
Interreligious activities for the protection of the environment

By Claus Bockbreder of the dojos Melle and Osnabrück (Germany)

For the first time in February 2015, representatives of different religions, of the Federal Department for Environmental Protection and of various environmental protection organizations met at the invitation of the Abrahamic Forum of Germany (a dialogue forum between Jews, Christians and Muslims) for a meeting of dialogue on the theme "Religions and Nature Conservation - Together for Biological Diversity".

Buddhism was represented by the Buddhist Union of Germany. In order to allow Buddhists to participate, the original title which contained the terms "preservation of creation" was changed to the one mentioned above.

The Forum representatives insisted on the importance of the protection of nature and species. They considered that the main reasons for the extinction of species are forms of economic activity, production and consumption that misuse resources, social injustice and discord in the world, climate change and the loss of biodiversity depriving people of their livelihoods and forcing them to leave their countries.

Accordingly, religious communities described their task as follows:

- For them, the protection of nature and its diversity is a common and ongoing task.
- Interreligious cooperation serves to get to know each other better and to make peace with each other and with nature.

In order to raise awareness of nature conservation:

- A religious week will be held in a different city each year in September and will deal with topics related to nature protection and biodiversity,
- Religious communities should create places of biodiversity around their buildings,
- Religious teams for nature protection should be created to spread information on the common task of religions in schools and educational institutions,
- Creation of a network of religions for the protection of nature.

Following the above suggestions, the local group "Religions for Peace", of which I am a member, organized a project week "Nature Protection and Religions" in September 2018. Our dojos of Osnabrück and Melle took part in this project. For example, during the daily morning zazen I read and explained poems by Master Ryokan, texts by Master Dôgen and Master Wanshi, about their attitude towards nature.

In addition, there was during this week and during excursions, a presentation of the city as habitat for many plants and animal species, as well as the presentation of various regional nature protection projects and measures to protect the forest ecosystem. It took place in an environmental education centre.

Two organic farms, working according to very different concepts, were also visited:

The first farm is a meeting place. The farmer's family, with other people living on the farm and temporary workers, take care together of the soil, plants and animals. On top of organic agricultural production, it is above all a matter of human cooperation and mutual learning, from childhood already. For example, there is a kindergarten on the farm where children can play in the nature and learn the basic religious attitude of "respect for life" while playing. A primary school is also being built on the farm.

In the other farm, cultivation takes place according to the Demeter's strict guidelines. We were informed about their way of growing things, we harvested, we processed and ate the vegetables together. And meanwhile, I recited and explained our Meal Sutra in German.

In both schools, we could see that the young people were already (and before Greta) very committed and very well informed about environmental protection. For example, they planted flower meadows for insects. Each school had its own apiary, where honey was produced and marketed directly, so that the pupils could learn to consider at the same time the often-contradictory aspects of ecology and economy. In one school, they had transformed some classes into "gardens of religions": a Judeo-Christian garden, a Muslim garden and a Far Eastern garden, in which plants that play a role in the different religions were cultivated, for quietness and contemplation.

At the closing event of the week, which was also attended by representatives of the City and the Region, the students very clearly formulated their demands for a responsible and sustainable environmental policy.

According to the agreement, a project day is to take place every year in September in the cities that have already carried out the "Nature Conservation and Religion" project week described above. This project day took place in Osnabrück on September the 1st, 2019:

The day began with a religious service, with a homily on environmental protection and a musical composition on "The Sounds of Religions" by a member of our local group "Religions for Peace". Afterwards, two scientific lectures were given, the first by a University professor of Botany on the theme "The decline of biodiversity: what can we do?" and the second one by the Director of the German Federal Environment Foundation based in Osnabrück on environmental pollution by chemicals.

The key messages of the first presentation were as follows:

A healthy environment is necessary:

- To provide food
- For the supply of raw materials
- For the production of oxygen to make the air breathable
- As carbon dioxide storage
- For the proliferation of many plants through the production of fruit by pollination
- For the adaptation of living organisms to changing environmental factors through genetic diversity
- For relaxation and well-being.

The intensification of the food industry is generally considered to be the cause of species extinction, resulting in:

- The transformation of the natural environment into cropland, e.g. by drying out heathlands which can store considerable amounts of carbon dioxide, and using them for agriculture,
- Monocultures: for example, by mobilising large areas for the cultivation of maize to produce biodiesel, or the replacement of our native mixed forests by spruce crops, which are more productive for the timber industry, but which also destroy the forest ecosystem,
- Mangrove forests, which protect tropical coastlines, are being cut down to create shrimp farms, with the result that sea water can reach inland and agricultural areas become unusable,
- The soil ecosystem is destroyed by the intensive use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides.

What needs to be done?

- "Renaturation" of forests and wetlands,
- Seeding with native wild plants. For this purpose, the Biological Institute of the local university provides a mixture of wildflower seeds, within the framework of the "Osnabrück Bee Alliance",
- Naturalization of the vast church grounds,
- Better implementation of the European "Fauna-Flora-Habitat" Directive,
- Prohibition of pesticides and other harmful chemicals,
- Stop all EU funding for biogas produced from corn,
- Link all EU agricultural funding to environmental and nature conservation requirements,
- Reduction of carbon dioxide and nitrogen emissions,
- Reduction of fertilizers in agriculture,
- Promotion of organic farming,
- Lifestyle change: stop excessive consumption.
- Change certain consumption habits: not to buy products containing palm oil, not to buy products made of tropical wood, not to buy garden soil with peat, etc.
- Fewer cars and planes.

In the second presentation, the sustainable development goals of the United Nations were presented, with first of all:

1. No poverty
2. No famine
3. Health and well-being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Clean and affordable energy
8. Dignified work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Less inequality
11. Sustainable cities and municipalities
12. Responsible consumption and production patterns
13. Climate protection measures
14. Protection of underwater life
15. Protection of life on earth

-
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions
 17. Partnerships to achieve these objectives.

Numerous graphs have shown how the consumption of water and energy resources has increased exponentially since the beginning of the twentieth century, in parallel with population growth. They showed also an increase in climate toxic emissions (carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane) and the destruction of tropical forests and natural land. According to these graphs, the influence of modern civilization on the climate and the environment cannot be denied. In addition, it was graphically shown to what extent the pollution of soil, air and water by use and environmentally toxic substances has already increased, in particular the pollution of water bodies due to fertilization with phosphates and nitrogen. This pollution has exceeded the limits of what is acceptable and the same applies to other threats to biodiversity. The number of 1,300,000,000 organic and inorganic chemicals from industry, agriculture, urban development, leisure activities, household tasks, clothing and medicines polluting the environment is impressive.

After presenting some positive examples of sustainable economic and recycling systems, the presentation ended with a quote from former German Federal President Horst Köhler in 2016: "It is only when we take a global perspective and look at poverty and environmental issues together that we have an idea of what lies ahead. The greatest challenge facing humanity in the 21st century is to enable all people to live in dignity, without destroying our planet. If everyone produced and consumed as Europeans and Americans do, we would need three or four planets, but we don't have them". After an in-depth discussion of the presentations, the day concluded with a play "The Plasticbusters", written and performed by the students on the theme of ignorance and the responsibility in the use of plastics to protect the environment.

All these events showed, often in a very radical way, how we are at a turning point ... This is not necessarily new to those who have been dealing with the subject for a long time, but is still frighteningly clear. Unfortunately, as usual, there were relatively few visitors, and those who were there were already well informed, but they were again well motivated to go on with their actions to protect nature.

It was very gratifying to see the great commitment and seriousness of the students in dealing with the subject, and they are now also succeeding in raising awareness for the "Friday for the Future" events.