

Sacred Sites and Peace

A discussion between Thymio Papayannis and Allen Putney

0. Introduction

On the occasion of the World Parks Congress in Durban, the IUCN/WCPA Task Force on Non-Material Values decided to draft a Recommendation entitled 'Spiritual Values of Protected Areas'. A text of this Recommendation, prepared by Gonzalo Oviedo with contributions of many members of the Task Force, is already in a mature form, and is being widely circulated for comments, along with other recommendations.

On this occasion, Thymio Papayannis presented certain queries concerning the pertinence of sacred sites in the developed world (see section 1 below). The response by Allen Putney broadened the discussion on this interesting issue, incorporating the notion of peace (see section 2 below). Thymio Papayannis comments on this response (section 3) continue the discussion. It is hoped that other members of the Task Force will participate, so that a reasonable preparation can be made before the Durban Congress.

1. The contemporary pertinence of sacred sites

[Thymio Papayannis writing to Allen Putney and Gonzalo Oviedo on 11 July 2003]

'As a recent member of the Task Force, I have followed with great interest the discussion on the recommendation for the Durban Conference. The definitive text prepared by Gonzalo Oviedo is now a mature document that needs little further refinement.

There is an issue though that gives me some concern. The document correctly associates sacred sites with indigenous and traditional peoples. After all they -to a greater or lesser extent- maintain strong religious beliefs, usually directly or indirectly related to natural elements. That is why it is our responsibility to do everything in our power to contribute to the protection of these invaluable relationships.

What is the pertinence, however, of sacred sites for the rest of us? We live in a world, which is becoming more and more secular. Our traditional links with nature are being weakened, as more and more of us are moving from the rural areas to the urban centres. Even our sense of spiritual values seems to lose its force and direction.

And yet enough natural sites remain that are still considered as sacred. In Greece, for example, the first that comes to mind is the Mount Athos Peninsula, the 'Holy Mountain', the 'Garden of the Virgin Mary', with its 20 monasteries, which maintain a millennium tradition. But there is also the sacred island of Patmos with its famous monastery, and the Strofades Islet in the Ionian Sea belonging to the Orthodox Church, a critical stop for migrating birds (and unfortunately still a place of hunting carnage), and various lesser ones. Are such places pertinent to us?

Following the recent initiatives of the major religions on the environment (of which you are well aware), I was thinking that perhaps attempting to combine spiritual with natural values, and on that basis identify sacred sites in the developed world as well, may strengthen both the moral aspects of our societies and contribute to the conservation of nature. This could be in the years to come a fruitful area of concrete collaboration between religions and the environmental organisation, to which we are committed¹

2. Sacred sites as Peace Parks

[Allen Putney writing to Thymio Papayannis on 12 July 2003]

'I totally agree with your concern for modern society and its losses, both in terms of natural environments and spiritual values. At the same time I appreciate how very difficult it is to develop an ecumenical approach to the subject that will effectively involve the world's major religions.

My personal conclusion, but one that may not be shared by all members of the Task Force is that, as a group within the World Commission on Protected Areas, we must approach the subject from the standpoint of protected areas first and foremost, and this should be presented in ways that are inclusive and which unite. Thus, at the global level, I think we should avoid building our work around religions, indigenous groups, or community groups. On the other hand, at the local scale we will have to work with strategic partners to deal with specific cases. These partners may be a religious group or a specific indigenous or community group.

The other option, which I find attractive from the standpoint of the WCPA, is to deal more with a broadened concept of "Peace Parks". Instead of building efforts around "spiritual" values per se, the slight shift to "peace" values avoids the immediate connection with religions, indigenous or community groups. Thus a Peace Park working towards peace within the individual and harmony with the environment, peace among cultures and generations, peace between nations, and peace between society and the environment would achieve a considerable amount without immediately having to get into the questions of doctrines, belief systems or politics, which at a broad scale tend to divide rather than unite.

These are points, however, that need to be looked at by the membership of the Task Force in general, and I think it is very important that we do so. The Technical Sessions at the WPC provide a chance for this, but we must assure that time is allotted.

I agree with Gonzalo¹ that if you could develop a short paper, outlining your thoughts on this, and what they imply for the work of the Task Force, that it would help to guide my work on developing some very preliminary guidelines, and for the discussions at the Congress.'

¹ Gonzalo Oviedo wrote to Thymio Papayannis on 11 July 2003: 'I agree with your points and if appropriate we can still strengthen this in the recommendation. So I suggest you think of preparing a few words that may be incorporated in the next couple of weeks. But I am thinking that apart from this, it may be more important to take the issue to the preliminary guidelines that Allen is writing, so again thinking of specific ideas to be included would help.'

3. On sacredness and peace

[A reply by Thymio Papayannis to Allen Putney on 20 July 2003]

'It is perhaps significant that Peace Parks have been associated with South Africa (in which the World Parks Congress will be held). Indeed the Peace Parks Foundation was established there by Anton Rupert, Nelson Mandela and other personalities. Its aims were to encourage turning transboundary zones previously involved in armed conflict into jointly protected areas, thus serving the double goal of nature protection and strengthening peace. The concept has been quite successful and a number of Peace Parks have been established in Africa and elsewhere.

Thus the notion of peace in relation to protected areas evoked by Allen Putney seems an appropriate one. Obviously there can be no protection of a sensitive area, nor sustainable use of its resources, in an environment of lawlessness, conflict or outright war. In fact, Allen Putney extends the notion of peace to cover the harmonious relation between people, generations, cultures and sectors, making it even more attractive in relation to protected areas. One could even consider the notion of peace between species, particularly *homo sapiens* versus all other species².

Is there, however, any relationship between peace and sacredness? Of course, various religions speak about 'peace on earth', but in a rather metaphysical context. In their practice, however, peace has not always been evident, as demonstrated by the Crusades (and the sacking of Constantinople in 1204), while 'jihad' is not an unknown concept. In fact religious conflicts have been at the root or at the periphery of various armed conflicts in human history.

If we look at it from a different perspective, the sacredness of a site is related to a particular culture and to a specific people or group and cannot have a universal value, except at the level of distant respect. Is it equally related to a specific religion? If it is, which seems to be the rule in most cases, joining forces with the churches that represent this religion (as well as with other social groups) in protecting the sacred site may be a wise decision to be taken without undue trepidation. In fact Allen seems to propose just this kind of collaboration at the local level.

But what happens at the broader level? I am afraid that if we look at sacred sites from the peace perspective -an essentially secular concept-, we may end up by losing their sacredness. That is why I would argue that we should not be afraid to work with religions, churches and faiths, as long as there are people who believe in them and who consider their teaching significant to their lives. After all, the protection of naturally and culturally sensitive areas depends on people; and we must use whatever means are available to reach them.

In this context, perhaps we should distinguish religions or faiths or beliefs from churches, which can be considered as organisational structures. Sometimes they constitute wealthy organisations that manage their resources, especially sensitive land properties, not always in a sustainable manner³.

² This brings to mind the sobering data presented by WWF international concerning the extermination of cetaceans in all oceans, with rates of 'around 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises killed every year after becoming entangled in fishing gear' (WWF Bulletin, 10-15 June 2003).

³ The Orthodox Church of Cyprus for example has been frequently accused for acting as a major land developer.

Now that quite a few of the major churches appear to discover the importance of environmental problems and to reawaken to the sanctity of Nature (the 'Creation')⁴, it seems to me that they can become sound allies in our efforts.

And allies we need! More and more areas are being declared as 'protected' under various national legal frameworks and international conventions⁵. But the human, technical and financial resources available for their integrated management and effective conservation are meagre. Thus the assistance of the churches focussing on sacred sites can be invaluable. In addition, the churches may provide or strengthen the links of reverence and delight between people and the sacred sites, thus effectively contributing to their conservation.

Working with religions and the churches should not be considered as divisive. Firstly, because they do have common points, especially in relation to the Creation. But also because of the high degree of specificity in the sacredness of sites.

Finally, such collaboration may contribute to the enrichment of the non-material values of protected areas, leading to a more holistic and equitable approach to nature conservation and natural resource use.'

⁴ For example, see the Common Declaration on Nature and the Environment signed by TAH Pope John Paul II and The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in Venice on 10 June 2002.

⁵ A case that comes to mind is the success of the WWF Living Waters Programme in encouraging the designation of new Ramsar sites of millions of hectares all over Africa; but how to manage and conserve them remains to be seen.