

Martin Palmer talks to **Sarah Meyrick** about how faiths became such strong defenders of the environment

IN MAY, a group of international experts will be gathering in London and online to discuss a radical reform of the global food system. The “Extinction or Regeneration” conference is being organised by Compassion in World Farming (CiWF), in partnership with others, and is intended to debate solutions for a system that, they say, is broken beyond repair.

“In this age of hunger and accelerating climate and biodiversity emergencies, radical reform of the global food system is urgently needed,” the charity says. The conference will bring together a global audience from interests including the environment, public health, the food business, agriculture, policy, conservation, finance, and animal welfare.

One of the experts contributing to the gathering is Martin Palmer, the founding president and chief executive of Faith Invest, one of the partners supporting the event. Mr Palmer was previously the secretary-general of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), until its closure in 2019. Faith Invest is its successor; the non-profit organisation works with faith groups and faith-based asset-owners to help them to make investments that are consistent with the values of their faith.

Mr Palmer has been involved with CiWF since the 1980s. The organisation has broadened its focus from its early days, campaigning for legislation that recognises animals as sentient beings.

“It is actually about the whole mindset of our relationship with the rest of creation. . . It’s not just protecting chickens and pigs and calves and so forth, which is hugely, vitally important. But it’s also that by making those changes, it’s changing the well-being of human beings as well — because battery hen chickens are bad food. They’re bad for you, and they’re very bad for the environment.”

There has been a gradual realisation that the misuse of animals is one of the great causes of climate change, he says. “It’s one of the engines of the destruction of biodiversity. And all of these have an impact on the health and well-being of human beings, and therefore there needs to be this bigger picture.”

CiWF has been interested in the input of faith groups since the 1980s, largely because they had a board member who was Muslim. “There’s this wonderful phrase in the Qur’an where it says all other creatures live in communities like you do. And, on the Day of Judgement, they will be asked who hurt them, and you will stand condemned,” he says. It’s stronger, even, than Jesus’s words about not a single sparrow falling to the ground without the Father’s knowledge.

“The ‘Extinction or Regeneration’ conference is the next step in saying [that] the welfare of animals is not just about whether we mistreat God’s creatures: it is about whether, actually, we have betrayed the Creator in what we’ve done.”

The situation in which we cur-



Religions unite to respect the earth

rently find ourselves is comparable to the Old Testament flood, he says. “We’re flooding the world with evil, with dreadful things, with cruelty. And we are facing a tsunami of climate change, a tsunami of the brokenness of our relationship with nature.”

MARTIN PALMER, an Anglican, has been working in this area for the best part of 40 years. What was his journey into the field? His father was a vicar; his mother was an atheist. (“It took him two years to persuade her to even go out with him.”)

“I grew up in a household where my father just knew that God was love. And, for my mother, who was a psychotherapist, it was a little more complicated than that. There was a lot that she really found difficult about faith. So, our dining table was a fulcrum of debate and discussion and passion and ideas and thoughts,” he says.

He abandoned his faith in his teens (“I think you have to become an atheist, if you grow up in a vicarage”). He was intending to study geology, but was offered theology as an alternative. “I thought, well, that sounds similar. So I found myself [studying] religious studies in order to disprove the Gospels, and it didn’t quite work.”

He travelled in China, where he encountered different faiths — “particularly Taoism, but also Maoism” — and then went to Cambridge to read theology and classical Chinese. After Cambridge, he began working in education, and was responsible for setting up the first ever multifaith religious-education centre in the world, in Manchester.

As a result, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) approached him and asked for his help in writing resource material to be used in religious education, as part of the national curriculum. The book, *Worlds of Difference*, published in

1982, sold one million copies and was translated into 27 languages. It was also picked up by the Duke of Edinburgh, then the international president of the WWF.

When WWF was planning its approaching 25th-birthday party, Mr Palmer says, Prince Philip looked at the proposed agenda and reportedly said that he would not be coming.

“He could express himself quite forcefully at times,” Mr Palmer says. “He said: ‘If it was data that we needed to change the world to stop the destruction of nature, we’d be doing it now. But we’re not — because we’re not touching hearts and minds. In fact, the only groups that have ever done that successfully in history are the arts and religion.’”

The Prince had just read Mr Palmer’s book. “He said: ‘We should invite the major faiths to come together with all the major conservation groups and we should say, What can we do together? And we should do it in Assisi.’”

The suggestion was apparently met with stunned silence. But the Prince prevailed, and Mr Palmer received an invitation to meet him — something that he describes as a surreal occasion, not least because he had recently watched an episode of *Spitting Image* featuring the Queen and her husband.

“I was supposed to be there for half an hour. It was four hours later that I left. And, in that time, we basically decided to launch a whole programme about religion and the environment. We invited Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish representatives. We had every nature conservation group, and people like Peter Scott and David Attenborough.”

From the beginning, they decided against an interfaith approach. “We said, We’re not going to ask them all to sign one statement. Let’s get each of these leaders — and they were very senior figures within their tradi-

tion — and tell them we need 2000 words on their beliefs and why they care about nature. So, right from the beginning, we were working with the wonderful diversity.”

ANOTHER outcome of their work together was the founding of ARC, of which Mr Palmer became the secretary-general. He also remained the Prince’s religious adviser from 1985 until the day he died. “It worked very well. But Prince Philip and I had seen so many good NGOs and charities coming into being for very good reasons — and then going on being, simply in order to go on being. So, we said we’d give it 20 years. We went on another two years, but we closed then.”

At its inception, there were just three religious environmental projects in the world, he says. Now, according to the UN, there are more than one million. Closing ARC on the grounds that it had achieved its aims therefore made sense. “At that point, Prince Philip said: ‘You know, there is no faith tradition in the world that hasn’t developed an environmental programme. Every single one of them has, for better or worse. Some are vast, some small, but they’re all making a difference locally.’”

What was lacking, however, was recognition from faith groups that they were financial stakeholders: hence Faith Invest, which helps them to move their investments into areas of social engagement, environment, and sustainability. Many have huge amounts to invest; and the decisions

that they make will have an immeasurable impact on future generations.

Faith groups sometimes struggle to identify what they are for, in investment terms, even though they are clear about what they are against. But he refers to the success of a recent move by Roman Catholics to return to the practice of not eating meat on Fridays, and the huge impact that that will have on carbon emissions. He talks about work to help to develop a Buddhist pension fund that reflects Buddhist values. “It’s a fascinating, burgeoning area,” he says.

Are we talking about problems that are solvable? “If we don’t solve them, we may be one of the shortest-lived species on the planet,” he says. “But I think they are — but not without considerable sacrifice. That is the most difficult thing. And that is why, as an Anglican, I feel Christianity is one of the most honest [faiths] about how you make a change happen.”

“You don’t make a change happen by tinkering. And you don’t make a change happen by making sure that you’re happy all the time. It will call for sacrifices. And we are a faith that understands that out of the depths can come new birth.”

He says he was struck by a statement from a South African woman during the “somewhat pointless Sharm el-Sheikh COP in November”, who posited the idea that perhaps the best was yet to come. “I was intrigued by that. But we’ve been through worse. We’ve [come through] the Black Death . . . the Thirty Years’ War. We’ve seen so much violence, so much destruction. And we’ve stayed with our people and rebuilt.”

SOMETIMES, the scale of the crisis can feel overwhelming. What difference can people make at a local level? Some of it is as small as contributing to biodiversity surveys in churchyards, he says, through the Caring for God’s Acre programme, which can offer a powerful partnership for education with the local primary school.

“We need to be creating spaces for nature, not bases for us to go and enjoy nature,” he says. “If you’ve got a churchyard, it will have been carved out of old meadow land or forestry 1000 years ago, and therefore they will have species that probably are not anywhere else. They can become centres for replanting; so it’s a very simple thing to do.”

We need to think about church building, he says, and he commends the Eco Church scheme. But, in the end, it’s about making good choices, and doing what needs to be done around you: “Lifestyle is such a crucial dimension.”

“The other thing is — and this is something that we’ve found over the last 30 years in particular — where a faith takes the environment seriously, and changes what it does to walk more gently upon this earth, and to care more for all of God’s creation . . . it’s where [faiths] take that seriously, and where they ask their communities to take it seriously in terms of diet and travel, in activities and donations, that they retain their young people — because we have created a generation which suffers in part from eco-fear.”

We are not alone in the struggle, he says. “I would say, looking at the number of religious organisations and events and programmes around the world, there’s probably about two billion people who are seriously trying to do what they can. So, why not join them, and make it two billion and one?”

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