

Jesuits in Buddhist-Christian Dialog and the Sustainability of Life

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Sustainability is a hot word today among scientists, economists, politicians, religious leaders, and others especially concerned with humanitarian values. It is like a sponge soaked in a solution of semantics from which one can squeeze out streams of diverse meanings. It has been linked to economics, ecology, social welfare, social justice, gender equality, financial security, conserving energy, eradicating poverty, and, of course, finding meaning in life. The 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) Report gave one of the most succinct definitions of *sustainable development* as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” As is implied by this definition, *sustainability* concerns everyone as all of us consume or exploit the limited natural resources—food, fuel, water, air, etc.—and have to be responsible to leave these resources for future generations. Since all natural resources are finite and subject to waste and contamination, we have to invent ways of replenishing the disappearing reservoirs and make efforts not to be wasteful.

With the advent of prosperity after the two World Wars, people, especially in economically advanced countries, tended to be super consumers without worrying about the consequences. Perhaps the earliest alarm against such consumerism was sounded by the conservationist Rachel Carson, who in her book *Silent Spring* (1960) eloquently portrayed the environmental destruction caused by industrial waste and pesticides. As a lone voice those days, she warned the world of the possible extinction of natural resources and even of humanity due to man-made causes, much like the cosmologist Stephen Hawking, who in January 2016 warned, at the BBC Reith Lectures at London's Royal Institution, that “as new technologies are developed, the number of threats to the human race will increase until some kind of global cataclysm is virtually inevitable.”

Even before Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* (2015) stirred up Catholics and other listeners worldwide to become aware of sustainability, others, especially economists, educators, and environmentalists, had concerned themselves with related issues, at least from the 1960s, partly stimulated by the work of Carson. Albert Bartlett, a Professor of Physics at the University of Colorado, traces the origins of sustainability concerns to the book *Limits to Growth* (1972), which predicted, based on research on the global economy between 1900 to 1970, that the mid-21st century will be calamitous for humanity unless radical steps are taken to maintain and sustain natural resources. The United Nations too has come up with several documents and conferences on the importance of sustainability. The Stockholm conference in 1972 on the Human Environment, the publication of the World Conservation Strategy by the International Union for Conservation of Natural Resources in 1980, the creation of the WCED in 1984 and WCED's report *Our Common Future* in 1987, the first UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) convened in Johannesburg in 2002 are some significant steps taken by the UN. Coming at an appropriate and critical time, *Laudato Si* alerted all humanity to the dangers of consumerism and stimulated many discussions, research, and activities towards achieving sustainability. The pope's encyclical inspired many educational institutions, especially Jesuit universities and colleges, to offer courses on sustainability and encourage students to go green.

Buddhism, among all major religions, may claim to be the most concerned with sustainability, ever since its origin. The Buddhist philosophy of *karma* ties together every existent being in every conceivable world, and the consequences of everyone's action are believed to impact on everyone else. Even the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods, and demons are not exempt from the law of *karma*. The interconnectedness that pervades the universe forces everyone to reflect responsibly on the effects of one's actions. The Buddhist concern for the universe is best expressed in the following extract from the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* (translated as 'The Hymn of Universal Love,' 'Discourse on Loving-kindness,' etc.) dated to 400 B.C.:

Let no one deceive another or despise anyone anywhere,
or through anger or resistance wish for another to suffer.
As a mother would risk her life to protect her child, her only child,
even so should one cultivate a limitless heart with regard to all beings.
With good will for the entire cosmos, cultivate a limitless heart:
Above, below, and all around, unobstructed, without hostility or hate.
Whether standing, walking, sitting, or lying down,
as long as one is alert, one should be resolved on this mindfulness.

While even major religions concerned themselves with only their own 'faithful' and extended their compassion only to humans, the Buddhist counsel to "cultivate a limitless heart" "with good will for the entire cosmos," extending the sphere of compassion to all beings, is truly remarkable.

Despite such extraordinary roots, however, Buddhism had been quite reticent and even negligent in expressing universal love and in sponsoring sustainability causes. As recently as 1998, the Dalai Lama acknowledged that Buddhists had been slow to act effectively in solving social and political problems and that they had much to learn from the Christians (cf. <http://www.emptybell.org/articles/engaged-buddhism.html>). Buddhist reluctance to get involved in activism may have been due to a questionable interpretation of *karma*, which held that even helping others was objectionable since such an act might hinder the others' chances of fulfilling their karmic obligations and bettering their rebirth options. In the 1970's, however, Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk and popular exponent of Buddhism in the West, put forward *Engaged Buddhism*, which re-focused Buddhism on sustainability concerns, advocating, among other goals, energy conservation, simpler life, and social justice. *Engaged Buddhism* got even a more powerful boost that led to significant activism after the *International Network of Engaged Buddhists* was founded in 1989 by eminent Buddhist leaders like the Dalai Lama, the Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda.

Jesuits engaged in dialog with Buddhists too are sincerely concerned with sustainability. They are aware of their obligations not only to implement effective practices of sustainability, but also to share with and learn from Buddhists ways and means of sustaining life. At least once a year, they take part in a Buddhist-Christian workshop, in which they allot several sessions to deal with sustainability. In their recent meetings, they have had presentations about Sulak Sivaraksa's contributions to social

welfare, Buddhist social activism in contemporary societies, Bhutan's Buddhist quest for sustainable development, Buddhist-Christian collaboration in the Philippines, and similar topics of relevance to sustainability. In their forthcoming workshop, to be held in Bodhgaya in March 2016, several Jesuits will be presenting papers and offering suggestions on how to contribute to sustainable living.

Presenting and discussing sustainability-related topics is easier than actually performing actions conducive to sustainability. Given the vast scope of problems, solutions have to be found at different levels of governance, administration, and execution. Clearly here the role of scientists, economists, environmentalists, politicians, and educators is highly important, so much so that ordinary civilians may feel that they have little to contribute or that their contribution will be merely a pencil stroke on a large canvas. What Pope Francis and Buddhist leaders like the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh remind us of is that, whatever little it may be, each of us must contribute to sustainability. In *Laudato Si*, for instance, the Pope tells us, "Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment. A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment." Putting the Pope's guidelines into practice can take various forms such as turning off unnecessary lights; shutting down personal computers, monitors, and TV if unused for longer than 30 minutes; recycling whatever we can (e.g., books, electric and electronic gadgets, clothes, and paper), opening windows and letting in fresh air instead of turning on air-conditioners, using more energy-efficient light bulbs, and making do with fewer electric appliances. Inventive persons can come up with many more ways to conserve energy, and they can also encourage others to do the same.

Unfortunately, some of us look down upon those who meticulously switch off lights or are economical in their life-style, criticizing them for being stingy or scrupulous. The urgency of the global situation and contemporary scientific evidence, however, dictate that we overcome such snobbish attitudes and remember that concerns of sustainability are not only about saving money, but also about saving the natural resources and saving ourselves.

In the wake of the 2011 Tohoku (East Japan) earthquake in Japan, there was panic in Tokyo for a few weeks. Within a couple of days after the quake, even ordinary batteries had run out of stock in stores, and everyone was encouraged to cut down on energy consumption. The Jesuit Community at Sophia University decided, on the suggestion of an administrator, to bring down electricity consumption by at least 5%, by turning off unnecessary lights and fans, and using electric devices more efficiently. The 50 or so Jesuits cooperated, and after about a month, the administrator was amazed at finding that the energy consumption fell not simply by 5% but by about 15%! Apparently, this lower energy consumption still continues after five years, thanks to the spontaneous efforts taken then and continued subsequently. The lesson is simple: if only we put our hearts into reducing waste and living a simpler life, we can contribute substantially to the sustainability of life.