John Dillon *is Emeritus Professor of Greek at Trinity College Dublin and a member of the Board of Green Foundation Ireland. He is a member of the Royal Irish Academy, and of the Academy of Athens. After graduating in Classics from Oxford, in 1969 following a PhD in Greek philosophy from the University of California at Berkeley, he joined the Department of Classics there, serving as chair of the department from 1977-80. He then returned to Ireland to assume the position of Regius Professor of Greek in Trinity College Dublin, a post in which he remained until his retirement in 2006.*

Elected to the Royal Irish Academy in 1983, John served as Senior Vice-President 2001-2, and in 2005 was awarded the Academy's Gold Medal in the Humanities. In 1997 he founded the Dublin Centre for the Study of the Platonic Tradition, based in Trinity College Dublin, of which he is still an active member. He is the author or editor of over 30 books in the area of ancient philosophy, and over 150 articles.

John has been part of the Green movement and a member of the Green Party for some considerable time, as the study of Plato has led him to develop strong views on the destruction of the environment and the concept of incremental endemic to modern civilisation.

How would you define religion? Is it useful to regard religion as a philosophy of life, a discipline? In antiquity did people regard Christianity as another school of philosophy?
Well the ancient world did not quite know what to make of Christianity; it was a cult, it was a sort of virus that spread. People did try to identify it as a philosophy and Christian intellectuals like Origen followed the philosophy of Christ. But when they began to look at it more closely, such figures as Celsus and Porphyry realised that the great difference was that the Christians believed on the basis of authority and not rational considerations, and that became a considerable occasion of criticism – the threat to rationality.

The philosophers of the Academy, for example, accepted the authority of Plato, and did not want to contradict Plato, but felt that they were proceeding on the basis of rational argument and not revelation, and that is when they realised they were faced with a new phenomenon.

Ancient religion was primarily a matter of the observance of ritual and tradition, respecting oaths, rules of hospitality etc. and performing the prescribed sacrifices, but it was not a set of beliefs. You were not expected to believe the stories about the Gods; you were expected to adhere to the traditional festivals, and honour the Gods of the place, great and small, at particular time**s** of the year. If the festivals were neglected the Gods would go away, which is why when the Christians appeared they were regarded, paradoxically, as atheists. The philosopher Proclus, for example, referred to Christianity as 'the present atheism', because the Christians did not respect the Gods and they did not approve of the festivals and sacrifices.

So when the ancient world began to look at Christianity they saw a difficulty. There was some attempt to make it a philosophy by such a thinker as Origen, but he got condemned for heresy. However, in due course, Christianity became adept at incorporating the doctrines of Hellenism, including Platonism and Stoicism. My brother Peter, who is a Benedictine monk, regards that as a malign influence on Christianity – Platonism I mean – and he has a point. Certain world-denying aspects of Platonism were adopted by the Church, which is infused by the philosophy that the point is to purify your soul and get it out of the body, leaving the material world behind as a sort of rubbish heap.

Your immersion in Platonic philosophy has inspired you to join the Green movement and to try to combat the environmental destruction which you see as the greatest threat in our time. Do you think therefore that philosophy and indeed religion can be an inspiration for the Green movement, and that it should reach out more to these communities for help in facing this crisis?

At the root of the current environmental crisis is the detritus of a culture expanding out of control. Antiquity has no such concept as progress – that is to say, *material* 'progress', in the sense of endless, linear growth of goods and services. There prevailed a cyclical view of change, and the life of the physical world was seen as a temporal projection of the eternal life of **a** higher intelligible world where there was no question of change or development.

In Book II of The Republic, where Plato is engaged in a schematic account of the genesis of the state, he contrasts early states in which small communities are living in complete harmony with their environments – to a more advanced stage, which he terms the 'pampered' or 'luxury loving' state – or, more pointedly, the 'fevered' state. This is, of course, the situation in which all existing societies find themselves, and it comes about, he proposes (II 372Eff), as a result of the incessant desire to add luxuries to the necessities of life.

Is this not, though written in the middle of the fourth century BC, depressingly relevant to our present situation? If there any solution to this problem it has to be along the lines sketched out by Plato in his Laws. It lays down the principle of a 'steady-state' economy, of balance with the environment. Moreover they must be characterised by justice.

Can we achieve a just society and a steady state economy without a philosophy of life, a way to live well on the planet that has finite resources?

Our ecological crisis shows us we are not living well, and how we are to live well is a Socratic question. The challenge of the young is a reaction to an unsatisfactory way of life, a life that prioritises consumption. We are facing a crisis of values, and it seems to me that one great problem that we in the West are facing is a progressive breakdown in the legitimation of authority. By that I mean an ever-increasing unwillingness on the part of citizens to accept the credentials of any authority, religious or secular, to prescribe what they shall do or not do; and this goes together with an avid enthusiasm for criticising the public and private conduct of those in public life, and for ascribing the worst possible motives to their actions. Now of course one might say that in all too many cases, such an attitude is not unjustified, and that a healthy disrespect for the great and good is the hallmark of an advanced and educated democracy. I would just like to enter a plea for the proposition that this sort of thing can go too far, and lead inevitably to disregard of one's duties as a citizen, a toleration

of anti-social behaviour, and an unwillingness to make use of one's franchise. It should be clear that no society can flourish very long when such attitudes prevail.

The question is what can be done about it? It is here, I think, that Plato can be of some help. It is his basic claim, in the area of political theory, that ruling is an art (*tekhnê*) or science (*epistêmê*), which must be acquired by a long and arduous process of self-discipline and study – and that to be a good citizen a process of self- knowledge and moral training is necessary. The principle which was basic to Plato's political philosophy, and which he inherited from Socrates (it features in the *Apology,* which is Socrates' speech from the dock, as well as in the *Laws*): the principle that any well-run state requires, is the *educated assent* of all the citizens, and this in turn requires that they undergo a moral and intellectual training.

Every citizen of the state is assumed to have been subjected to the same comprehensive education – which, while covering the basic skills is primarily concerned with instilling right attitudes – young people are to learn, from their earliest years, to value the right things. Now we in the western world are, pretty uncomfortable these days about the inculcation of 'values' into the young – the whole process smacks of authoritarianism of one sort or another, religious or secular – and yet we do, I think, often wish that they had some values. Our position, I would argue, is in fact deeply incoherent. The basic premise of Plato's political philosophy that I feel we have something to learn from, is that it is the right and duty of a state, not only to provide a life for its citizens, but a good life, in the sense of a purposeful life. And since states cannot do their own providing, being abstract entities, this has to translate into a consensus, however arrived at, of the citizens.

The older generation has a duty to see to it that the young are educated to live well. We have not done so because we have experienced a failure of nerve. That was the atmosphere in the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s**,** when I was teaching there. The older generation lost their nerve completely and questioned that they had any right to tell the young how to live. They were the post-war generation, who had worked hard to provide their children with the good life, and their children found that was a life lacking in morality and purpose. There may also have been a sort of feeling that western culture had generated two massively destructive World Wars in a generation , and that a philosophy of acquisitiveness and aggrandizement (such as Plato criticises in *Republic,* Book II) might have had something to do with it.

We need some way of directing the idealism of the young towards countering environmental destruction and for humanitarian purposes. We need a practical way of channelling the energy of youth towards a purposeful activity that they can understand the value of. The kind of thing I have in mind is similar to the creation of a European Peace Corps dedicated to environmental and humanitarian works which the European Greens were some years ago advocating.

We need to recover our nerve. People need a sense of value and purpose, and this is a great problem for Europe in the face of radical Islam. We need to recover our values if youthful idealism is not to be lured by destructive alternatives. Unless Europe can recover a sense of how to live a good and purposeful life, and not simply a life of materialism and consumption,

young people will continue to be seduced by extremism and fundamentalism. Here I think the Green movement offers a positive and transformative example.

What is the place of Islam in Europe?
I have been recently browsing extensively in the Qur'an, and have come to see that, despite a good deal of polemic, Mohammed's revelation is deeply rooted in both Jewish and Christian thought. Islam is traditionally much more tolerant of Judaism and Christianity than they have been of it. It sees itself, after all, as the culmination of a series of revelations which were made in earlier times to Abraham, to Moses, and to Jesus, and it incorporates much of what they had to say in its sacred text. The chief scandal and absurdity, from their point of view, is the claim by later Christians (though, they feel, not by Jesus himself) that he was, in some physical way, the son of God – and I must confess I find myself very much in agreement with them on that point.

Islam regards Abraham as the father of us all and Moses and Jesus are respected prophets. Mohammed actually accepted the virgin birth, as emerges in the third Surah of the Qur'an, but for Islam that does not imply that the son thus produced was God – just a very special person, of a prophetic nature. The Eastern Orthodox theology of Christ is actually much more enlightened, I think, than that of the Latin Church. They see the incarnation allegorically: it is a symbol of God validating the world, dignifying the world by divinising it; they don't dwell on the physical process, and it is symbolic. Islam does not accept the Resurrection, and nor, I think, did many early Christians. The doctrine of the Trinity only arises after a century or more of conflict about the relationship between the Father and the Son – has he two natures or one, for example – and this all arises from assimilating the historical figure of Jesus to something like the Platonist 'demiurge', or secondary, creative god.

Above all, though, the Abrahamic faiths must, I think, divest themselves finally of the concern that the whole human race should come to believe exactly what we believe – Christians and Muslims are particularly guilty of this dangerous obsession – we must also learn to allegorise our beliefs, rather than rejecting them outright in a fit of misplaced rationality – and come to see our particular ceremonies and myths as embodying hidden symbolic representations of a higher truth, all of them ultimately reconcilable with one another.