Engaging Religion in the Fight for Environmental Justice: Jesuits and Conservation in the Palni Hills of South India

Joseph Satish Vedanayagam

Summary

Environmental activists often hesitate to link ideas on religion and ecology to ideas on environmental justice, because religion is often identified with enviro-skepticism. But acknowledging religious motivations can help shape environmentalism within the religious worldviews that operate in a majority of the global population. This article looks at how one Indian Jesuit botanist—Father K. M. Mathew—embraced the twin dimensions of faith-based justice and eco-centric spirituality of the Jesuits and pioneered research in botany and environmental conservation in 1970s South India. This article illustrates how religious worldviews can further the cause of environmental justice in a secularized world.

In 1967, Lynn White famously located the roots of the ecological crisis in Western Christianity. Interestingly, White argued that since the roots are religious, the remedy must also be religious. He suggested an alternate Christian worldview based on an idea inspired by the thirteenth-century Catholic mystic, Francis of Assisi—that all creatures are equal. Almost fifty years later, the first pope from the global South chose the name Francis, inspired by the same mystic. Pope Francis has been acclaimed as the most powerful ally of the environmental justice movement, thanks to his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*.

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Jan Siberechts, *Heilige Franciscus van Assisi predikt voor de dieren* [Saint Francis preaching to the animals], 1666. Oil on canvas, 235.7 x 312.7 cm.

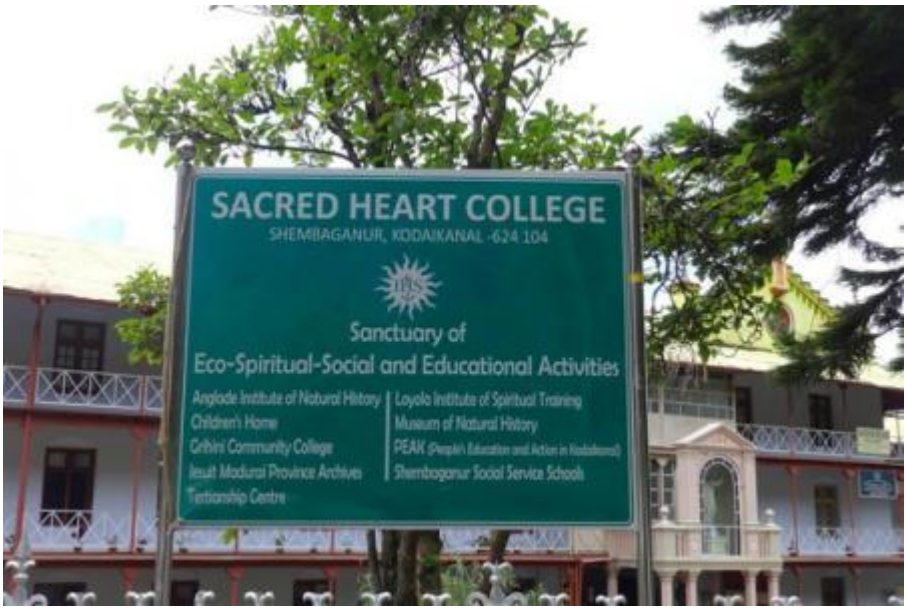
Painting by Jan Siberechts, 1666.
Held by Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.
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The strand of "religious environmentalism" advocated by Pope Francis is not surprising: he belongs to a Catholic order (the Jesuits) whose founder was a nature lover himself—Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). In his *Spiritual Exercises*, considered the foundational document for Jesuit spiritual training, Ignatius asks the Jesuit trainee to consider how God dwells in creatures, elements, plants, animals, and human beings. This tradition of contemplating how God dwells in all earthly beings has informed the global Jesuit mission, including in India.

In 1972, the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm highlighted the growing conflict between environmental conservation and economic development in the "developing" world. In 1975, the Jesuits renewed their global mission to be "the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. For reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another" (Society of Jesus 1975). This renewed mission, along with the Jesuits' eco-centric spirituality took the shape of 'socio-environmental justice' in the Jesuits' missionary practice in South India.

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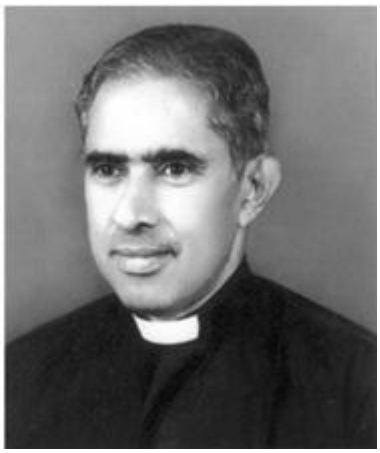


Board at Sacred Heart College listing the various institutions.

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The Palni Hills are located in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In 1895, the French Jesuits established the Sacred Heart College at Shembaganur, situated amidst the Palni Hills, to train Jesuit novices. Influenced by the scientifically minded European Jesuits, the novices were also trained in the natural sciences. One young novice, K. M. Matthew (1930–2004), acquired his doctorate in plant taxonomy of the Palni hills, even before he was ordained a priest in 1965. In 1967, Father Matthew established the Rapinat Herbarium, a center specializing in systematic botany and conservation research. Over the next few decades, Matthew pioneered environmental research and conservation efforts across the Palni Hills.



Fr. K. M. Matthew (1930–2004).

Courtesy of the Rapinat Herbarium. Click here to view source.

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The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) released the first Report on the State of India's Environment in 1982, which argued that environmental conservation must go hand in hand with economic development. CSE's report followed the 1980 publication of World Conservation Strategy (WCS), the first major international report to prioritize conservation as a public policy issue. Meanwhile, the Palni Hills gained popularity as a tourist destination in the 1980s, with disastrous effects on its ecology. Concerned citizens, keen to restore the pristine habitats of the Hills, founded the Palni Hills Conservation Council (PHCC) in 1985, with Matthew as its Founder-Vice President. He also established the Anglade Institute of Natural History in 1984 to expand the conservation efforts in the hills. Supported by the Government of India, Matthew launched a residential training program in environmental conservation and sustainable development. The program drew from the CSE and WCS reports, but he adapted it to the needs of the local people and regional ecology. Even after Matthew's demise in 2004, the program continues to be in vogue and has since been adapted to different audiences—students, teachers, government officials, village leaders, and women—and trained almost a million people till date.



Training in progress at Anglade Institute.

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Palni Hills Review Map.

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Scholars have often hesitated to link the literature on religion and ecology to the literature on environmental conservation because religion is often identified with enviro-skepticism. It is true that many climate change deniers are influenced by Christian worldviews. But to insist on a radical, secular worldview is refusing to engage with vast religiously inclined populations. Encouragingly, institutions like the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale seek to understand both the problems and the promises of religion in responding to environmental crises. As Handley (2016) suggests, acknowledging religious motivations can help shape environmentalism within the religious worldviews that operate in a majority of the global population. For example, Kent (2013) has explored how the sacred groves of Tamil Nadu do not just embed the beliefs of the local people but also articulate the pragmatic needs for socio-environmental justice. Likewise, the social history of the *kulam* (water tanks in Hindu temples) in Tamil Nadu indicate the environmental role fulfilled by a place of worship—protection of groundwater resources.

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Fr. Matthew's redefinition of the Jesuit mission as one that reconciles humanity with creation is noteworthy for the advocacy of environmental justice. His pioneering efforts in preserving the ecological diversity of the Palni Hills offers an example of religious environmentalism. Significantly, the Jesuits also note that human rights include "rights such as development, peace and a healthy environment" and recommend alternative development models which "integrate cultural, environmental, and social justice values in their functioning" (Czerny 1999). The cause of environmental justice stands to gain from eco-theological ideas espoused by religious communities like the Jesuits. As White argued, these religious ideas can help in identifying a multi-pronged remedy for our current ecological crisis.

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Further readings:

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Websites linked in image captions:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Siberechts_-_Saint_Francis_Preaching_to_the_Animals.jpg
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Joseph Satish Vedanayagam is a PhD researcher in Science, Technology & Society Studies (STS) at the Centre for Knowledge, Culture and Innovation Studies (CKCIS), University of Hyderabad, India. His research focuses on the role of spirituality in the scientific practice of Jesuit priest-scientists in India, and his writings have appeared in *The Hindu – Survey on Indian Agriculture* (2012), *Femmes savantes, femmes de science* (2014) and *Social Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Business Models: The Case of India* (2018). Joseph Satish is on the editorial board of *Intersect: The Stanford Journal of Science, Technology, and Society*.