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## SUSTAINABILITY AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

**SUMMARY:** In the wake of the promulgation of *Laudato si'* (LS), Pope Francis' 2015 landmark encyclical on our relationship with the natural world, there has been a renewed interest in the role religions and Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) can play in fostering sustainability, as well as in the possibilities and limits of interreligious dialogue related to one of the central objectives of our time: the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) defined in the UN Agenda 2030 and the Paris Climate Accord. This article claims that a growing interreligious discursive convergence on ecology has its roots in the acknowledgment of a set of ecological meta-problems, rather than in a common, single meta-narrative. The emergence of distinctive inter-denominational and inter-religious discourses is increasingly shaping a shared, pluralistic narrative grounded in social justice, care for creation and intergenerational solidarity. Moreover, religions and FBOs are already bringing an integral, holistic perspective to the socio-environmental debate, filling in an interstitial place in the sustainability arena, while performing four key functions: bridging, binding, deepening and sustaining. The medium and long-term impact of the recent interreligious discursive convergence in catalyzing action and bringing behavioral change on ecological matters still lacks, however, a robust, evidence-based analysis.

### *Introduction*

This article explores how religions are shaping the contemporary environmental debate and the role, if any, of interreligious dialogue and action within it. The topic is undoubtedly complex and wide-ranging. In postmodern thought the three realities under scrutiny – namely religion, interreligious dialogue and the possibility of an environmental “meta-narrative” (the discourses and world views that shape and are shaped by how we see ourselves in relation to the natural environment) – are contested, which makes an analysis of their mutual relationships even more complicated and controversial. Yet, it is necessary to sketch these relationships, because religions, contrary to some premature forecasts, have not only survived the successive

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secularization waves of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries but have thrived and become increasingly prominent and active in environmental movements<sup>1</sup>.

In an oft-quoted article from 1973, Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess claimed that modern environmentalism focused too much on “shallow” technocratic discourses centered upon singular issues such as pollution and resource depletion, underestimating the importance of “deep” philosophical and cultural insights<sup>2</sup>. His landmark article set in motion the Deep Ecology Movement, which indirectly facilitated the entrance of humanistic and spiritual contributions into the environmental debate of the 1970s. Yet Naess was neither the first nor the last theorist to directly question an exclusively scientific approach to ecological matters while encouraging holistic visions that could take into account philosophy and the social sciences.

Six years earlier, in 1967, American historian Lynn White’s highly influential article in the journal *Science*, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, had also recognized the need for a comprehensive vision of the environment capable of embracing spiritual insights. Through the framing of the human relationship with the natural world as a relationship of dominion and control, religions – Abrahamic traditions in particular with their command to subdue the earth – had been, in his opinion, a major driver of ecological degradation. However, White argued that religious traditions could still come to the rescue and make a valuable contribution: “More science and technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one”<sup>3</sup>.

Some twenty-five years following the publication of White’s article, similar sentiments regarding the place of religion were prevalent in the run-up to the historical 1992 United Nations Earth Summit. Rockefeller and Elder commented in one of the first comprehensive books on religion and ecology *Spirit and Nature* that “The global environmental crisis, which threatens not only the future of human civilization but all life on earth, is fundamentally a moral and religious problem”<sup>4</sup>.

Amidst growing awareness and evidence of existing and looming global and local environmental threats, this sentiment continues today. However, although new religions have not emerged, spiritual leaders have come to the forefront of the debate, engaging scientists, policymakers, activists and their own constituencies while calling for dialogue and meaningful action to reverse the most dangerous dynamics set in motion by the *Anthropocene* (Earth’s most recent, human-dominated geological epoch)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. P. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Washington D.C. 1999; Pew Research Center, “The Global Religious Landscape” (published on-line on December 12, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. A. Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A summary”, *Inquiry* 16/1 (1973) 95-100.

<sup>3</sup> L. White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science* 155 (1967) 1203-1207.

<sup>4</sup> S.C. Rockefeller – J.C. Elder (ed.), *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue*, Beacon Press, Boston 1992, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. P. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind”, *Nature* 415 (2002) 23.

Furthermore, religious leaders are not only talking to many different key social actors and their own followers, they are talking to each other and encouraging believers to do so as well.

Subsequently, religions are actively shaping contemporary environmental movements and increasingly being shaped by environmental discourse; one that, despite its secular appearances, has, as German environmental historian Joachim Radkau has argued, deep spiritual roots<sup>6</sup>. This could very well signal the religious rethinking White advocated in 1967 – one capable of pouring the new wine of ecological awareness into the old wineskins of religious worldview while bringing interreligious dialogue and action to a new level.

The following article aims to:

1. Offer an overview of the interreligious character of LS;
2. Outline the main reasons why dialogue, cooperation and action among and within religions are not just means but ends in themselves in the quest for sustainability;
3. Show how the growing awareness of facing pressing and complex socio-environmental “meta-problems” led to the emergence of a distinctively inter-denominational shared narrative that crystalized in the run-up to the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP23) and the formulation of the SDGs both taking place in 2015;
4. Finally, provide an outline of suggested ways forward to leverage the bridging, binding, deepening and sustaining potential of religions and FBOs to transform cultures, foster dialogue and catalyze action across diverse communities.

#### *Interreligious dialogue, Laudato si’, and the Kairos year of 2015*

Pope Francis is neither the first nor the only spiritual leader to address the environmental challenges of our time in religious terms<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, 2015 – the year of LS, the Paris Agreement, and the SDGs – was neither the first time in history that a high-level religious leader denounced the degradation of the environment and its dire social effects in secular venues. There is, in fact, a long history of ecumenical declarations and joint symbolic actions organized by Christian churches and other religious groups<sup>8</sup>. Never before, however, has there been a truly interreligious discursive convergence: the window of opportunity opened by the climate negotiations at the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC in Paris in late 2015 (COP21) has facilitated this, as has the debate leading up to the formulation of the SDGs.

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. J. Radkau, *The Age of Ecology*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2014, 182-201; E. Berry, *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Other religious and spiritual figures have spoken on the issue, including Bartholomew, the Orthodox leader sometimes called the “green patriarch”. Others, from the Dalai Lama to Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu, have also spoke eloquently on environmental concerns.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance: D. Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth: Catholic Social Teaching*, Orbis, New York 2012.

A triple confluence of events – the *Kairos* moment of 2015, the charismatic personality of Francis and the global clout of the Roman Catholic Church – made LS one of the most influential encyclicals in the history of Catholic Social Teaching, both within and outside Christian milieus. In secular circles, for example, this encyclical has been described as ‘a rock in this pond, not a pebble’<sup>9</sup>. LS stands as one of the most influential documents of recent times, with many commentators comparing it to the likes of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, E.F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful*, and Meadows’ *Limits to Growth*<sup>10</sup>. Although a formal part of Catholic Social Teaching, the encyclical aims to be inclusive – to go beyond the 1.2 billion followers of the Catholic Church, to speak to a universal audience, to generate “a conversation which includes everyone” (LS, §14).

A fourth element also has to be taken into account in order to understand its global impact: its distinctive interreligious character. LS is designed as a document oriented towards ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and action. The reference to Patriarch Bartholomew I (LS, §8-9) in the prologue and the “prayer for our earth” (LS, §246) at the conclusion form a great inclusion making ecumenical and interreligious dialogue a structural element of the document.

In tune with the spirit of Vatican II’s *Nostra aetate* (NA)<sup>11</sup>, the ecumenical character of Christian environmentalism, and the pastoral plan laid out by Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* (EG)<sup>12</sup> LS unfolds as an inter-denominational project in which “the Catholic Church joins her own commitment to that made in the social field by other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, whether at the level of doctrinal reflection or at the practical level”<sup>13</sup> This is a commitment that builds upon the dialogue initiated by Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI with Bartholomew I but aims to embrace all religions.

Although the references to Judaism (LS, §15, 67, 76, 78, 237), Islam (LS, §233) and indigenous spirituality (LS, §146, 179) stand in sharp contrast with the silence of the great Eastern religions<sup>14</sup>, Francis implicitly considers all spiritual traditions, making interreligious dialogue and action a key element in the configuration of LS: “given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/08/13/pope-and-planet/>

<sup>10</sup> G. Ceballos, “Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’*, Global Environmental Risks, and the Future of Humanity”, *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 91 (2016) 285-295.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_sp.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_sp.html)

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 244-258.

<sup>13</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (CSDC), 12. Cfr. EG 183.

<sup>14</sup> In Pedro Castelao’s view, this omission is intentional and due to two main theological reasons: the infinite distance between God and the non-divine in Christianity, and the personal and paternal character of the creative God. Yet, Francis implicitly includes all religions and spiritualities, confident of the contributions that all traditions can make (LS, §146, 179, 199-201, 222): cfr. P. Castelao, “La ‘cuestión ecológica’ y la teología de la creación”, in E. Sanz Giménez-Rico, *Cuidar de la Tierra, cuidar de los pobres: Laudato si’ desde la teología y con la ciencia*, Santander 2015, 67-85.

solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality”, this is why “no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion” (LS, §64).

Religions matter to our contemporary world, and they also matter to the ecological debate. Yet the relationship works both ways. The world and the environment matter to all religions because it is the context where human life and religious experience takes place. Quoting the Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, religious scholar Paul Knitter comments that, for most religions “there is no salvation outside the world”<sup>15</sup>, since, quoting from LS, all believers “realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith” (LS, §64).

A clear sign of this realization and of the growing importance that ecological challenges presented to all religions is the number of declarations issued in 2015, before and after the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP21) in Paris, and in the formulation process of Agenda 2030 in New York. These two events catalyzed an interreligious dialogue, a coordinated advocacy campaign – centered mainly on climate change – and a remarkable discursive convergence<sup>16</sup>. Paraphrasing the Conciliar Fathers, people of faith, by means of ecological concern, are “being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger” (NA, §1).

Dialogue, cooperation, and action, thus, become not only a way of proceeding among religious leaders and faith communities but ends in themselves in order to tackle environmental challenges. The term *dialogue* in particular – repeated twenty-five times in LS – is the key word in the action-oriented final section, “Lines of Approach and Action” (LS, §163-201), conveying a five-layered conversation on where change needs to happen in order to bring about the ecological conversion Pope Francis sees as fundamental to improving our relationship with our common home. These five points of dialogue must take place within the international community, in national and local policies, in decision-making, in politics and economy, and between religion and science.

Throughout history, spiritual awakenings have gone hand in hand with some of the greatest leaps forward in human development and social transformation. Mahatma Gandhi and the peaceful struggle for Indian independence, Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement or the religiously inspired anti-Apartheid mobilization in

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. P.F. Knitter, “Deep Ecumenicity versus Incommensurability: Finding Common Ground on a Common Earth”, in D.T. Hessel – R. Radford-Ruether, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans*, Cambridge 2000, 374.

<sup>16</sup> There are, however, very few evidence-based studies of interreligious collaborative efforts. The paradigm of *collaborative governance* as a means of addressing environmental problems is a dominant one in the literature. Analysis of this paradigm and a deeper understanding of if, when, and how collaboration is effective has been developed by Ö. Bodin, “Collaborative environmental governance: Achieving collective action in social-ecological systems”, *Science* 357 (2017), doi: 10.1126/science.aan1114.

South Africa are some of the best-known examples from the 20th century. Will religions once again play a crucial, catalytic role in fostering dialogue and bringing forward the vision laid out in the Agenda 2030 and, if so, how? The comparative analysis of some of the 2015 high-level religious statements will help clarify the answer to this question.

*From meta-problems to analogous discourses and actions*

From the outset, LS recalls Saint John XXIII's historic encyclical *Pacem in terris* and the pope's desire to address his message not only to believers, but to "all men and women of good will" and to "enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (LS, §3). Just as John XXIII's deep concern and call to dialogue was motivated by the looming threat of nuclear obliteration in the 1960s, Francis' sense of urgency springs from a reading of the signs of the times, namely, the grim realization that humankind is on the brink of transgressing the planetary limits described by the scientific community (LS, §20-42). Pressing problems and novel moral challenges, not just great ideals or broad ethical principles, are the main reasons behind the promulgation of the first environmental encyclical in Catholic history and similar statements by other spiritual leaders.

Francis believes that sincere dialogue and collective deliberation are the best ways to tackle the challenges we are facing: "I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all" (LS, §14). The clear awareness of two deeply intertwined meta-problems, "one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (LS, §139), makes urgent a dialogue that promotes cooperation and action and, indirectly, facilitates the emergence of a shared religious discourse. The aim of dialogue, however, is practice-oriented and does not seek to produce a single, unified meta-narrative; instead, it aims for transformative action through the process of dialogue and its proposed objectives.

Given the urgency of the socio-environmental challenges we face, any dialogue should be looking for answers and practical decisions: "This makes a variety of proposals possible, all capable of entering into dialogue with a view to developing comprehensive solutions" (LS, §60). Or, as Willis Jenkins puts it, "the most important tasks for a global sustainability ethic lie in summoning agents into projects that cross alienating boundaries and in cultivating the shared commitments that can emerge". Jenkins argues that "the idea of sustainability [...] probably cannot function as a universal norm or shared worldview, but it can facilitate pluralist deliberation over responses to planetary problems"<sup>17</sup>. Compelling ethical ideas, scientific innovations and technological leapfrogs – vital as they are in providing a clear vision, identifying

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

leverage points and finding practical solutions – will not, just on their own, catalyze the necessary social transformations<sup>18</sup>.

Environmental degradation is making clear to most spiritual leaders and to an increasing number of faithful believers the need to undergo societal transformation, reinvigorate the concept of the common good and engage in creation-care to preserve our *common home* for current and future generations. The complexity and wide-ranging implications of contemporary socio-ecological challenges (or SDGs in development parlance) demands deep behavioral transformation. As David W. Orr, a pioneer in environmental education puts it: “what is at stake now – the death of the ecological conditions that permitted humankind to flourish – calls for a higher level of honesty, directness, and spiritual wisdom sufficient to shift the perceptions, loyalties, and behavior of an entire nation”<sup>19</sup>.

The new eco-scene is also blurring and redefining the boundaries between *us* and *them* – in both religious and academic terms – engaging many in transformative, ecumenical and inter-disciplinary projects. This is evident, for example, in the emergence of popular advocacy movements such as the Global Catholic Climate Movement, the role and prevalence of FBOs in driving the global fossil fuel divestment campaign, and the favorable reception towards *Laudato Si’* among popular environmental activists, such as Bill McKibben<sup>20</sup> and Naomi Klein<sup>21</sup>.

Secular and religious actors can and must learn from each other. Erik Assadourian, senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute, affirms that “for the environmental movement to succeed it will have to learn from something it often ignores or even keeps its distance from—religion, and specifically missionary religions, which have proved incredibly successful in orienting how people interpret the world for millennia, effectively navigating across radically different eras and geographies”<sup>22</sup>.

An excellent example of an interreligious mobilization centered on an environmental threat, namely climate change, is the significant global religious reflection and lobbying that led to the Paris Climate Accord and the adoption of the Agenda 2030 (Cfr. Table 1). In a statement signed by 270 high-level faith leaders and 176 different groups (many of them FBOs) on the occasion of the UN Secretary General’s High-Level Signature Ceremony for the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the signatories concluded: “Climate change presents our global family with the opportunity to embark on a path of spiritual renewal defined by deeper awareness and greater ecological

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. LS, §14, 110, 139, 144.

<sup>19</sup> D.W. Orr, *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012, 133.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. B. McKibben, “The Pope and the Planet” (published on-line on August 13, 2015), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/08/13/pope-and-planet/>

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. N. Klein, “A Radical Vatican?” (published on-line on June 10, 2015), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-visit-to-the-vatican>

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. E. Assadourian, “Building and Enduring Environmental Movement”, in Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2013*, Island Press, Washington D.C. 2013, 297.

action. Every act to protect and care for all beings connects us to one another, deepening the spiritual dimension of our lives. We must reflect on the true nature of our interrelationship to the Earth”<sup>23</sup>.

Table 1. *Environmental Religious Declaration of 2015*

<i>A Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis</i> (11.5.2015)
<i>Lambeth Declaration on Climate Change</i> (17.5.2015)
<i>Laudato si'</i> (24.5.2015)
<i>Sommet des consciences sur le climat</i> , Paris (21.7.2015)
<i>Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change</i> (18.8.2015)
<i>Faith in the Future: The Bristol Commitments</i> (2015)
<i>Statement of Faith and Spiritual Leaders on the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP21</i> (20.10.2015)
<i>Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders</i> (29.10.2015)
<i>Bhumi Devi Ki Jai! A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change</i> (23.11.2015)

Whether compelled by “a *dharmic duty* for each of us to do our part in ensuring that we have a functioning, abundant, and bountiful planet” (Hindus)<sup>24</sup>, by “the Buddha’s realization of *dependent co-arising*, which interconnects all things in the universe” (Buddhist)<sup>25</sup>, or by “the deepest, most ancient insights of Torah about healing the relationships of Earth and human earthlings, *adamah* and *adam*” (Jewish)<sup>26</sup>, all religious representatives began their declarations acknowledging, listening to and showing great respect for what scientists had to say.

In a similar vein, the signatories of the historic 2015 Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change (IDGCC) not only took into account the recent scientific reports and acknowledged that, in order to prevent the worst effects of the climate crisis, “an urgent and radical reappraisal is called for;” they also called “on all groups to join us in collaboration, co-operation, and friendly competition in this endeavor, and we welcome the significant contributions taken by other faiths, as we can all be winners in this race”<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Interfaith Climate Change Statement to World Leaders (April 18, 2016), [www.interfaithstatement2016.org](http://www.interfaithstatement2016.org)

<sup>24</sup> *Bhumi Devi Ki Jai! A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change* (November 23, 2015), <http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english>

<sup>25</sup> *Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders* (October 29, 2015), <https://gbccc.org/buddhist-climate-change-statement-to-world-leaders-2015/>

<sup>26</sup> *A Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis* (May 11, 2015), <https://theshalomcenter.org/RabbinicLetterClimate>

<sup>27</sup> Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change, Istanbul (August 18, 2015), [http://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/climate\\_declarationmMWB.pdf](http://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/climate_declarationmMWB.pdf)

Though different in scope and extension, “it is clear that there are many things in common between the Declaration and the position of LS”<sup>28</sup>. In a message sent by Peter Turkson to those gathered at the Islamic Climate Change Symposium that issued the declaration, the African cardinal said: “A great motivation which unites Christians, Muslims and many others is the firm belief in God. This faith compels us to care for the magnificent gift he has bestowed upon us – and, God-willing, upon those, who will follow us. Our urgent action will surely be more effective if we believers of different religious communities find ways to work together”<sup>29</sup>.

Both Christians and Muslims leaders – alongside Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Indigenous – are aware of their spiritual clout, their institutional and financial assets, and the moral imperative to act. Given the significant global reach of the Muslim faith, commentators have expressed the importance of this and other recent Islamic environmental declarations and the many commonalities with analogous statements stemming from high-level religious representatives and international FBOs.

However, despite the emerging consensus and the discursive convergence, Radkau warns that, when it comes to the history of the environmental movement, it would be wrong to present a single master story<sup>30</sup>. Likewise, when dealing with religious statements, it would also be inappropriate to conflate all their rich diversity into a unified, homogenous narrative. Although each tradition grounded its declaration in a different sacred text and offered a different set of responses – for example, only Buddhists and Hindus explicitly called for the adoption of a plant-based diet and only Jews and Christians recalled the significance of the Sabbatical rest – all of them issued a call to action and underlined, in one way or another, the (ecological) principle of interconnection and the shared values of respect, justice, care and responsibility towards the poor, future generations and other living creatures.

Furthermore, more importantly, most denominational statements referred to other religions and expressed the need and the will to engage in collective action. In doing so, as philosopher Roger S. Gottlieb concluded in his extensive review of spiritually-inspired ecological initiatives, “religious environmentalism—activists defending God’s creation or Mother Earth, the entire globe or their own villages—have become an essential part of an international movement for a sustainable future”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> D. Howard, “Una dichiarazione islamica sul cambiamento climatico”, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3967 (2015) 44-53; cfr. E. Pisani, “Écologie en islam et dialogue interreligieux,” *Transversalités* 139 (2016) 53-64.

<sup>29</sup> P. Turkson, “All faiths must work together on ecological crisis” (August 17, 2015), [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/08/17/cardinal\\_turkson\\_all\\_faiths\\_must\\_work\\_together\\_on\\_ecology/1165624](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/08/17/cardinal_turkson_all_faiths_must_work_together_on_ecology/1165624)

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. Radkau, *The Age of Ecology*, 430-431.

<sup>31</sup> R.S. Gottlieb, “Religious Environmentalism in Action”, in R.S. Gottlieb (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, 467-502.

*Interreligious intersections*

Contemporary challenges are not only bringing believers of different faiths side-by-side and face-to-face, but are also helping them realize the many theological and ethical commonalities as well. Religions are becoming “greener”, and they are doing so in a clearly interreligious way. Yet, what are the commonalities to which spiritual leaders increasingly refer? What are the main theological intersections offering a springboard for collective action across religious faiths and other societal actors?

Larry Rasmussen has forcefully argued that there are “deep traditions” of spirituality across religions, traditions that include mysticism, sacramentalism, asceticism, prophetic practices, and the cultivation of wisdom. These shared spiritual traditions and practices not only offer strategic points of entry for religiously inspired social action but also coincide with structural dimensions of religious experience<sup>32</sup>. When Mary Evelyn Tucker, the director of The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, claimed persuasively that religions had entered their “ecological phase” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, she was already pointing in a direction similar to the one Rasmussen and Jenkins described<sup>33</sup>.

For religion scholar Bron Taylor, however, there is no clear proof of Tucker’s “Greening of Religion Hypothesis”, and thus, the long-term, political and behavioral impact of high-level religious statements such as LS and the IDGCC remains to be proven<sup>34</sup>. But, at the same time, there are clear signs that, as Taylor himself recognizes, “the religion and ecology movement can be viewed as a religious revitalization movement as well as a new, ecumenical, religious movement”<sup>35</sup>. The religion and ecology movement can help bridge the divide between different disciplines, bond multiple societal actors, deepen the shallow technical discourse, foster a cosmopolitan environmentalism, and sustain hope in the future. According to Gottlieb, “once focused on the environmental crisis, the resources of religion have a distinct—and I would argue enormously valuable—role to play in trying to turn things around”<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> L. Rasmussen, *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. M.E. Tucker, *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase*, Open Court, Chicago 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. E. Maibach et al., *The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming*, George Mason University and Yale University, Fairfax 2015.

<sup>35</sup> B. Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly”, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* (2016) 295, doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29010. R. S.

<sup>36</sup> R.S. Gottlieb, “Introduction. Religion and Ecology-What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 12.

### *Bridging*

The need to transcend the dividing lines and academic silos in the Agenda 2030 underscores the importance of interdisciplinary research and inter-cultural actors in achieving the SDGs. Religiously inspired initiatives can foster a sense of moral urgency, build trust among different actors and catalyze collective action in a unique way. They have done it before – from India to South Africa to the U.S. – with different aims in mind – peaceful liberation, the end of Apartheid, movement for Civil Rights – and, when it comes to the protection of the environment, they could do it again.

As Colin Bell points out, “the church can form a hub of sustainable activity”, a place for social engagement, collaborative consumption and environmental literacy<sup>37</sup>. For instance, the historical role of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in promoting ecological awareness and literacy at the Vatican while engaging the scientific community shows how FBOs can become cultural bridges and strategic leverage points<sup>38</sup>.

For Francis, “a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal” (LS, §111). On this path, there is a need for educational reform on a planetary scale. Here again, religions are well positioned to make a valuable and timely contribution<sup>39</sup>. The extensive network of religious schools and universities occupies a key interstitial space in promoting eco-literary and ensuring, at the same time, “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (SDG4).

Since “colleges and universities are globally distributed, loosely networked around an expanding agenda of sustainability, and open to new ideas”<sup>40</sup>, closely connected religious schools and universities can play a key role in the new dynamic. Healing Earth, an e-book launched by an international network of Jesuit secondary schools and universities, is an excellent example of this type of initiative<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> C. Bell, “The Role of the Church in the Coming ‘Crisis of Sustainability’”, in C. Bell et al. (ed.), *Living Lightly, Living Faithfully: Religious faiths and the future of sustainability*, The Faraday Institute, Cambridge 2013, 282. I borrow the bonding/bridging terminology from R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Pontifical Academy of Science – Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature: Our Responsibility*, PAS-PASS, Vatican City 2014; Id., *Climate Change and the Common Good: A Statement of the Problem and the Demand for Transformative Solutions*, PAS, Vatican City 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. Worldwatch Institute, *EarthEd: Rethinking Education on a Changing Planet*, Island Press, Washington D.C. 2017.

<sup>40</sup> M. Maniates, “Suddenly More Than Academic: Higher Education for a Post-Growth World”, in *EarthEd*, 194.

<sup>41</sup> Healing Earth is a free, on-line, interdisciplinary and interreligious science textbook for upper level secondary school students, beginning college students, and adult learners: [www.healingearth.ijep.net](http://www.healingearth.ijep.net)

### *Bonding*

Religions also convey a great deal of moral influence through their educational, pastoral and health care networks generating human capital, influencing behavior and building trust. The achievement of the SDGs will need support in these three areas. In many parts of the world, FBOs are the only organizations that provide social cohesion and the only ones that remain active when other institutions fail or leave. The question is how, not whether, we relate to religion and, to what extent, other relevant societal actors can harness and channel FBOs bonding capacity in a way that can move the SDGs forward.

Assadourian has argued that environmental initiatives should learn from missionary movements how to bring forth moral strength, courage and creativity while addressing social justice and environmental degradation<sup>42</sup>. It is no coincidence that, for Francis, ecological disruption is partly related to community decline, cultural disorientation and selfish attitudes: “In the concrete situation confronting us, there are a number of symptoms which point to what is wrong, such as environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living” (LS, §110).

Community bonding, thus, becomes an environmental task in itself because not only “the complexities of local problems [...] demand the active participation of all members of the community” (LS, §144); furthermore, community-based initiatives – hopes Francis – “are able to instill a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land” (LS, §179).

Although the long-term impact of the recent interreligious discursive convergence in catalyzing action and bringing behavioral change on ecological matters still lacks a robust, evidence-based analysis, “what can be said on the basis of new empirical scholarship is that there is a clear positive correlation between religious beliefs and increased engagement in ecological issues”<sup>43</sup>.

### *Deepening*

The environment is an issue that cuts across various concerns about development, one that directly touches many, if not all, SDGs. Yet, the complex task of achieving human well-being and environmental protection reveals, as Naess famously put it, the need to move from “shallow” ecological approaches to “deeper” ones that include philosophy and spirituality.

The century-old tradition of Catholic Social Teaching and its holistic approach to human development grounds Francis’ vision of an integral, deep ecology, one that

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<sup>42</sup> Cfr. Assadourian, “Building and Enduring Environmental Movement”.

<sup>43</sup> H. Bedford-Strohm, “Public Theology of Ecology and Civil Society”, in C. Deane-Drummond – H. Bedford-Strohm (ed.), *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere*, T&T Clark, London 2011, 53.

“calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human” (LS, §11).

Theologian R.W. Miller argues that religions in general, and those with a developed eschatology in particular, are “opening our imaginations to the deep future” of global environmental degradation and intergenerational injustice. Whereas science, ethics and economics describe future scenarios and sketch possible ways of proceeding, religions can foster a sense of “deep responsibility”<sup>44</sup>. Religions can also open our imagination to a new type of “cosmopolitan solidarity”<sup>45</sup> like the one sociologist Ulrich Beck advocates for, one that can help us transcend our myopic nationalistic drives and private self-interests.

The intergenerational and integral vision of most religious declarations draw from ancient wisdom traditions that can bring depth to the debate and become lynchpins for global efforts to achieve the multilayered and deeply intertwined socio-environmental challenges.

### *Sustaining*

Religion significantly shapes the worldview, values and behavior of over 80% of the world’s population. Not only do churches, mosques, temples and synagogues undergird the widest international social network, the religious narratives, liturgies and practices they convey also provide meaning to millions of people, setting a common ground for action. FBOs are, thus, well positioned to illuminate the meaning of development, sustain efforts amid setbacks and ground hope amid despair.

From a Christian perspective, *solidarity* is not only a principle of Catholic Social Teaching, it also becomes a key term – mentioned fourteen times in LS – in a globalized world that faces unprecedented global challenges: “We require a new and universal solidarity” (LS, §14). Furthermore, as Francis warns, “we can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity” (LS, §159).

However, as Benedict XVI stated years earlier, “in addition to a fairer sense of intergenerational solidarity there is also an urgent moral need for a renewed sense of intragenerational solidarity”<sup>46</sup>. A third sense, inter-species solidarity, should be added to the list<sup>47</sup>. In all three senses, religions can make a valuable contribution.

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. R.W. Miller, “Deep Responsibility for the Deep Future”, *Theological Studies* 77 (2016) 416-435.

<sup>45</sup> U. Beck, “Climate for Change, or How to Create a Green Modernity”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2012) 255.

<sup>46</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for the 2010 World Day of Peace, 8, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliiii-world-day-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliiii-world-day-peace.html)

<sup>47</sup> The exclusion of nonhumans and a distorted understanding of dominion by the “modern myth of emancipation” is, for Bruno Latour, one of the main reasons that have brought our civilization to the current environmental crisis: cfr. B. Latour, “Love Your Monsters”, in M. Schellenberger – T. Nordhaus (ed.), *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene*, Breakthrough Institute, Washington D.C. 2011, 26.

Religions can “sustain sustainability”, according to Pablo Martínez de Anguita, fostering “environmental solidarity” among human beings and towards future generations while taking into account other living creatures<sup>48</sup>. Expressed in Christian theological terms, “everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity” (LS, §240) reaching all creatures, present and future.

### *Conclusion and way forward*

Over the last few decades, it has become increasingly evident among scientists, technologists, economists, development agencies and environmental groups that, in order to achieve the SDGs, religions and FBOs must be taken into account and become active partners in the intertwined development and environmental agendas<sup>49</sup>.

International diplomacy, financial institutions and development agencies have historically been influenced by the secular, Western view of religion as a private issue. The tide, however, seems to be turning. Not only has the secularization theory been called into question by some of its best-known proponents<sup>50</sup>, but religion seems to be sociologically and culturally becoming more relevant. Moreover, religious beliefs and practices, as well as spiritually-inspired organizations and cultural dynamics, cannot be perceived anymore as private; they involve morals, behavior, rituals, identity and community. All this is public and political. And all this is also central in shaping a more sustainable future.

In other words, as noted environmental ethicist Holmes Rolston has claimed, a values-based environmental policy takes religious contributions seriously since it can be nurtured by spiritual insights and practices<sup>51</sup>. For Celia Deane-Drummond and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, “this translation of theology into concepts meaningful in public discourse applies to the explicitly political and policy realm, as well as to public debate as such. Ecological ideas generated by religious traditions must be shown to be a valuable resource for the daily political business of policy and governance as well as for a fundamental change of culture”<sup>52</sup>.

The momentum generated by the interreligious convergence created around COP21 and in the process of formulating the SDGs reveals the catalyzing role that

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<sup>48</sup> Cfr. P. Martínez de Anguita, *Environmental Solidarity. How Religions Can Sustain Sustainability*, Routledge, New York 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, “Religious Communities as Partners for Development Cooperation”, BMZ, Bonn 2016.

<sup>50</sup> For one of the many discussions of this point in the later writings of the recently deceased sociologist Peter L. Berger, see “Secularization Falsified”, *First Things* 180 (February 2008) 23-27.

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. H. Rolston, “Saving Creation: Faith Shaping Environmental Policy”, *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 4 (2010) 121-148.

<sup>52</sup> C. Deane-Drummond – H. Bedford-Strohm (ed.), *Religion and Ecology in the Public Sphere*, T&T Clark, London 2011, 4.



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## RÉSUMÉ

A la suite de la promulgation de *Laudato si'* (LS), l'encyclique du Pape François, point de référence pour notre relation avec le monde naturel, il y a eu un nouvel intérêt pour le rôle que les religions et les *Faith-Based Organisations* (FBOs) peuvent jouer pour encourager une telle initiative. De même, cet intérêt s'est porté sur les possibilités et les limites du dialogue interreligieux relativement à un des principaux objectifs de notre temps : la réalisation des *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) définis dans l'Agenda 2030 des Nations unies et dans l'Accord sur le Climat de Paris. Cet article affirme qu'une progressive convergence discursive sur l'écologie a ses racines dans la prise de conscience d'une série complète de méta-problèmes écologiques, plutôt que dans une commune et seule méta-narration. L'émergence de discours spécifiques interconfessionnels et interreligieux est en train de former de plus en plus une narration participée et plurielle fondée sur la justice sociale, l'attention à la création et la solidarité intergénérationnelle. D'autre part, les religions et les FBOs adoptent désormais une perspective intégrale et holistique pour le débat socio-environnemental, tout en réalisant quatre fonctions-clé : construire des ponts, établir des liens, approfondir et soutenir. L'impact à moyen et long terme de la récente convergence interreligieuse discursive, catalysant l'action et engageant un changement comportemental en matière écologique, manque encore d'une analyse forte basée sur l'évidence.

