

Axum Tusison Church, Tigray Province. Photo: Georg Gerster

CHURCH SETS ITS SITES ON TREES

by Tim Allen-Rowlandson

Any visitor travelling in rural Ethiopia cannot fail to notice the occasional patch of trees atop a nearby hill. Closer inspection will invariably reveal a church or other holy site such as a cemetery. These wooded hilltops, often in an otherwise tree-less landscape, are mostly in Ethiopia's northern highlands, home of the Ethiopian Orthodox (*Tewahido* - an Amharic term meaning united) Church. The northern highlands are also the home of settled agriculture. Here disproportionately high human densities have led to increased pressure on natural resources and widespread degradation of the environment, making this sight particularly uncommon.

Drought conditions in Ethiopia have been recently magnified by extensive deforestation due to fuelwood gathering and land cleared for human settlement in much of the highland areas. Realizing the current need for more active conservation measures, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) through its Development and Inter-Church Aid Department (DICAD), has embarked on an extensive scheme of afforestation in an effort to reverse the trend.

These development activities were initiated at the end of 1985, when technicians were trained in nursery management in consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture. A total of 21 nursery centers have been established to date, mainly in the

northern provinces of Tigre, Wollo, Gojam and Gonder, where more than 2.6 million seedlings of 19 different species have been raised. These seedlings are distributed free of charge to government departments, urban communities, farming cooperatives and peasant farmers associations.

The church tries to provide these local communities with species of their choice, and because imported trees generally have faster growth rates than indigenous ones, there is a greater demand for imported or foreign species such as eucalyptus. Several indigenous trees, however, - including scented thorn, apple-ring thorn tree, wild olive and cordia - are raised in the nurseries. The church has also established more than 300 small plantations, most of which are near church grounds. They are tended by the clergy; many of the priests have also been trained in development activities and act as teachers, farmers and laborers as well as spiritual leaders.

In addition to these new afforestation efforts, the Church continues to uphold the centuries-old tradition of planting and maintaining trees around church yards and cemeteries. Trees within the grounds of these churches are considered sacred by members of the EOC and are also respected by locals following other forms of religion.

This is particularly obvious in the Merto Lemariam district of Gojam Province, which has the third oldest church in Ethiopia. There is a chronic

shortage of trees for fuelwood and construction in this region and the main source of fuel energy is cattle dung. Despite this pressure for wood, existing tree stands within church grounds remain untouched. Consequently, many of the trees associated with churches are very old, and may include juniper, wild olive, and other indigenous species as well as imported trees such as cypress and gum.

The trees provide an important focal point for local gatherings as well as shade where members of the community can meditate and pray. An added and vital benefit, which was probably not understood in earlier times, is that this vegetation promotes soil and water conservation by trapping rainfall and preventing water run-off and consequent soil erosion. The vegetation also provides food, shelter and cover for several species of wildlife such as monkeys, small antelope and rodents, as well as roosting and nesting sites for various bird species. All forms of wildlife are given the same status as the trees, and are therefore protected on purely religious grounds.

An example of this protection can be seen on Lake Tana in the northwest of the country. It is Ethiopia's largest lake and the source of the Blue Nile. Its 37 islands shelter more than 20 monasteries and churches (where several emperors are buried), and are important aquatic, wooded and forest habitats for substantial colonies of birds including spoonbills, herons, ospreys, hornbills, hoopoes and weav-

ers. It is claimed that the birds on one island, Dega Stefanos, are so tame that they can be fed by hand.

Such passive forms of conservation have probably been practiced since Ethiopia became the first Christian country in Africa with the establishment of the EOC at the ancient city of Axum in 327 AD. Today, the EOC - sometimes incorrectly called the Coptic church, which implies an association with the Egyptian church - has some 20,000 parish churches spread throughout much of the country, with more than 25,000 clergymen and a membership in excess of 25 million, approximately 57% of Ethiopia's estimated population of 44 million.

The country's other major religions are Islam with 9.9 million members, Evangelical Protestant with 972,000 members, Roman Catholic with 221,000 members and Judaism with 34,000 members. Again, vegetation surrounding mosques, churches and other hallowed sites of these faiths is generally preserved, even if it is merely a single tree in a cultivated field marking the burial site of a prominent Muslim and no active form of worshipping is continued there. Similarly, certain tree species or individual trees are held in high esteem by between 5% and 15% of the population that follow animist rites and ceremonies.

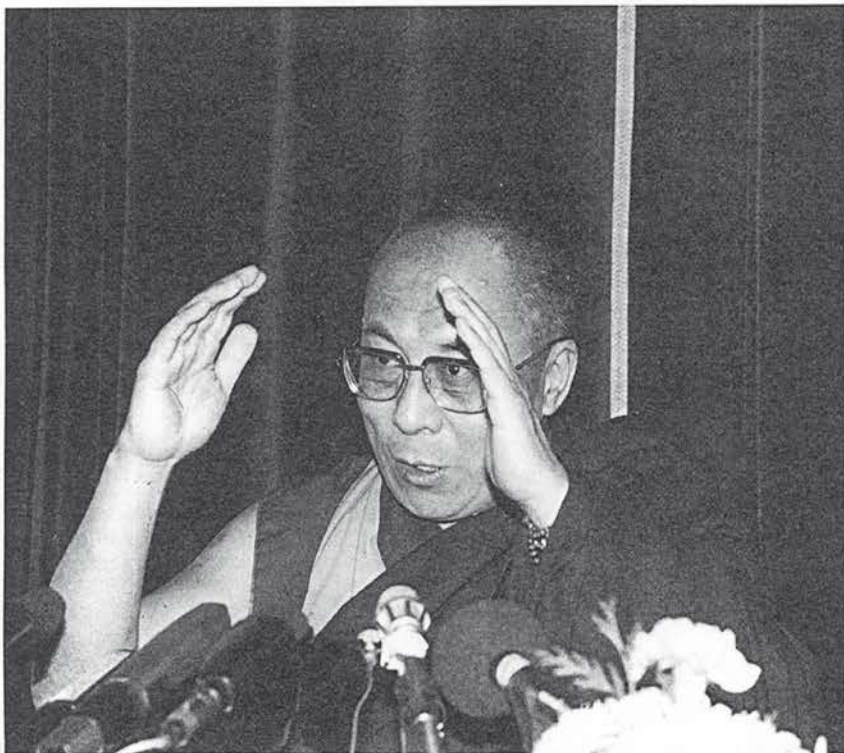
The church's primary objective in providing and planting these trees both in nurseries and in sacred

grounds is to promote the conservation of soil and water resources in the northern highlands and to complement the efforts of the nation in environmental rehabilitation.

A second and more long-term objective is to provide fuel and construction timber from eucalyptus species, which are not considered sacred in church grounds, on a sustained yield basis, where any tree that is cut down is immediately replaced. This form of harvesting will, in time, provide a source of revenue which can be directly paid back into the afforestation programme (a condition that is not always met in other wildlife utilisation programmes).

Finally, the afforestation programme intends to motivate people, by increasing awareness and providing training, to participate more fully in the life of their communities and to take an active part in their own development. This aspect is vital if the programme is to succeed and will clearly elevate this programme above many other afforestation schemes in the country. The EOC's activities will undoubtedly strengthen the alliance of religion and conservation which has existed in Ethiopia for many centuries. □

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HH The Dalai Lama. Photo: Dominique Sidé

THE DALAI LAMA

At a conference which drew much of its inspiration from WWF's 1986 Assisi events which launched the Network on Conservation and Religion, the appearance of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the first full working day brought a different dimension to the proceedings. Following speakers James Lovelock, Wangari Maathai and Carl Sagan, the Dalai Lama emphasized the spiritual side of the Network.

able to cope with them."

"We are sacrificing the fate of future generations to our own short-term interests," he continued. "This is an extremely selfish and morally wrong attitude." But the world's faiths could help. "We need a renewal of universal and spiritual and humanitarian values. The age-old ideals of altruism and compassion, upheld by all the world's faiths, must be revived to balance material progress."

"Our diversity is our richest and most vital resource."

As he walked down the hall to the platform, delegates rose to greet him, some offering traditional white scarves. A particularly moving moment came when he greeted Mother Teresa, with whom he spent some time in private conversation.

In his speech, the Dalai Lama expressed concern for the dangers facing us. "The delicate balance of the earth's ecology is being eroded on the land, sea and in the atmosphere. Global population is increasing while our resources are rapidly being depleted. The awesome specter of nuclear annihilation looms over us all. If the present generation does not find some means to solve these problems, future generations may not be

He said that we should learn to recognize the common humanity shared by us all. "We should begin to develop, from the level of the individual through that of society to the world at large, what I call a sense of universal responsibility - a deep respect for every living being who lives on this one small planet and calls it home. Such a global concern transcends religious and political differences. At the same time, the cooperation it calls for, does not imply submersion of our separate identities... Our diversity is our richest and most vital resource. Without it, our potential for creating a better world would be greatly reduced." □

TALKABOUT

In the Spirit of Assisi

A consultation called by the World Council of Churches' Sub-Unit on Dialogue and the Programme Unit on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation recently gathered members of six faiths - Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim. The meeting was organized by the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture (ICOREC) at the Othona Community in Dorset, UK. The following document was prepared as a result of the meeting:

- We wish to start by giving thanks for all creation and nature.
- From very different perspectives we wish to challenge the prevailing attitude towards nature of utilitarian, anthropocentric materialism whereby the value, purpose and meaning of nature is judged predominantly or even solely in relationship to our use of nature.
- We wish to put forward two different yet complementary perspectives on nature. Both perspectives stress that humanity is part of nature and that we are therefore participants in nature, not objective observers or users of nature.
- The first perspective arose primarily from those of us who are from the Hindu and Buddhist faiths. We wish to say that we see all life as linked by the commonality of consciousness, be that seen as the atman, divine spark, aspect of the One, or whatever. For us the physical manifestation is simply that the spirit within any creature or sentient being is one and the same. The physical manifestations are but temporary and secondary. Our belief in reincarnation emphasizes the essential unity of the spiritual and the ultimate insignificance of

the physical. Attachment to the physical is to be seen as the root of our disease and distress. From this perspective all sentient life has a right to exist and is also to be seen as a part of the sacred. Whilst in certain expressions of our tradition the human incarnation is considered most desirable, this does not give us greater rights, but rather, greater duties towards the rest of nature.

- For those of us from the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, including the Baha'i faith, we see the world as being the purposeful work of a loving creator. Humanity is the highest stage of that creation and in certain traditions is described as a vice-regent of God on earth. Creation is seen as being there for the use and enjoyment of humanity, but that is only one side of the coin. Creation is also there for its own sake. As Islam sees it, all creation worships the Creator in its own way, and thus wanton or careless or wasteful use of that creation is a sin against the Creator. As the Book of Job shows, God delights in those aspects of his creation which humanity never sees. Creation has a divine purpose in itself, of which we are part, as well as humanity having a drama of which creation is a part.
- We all acknowledged that the primary task for religious communities is to reconcile the teachings and insights in our faiths with the practice of our faiths. The frequent disparity between our teachings and our actions on nature are a source of distress and concern. We hope that in the spirit of the programmes launched after the WWF Assisi meeting (in September 1986) our faiths will undertake an "internal mission" - that is to say, look to our own actions and responses to nature.

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ROMAN CATHOLICS LAUNCH ECOLOGY INSTITUTE

For the first time ever, Roman Catholic priests, religious and other students in Rome will be able to study Christian ecology thanks to a new institute opening this autumn.

The Franciscan Center of Environmental Studies will become a fully fledged university-level institute this September. It was established by a special Commission created in July 1987 when the Conference of Franciscan Generals, which groups the various branches or families within the Order, passed the following resolution: "The Franciscan Ministers General consider useful and opportune the establishment of a Franciscan Institute of Ecology at the university level. They therefore appoint a Commission to study the possible ways whereby it may be realized."

One of the driving forces behind the center's establishment was Father Bernard J Przewozny OFM Conv, a member of the Ecology Commission. For him, the creation of the center fulfills a long-cherished ambition to enable a clear and profound Christian voice to be heard in ecology.

"The aim of the center, which is to be housed in Rome and attached to the main Catholic university, is to develop a two-year university-level institute," said Father Bernard. "This would enable someone studying, say, biology or philosophy and who wished to work in an interdisciplinary way, to attend the institute and receive a degree in that subject and ecology. It is expected that it will take the center two years to reach the stage of becoming such an institution."

The center will also run study days, designed to help clergy and other students explore the theological, philosophical, ecumenical, anthropological and scientific aspects of Christian ecology. Father Bernard believes

strongly that Christianity has an important role to play in practical work, but equally importantly that Christian philosophy has truths within it which the secular world of conservation needs to hear. The current use of evolutionary data or the perception of human nature both fundamentally affect the understanding we have of reality, according to Father Bernard. The center cum institute will be seeking to address these issues as well as prepare students and clergy to play a role in the practical struggle for life on earth.

"Christian philosophy has truths within it which the secular world of conservation needs to hear."

In seeking to develop the institute, the Commission wrote to religious and environmental groups worldwide, asking for ideas and advice on what the institute should study and how it should do it. From these responses and in particular from the responses of the Franciscan families around the world, the Commission has felt able to launch the institute. The formal inauguration of the project will take place during a three-day congress in November where the goals of the institute will be agreed and the methods for implementing them discussed.

The institute's creation can be traced back to the nomination of St Francis as the patron saint of ecology on 29 November 1979 by Pope John Paul II. The love and respect which St Francis, founder of the Franciscan movement, showed all of God's creation has become a source of inspiration to people from many faiths and cultures. With the formal 1979 proclamation of St Francis as ecology's

patron saint, his role as the Church's ecological voice was confirmed. The Church and the Franciscan orders then had to find a way to make St Francis's voice heard in this century.

According to some theologians, the image of Francis has often been sentimentalized. From a figure of radical challenge, he has been made into a safe, cozy plaster saint. It was therefore a significant turning point that on the 800th anniversary of his birth, celebrated in 1982, the Franciscans joined with a wide range of environmentalist organizations including the Club of Rome, World Future Studies Federation and WWF-Italy to issue the Gubbio Declaration on humanity's moral and practical responsibility for the ever-deteriorating state of the environment (see *TNR Issue 4*). The Gubbio Declaration marked the Franciscans' first formal link with the newly emerging forces of environmental concern.

In 1986 the Franciscans again joined forces with the wider conservation world when they hosted the WWF International meetings which launched the network on conservation and religion. The network was established as a result of an interfaith gathering which included representatives from five of the world's major religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. The events, held in Assisi, Italy in September 1986 to celebrate WWF's 25th Anniversary (see *TNR Issue 1*), consisted of a pilgrimage, conference, interfaith ceremony and retreat.

The Franciscans not only provided the basic support and facilities which made the interfaith events possible, but also provided the Christian input in both the drafting of the Christian Assisi Declaration and representation to both the retreat and the ceremony. □