

Imagine life on Earth as three threads woven together: the natural environment, the economy and human society. When these threads complement and support one another, an intricate, beautiful fabric is produced. This is how I like to conceptualise sustainability. Presently, the economy thread often dominates over the other two, resulting in a fabric with holes in it: the environment or people suffer. Pursuing sustainability is about realising that every fibre of these three threads is connected: people, religions and cultures, financial and political systems, air, water, soil and creatures large and small.

Cultural values and beliefs shape society and our interactions with the environment and economy, reinforcing disconnections or promoting connections between these different threads. Some cultural values, such as the consumerism which currently dominates much of society, promulgate beliefs about material acquisition, that such wealth increases human well-being, promoting the economic thread over other forms of well-being and environmental concerns.

Conversely, society, especially in religious and spiritual belief systems, also contains many values which could be used to encourage sustainable living. For us to evolve and strive for sustainability, it is imperative that these are extracted.

Teachings of Buddhism

Living in Thailand, I am surrounded by three of the world's major religions: Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. Most Thai people are Theravada Buddhists, with around 5 per cent being Muslims. Very few Thais are Christian, but I volunteer and live within a Marist school and community here. Each of these religions has a basis for pursuing sustainability: all feature ideas of interconnections and calling people to take responsibility for their actions. I am also inspired by indigenous spiritual beliefs, particularly from my native Aotearoa.

Buddhism knits together the ideals of *karma* (cause) and effect and *ahimsa* (non-harm), along with the



SUPPORT TO SUSTAIN OUR COMMON HOME

values of compassion, selflessness and mindfulness. Through this lens, all living things are woven together, so that people become intertwined with their surrounding environment.

This is exemplified through positive or negative *karma*, leading to happiness or suffering respectively; respecting all living beings through *ahimsa* (many Buddhists are vegetarians); and striving to live a life enriched with compassion, selflessness and mindfulness, so as to mutually benefit all life forms. Contrary to predominant Western individualistic, consumerist values, an individual's significance is diminished and satisfaction cannot be achieved simply through personal gain.

Islamic Teaching

Christians and Muslims alike believe that God created everything and all creatures' existence is reliant upon God. Islamic teaching is founded upon interconnection through the principle of *tawheed* (the Unity of God), relating to the statement "There is no God, but God".

The Unity of God is mirrored in the Unity of all creation, including humans, flora and fauna, and all of the natural environment. Everything is an intrinsic

part of God's creation. Furthermore, integrity and equilibrium of all things is needed to accomplish Unity and this cannot be done if certain priorities dominate over others.

Christian Teaching

Similarly for Christians, God's love, wisdom and glory is revealed through the universe being united in harmony, and interdependency is required to guarantee this continues. Acknowledgment of Earth belonging to all is infused throughout Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, referring to Earth as "*Our Common Home*" and proclaiming: "We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it". This is echoed by The World Council of Churches which recognises that people are but one part of the global community.

Māori Teaching

Many indigenous groups, such as Native Americans, Australian Aborigines and Māori, also have spiritual beliefs featuring strong connections to the land and people — both present and past.

For Māori, everything is connected, which is evident through their whakapapa, their identity in



ALEISHA KEATING writes of how Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Māori teach about our relationship in creation and caring for Earth communities.

relation to the land, water, animals and other people. Believing that everything is inherently linked, they consider their well-being to be dependent upon ecosystem health: “Ko ahau te taiao, ko te taiao, ko ahau”, meaning my well-being is characterised by the ecosystem (Ngāti Wai and Ngāti Whatua).

Merely recognising that nothing happens in isolation is not sufficient: to pursue sustainability we must also take responsibility and ownership for restoring harmony on earth. These ideals are fostered in many religious and spiritual beliefs.

As our lifestyles become increasingly urbanised, industrial and technology dependent, we are becoming more disconnected from nature and each other. Without holistically considering the wider social, environmental and economic impacts of our decisions and behaviour, the global ecosystem will continue to be pushed out of balance. However, merely recognising that nothing happens in isolation is not

sufficient: to pursue sustainability we must also take responsibility and ownership for restoring harmony on earth. These ideals are also fostered in many religious and spiritual beliefs.

Learning from One Another

Buddhism has a strong basis for taking responsibility to ensure that all beings flourish through *karma*, *ahimsa* and its core values. Through belief in the intrinsic value of people to all life, nature is cherished as a friend, cultivating behaviours that work with rather than against nature.

The Dalai Lama suggests that people have responsibility to act: “Ultimately the decision must come from the human heart ... So I think the key point is genuine sense of universal responsibility which is based on love, compassion and clear awareness.” Buddhism’s core values and ideals, and living simply can thus be applied to make good change in the world.

The Islamic principles of *tawheed*, *akhroh* (accountability) and *khalifa* (guardianship) are central for developing environmental consciousness and advocating stewardship.

Muhammad (the Prophet of Islam) said: “The world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you

stewards over it”, calling Muslims to be *khalifa* rather than masters. People are therefore responsible and accountable for maintaining the earth’s integrity, everything that God has created. Moreover, Islam discourages waste and extravagance, with the Qur’an promoting using rather than abusing Allah’s gifts: “O children of Adam... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters.”

The bible’s reference to people having “dominion” over the earth has often been interpreted as being a licence to exploit and control everything non-human. “Dominion” is mentioned in the Genesis creation story and other passages such as Psalm 8:6: “You have made him to have dominion over the works of your hands.” The 1986 Assisi Declarations on humanity and nature refuted this, instead proposing that people be stewards of God’s creation. This mirrors Francis of Assisi who, centuries before, summoned people to lead mutually beneficial lives, for people and all creatures. From his perspective, we are fed by the earth, our sister; and we co-inhabit the earth with our brothers and sisters.

Guardianship is also fundamental to Māori spirituality: people are called *tangata whenua* (people of the land) and have responsibility to be *kaitiaki* (guardians) over *wāhi tapu* (sacred sites) and natural *taonga* (treasures) to sustain both human and environmental well-being.

While religious and spiritual beliefs differ greatly, many are grounded in strong values, offering guidance on how to live full and sustainable lives. This is illustrated through examples from Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Māori spirituality, but there are many more in other religions and spiritual beliefs. We must embrace values which promote interconnection and responsibility to ensure that the beautiful fabric of life on Earth endures for generations to come. 🌱



Aleisha Keating is a volunteer teacher with Marist Asia Foundation in Ranong, Thailand. She also enjoys writing about sustainability issues in her blog www.anethicalyarn.com