 June 2017.

protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about.<sup>55</sup>

When Pope Francis met indigenous people from the Amazon during his visit to Brazil in July 2013, he called for ‘respect and protection of the entire creation which God has entrusted to humanity’.<sup>56</sup> A genuine lover of creation, Pope Francis has expressed this love: ‘We are losing our attitude of wonder, of contemplation, of listening to creation and thus we no longer manage to interpret within it what Benedict XVI calls ‘the rhythm of the love-story between God and man’.<sup>57</sup>

Although humanity has made tremendous progress in the field of science and technology, its progress in the field of spirituality and ethical living is lop-sided. This imbalance is causing our relationship with creation and with God to break down, and our hearts to become hardened to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. Creation is entrusted to the care of humans, but instead of protecting and preserving it for the future generations, we exploit and destroy it.

### *Conclusion*

Various Asian religious traditions and scriptures reveal the importance of creation in the plan of God. The world, as the body of God, and Earth, as the primeval mother of all creation, gives humans a unique responsibility to take care of creation. Asian religions with their focus on the universal ethical principle and non-violence invite humans to protect and preserve creation through simple and responsible living.

Hindus, Buddhists and Jains believe that the world is the place of repeated births and deaths of soul (*samsāra*) before a soul is completely liberated. World is the cause of enslavement and attachment, which one has to diligently avoid and, at the same time, world is a place from which a soul will get completely liberated. Qualified monism (*Viśiṣṭadvaita*), one of the schools in Vedānta philosophy, considers world and humans as part of the body of God.

---

55 iCatholic, ‘The Cry of the Earth Relunched by Irish Bishops Conference’, 10 November 2014, <<https://www.icatholic.ie/cry-of-the-earth-relaunched/>>, accessed 16 January 2017.

56 Donal Dorr, op cit.

57 ‘Celebrating the Sainted’, *Catholic Ecology*, 25 April 2014, <<https://catholicceology.net/blog/celebrating-sainted/>>, accessed 16 January 2017.

The Parsi worship fire and take special care of water, earth and air, because they were created by Ahura Mazda and they are therefore holy.<sup>58</sup> They have an important role to play in the final liberation of all souls. The world according to Zoroaster is only a temporary abode of humans, a stage to prepare themselves for liberation through good thoughts, good words and good deeds. So, Parsis take extreme care not to pollute any of these elements, and whoever pollutes them will be subjected to severe punishments at the last judgement. They don't bury or cremate their dead for fear of polluting earth, air, fire, and water.

Jains believe that there is soul even in material objects, so respect for material objects is the basis of their ethics. They practise ethics of moderation, making use of material objects for leading a happy and ethical life.

For St. Paul: 'the entire creation is groaning for liberation'. Our life in this world is a process, an evolution towards total liberation for which Christ is the model. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin presented Christ as the 'omega' point towards which the entire creation is evolving. Ecology of the common home demands us to lead ethical living with respect and care for the entire creation.

This is the underlying theme of most of the Asian religious traditions.

---

58 Y 17.10–18; 38.1.



*Dr Stephen Chundamthadam S.J. at the De Nobili College recycling fields, Pune, Maharashtra, India, 26 November 2016. Photograph by Barry Rodrigue.*

**Stephen Chundamthadam** is a Jesuit priest from Kerala, South India. He belongs to the Syrian Catholic Community in Kerala. Its history goes back to St. Thomas the Apostle who came to India in 52 CE and converted a few families in Kerala. After his formation in the Society of Jesus and Masters in Economics and in Indian Philosophy, Stephen continued his doctoral research in Vedanta philosophy at Madras University, completing his PhD in 1998. After a few years of teaching in a Jesuit Regional Theology Centre in Kerala, he did his post-doctoral research in the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl at Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, in 2002. He is a professor of Indian Studies in Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV) – Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion – Pune, India where he teaches Indian philosophy, world religions and Indian spirituality.

He did his Advanced Yoga Teachers Training (Yogacharya) from Sivananda Ashram in Trivandrum, South India. He has been practising and teaching yoga since 1970. He is also a senior Karate instructor in JDV with Black Belt (3rd dan) in Wado-Ryu style. He has presented several papers and published several researched articles in edited works and journals. Stephen can be contacted through the following email: <sthadam@gmail.com>.