

Windsor Celebration of Faiths and the Environment, November 2-4

Speech by His Royal Highness The Prince Philip Windsor Castle, Tuesday November 3

Well, ladies and gentlemen it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to Windsor Castle, and I am sure that you will all join me in a special welcome to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and I know that everyone here is very encouraged by his presence at this celebration of 'Many Heavens One Earth'.

Now before we get down to the business of this meeting, I just thought you might like to know something about the origins of the ARC, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. In 1981 I was invited to become President of the World Wildlife Fund, or the Worldwide Fund for Nature as it is now.

Now one of the main aims that WWF was to get the message across to the public that the natural environment, and all the wild plants and animals that depend upon it, was being seriously damaged by human activities. It then struck me that, since many of the major faiths believed in the special creation of the world, they ought to have a special concern for its health and vitality. It also occurred to me that the faiths could reach communities which WWF could never hope to influence.

And as WWF approached its 25th anniversary in 1985 the board spent a lot of time discussing the idea of having a special celebration of the event. Well, my suggestion was to hold our annual conference in that year at Assisi. Not everyone saw the connection until I mentioned St Francis and the birds, and I'm afraid it was taken as a bit of a joke.

However, the board could not agree on any other suggestions, so the decision was postponed. The point came up again at the next board meeting, and I mentioned Assisi again. Again the discussion came to nothing, so I repeated the suggestion at the next meeting. This time the response was a resigned 'oh alright'.

Now once the decision was made, someone suggested that we should ask the head of the Franciscan Order in Assisi whether he would be prepared to invite leaders of the five major faiths to a meeting to coincide with the WWF annual conference. The idea was that they should discuss amongst themselves their attitude towards the natural world, or, what is for some of them God's creation. I was particularly concerned that this should not be seen as an attempt to arrive at some kind of ecumenical consensus. It seemed to me that each community should respond in its own way and in tune with its own traditional attitude to the natural world.

In the end the idea was accepted, the whole celebration was a great success, largely thanks to Martin Palmer here who was the impresario of the occasion. And then I thought that was the end of that. However. I was then invited to attend a press conference with the religious leaders to talk about their discussions.

Well, in the end everyone agreed that it had been a success, and inevitably of course, someone proposed setting up a new body. And I was dead against this as I feared that it would just become another bureaucracy, cost a lot of money, and I did not think that WWF should get side tracked into such a project.

The result was that it was decided to form a loose association of the religious bodies to be described as the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, or ARC. With WWF acting as its specialist consultant. Well, the ARC went on to attract most of the World's faith communities, and it organised a series of conferences to give them the opportunity to discuss the issues among themselves, and for each of them to announce their responses.

This meeting today sees the culmination of the work of ARC. And as you will hear, all the major faiths have responded magnificently to the challenge, and today they will announce their plans for the care and protection of those parts of the natural environment for which they have a special responsibility.

And I now invite each faith to come forward to receive certificates from the Secretary General, and from the ARC, which will recognise and endorse their plans for the future, so if I could ask the Secretary General to come up and join us on this platform.

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