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Journal of Interreligious Studies Issue 19, Summer 2016

We are delighted to present this issue on interfaith/multifaith environmental activism and teachings, expertly curated by the **Rev. Fletcher Harper**, Executive Director of **GreenFaith**, a leading interfaith environmental organization. We at the JIRS are grateful to Fletcher, the folks at GreenFaith, and the many contributors to this issue for the wealth of perspectives we are able to share with you here.

Summer is often a time of goodbyes and hellos, and that is especially true this summer for the Journal. As **Andover Newton Theological School** reimagines its future, it has transferred responsibility of the publication of the journal from **The Center for Inter-Religious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE)** to the **Miller Center for Interreligious Learning and Leadership at Hebrew College**, directed by **Rabbi Or Rose**. JIRS will be published in partnership with the **Boston University School of Theology**, and **Dr. Mary Elizabeth Moore**, the School's dean, will serve with Or as co-publisher. We are grateful for the years of service of the **Dr. Jennifer Howe Peace** and **Celene Ibrahim, MDiv**, the other two long-time CIRCLE co-directors, who are now joining the JIRS Advisory Board.

With much gratitude, we also bid farewell to **Kendra Moore**, our associate editor, who will be pursuing a Ph.D. at Boston University's **Graduate Division of Religious Studies**. Kendra has been an outstanding colleague, generous and skilled, and an essential part of the stability of the Journal through a time of much change. We wish her much success in this next phase of her scholarly life.

Finally, a very important hello: Having served as the Editor-in-Chief for the Journal for this transitional year, I now pass the torch to **Axel Marc Oaks Takács**, a ThD candidate at **Harvard Divinity School** in Comparative Theology and Islamic Studies. Axel is a co-founder and editor of the graduate student publication, *Journal of Comparative Theology*. He brings a combination of scholarly and technical expertise to the position, as well as a passion for interreligious engagement. He has hit the ground running, and soon will be hiring a new editorial associate. We welcome him enthusiastically.

It has been a pleasure shepherding the Journal to this next stage. May it go from strength to strength!

Sue Fendrick

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Snapshot of a Movement on the Move: The Paris Climate Talks and Religious Environmentalism

By Fletcher Harper

The twenty-four month period leading up to the Paris climate negotiations last December, also known as COP 21, represented, by almost any measure, a high water mark of the religious-environmental movement. Never before have religious groups around the world within such a concentrated period of time shown such a level of public support for environmental action. This essay represents an effort to chronicle some of this activity and demonstrate the substantial and multi-faceted growth of this movement, and then introduces the other articles and essays in this issue of the *Journal of Inter-religious Studies*, of which I (on behalf of GreenFaith) serve as guest editor. In doing so, it highlights some of the questions, developmental challenges, and new dimensions of a movement that has steadily emerged from the margins of religious life, to represent an increasingly strong center of gravity for interfaith organizing on a global scale.

Fossil Fuel Divestment

During 2014-15, the fossil fuel divestment movement found its stride, with faith groups around the world playing a leading role, in part due to early divestment commitments by the Church of Sweden, the United Church of Christ (US), the New South Wales Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, and others. During this time, a number of high-visibility religious divestment commitments were announced, further galvanizing this movement. The World Council of Churches; the University of Dayton (a Marianist Catholic institution); Union Theological Seminary; the Unitarian Universalist Association; the Church of England; the Episcopal Church; the Lutheran World Federation; the United Church of Canada; the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits of the United Methodist Church; and over one hundred other faith-based institutions committed to divest from fossil fuel holdings, or from holdings in the coal or tar sands sectors of the fossil fuel industry. Several of these commitments received international media coverage. By the middle of 2016, 126 religious institutions with assets of over \$24 billion had pledged to divest.¹ (While the divestment movement has been most active in the Christian world, debate has begun in parts of the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist communities as well.)

The People's Climate March

Faith communities demonstrated their mobilizing muscle at the People's Climate March, the September 2014 march that brought over 400,000 people into the streets of New York City to call for climate action from world leaders. Over twenty different denominations and faith traditions collaborated to organize a kaleidoscopically-diverse multi-faith presence at the march, with estimates that for at least 15,000 participants, faith was a primary

¹ <http://www.arabellaadvisors.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Measuring-the-Growth-of-the-Divestment-Movement.pdf>

motivation. Organized groups marched from the Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist, Sikh, Jain, Pagan, Humanist, Agnostic, Atheist, Indigenous, Baha'i, and Shinto communities. 10,000 of these people gathered for a three-hour, multi-faith prayer and invocation service on 58th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues in Manhattan, featuring prayers, readings, and statements by religious and moral leaders, and music by cellist Michael Fitzpatrick, folk singer Peter Yarrow, and others. Auburn Theological Seminary, GreenFaith, Judson Memorial Church, and the World Council of Churches partnered to construct a school bus-sized replica of Noah's Ark, which was pulled the entire length of the march by a bio-diesel powered pickup truck. A sign on the side read, "We are all Noah now," repurposing the biblical flood narrative for the purposes of contemporary environmental protection.

Laudato Si'

Nine months after the march, on June 18, 2015, Pope Francis released his eagerly anticipated encyclical on the environment. Titled "*Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*," the encyclical immediately became the most widely-known religious statement ever on the environment, and received global media coverage. It combined lyrical prose, incisive criticism of an unchecked neoliberal economic model that treats both the environment and the poor as disposable, and an embrace of "integral ecology," a holistic understanding of the relationship between people and planet.

Fr. Thomas Reese, a respected Jesuit commentator, described this concept, central to Pope Francis' thinking, in an article in the *National Catholic Reporter*. Quoting from the encyclical itself, Reese wrote: "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live," writes the pope. "We are part of nature." As a result, if we want to know "why a given area is polluted," we must study "the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality." And in considering solutions to the environmental crisis, we must "seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems."²

Many organizations, both Catholic and interfaith, worked to ensure that the encyclical's message resonated widely. First, to build momentum towards *Laudato Si'*'s release, in April 2015 the Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences, the UN's Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and Religions for Peace held a day-long event at the Vatican entitled "Protect the Earth, Dignify Humanity: The Moral Dimensions of Climate Change and Sustainable Development." UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon gave the opening address at the event, and sixty world religious leaders and scientists took part.

Numerous Catholic groups then stepped forward to amplify the encyclical's message, and to interpret it in their own contexts, including the US-based Catholic Climate Covenant, CIDSE (an international alliance of Catholic development agencies), the Franciscan Action Network, and many others. The Global Catholic Climate Movement, a newly formed

² <http://ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/integral-ecology-everything-connected>

grassroots, international network, organized a petition drive that delivered over 900,000 petition signatures in support of climate action, with Catholics from the typhoon-ravaged Philippines signing the petition in large numbers. Soon after the encyclical's release, a number of groups, led by the OurVoices campaign (a joint effort of GreenFaith and the UK-based Conservation Foundation) and FOCSIV (a coalition of Italian-based Catholic development and social justice groups), organized a multi-faith march into St. Peter's Square to thank the Pope for his leadership. Called "Una Terra, Una Famiglia Umana," (One Earth, One Human Family), the march attracted several thousand participants from Italian environmental groups and from diverse faiths, including 110 emerging faith leaders from thirty countries who were in Rome for the Emerging Leaders Multi-Faith Climate Convergence, the first-ever international, multi-faith climate gathering for Millennials.

The Summit of Conscience

In July, religious and moral leaders from around the world gathered in Paris for the Summit of Conscience, an event hosted by the French Government in anticipation of the upcoming climate talks, and attended by Pres. Francois Hollande, high-level French government officials, climate experts, and religious and cultural leaders from around the world. The purpose of the event was to invite these leaders to ponder the deceptively simple question, "Why do I care about the environment?", an effort to reinject a human dimension into a climate negotiations process so often dominated by technical, financial, and political considerations. For such an event to take place in the halls of power of a country that highly prizes secularism represented a remarkable acknowledgement of the importance of faith. When asked why the summit was needed, the secretary general of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, Martin Palmer, who was central to the summit's success, replied, "What is needed is a change of ethos...And ethos is what faiths, the arts, the wonderfully diverse cultures of our planet do best. Many want faiths to be moral teachers, to give a list of ethical reasons why something should or should not be done. ... They (also) inspire through the ethos of everything we do – how we raise our children, share food and drink with strangers; celebrate as well as fast; repent but also rejoice; sing and dance as well as sit quietly reflecting."³

Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu Statements

The summer of 2015 saw the release of three major statements from the Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu communities respectively. Each statement articulated the clear philosophical, theological, and moral foundation for addressing climate change from the perspective of its tradition. Each, after noting the number of years that had passed without meaningful international action on climate change, also urged world leaders to recognize the urgency of the Paris negotiations and to act boldly. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change⁴ was released at an Istanbul symposium in August 2015, organized by Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Climate Action Network International, and GreenFaith. It noted the disproportionate impact of

³ <http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=662>

⁴ <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/>

climate change on hundreds of millions of Muslims in climate-vulnerable regions, and called for a 100% clean energy and/or zero emissions future and for corporations, finance, and the business sector to “assist in the divestment from the fossil fuel driven economy and the scaling up of renewable energy and other ecological alternatives.” Given the substantial dependence upon petro-dollars of many Muslim charitable, educational, and religious institutions, this was a remarkable and courageous statement.

The Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders⁵ was signed by 300 highly respected Buddhist leaders and teachers, representing the main schools and traditions of Buddhism from 37 countries and including the world’s three most prestigious Buddhist leaders: Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. The statement, organized by twelve organizations⁶ and facilitated by the Global Buddhist Climate Change Collective, marked the importance of mutual support among groups from different faiths by recognizing the importance of *Laudato Si’*, the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, and the upcoming Hindu Declaration on Climate Change.

The Hindu Declaration on Climate Change,⁷ released a week before the Paris negotiations began, was signed by over sixty Hindu leaders and organizations, including renowned scientist and activist Vandana Shiva and Hindu spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. It called for the world’s 900 million Hindus to use clean energy and to adopt or maintain a plant-based diet, and for international and national leaders to take action that is “scientifically credible and historically fair, based on deep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through a rapid transition away from polluting technologies, especially away from fossil fuels.” It further noted that “(r)enewable energies are also the best hope for the billions of people without electricity or clean cooking facilities to live better lives and reduce poverty.”

In addition to these three statements, which represented an important new level of engagement on climate change by Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu leaders, the ACT Alliance (a global alliance of churches and related organizations focusing on development and humanitarian assistance) organized the Statement of Faith and Spiritual Leaders on the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP21 in Paris in December 2015.⁸ This statement was signed by 154 primarily Protestant leaders, joined by Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Buddhist and Hindu colleagues. This statement referenced the Statement from the Interfaith Summit in New York in September 2014, organized by the World Council of Churches and Religions for Peace.⁹ Both statements made mention of the urgency of the Paris negotiations and of the vital importance of action to limit global

⁵ <https://gbccc.org/buddhist-climate-change-statement-to-world-leaders-2015/>

⁶ Buddhist Climate Action Network, Buddhistdoor Global, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation USA, Dharmagiri, Eco Friendly Volunteers, GreenFaith, International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Inter-Religious Climate & Ecology Network, Plum Village, One Earth Sangha, Shambhala and Sokka Gakkai International

⁷ <http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/>; organized by the Bhumi Project, a joint project of the Oxford Center for Hindu Studies and GreenFaith, along with the Hindu America Foundation

⁸ http://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/COP21_Statement_english2.pdf

⁹ <http://interfaithclimate.org/the-statement>

temperature rise (to a level of 1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels). Additionally, the Shalom Center, a Philadelphia-based center for Jewish activism, issued the [Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis](#) signed by over 425 rabbis who called for vigorous climate action. At the Paris negotiations themselves, ACT Alliance and CIDSE both carried out sophisticated and substantive religious advocacy, with a team of policy experts monitoring numerous aspects of the negotiations and commenting on them with a combination of technical expertise and moral focus.

While religious statements are often criticized as ineffectual, this collection of statements had a meaningful impact on public awareness of the climate crisis, as measured by the media coverage each statement received. 2015 was also the first time that so many high-level religious leaders globally publicly and together called for action on an environmental concern, another facet of the intensification of religious attention to the environment.

From *Clean Kumbh* Towards Interfaith Engagement in India

India, a country with the world's second largest population and third largest economy as measured by purchasing power parity, is vital to the future of the world's environment. 2015 and 2016 has seen an important uptick in the level of Hindu and multi-faith environmental engagement. At the same time, the Indian government has restricted the operation of environmental groups such as Greenpeace and 350.org, making this religious-environmental emergence even more significant.

The Kumbh Mela is a mass Hindu festival during which Hindus bathe in a sacred river for the purpose of spiritual cleansing. It offers an opportunity to reach millions of Hindus who make a pilgrimage to the one city among four that hosts the Kumbh in any given year. The 2015 Kumbh took place in Nashik in July and August, with nine million attendees. The Bhumi Project coordinated the first ever Clean Kumbh Campaign, raising awareness about climate change and the promise of clean energy. The campaign included a Solar Lamp giveaway to share the message that with solar lamps, every child can study after dark, promoted by iconic Hindu gurus who showed support online and through radio messages. Bhumi conducted outreach via local newspaper, flyers, tuk-tuk (a three-wheeled motorized vehicle used as a taxi), and railway station advertising, in addition to radio messages and online, interactive maps of the Kumbh venue.

The campaign's message was viewed by a stunning 12 million people (numerous people were exposed to the message more than once), with more than 100,000 people showing their support by placing a "missed call" to a dedicated phone number.

Building on this success, Bhumi played the leading role in convening Muslim, Buddhist, Christian and Sikh groups from India and South Asia in early 2016 to plan an interfaith activity to show that the faiths were coming together to address climate change. Young leaders from each of these traditions organized a multi-faith event on June 12 in Delhi as part of the international Sacred Earth, Sacred Trust campaign that marked the six-month anniversary of the Paris Climate Agreement. The Times of India, a leading national daily, ran a feature article on the interfaith Delhi event in its "Speaking Tree" section, conveying

pleasant surprise that members of different faiths could join together in this way.¹⁰ Explorations are underway to organize a multi-faith South Asian convergence in India, similar to the Rome Convergence described above, in 2017.

Petitions

Throughout 2015, a number of religious groups organized petition drives to demonstrate the breadth of support for climate action from people of faith at the grassroots level around the world. The results of these petitions were presented, in the form of 1.78 million signatures, to Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris the day before the Paris negotiations began. Less than two weeks later, a multi-faith delegation presented the signatures to French President Francois Hollande. In addition to being the largest faith-based petition effort in history on climate change, these petitions generated sizeable email lists for a number of leading religious-environmental groups, an important asset for future digital organizing.

Climate Pilgrimages

A final manifestation of increased religious-environmental commitment was the collection of “climate pilgrimages” that took place primarily in Europe and Africa in the lead-up to COP21. From Scandinavia, Germany, Great Britain, and France, thousands of pilgrims walked into Paris, with many making the entire journey from their homes on foot. The Scandinavian pilgrimage began in Norway and proceeded through Sweden, Denmark, and Germany before entering France.¹¹ In Germany, Catholic and Protestant churches worked closely together to coordinate a pilgrimage beginning in Flensburg and proceeding over 600 miles to Paris.¹² In Africa, pilgrims conducted a combined walking and bicycling pilgrimage to Nairobi, collectively travelling thousands of miles from South Africa, Burundi, Uganda, and other countries in a colorful, impassioned display of concern. “Pilgrimage to COP21 is a pilgrimage of justice and peace, for people and for the earth,” said the ACT Alliance’s Isaiah Toroitich. As people of faith we hope to speak in one united voice in Paris demonstrating our solidarity with those affected by climate change.”

The People’s Pilgrimage, led by former Filipino climate diplomat Yeb Sano, represented another example of physical endurance in the service of moral witness. After pilgrimages in early- and mid-2015 in the Philippines, Vanuatu, and Australia, Sano and his multi-faith, multi-ethnic team of pilgrims travelled to India where they visited sites ravaged by cyclones and several Hindu sacred sites. Then on September 30, after receiving a blessing during a public papal audience in St. Peter’s Square, the pilgrims embarked on a 900-mile walk from Rome to Paris, a truly epic trek. As they headed to Paris, the terrorist attacks drastically changed the last weeks of the pilgrimage, with public group activities and gatherings banned in Paris. But it also now held a new meaning; here was a group that

¹⁰ <http://www.speakingtree.in/article/green-faith>

¹¹ <http://culture-routes.net/news/st-olav-ways-pilgrimage-climate-justice-2015>

¹² <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/hundreds-of-pilgrims-making-way-to-un-climate-change-conference>

contained people from nearly every continent and from many faiths, walking together, sharing a united message of hope. The pilgrims entered Paris one by one, the police having banned public gatherings.

This pilgrimage, and the others, ended with a final symbolic walk to the Place de la Republique, the site of the memorial to those who lost their lives in the terrorist attacks, where both Parisians and pilgrims from across Europe left hundreds of pairs of shoes.

In This Issue

In the wake of this remarkable outpouring of religious leadership, of which the aforementioned examples represent but a sample, this issue of the *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* seeks to accomplish several things. First, it seeks to elevate the voices of religious-environmental leaders from different parts of the world. The articles here are written by authors from Brazil, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Switzerland, Israel, India, and the United States, a reflection of a genuinely global movement. Second, it seeks to share the perspectives of religious-environmental practitioners, with leaders from the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Jewish traditions, as well as a secular communications expert, reflecting about their actual work in this field.

Brazil is well-known internationally for its biodiversity; less well-known is that Brazil also enjoys enormous religious diversity, with Catholic, Protestant, and neo-Pentecostal groups alongside indigenous groups and a sizeable Afro-Brazilian population with its own distinct spiritual practices. Denise Pini Rosalem da Fonseca, Maria Rita Villela, and Alice Amorim Vogas trace the history of engagement with environmental concerns by Brazilian religious groups, noting the formative work done by the Instituto de Estudos da Religião (ISER) since the 1990's. They chronicle ISER's leadership before, during, and after the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, with ISER's multi-faith, overnight vigil at the Earth Summit itself an inspiration for religious-environmental activism globally. They also note the recently increased influence of the so-called "Evangelical bench" on Brazilian government policy, including policies related to extractive industries, and they highlight the challenges for interfaith work in a context in which certain groups – in Brazil's case, a number of neo-Pentecostal groups – use language so intolerant of other faiths and spiritualities as to represent a human rights concern. Their analysis of the challenge of religious fundamentalism in relation to ecological concerns is one that finds application beyond Christianity and beyond Brazil.

George Marshall is a widely respected researcher in the field of communications on climate change. His essay seeks to identify ways of communicating with faith groups about climate change that emerge not primarily from theological scholarship but rather from actual conversations with followers of a range of religious traditions. The essay draws on separate focus group conversations with members of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities in greater London (a region chosen because of the presence of large numbers of recent immigrants from around the world who comprised a substantial percentage of the focus groups), interviews with theologians and religious-environmental leaders, and a survey that received over 800 responses from dozens of countries in the global north and south. Marshall offers five narratives that his research indicates can

engage people of diverse faiths in climate change work in a religiously plural world. He also notes the significant research gap on effective climate communications with most faith traditions, and calls for further investment in this area.

Most Western religious leaders have not had the benefit of extensive engagement with Asian Buddhist communities, a primary focus of the article written by Somboom Chungprampree, also known among colleagues as Moo. While the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), which Moo coordinates, engages with Buddhists globally, his article focuses particularly on the background of INEB's work and its Southeast Asian Buddhist underpinnings. Moo takes us on a journey that describes the forest protection work of Thai Buddhist monks, the importance of meditative practice in supporting the transformation required for a sustainable culture, and the influence that Asian Buddhism can exert on governmental policy, evidenced by Bhutan's project to replace Gross Domestic Product with Gross National Happiness as a measure of wellbeing.

Gopal Patel and Mat McDermott, respectively the director of and a long-time writer for the Bhumi Project, raise important questions about the distinctions between Dharmic and Abrahamic framings of climate and environmental issues. Their essay first immerses us in a thoughtful summary of Hindu environmental thought, and then teaches us about the differences in both tone and content with which the religious-environmental movement must engage to become truly global and truly multi-faith. They lift up the importance of dietary choices from a Hindu perspective, seeking to broaden religious engagement around climate change beyond fossil fuels. They also emphasize the foreignness to many Hindus of the Abrahamic community's tendency to frame messages in terms of good and evil – a polarizing tendency not as common in Hindu thought.

As noted above, Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* became an instant classic in the pantheon of religious-environmental literature. In September 2015, GreenFaith hosted two webinars on the encyclical, providing Catholic and multi-faith leaders alike the opportunity to respond. We have excerpted remarks by the speakers on these webinars, who included two Catholic theologians, a scientist-advisor to the Catholic church in Argentina, a US-based Catholic activist, a rabbi and Jewish eco-theologian, a leading imam, a Hindu cleric who is also a broadcaster and Hindu Chaplain to Oxford University, a Protestant Latina eco-theologian, and a California-based Buddhist nun and teacher. Their remarks demonstrate both the convergence and distinctiveness of religious-environmental thought, and offer another example of the significance of the encyclical as an interfaith conversation-starter.

In a series of short personal statements, emerging faith leaders from the Millennial generation express their interest in climate change in a manner that is both personal and primary. Their starting place is a world – their generation's world – that speaks about climate change in the present rather than the future tense. These young leaders articulate the values of their traditions in relation to the morally disengaged aspects of global consumerist culture, and the often environmentally disengaged senior leadership within their own traditions. Climate change poses two fundamental challenges to this generation of faith leaders: Will we muster the humanity to respond before massive ecological

devastation becomes unavoidable? And will our religions respond with creative and moral energy sufficient to re-establish their often-missed cultural relevance?

Water is often a forgotten stepchild of the religious-environmental movement, due to a combination of climate urgency, the programmatic focus of existing religious-environmental groups, and environmental funder commitments. But as Susie Weldon points out, faith groups have long addressed water issues – particularly access to clean, drinking water as part of their longstanding commitment to reducing poverty. She shares examples of this work, with a particular focus on the intersection of sanitation and clean water access, and describes the emergence of Faith in Water, a newly-formed NGO emerging out of the Alliance for Religions and Conservation. In the coming decade, the intersection between these traditional religious commitments appears likely to grow dramatically around water-related activism, environmental concerns about the protection of drinking water from various forms of toxic contamination (both household and industrial), and efforts to prevent devastating levels of water supply depletion.

Jeremy Benstein’s review of Rabbi David Seidenberg’s book, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, represents not only a highly engaging review of the book itself, but also an insightful reflection on the theological tendencies within “traditional” Jewish environmental thought, and a critical engagement with its anthropocentric and rationalist tendencies. In praising Seidenberg’s work of creative theology, Benstein notes the importance of Seidenberg’s efforts to re-imagine traditional Jewish theological concepts such as “the divine image” found within humanity. He praises Seidenberg’s conclusion that it is not enough for Judaism (or for any tradition, I would add), merely to re-state ancient teachings to meet the magnitude of the environmental crisis. A more energetically inventive effort is required, as is a welcoming embrace of a level of theological experimentation.

In closing, as the recap of the past two years of religious-environmental activity and these essays show, the religious-environmental movement is leaving its infancy both theologically and programmatically, and is becoming a global force. It should be noted that there are any number of critically important perspectives that are not engaged actively in the essays in this volume – eco-feminism, indigenous perspectives, and environmental racism among the most prominent. These perspectives provide further evidence of the growth and vitality of this movement, which clearly represents an area of increasing interfaith activity around the world.

It is not an overstatement to say that, in the years to come, the creativity, vigor, and magnitude of religious responses to the environmental crisis will, as noted above, have an important impact on the state of the earth, the human family, and the wider community of life. These religious responses will also impact the future of organized religion, for it is difficult to envision the faith sector gaining the allegiance of future generations if it is not able to respond to the environmental crisis at a level commensurate with the challenges it presents. For all of us who have invested our lives in this intersectional movement—and for the planet as a whole and all its inhabitants—there is a lot at stake. Let’s hope, and pray, that together we get it right.

Fletcher Harper is an Episcopal priest and GreenFaith's Executive Director. Under his leadership, GreenFaith has developed innovative programs linking religious belief and practice to the environment. An award-winning spiritual writer and nationally-recognized preacher on the environment, he teaches and speaks at houses of worship from a range of denominations in New Jersey and nationwide about the moral, spiritual basis for environmental stewardship and justice. A graduate of Princeton University and Union Theological Seminary, he served as a parish priest for ten years and in leadership positions in the Episcopal Church before becoming GreenFaith's Executive Director.

Fé no Clima: Faith Communities and Climate Change

By Denise Pini Rosalem da Fonseca, Maria Rita Villela, and Alice Amorim Vogas

The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy...and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation...and we scientists don't know how to do that.

Scientist Gustave Speth, 2013

We are being invited to change our development model, because the present model is unsustainable and is based on the ideal of *having*, when it should be based on the ideal of *being*.

Senator Marina Silva, 2015

My Franciscan brothers have all learned (...) that we should seek for caring of Mother Earth (...) but this does not mean that the ecological consciousness of my confreres changed.

Friar Sérgio Görden, 2015

Introduction

Since the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, in June 2015, we have been witnessing a historical convergence of understanding coming from the scientific, political, and religious fields regarding the urgency of taking action to care for the planet. However, the complexity that emerges from the intersection of these diverse fields presents important challenges to those committed to contributing critical thinking and initiatives to support this emerging ecological consciousness. *Fé no Clima: Comunidades religiosas e mudanças climáticas* (Faith on Climate: Religious Communities and Climate Change), an initiative designed to face such challenges, took place from May to September 2015 in Rio de Janeiro. A well-established Brazilian NGO that had previously worked on issues of religious diversity and human rights (*Instituto de Estudos da Religião - ISER*) and another organization that works on climate change and development projects (*Gestão de Interesse Público - GIP*) created the initiative.

This article describes and discusses *Fé no clima* from the following standpoints: 1) the religious context of contemporary Brazil, where neo-Pentecostal intolerance towards non-Christian faith communities constitutes a human rights matter; 2) the relevance, in such a context, of multi-faith work in the search for a new ecological consciousness, as an opportunity to reshape social and political agendas, and 3) the multi-faith environmental work carried out by ISER since 1992, in view of the 2015 Conference of Parties in Paris.

The political need for a spiritual and cultural transformation in Brazil

Brazil has been one of the world's most populous Catholic nations for more than two centuries, but that has shifted over the last two decades. The national census of 1872 registered Catholics as 100% of the population prior to the proclamation of Brazilian

republican regime (1889). For more than 100 years of republican life, that figure remained over 90% of the national population.

The religious affiliations of Indigenous populations, as well as those of people of African ethnicities who had been forcefully migrated to the country, were systematically ignored by national census considerations through the 1940's, due to a combination of religious prejudice and the political denial of civil rights to those communities. Traditional Protestant denominations started to figure in the national census at the eve of the republican period, but their count remained well under 10% of the population up until the end of the military regime in the beginning of the 1980's.

After the promulgation of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Brazil in 1988—the so-called “Citizen’s Constitution”—the Christian religious segment of the population, along with many other social movements, restated their faith communities’ identities, established new political agendas, and developed other forms of advocacy. In this context, religious intolerance towards non-Christian faith communities not only continued in the social-religious arena, but also emerged in the form of unabashed political activism led by recently created Brazilian neo-Pentecostal denominations.

According to the last official religious census (IBGE, 2010), Brazil’s population is composed of 64.6% Catholics; 22.2% Protestants (including traditional Protestants and Brazilian neo-Pentecostals); 8% with no religious affiliations; 2% Spiritualists; 0.3% with African-Brazilian religions, and a mere .03% with Indigenous traditions; 3% are members of various other religions. The exponential expansion of the population with neo-Pentecostal affiliations in the last 20 years—particularly in African-Brazilian and Indigenous communities, which were historically registered as part of the Catholic denomination—is a phenomenon that has been raising concerns regarding the relationship between religious affiliations and the public sphere, especially in the field of politics (VITAL, 2015).

Although the Brazilian republican state is legally defined as secular, recent events at the National Congress provide strong evidence that the religious political agendas of congressmen and women who belong to Brazilian neo-Pentecostal churches and who comprise the so-called “Evangelical Bench” have heavily influenced the political process. Even though internally diverse and not politically unified, the Evangelical Bench adopts generally conservative positions concerning critical issues such as: pro-fossil fuel industry; anti-environmental protection; pro-extensive monoculture; anti-abortion; anti-GLBT people, and, most recently, support for the impeachment of the left-wing President of the Republic. At the voting session at the Chamber of Deputies, held in April 17, 2016, over 80% of the Evangelical Bench voted in favor of the charges against the President.

While there is not yet enough research on the impact of the Evangelical Bench with regards to environmental protection, control of deforestation, and carbon emissions reduction, it has become obvious from the recent history of Brazil that any analysis of approaches to climate change issues in the country will necessarily need to face the question of religious affiliation. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that religious

membership does not only have an influence in the macro-political sphere —like in Congress—but also in the micro-politics of everyday life. Considering that most of the Brazilian population professes some level of religious affiliation, religious ethics and values will inevitably shape environmental opinions and actions at a local level as well as a national one.

Thus, considering that environmental issues —and in this case, climate change— have interfaces with a more comprehensive political arena, where public policy is conceived, and the level of everyday practice, both of which reflect the influence of faith communities, ISER has devoted work to investigating how the actors of different faith communities have been shaping agendas in Brazil regarding the challenge of climate change. What follows is a brief description of ISER’s study of the history of multi-faith environmental work from 1992 to the present, which laid the groundwork for *Fé no Clima*.

History of ISER’s engagement with environment and climate change

ISER was founded in 1970, in the context of the Brazilian military regime. It came into being through the joint efforts of a number of scholars who were interested in the impact of religion upon Brazilian society. Some of those were deeply involved with liberation theology¹³ in Brazil. The Institute hosted academic research and became a place where scholars could develop their investigations in a less structured atmosphere than at universities.

By the end of the 1980s, the Institute had started to become involved with new issues that were arising in the public arena, in the context of the end of the military regime and the promulgation of the Citizen’s Constitution. This was the period of newfound openness within Brazilian civil society and social movements, and many intellectuals at ISER played important roles in the participatory process of writing the 1988 Constitution. Therefore, ISER was ready to play a major role in the preparations for what came to be one of the largest and most important international intergovernmental and civil society events in the world: the United Nations Earth Summit of 1992, the so-called ECO-92.

It was then that ISER began to place the environment as a research theme at the heart of its agenda. At the ECO-92 Conference, ISER organized the memorable Interreligious Vigil *One Night for the Earth*, which lasted for 12 hours, with public concerts and prayers from different faith communities from all over the world, in honor of Mother Earth (Vigília Interreligiosa, 1992). The Institute also developed a series of studies (both qualitative and quantitative) on sustainable development called “What do Brazilians think of environment and sustainable consumption?” (ISER, 1992; 1997 & 2002; NATURA, 2006 & MMA, 2012).

¹³ Liberation theology is a radical socioreligious movement that emerged in South America in the mid-20th century, arguing that the Catholic Church should devote itself to bringing about social change, in alliance with the poor and other oppressed groups.

In 2007, the British Embassy in Brazil commissioned an adapted version of this study. The result is the report called “What do Brazilian leaders think of climate change and Brazilian engagement?”, which presents the findings of the investigation within six different societal sectors: government, media, congress, private sector, civil society and NGOs, and academia. Although core to the reflections at ISER, religious leaders were left out of this research, as the commissioner’s guidelines of the commissioner did not allow for reflections on this sector.

But in 2009, ISER organized the Meeting of Religious Leaders on Climate Change, which was attended by representatives of 13 different religious traditions. This success of this multi-faith configuration highlighted the importance of diversity in the learning process for people of different cultural, ethical and spiritual backgrounds. The main concerns that emerged in that meeting pointed to the urgency of developing: 1) a pedagogy of climate change for the religious sector; 2) environmental education for action through faith communities, and 3) skills and experience to enable faith communities to articulate their environmental concerns to different levels of political actors (ISER, 2009).

Learning about a spectrum of ecological sacred values and faith-inspired actions

GIP was created in 2011 with the mission of “combining actors and knowledge to promote social and environmental justice.”¹⁴ One of the organization’s goals is to raise the issue of climate change among different political groups in Brazil, so as to find ways to promote advocacy and help them influence the national and international political arena.

In view of the fact that nowadays religious groups are extremely influential at the Brazilian governmental level, and also have a great impact on everyday community life and political ethics, GIP partnered with ISER to design a strategy for mapping ongoing climate change debate within the religious segment. That partnership gave birth to Fé no Clima. Broadly speaking, it was intended that the initiative should provide positive answers to the needs identified by the Meeting of Religious Leaders on Climate Change and identify further advocacy strategies.

Three central values served as the organizing themes of Fé no Clima: *Reconciliation* —the search for resacralizing the relationship between humanity and nature; *Care* —a new ecological consciousness to enable a revised comprehension of humankind’s role with regards to nature, and *Socioenvironmental Justice* —the construction of instruments to help faith communities articulate environmentalist agendas in defense of the most vulnerable, with a focus on climate change. Designed as a set of events and activities for knowledge production, Fé no Clima consisted of: 1) an initial national qualitative research and internet inventory of initiatives connecting faith communities with climate change; 2) an international meeting of senior religious leaders, and 3) a multi-faith event called *Aldeia Sagrada* (Sacred Hamlet).

¹⁴ Available in: <http://www.gip.net.br/novo/historico-e-missao/> Access in: 2016/04/18. [Own translation].

The Fé no Clima International Meeting was held in August 2015 in Rio de Janeiro. The main goal of the event was to gather senior leaders from a diversity of faith communities in order to learn about their sacred values regarding nature, their ongoing actions concerning environmental activism, and their future propositions with regard to climate change. To achieve that goal, guest participants were invited to answer the following questions: 1) Which are the religious foundations that guide the relation between humans and nature in your tradition?; 2) Which are the concrete actions of your faith community regarding the care for the environment, with emphasis on climate change?; and 3) Which are the views of your faith community (your political agenda) with regards to facing the socio-environmental impacts of climate change?

Eleven well-known religious leaders, from Brazil and abroad, accepted the invitation and attended the meeting.¹⁵ Their names are listed below in the left column, with their religious title listed first and italicized, followed by their name. In the right column, their title and the name of their religious or spiritual tradition are listed in the order customary for each tradition. If their organizational affiliation or location is included, it has been placed in parentheses.

Religious leaders as guest-participants at *Fé no Clima International Meeting 2015*

<i>Mãe</i> Beata de Yemonjá	•Iyalorixá do Ilê Omi Ojuarô (Candomblé Ketu)
<i>Txai</i> Leopardo Yawa Bane	•Txai Huni Kuin
<i>Inkaruna</i> Dolores Ayay Chilón	•Quechua leader (Peru)
André Trigueiro	•Spiritualist
<i>Father</i> Josafá de Carlos Siqueira S.J	•Jesuit priest
<i>Mãe</i> Flávia Pinto	•Babá of Umbanda (Casa do Perdão)
<i>Minister</i> Ariovaldo Ramos	•Pastor, Christian Reformed Church
<i>Baba</i> Kola Abimbola	•Yoruban Babalorixá
<i>Lama</i> Padma Samten	•Buddhist Lama
<i>Reverend</i> Fletcher Harper	•Episcopal priest (GreenFaith)
<i>Pastor</i> Timóteo Carriker	• Igreja Presbiteriana Independente do Brasil

Source: ISER, Fé no Clima 2015 Report.

¹⁵ The biographies of the participants and their Fé no Clima testimonials can be seen in a series of videos available on <http://fenoclima.strikingly.com> Access on 2016/04/22.

Additionally, the former Minister of Environment, environmentalist and evangelical Senator Marina Silva, sent a video addressing the meeting's audience.¹⁶ The assembly included another 20 people as observers and reporters. The selection of guests was based on the following criteria: 1) The participants' public recognition for their contributions on environmental debate and activism; 2) The expression of a geographic comprehensiveness; and 3) The assurance of a diversified representation of faith communities.

The main outcome of the International Meeting was the Fé no Clima Declaration and Commitment,¹⁷ which was agreed to by the participants at the event. In September 2015, the document was delivered at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) to the current Minister of Environment, Izabella Teixeira, in the context of an event about the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. A month later, the Declaration was delivered to the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, Dom Orani Tempesta, who committed to delivering it to Pope Francis.

The Aldeia Sagrada is an event that has been organized annually by the Inter-Religious Movement of Rio de Janeiro (MIR) since 2002. This multi-faith event is a spin-off of ISER's inter-religious vigil of ECO-92, and was created to evoke a spirit of multi-religious care for Mother Earth. The 2015 Aldeia Sagrada gathered 150 participants with the goal of inspiring and mobilizing religious and non-religious people on the theme of climate change.

As part of the 2015 Aldeia Sagrada, the Fé no Clima panel included four speakers who reported on environmental initiatives undertaken by their faith communities, listed below: 1) Brahma Kumaris, on their experience with natural agriculture and solar panels; 2) Quilombolas (African-Brazilian runaway societies), on their experience with environmental techniques based on their traditional knowledge; 3) Indigenous peoples, on their importance of intergenerational responsibility; and 4) Celtic culture, on the devotion to nature as a foundation for ethical practice. The conversation sought to articulate the contents of the Fé no Clima Declaration and Commitment with practical examples presented by the panelists.

Assembling faith communities' ecological consciousness consensus

In an effort to identify a common vocabulary for future use by faith communities, the gathering's organizers adopted a consensus-based form¹⁸ to identify a selection of words and themes used by the various religious speakers at Fé No Clima, in order to establish a glossary of terms to be used thereafter. The purpose of this glossary was to develop a collection of religious and spiritual terms and themes which represent ways in which various faith leaders utilize and adapt traditional religious teachings for use in the

¹⁶ Available on <http://fenoclima.strikingly.com> Access on 2016/04/22.

¹⁷ Available on <http://www.observatoriodoclima.eco.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/fe-no-clima.pdf> Access on 2016/04/22.

¹⁸ The Consensus-Based Form involves a reasoned societal debate, focused on the full scope of technical and social dimension of the problem and the desirability of multiple solutions. (...) Here, resolution is found through a focus on its underlying elements, moving away from positions (...) and towards the underlying interests and values at play (Hoffman, 2012). [Our emphasis].

context of climate and environmental concerns. Several examples of these themes are shown in the following graphic, originally published in the Fé no Clima 2015 report.

Main concepts used by religious leaders and faith communities' representatives
Fé no Clima 2015



Source: ISER, Fé no Clima 2015 Report.

Beyond differences in the format of the speeches, in the choices and meanings of the words used, and in the religious practices and perspectives presented, the Fé no Clima International Meeting--along with the panel at the Aldeia Sagrada--engaged in an emerging process of consensus building within the religious sector regarding the baseline for the development of a new ecological consciousness.

In short, from the findings of *Fé no Clima 2015*, it can be said that to be successful, a consensus-based new ecological consciousness should build on the following references:

A New Theological Paradigm. Within Christianity, it has been increasingly accepted that there is a need for a shift in biblical interpretation to overcome humanity's utilitarian approach towards nature. In this sense, most of the non-Christian traditions can contribute strong religious teachings and liturgical practices based on their traditional recognition of nature's sacredness. Furthermore, there is growing awareness of a consensus about the existence of an agency and wisdom within nature's creation (God, Orisà, Cosmic Intelligence, Cuxipá). In this context, there is a positive appetite for renewed contemplation of the holiness of the relationship between humanity and Mother Earth (*Mamapacha*, garden, our common house). Finally, there is a common recognition that the current moment offers perhaps the last opportunity for humanity to undergo such a paradigm shift before devastating environmental damage is done.

Common Care versus Intolerance. There is already an established consensus that *common care* is one of the few possibilities for the survival of human life in the planet. This agreement is the most powerful ethical standpoint at hand to be used against the increasingly organized, institutionalized, and destructive religious intolerance in the contemporary world. A consensus-based new ecological consciousness might provide the groundwork for a sustainable balance of power between historically dominant and marginalized cultural and religious traditions. Through such a shift in dynamics, the oppositional political positioning that currently pits perpetrators and targets of religious intolerance against each other (such as Neo-Pentecostal and African-Brazilian/Indigenous communities) might give way to an agreement to uphold the construction of an effective inter-religious political agenda that identifies common interests and values.

An Integrative Worldview. There is an overall acceptance of the need to move from a fragmented perspective to an integrative worldview. For the religious sector, this consensus particularly relates to: 1) inter-generational roles, and 2) inter-religious communication patterns and tools. Concerning the common care of the planet, it is recognized that senior religious leaders should guide and mobilize their faith communities towards environmental activism while also supporting innovative and ambitious environmental actions by representatives of younger generations. In relation to inter-religious communication, new tools of communication and patterns of interaction are needed to enable justice and balance in the exchange of faith communities' values, concepts, and interests in relation to climate change and the environment. There is also an appetite for education for action with a focus on younger members of faith communities.

Water as a Central Issue. There is a consensus about the need to provide the most dramatic evidences of the effects of climate change on water. Water's sacredness, water as a commodity, how climate change impacts on water availability, and water's importance for the maintenance of social and cultural life were pointed out in virtually all faith communities' narratives. Based on the articulation of water's sacred dimension, sustained by ancestral faith communities (African-Brazilian, Indigenous, Orisà); on the political struggle for access to drinkable water (Peruvian Indigenous); and the human consequences

of floods and droughts (Brazilian Indigenous), there is a unanimous call for immediate action concerning water.

Final considerations

Fé no Clima sprouted from the questions, findings, and networking put together by ISER over more than two decades of research and action on the engagement of faith communities with environmental concepts and activism. Beyond the extraordinary richness of the faith communities' values and interests, which this article has attempted to describe and discuss, several other considerations of no lesser importance remain.

First, it should be said that the engagement of faith communities with the issue of climate change is still an uneasy subject. There is much to be done to mobilize the religious sector for climate action, especially because the language used to deal with climate change is often hermetic and either intangible or incomprehensible to the non-scientific public. The same can be said about the traditional environmental movement, which still lacks the vocabulary to connect meaningfully with the religious sector. Therefore, developing innovative communication strategies to connect the religious, scientific, and environmentalist sector represents a high priority.

Because it is assumed that religious ethics could be a major shaper of political and economic practices, it will be necessary to face the challenge of establishing a common understanding of religious terms and concepts, in order to lay the groundwork for convergences of multi-faith of social-political positions and actions, at both the local and global levels. For the same reason, support should be provided to help faith communities to understand and appropriate environmental terms and concepts and their related political agendas.

Finally, a communication strategy to successfully promote this dialogue must consider the importance of the use of traditional means of communication within local faith communities, preserving their language, forms, and meanings. On the other hand, there is a need for capacity building in the use of new digital tools and online means to enhance communication between faith communities worldwide.

The challenges of making climate change a substrate for multi-faith work are large and deep. May the consensus-based new ecological consciousness featured by Fé no Clima lay the groundwork for innovations in various social technologies to flourish.

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Communicating with Religious Communities on Climate Change: Research Overview and Emergent Narratives

By George Marshall

In late September, my local church in rural Mid-Wales is filled with flowers and teetering displays of food for the Harvest Festival. This is a celebration with roots in pre-Christian faith (held around the full moon closest to the Autumn Equinox) at which communities come together to celebrate and give thanks for what has, hopefully, been a successful harvest. Last year, I was invited by the environmentally minded vicar to speak at the Festival time about climate change and its potentially severe impacts on future harvests and global poverty.

The congregation thanked me pleasantly over the tea and biscuits that followed. But whenever I tried to talk more about climate change, our conversations became awkward and stilted. They were mostly older people from farming families, and they had noticed dramatic changes in the weather over their lifetimes. Yet, despite this personal connection, they were unwilling to accept that there was any major cause for concern. They drew on arguments of continuity, saying that weather "has always changed," or that any changes that might come lie in the far future "when I am long dead and gone." People were very unwilling to stay with this subject and, invariably, steered the conversation as fast as politely possible to another, safer topic.

This anecdotal example contains useful insights for the wider challenge of engaging with people of faith. First, it displays, in microcosm, the complex mechanisms of avoidance and disavowal that suppress discussion of climate change. People are well aware that the climate is changing, but create subtle yet effective boundaries to prevent it being publically acknowledged or discussed.

Second, despite these people's strong shared faith, their attitudes about climate change were entirely consistent with that found among any other British people of their age and political worldview. My community is largely made up of "small-c" conservatives--wary of ideology, and committed to family, community, and tradition. Balance and continuity are such strong principles for them that they are intuitively skeptical of all warnings of change. In the wider research, personal politics and age are far more important determinants of attitudes towards climate change than faith or any personal connection with the climate.

Third, as I stood in the medieval vestry, I found myself wondering to what extent the time-honored rituals of faith may mitigate against messages of radical change. Harvest Festivals have been celebrated inside this building for at least five hundred years, always at the same time each year. The season in which it is celebrated has been shifting by 2-3 days per decade.¹⁹ The December that followed my presentation was, almost certainly, hotter than any since the church was founded, and spring flowers started blooming in the graveyard

¹⁹ R.A. Sherry, X. Zhou, S. Gu, J.A. Arnone Iii, D.S. Schimel, P.S. Verburg, L.L. Wallace, and Y. Luo, "[Divergence of reproductive phenology under climate warming](#)," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* **104** (1): 198-202, (2007).

well before Christmas.²⁰ Yet the church itself, with its thick stone walls, gives a misleading sense of sense of permanence and continuity. In our wider research, experts from all faiths commented on the challenge of finding a place for this new and unprecedented issue within their ancient theologies.

Finally, it is worth noting that there is no automatic and easy path from faith principles, even those grounded in a care for the earth and the vulnerable, to an acceptance of climate change. However, the institutions of faith--the church, the Sabbath, and the leadership of the priest--had all enabled me to start a conversation that would not otherwise have happened. I doubt if many people in the church that day had had any previous opportunity to consider climate change in any depth. The language of faith provided a shared code of values and identity that initiated a conversation and bridged otherwise insurmountable political barriers.

In opinion polls, the majority of people recognize that climate change is real, is caused by humans, and is a cause for concern.²¹ Recent research suggests that the level of concern is increasing. However, superficial answers to surveys can be misleading. Climate change has a very limited hold on people's attention. When asked directly, people often express concern, but when they are asked without prompting what issues concern them, few if any people remember to mention it. Every year since 2001, the Pew Research Center has asked people to choose the policy issue that should be a high priority for the US president. "Dealing with global warming" has never risen above the bottom slot.²²

There are many reasons for this. It has been suggested by cognitive psychologists and specialists in the psychology of risk²³ that climate change as an issue may lack the necessary qualities of proximity and immediacy to command people's attention.²⁴ But it is not that simple. As my Welsh neighbours told me, changes in the weather are already significant and have already been underway for a generation. It appears that people choose to generate a "psychological distance" from the issue by deliberately creating narratives that place it far away in time and place- at the North Pole, or "after I am long dead and

²⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35119311>

²¹ A. Corner, (2013). A new conversation with the centre-right about climate change: Values, frames and narratives. Oxford: Climate Outreach and Information Network; D. Kahan, (2012). Why we are poles apart on climate change? *Nature* 488, 255; J. Smith, R. Tyszczuk, & R. Butler, (Eds). (2014). *Culture and climate change: Narratives*. Shed, Cambridge.

²² <http://www.people-press.org/files/2016/01/1-21-2016-Priorities-Release.pdf>

²³ S. Van der Linden, (2015). The social-psychological determinants of climate change risk perceptions: Towards a comprehensive model. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 41, 112-124.
http://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/slinden/files/jep_0.pdf

²⁴ Center for Research on Environmental Decisions. (2009). *The Psychology of Climate Change Communication: A Guide for Scientists, Journalists, Educators, Political Aides, and the Interested Public*. New York.

gone."²⁵ Climate change is invariably presented as a problem for the future. Scientific models only claim authority for predictions some decades in the future. Politicians, pressured to respond to immediate issues, are mostly satisfied to categorize climate change as a long-term problem. The public duly respond in kind--willingly identifying climate change as a major problem for future generations, though not for themselves. Some qualitative research in the US has suggested that a strong belief in the afterlife and divine intervention may be playing a role in leading some Christians to play down the urgency of climate change.²⁶

Generally, though, the research suggests that people of faith are not significantly different in this respect than the wider public. Recent polling found that only 4% of British Christians cited climate change as a "major issue facing Britain *today*," far behind thirteen other issues. When the question was rephrased with greater distances: as "a major issue facing *the world* as a whole over the next *ten* years," that level of concern rose to 28%.²⁷

As should already be evident, acceptance or rejection of climate change has little to do with a rational evaluation of the scientific evidence. A growing body of research has shown that climate change is interpreted primarily through the lens of people's values and worldview,²⁸ and understandings of it are held and shared in the form of socially constructed narratives.²⁹ Where these narratives line up with people's existing worldview, and are transmitted between trusted social peers, they can become powerful motivators for change. However, when narratives conflict with people's worldviews, or are received from distrusted communicators, they can create deeply entrenched opposition. As the Australian academic Clive Hamilton puts it, "Denial is due to a surplus of culture rather than a deficit of information."³⁰

At present, faith appears to be having little influence on people's environmental views. In the US, just 6% of US adults in the 2010 survey said religious beliefs have had the biggest influence on what they think about "tougher laws to protect the environment."³¹

²⁵ A. Spence, et al. (2011). The Psychological Distance of Climate Change, *Risk Analysis* Volume 32, Issue 6, pages 957–972, June 2012.

http://www.climateaccess.org/sites/default/files/Spence_Psychological%20Distance%20of%20Climate%20Change.pdf. T. Isaksson, A. Corner, & C. Shaw, (2015). Managing the psychological distance of climate change. Oxford: Climate Outreach. <http://climateoutreach.org/resources/psychological-distance/>

²⁶ A. L. B. Hope, & C. R. Jones, (2014). The impact of religious faith on attitudes to environmental issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) technologies: A mixed methods study. *Technology in Society*, 38, 48–59.

²⁷ COMRes, 2015, Post-election polling for Tearfund- unpublished, ComRes, London/.

²⁸ A. Corner, E. Markowitz, & N. Pidgeon, (2014). Public engagement with climate change: the role of human values. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 3, 411-422; S. Van der Linden, (2015). The social-psychological determinants of climate change risk perceptions: Towards a comprehensive model. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 41, 112-124.

²⁹ Making Sense of Climate Change: How Story Frames Shape Cognition. *Political Psychology* 4, 447-476.

³⁰ C. Hamilton, 2010, *Requiem for a Species, Why we Resist the Truth about Climate Change*, Routledge.

³¹ Pew, 2010, *Few Say Religion Shapes Immigration, Environment Views*, 2010 Annual Religion and Public Life Survey, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/09/immigration-environment-views-fullreport.pdf>

Polls in the US consistently show that, regardless of religious affiliation, it is the demographic issues of class, politics, and ethnicity that are the dominant determinant of attitudes on climate change. For example, white Catholics have very similar levels of concern (or disregard) concerning climate change to white evangelical Protestants and, in the wider society, Republican voters. Hispanic Catholics, on the other hand are, despite a common religion, two-and-a-half times more likely to be "very concerned" about climate change, which is entirely consistent with the wider attitudes of Hispanics and Democrats as a whole.³²

An important caveat must be raised here: detailed attitudinal survey research is almost all based in the US, and within it, climate change faith research is predominately with Christians. There is yet to be a major international survey that explores attitudes to climate change across different faiths. Conclusions should therefore be drawn with due caution.

There is sufficient international evidence to show that political polarization is found across the English-speaking world, where surveys of the past ten years have consistently found that political orientation is the single greatest influence on people's attitude to climate change.³³ One poll in the US concluded that attitudes to climate change were a stronger predictor of people's voting preferences than any other single issue, including gun control, abortion, and capital punishment.³⁴

These obstacles--psychological distancing and political polarization--have led to, and are in turn exacerbated by, a collective silence.³⁵ The majority of people have never talked about climate change with anyone other than friends and family, and a third of people have never discussed it with anyone at all.³⁶ As noted in my opening anecdote, people find it hard to initiate or sustain any conversation about climate change. Research finds that this silence is not incidental but socially-constructed to remove climate change from the norms of attention—that is, those issues that are considered appropriate for recognition.³⁷ This silence follows a similar form to that formed around other issues that challenge collective responsibility, such as human right abuses.³⁸

In June 2015, the Pope issued *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, a much-awaited encyclical that presented the doctrinal basis for all Catholics to respond to climate change. It is the most significant faith-based response to climate change to date, and many

³² PRRI, 2014, Believers, Sympathizers and Sceptics: Why Americans are Conflicted about Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science, Public Religion Research Institute, American Academy of Religion, November 2014

³³ A. Hoffman, 2015, How Culture Shapes the Climate Change Debate, Stanford Briefs.

³⁴ C. Hamilton, 2014. Do You Trust Scientists About the Environment? Carsey Institute, Regional Issue Brief #40, Spring 2014 <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1213&context=carsey>

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³⁶ A. Leiserowitz, E. Maibach, C. Roser-Renouf, & G. Feinberg, (2013) How Americans communicate about global warming in April 2013. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Project on Climate Change Communication

³⁷ A. Corner, 2014. Climate Silence (and How to Break It), Climate Outreach Information Network, 2014 <http://climateoutreach.org/resources/climate-silence-and-how-to-break-it/>

³⁸ Stanley Cohen, (2110). States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering, Polity Press. P 5

campaigners hoped that it would create a sea change in faith-based attitudes to climate change.

A superficial reading of polls³⁹ taken before and after its release confirm that there was a small but significant increase in awareness of climate change across all Christian denominations in the US. Unfortunately, we do not have any polling data on the impact of *Laudato Si'* in other countries or with other faiths.

However, a more careful reading of these polls makes it hard to identify a clear signal of wider influence. *Laudato Si'* was released on the run up to the Paris climate negotiations, when interest and concern was rising across the whole population. The increase of concern among Catholics was no more significant than this wider trend. Curiously, 5% of Catholics became less inclined to trust the Pope as a source of information on global warming after *Laudato Si'*, possibly--though this cannot be said for certain--because climate-skeptic Catholics were rejecting his message.

Laudato Si' may have opened up the discussion, but it did not manage to break through the collective silence around climate change. Only 18% of Catholics discussed it within their place of worship, and after its publication Catholics showed no greater desire to discuss climate change with family and friends than their non-Catholic neighbors, with three-quarters of Catholics reporting they had discussed climate change "rarely or never."

The primary challenge for faith communications must be to break this silence, and the experience of *Laudato Si'* suggests that greater attention needs to be paid a *process* of engagement that initiates an active conversation. Faith leaders should establish that talking about climate change, preaching about it, and bearing witness to it are essential and defining expressions of their faith.

Despite these obstacles, there are many reasons why people of faith should be leading on this issue and why, over time, faith values could become a key determinant in mobilizing public concern.

The primary reason, as will be discussed below, is that climate change is one of the key moral issues of our time, having direct impacts on the poorest and most vulnerable people, and future generations. It is incumbent upon people of faith to recognize its importance and be consistent with their moral teachings on these topics.

Second, given that attitudes to climate change are determined by values, identity, and socially-transferred narratives, faith provides an opportunity for reframing climate change around a set of common ethical values that can be shared across political and cultural boundaries.

³⁹ E. Maibach, A. Leiserowitz, C. Roser-Renouf, T. Myers, S. Rosenthal, & G. Feinberg, (2015) *The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming*. George Mason University and Yale University. Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.

Finally, seen from the perspective of political expediency, it is essential that faith communities, arguably the largest and most successful social institutions in the world, be fully involved and mobilized. Faith groups have played a central role in previous movements for progressive change, and it is hard to imagine how humanity could generate sufficient momentum for change without them being fully involved.

FINDING NEW LANGUAGE BASED ON FAITH VALUES

The dominant public narrative of climate change is secular and has sometimes been actively irreligious. It emerged from scientific language and dispassionate data. When environmental organizations converted this into wider communications, they applied the framing of their own values and ideology, emphasizing the impacts on the natural world and the role played by personal consumption and political vested interests. Politically motivated skeptics, such as former Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz, have applied their own bias and accused climate change of not being "real science" but being "a new religion."⁴⁰ In return, some scientists have felt it necessary to assert that climate change is solely empirical and adamantly not a "belief."⁴¹

This enforced dichotomy between science and religion is unnecessary and misleading. Sir John Houghton, the founding chairperson of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the United Nations body that presents scientific evidence to policymakers) is a Methodist lay preacher. He speaks often about the synthesis of science and climate science, and has played a key role in reaching out to evangelicals. Texan and climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, a committed evangelical and wife of a pastor, has received widespread recognition and respect for her commitment to sharing her science with people of faith.

The challenge for people of faith is to find narratives about climate change that will respect and can build on that science, yet can also speak to their own faith traditions effectively and compellingly. For over ten years, the world's main faiths have been designing declarations and making calls for action that convert climate change into the language of their traditions.⁴² Often, though, these statements have been dry, academic, and theological in tone. Coming from church leaders and scholars, they have also been hierarchical and instructional. The opportunity remains to find language that can have a wider popular appeal and be better disseminated through grassroots movements.

RESEARCHING LANGUAGE

In 2015, GreenFaith, a US-based Interfaith environmental network, commissioned Climate Outreach to identify language around climate change that could speak across all the world's five main faiths (Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam).⁴³ The language

⁴⁰ Ted Cruz Interview with Glenn Beck, October 2015.

⁴¹ G. Marshall, 2014, *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, Bloomsbury, pp. 212-213.

⁴² An overview can be found at <http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/resources/religious-statements-on-climate-change/>

⁴³ G. Marshall, A. Corner, O. Roberts, and J. Clarke, (2016). *Faith & Climate Change - A guide to talking with the five major faiths*. Oxford: Climate Outreach. <http://climateoutreach.org/resources/climate-change-faith/>

needed to be engaging and compelling such that it could support interfaith mobilization leading up to the December climate conference in Paris. In order to work within an interfaith context, it needed to speak effectively to very different faith traditions. Recognizing the dangers of political polarization, successful language needed to be free of any distinct political ideology.

On the basis of 11 expert interviews and assimilation of existing faith materials, Climate Outreach designed trial narratives. These were then tested with six focus groups. Each group had a gender balance and people of diverse political views and countries of origin. The findings of the groups were further refined through an online survey which had 650 participants from 53 countries.

Four key narratives were found to be effective across all the faith groups. The quoted text was tested, in this form, in both focus groups and the survey. The emphasis in bold has been added to highlight the key language frames for engagement.

1. "**The natural world is a precious gift.** Caring for the natural world is an act of worship. We have a sacred **responsibility** to care for the earth and be its stewards."

Although the underlying concept of a responsibility to care for and protect the world is strong across all faiths, the most commonly used frame of "Creation Care" does not work well outside the Abrahamic faiths. The terms "natural world" and "the earth" were found to be sufficiently neutral to work across all faiths, but were weaker as a consequence. However, the language of the world being a *gift* that we have a responsibility to respect did work well across all faiths, and was mentioned spontaneously in all of the focus groups.

2 "**Climate change is a moral challenge.** Climate change is *harming* the poor and vulnerable. We should be generous and care for them. It is our **responsibility** to preserve the legacy of our parents and provide for the future for our children."

All faiths contain sacred values condemning violence and harm to others (and, for Hindus and Buddhists, this extends to all living things), being charitable, and protecting the vulnerable. Future generations are important to all groups. As noted earlier, psychological distancing often leads people to frame climate change as a future problem. For this reason, the narrative places it within the intergenerational timeline of respect for both those who came before us and those as yet unborn.

3. "**Climate change is disrupting the natural BALANCE.** There is a divine **balance** to the world. Climate change is **disrupting** that balance. Climate change is a **message** that something is wrong. By taking action on climate change we can **restore** that natural **order** and balance."

All faiths, especially in their more traditional or conservative expressions, are concerned with order, authority and stability, which are presented in constant opposition to disorder and instability. This narrative works especially well with the

Hindu and Buddhist understanding of a universal order. Islam also has a strong concept of balance, embodied in the Arabic word *mīzān*, which denotes equilibrium, balance, and the scales on which all deeds are weighted. The framing of balance appears throughout the 2015 Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change, for example: "*The Earth functions in natural seasonal rhythms and cycles. Climate change is a result of the human disruption of this balance.*"⁴⁴ The language about climate change being a "message" also works well, although alternative language about it being a specific sign or warning was rejected by the focus groups.

4. "Taking action brings us closer to God. Climate change is taking us all away from the divine system, will or plan. Through action on climate change we can become **closer** to God, **deeper** in our faith and **better people** individually and collectively. And by being closer to God we will be better able to take action on climate change."

Given that climate change is understood through the lens of people's values and identity, this narrative explored the notion that the best reward for action would be a reinforcement of those values and identity. It worked well with all five faiths.

This finding is important for all communications. Climate change communicators have always tended to assert rewards in terms of external measures ("saving the planet"/protecting future generations) or the defeat of the challenge (preventing climate change, stabilizing the climate). This narrative suggests that people may be motivated by internal rewards measures (becoming *more* the person you believe yourself to be, becoming a stronger member of your peer group). This formulation has been applied successfully by Climate Outreach around national⁴⁵ and political⁴⁶ identities.

In testing, we found that some familiar narratives did not work well with all faiths, or across the diversity of people within them. As noted above, the language of Creation Care, a dominant faith communications frame around climate change, works poorly with Hindus and Buddhists whose faiths lack a central divine creator.

The language of social justice (often expressed as the compound phrase Climate Justice) has also long been a central rallying cry for progressive faith campaigns.⁴⁷ However, in testing it performed badly with Hindus. The word *justice*, like *equality*, may also be politically contentious for conservatives⁴⁸ who prefer language around fairness. Faith

⁴⁴ <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/>

⁴⁵ G. Marshall, 2014. [Hearth and Hiraeth: Constructing Climate Change Narratives around National Identity](#), Climate Outreach.

⁴⁶ A. Corner, (2013). A new conversation with the centre-right about climate change: Values, frames and narratives. Oxford: Climate Outreach and Information Network

⁴⁷ Climate Justice is a Matter of Faith, US Catholic, Vol. 81, No. 4, April 2016 pp 22-26
www.uscatholic.org/articles/201603/climate-justice-matter-faith-30604#sthash.ovEqjY3N.dpuf

⁴⁸ See for example its prominent mention in The Liberal Lexicon A Conservative's Dictionary of Libberish, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/673701/posts>

communicators should always be vigilant about the danger that, by projecting their own values, they are inadvertently alienating people of different political worldviews.

Our research also sought to identify the language that might work best within each faith. In this context, Creation Care, and being a responsible steward, or in the Islamic tradition a vicegerent, was certainly the most effective language for the Abrahamic faiths.

For Hinduism and Buddhism, language around the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world, and the divine or cosmic order of universe, was most effective. Although not fully tested, participants and faith experts felt that climate change could be presented as a form of violence,⁴⁹ and action against it framed within the theology of Dharma as an abhorrence of violence and causing harm to others (*ahimsa*).

For Jews, language around justice and intergenerational equity was especially meaningful. Compared with other faiths, Judaism has a particularly strong understanding of the morality of inaction and missed opportunities, and requires atonement for the specific "sin of omission" when "a man fails to fulfil the duty incumbent upon him."⁵⁰ All of these approaches could be particularly relevant to this complex issue that is so often marginalized through a social silence.

Many of our findings confirmed existing practice. However, there were some surprises, and these show that language can never be assumed to work, and that communications should always be carefully tested.

For example, we had not anticipated that there would be any problems with the phrase "the world contains all we need but cannot provide all we want or desire." The idea that the world's resources are finite and limited is central to modern environmentalism, especially since the seminal 1972 club of Rome report, "The Limits to Growth." Yet, this language was consistently and strongly rejected by Muslims who argued that Allah is always bountiful. In the words of one workshop participant, "The problem is not meeting the greed, but the gluttony itself."

We were less surprised that language around blame and punishment worked poorly. Climate change is a complex issue with dispersed responsibility and is difficult to align with traditional edicts about personal behaviour. As with the wider public,⁵¹ people of faith are unwilling to shoulder personal moral responsibility for a problem with is systemic and widely distributed.

However, we also found that the context effected how language about personal responsibility was received. People were resistant to judgmental language when it was

⁴⁹ For example, Rebecca Solnit's article "Call climate change what it is: violence" www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/climate-change-violence-occupy-earth

⁵⁰ K. Kohler, 1906, Atonement- entry in the Jewish Encyclopaedia. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2092-atonement>

⁵¹ <http://talkingclimate.org/guides/using-scare-tactics-does-it-work/>

presented as a form of collective failing using the "we" form: "We need to control our desires and stifle our greed. If we need to make sacrifices we will do so as our duty," Yet similar language around responsibility and duty was strongly approved in both groups and the survey, when it was presented as a personal statement: *"I pledge to change myself from within and reduce my own contribution to climate change. To do this I will gladly live a simple, contented, and fulfilled life. I do this as a duty and an offering to my God/creator."*

This is potentially an important finding. All formal faith declarations on climate change have been expressed in the collective "we" form, calling for collective action. Our research suggests that calls to change behaviour may be more effective if they are voiced as personal commitments. The process of engagement could therefore be to initiate and encourage people to make and share their own commitments rather than the assertion of doctrinal principles.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Among the faiths, three specific audiences deserve particular focus and further research: Hindus, Muslims, and US evangelicals.

There are over one billion Hindus in the world, 85% of them in India. Our research identified multiple opportunities to develop a Hindu narrative around climate change and traditional values of responsibility, duty, and respect for nature. To date, there has been no formal research into Hindu attitudes to climate change or language testing. India is an increasingly important and sometimes obstinate player in the international climate negotiations, and the creation of distinctly Hindu narrative for action could have a major global importance.

There have been more attempts to mobilize an Islamic voice on climate change; the 2015 Declaration by Islamic scholars⁵² was especially noteworthy. But far too few people have yet recognized that the most severe impacts of climate change will fall disproportionately on Islamic countries, especially those in the hot and arid latitudes. This, and the predominant role of Islamic countries in international petro-politics, creates an urgent need for a parallel, faith-driven discourse.

Substantial in numbers, no denomination exerts greater political influence in the US, and, by extension, in global politics, than American evangelicals. Successive surveys have found evangelicals to be the most skeptical faith group on climate change in the US. They require a distinctive narrative of their own but, if mobilized, they would undoubtedly shift the polarization of American politics.

Finally, it is time that the wider environmental community respect faith communities and recognize the need to engage them better as partners in mobilizing change. Even the most cursory overview of history cannot ignore the central role played by people of faith in the key political struggles of the past two hundred years, and always their involvement has been fuelled by narratives drawn from their traditions and identity.

⁵² <http://www.greenfaith.org/religious-teachings/islamic-statements-on-the-environment>

As I look out my window, I can see the tower of my village church standing high above the surrounding houses and fields, a beacon of permanence in a rapidly changing landscape. As they struggle with denial and disavowal, climate-change campaigners actually stand to learn a great deal from the faith traditions that have for so long sustained strong communities of shared belief and held such a central role in people's lives.

George Marshall is the co-founder of Climate Outreach, a non-profit based in Oxford, UK, the leading European specialist in climate change communications. He is the author of *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*.

Spirituality and Ecology from a Buddhist Perspective: Engaged Buddhism Across Asia

By Somboon Chungprampree (with Jane Rasbash and Fletcher Harper)

Over the past four decades, Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai social critic, and friends have spearheaded an Engaged Buddhist approach that is actively addressing planetary issues like climate change and environmental devastation, and human ecology concerns like social justice and ecology and inter-religious conflict. Engaged Buddhism refers to the practice of those Buddhists who apply the insights gained from meditation practice and dharma teachings to situations of social, political, environmental, and economic justice.

Sivaraksa is one of the founding leaders of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), which was established in 1989 with support from high-level Buddhist leaders including the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Theravada Bhikkhu Maha Ghosananda. INEB has members in 20 countries around the world, mostly in Asia, but also in the USA, Australia, and Europe. Its members include monks, nuns, activists, and academics. While it is a Buddhist organization, some of its members come from other spiritual traditions, and interfaith activities are part of its program through its Inter-religious Climate and Ecology Network (ICE). Sivaraksa also played a key role in creating the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), another important pan-Asian initiative whose members seek to “understand the ways in which prevailing economic, social and political systems contribute to suffering, and to violence and the culture of violence that surrounds us, in order to provide a countervailing force of non-violence, compassion and understanding.”⁵³

Buddhism inherently has an ecological approach within its emphasis on the interconnection of all beings, harmony with nature, reduction of suffering, and contentment as central tenets in teachings. This article looks at some of the influences on and a few of the activities of the Engaged Buddhist movement, illustrating how Buddhist wisdom serves to bring together spirituality and environmentalism while also building strong interfaith relations.

INEB's Beginnings

INEB draws upon the experience and early mentorship of two key figures who were vital in setting the scene for social and ecological engagement in the early days of the Engaged Buddhism movement. Two key figures were Maha Ghosananda and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

Maha Ghosananda (1929-2007), a Cambodian peacemaker and Niwano Peace Laureate (1988), was considered the “Cambodian Gandhi.” *Step by Step*, his only book, is a well-known guide for Buddhist practitioners. The chapter entitled “The Present Is Mother of the Future” discusses how we cannot talk about the future without taking care of the present. A

⁵³ <http://www.sem-edu.org/>

new, long-term paradigm for the future must also focus on changing our societies now to be more peaceful, just, and harmonious with nature.

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1906-1993), perhaps the best known Siamese Buddhist monk, taught that to follow the teaching of the Buddha, to become awake, one must practice transforming greed into generosity, hatred into lovingkindness, and delusion into wisdom or real understanding—and learn to be less selfish and care more for other sentient beings. He argued that the essence of other religions is similar in encouraging their followers to work for personal liberation as well as for social justice and environmental balance.

Each of them held that we should not regard other religions as inferior to ours but live harmoniously together. Each religion is unique with its own characteristics; we should respect all scriptures, such as the Bible or the Koran, as their purpose is to guide us to be better human beings and serve others more than ourselves. Those of different religions should also work together with those of no religious tradition, for the betterment of humankind.

The wisdom of these renowned Buddhist scholars has great relevance in modern society where the ecology is greatly impacted by consumerism, pollution, climate change, and social disorder. When the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) was founded more than 20 years ago, it provided a space for *kalyanamitra* (spiritual friends) to share experience and address these kind of contemporary issues drawing on Buddhist teachings. In recent years, INEB has been developing more collaborative programs that bring together members around issues of common concern like climate change and inter-ethnic conflict.

Another important individual in raising awareness of Buddhist teachings in relation to planetary ecology challenges was Phra Prachak, who created a movement against deforestation in Thailand. He was a Thai Buddhist monk who, beginning in his 50s, wandered barefoot from forest to forest and jungle to jungle for more than ten years. One day in 1991, he came across a beautiful forest called Dongyai where villagers were cutting down the trees. Because of his deep love of forests, he used his cultural influence as a highly respected forest monk to beg from the villagers for Dongyai Forest, in the manner that a monk might beg for food every morning. The villagers agreed to donate that forest as a forest monastery.

Phra Prachak initiated a tree-ordination ceremony, with Buddhist chanting and Buddhist monks tying the saffron monk's robes around the large trees. This creative use of the traditional Buddhist ordination ceremony made the forest a sacred palace in the villager's eyes. The local people greatly respected the orange robes; once they adorned the trees they would not cut them down. Since then, tree ordination ceremonies have been widely used in Thailand by environmental groups to protect forests. Phra Prachak also led forest walks, taking people deep into the jungle to meditate and build relationships with nature, resulting in personal growth as well as deepening care for the environment.

Unfortunately, while effective in raising awareness of the urgency of saving tropical forests, Phra Prachak was politically naïve and his well-meant actions got him into trouble. Various parties had vested economic interests in Dongyai Forest: local organized crime, corrupt police, and greedy forestry officials. Consequently, he was attacked from various levels of the state machinery and by the local “mafia.” His temple was dismantled and he was arrested several times, with criminal cases going on for many years. However, the movement he initiated continued, and tree ordinations to protect the forest and forest walks--combining the teachings and practices of traditional Thai *tudong* (wandering forest monks) and Deep Ecology--are regular, inspirational occurrences in Thailand and beyond.

The Inter-religious Climate and Ecology (ICE) Network

In 2012, INEB organized an interfaith dialogue on religion and climate change. More than 150 people representing Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Islamic, Baha’i, and animist faith traditions gathered together at the Islander Center in Sri Lanka. An outcome of this event was the formation of the Inter-religious Climate and Ecology (ICE) Network, a pan-Asian, local-to-local, collaborative network of diverse spiritual communities seeking to share experiences, learning, and wisdom to build resilience and empowerment in the face of climate change.

ICE also works to wisely influence national public policy within Asia, and to stimulate and strengthen diplomatic discussions around climate change at the international level. ICE aims to do this in cooperation with various stakeholders, such as faith-based and civil society organizations, gender- and age-based groups, and business networks, always seeking to encourage healing in a world struggling with inequality and vulnerability, both intensified by climate change.

The Missing Moral Element

ICE members have consistently noticed that international negotiations and forums on climate change tend to focus on legal arrangements and technical considerations. In all of these discussions, an important point is often ignored: The climate crisis is rooted in human behavior. It is driven by ever increasing consumption, the belief that more material possessions will lead to greater happiness, and a lack of mindfulness about the consequences of our actions. Our current systems reflect unarticulated values and beliefs about our relationship with the living world. Climate change is a moral issue, and the climate crisis, which we have created together, requires a shared ethical response.

On a practical level, ICE has recognized that religious leaders in its network have been teaching about the causes of climate change, the resulting suffering, and the responsibilities of religious practitioners, but need additional technical information to be able to effectively communicate on this subject. ICE develops curricular and resource materials that integrate religious teachings and available information on climate change drivers, expected impacts, strategies for mitigation, adaptation and response, and current political debates, translating and adapting these materials into local languages and cultural contexts. In this

way, ICE seeks to empower religious leaders to conduct effective awareness and climate education programs in their own arenas.

ICE also recognizes that religious leaders and institutions are well-positioned to model climate action and respond to local needs. Consequently, ICE seeks to catalyze religious leaders, institutions, and communities towards collective action and local initiatives for climate change mitigation, adaptation, and response, such as carbon-neutral temples, churches and mosques; home gardening and food security programs; community resilience programs (e.g. disaster plans and savings systems), disaster mitigation (e.g. reforestation, canals, rainwater harvesting); emergency response to climate disaster, documenting indigenous knowledge and local change, and more.

On the level of policy advocacy, more and more Asian religious leaders and organizations are becoming more actively engaged in climate responses, and are beginning to work together to influence local and national policies. ICE both provides basic training on local policy and on culturally appropriate advocacy techniques, and seeks to support networks that link policy advocates of different faiths across Asia.

Response to Buddhist-Muslim Violence

Another recent sociopolitical development in Asia to which there has been an Engaged Buddhist response has been the emergence of Buddhist-Muslim violence, particularly in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. INEB has worked with other international groups, including International Movement for a Just World (JUST), to hold a series of discussions on how to address the roots of these violent conflicts. In 2015, INEB and core partners of the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations (BMF) issued a Jogjakarta Statement on shared values and commitments to overcome extremism and advance peace with justice. This statement drew on common values shared by our respective scriptures and included, as part of its substance, a section of canonical texts from both traditions on Living in Harmony with the Environment. Examples drawn from both traditions follow:

As the bee derives honey from the flower without harming its colour or fragrance --- So should the wise interact with their surroundings.

(Dhammapada 49)

One day a deity asked the Buddha, "Whose merit grows day and night, who is the righteous, virtuous person that goes to the realm of bliss?" Answered the Buddha, "the merit of those people who plant groves, parks, build bridges, make ponds, dwelling places, etc. grows day and night, and such religious persons go to heaven"

(Discourse on the Merit Gained in Planting Groves, Vanaropa Sutta)

For the true servants of the Most Gracious are only those who walk gently on earth.

(The Qur'an 25:63)

And there are on earth many tracts of land close by one another (and yet widely differing from one another); and (there are on it) vineyards, and fields of grain, and

date-palms growing in clusters from one root or standing alone, (all) watered with the same water: and yet, some of them have we favoured above others by way of the food (which they provide for man and beast). Verily, in all this there are messages indeed for people who use their reason.

(The Qur'an 13:4)

The statement named a number of core principles that serve as the framework for peaceful interreligious relations: the importance of religious diversity and peaceful co-existence; universal mercy and compassion; universal justice, human dignity, and non-violence; pluralism, tolerance and religious freedom; rejection of hate, hate speech, and retaliation; and the importance of self-introspection; and living in harmony with the environment.⁵⁴

Gross National Happiness

Around the world, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) are the standard, widely accepted measurements of social well being and development for nations. However, the shortcomings of these metrics are both evident and dangerous, as they only measure certain kinds of economic activity and fail to reflect aspects of human and ecological well-being that are fundamental to life. In response, Bhutan held its first international conference on Gross National Happiness (GNH) in 2004. The key concept comes from Bhutanese Buddhist wisdom, and implies that sustainable development should take a holistic approach towards notions of progress, give equal importance to non-economic aspects of wellbeing, and balance human development with the conservation and protection of the natural world.

INEB, SEM, and Suan Nguen Mee Ma (an Asian social enterprise initiative that has created a Green Market Network across Asia) actively joined the “GNH Movement” in 2005 and continued to search for a holistic development paradigm. After some initial follow-up activities, a small-scale but permanent organization was created: the School for Wellbeing Studies and Research. The three founding partners of the School for Wellbeing are Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok; the Centre for Bhutan Studies based in Thimphu; and the Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, a Siamese umbrella for independent civil society initiatives, founded by Sulak Sivarastra in 1968. Apart from research on “the well-being of society” and organizing a public debate on happiness, “limits to growth,” and sustainable development (with experts including Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz, Vandana Shiva, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Matthieu Ricard, David Loy, and Arthur Zajonc), the School for Wellbeing (inspired by Shiva) started the Towards Organic Asia program, together with partners in the Mekong region. Its major achievement is the start of a Young Organic Farmers’ (YOF) network.

Initiatives like ordaining trees, Gross National Happiness, and the Inter-religious Climate and Ecology network have all drawn deeply from Buddhist wisdom. Interconnection, respect for all beings, and acknowledging and addressing suffering are integral to their ability to inspire as well as their effectiveness. Through SEM and INEB, Buddhist leaders

⁵⁴ <http://www.inebnetwork.org/bmf-home/621-a-high-level-summit-of-buddhist-and-muslim-leaders>

have reached out to share with, influence, and learn from other spiritual traditions across Asia and beyond. Engaged Buddhism offers a vision of thinking about social, ecological, cultural, and spiritual issues in conjunction with economic activity, which is surely a way forward to both a more harmonious and a more balanced planet.

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Somboon Chungprampree (Moo) is a Thai social activist working for peace and justice in Asia. He was involved in the student movement in Thailand, which focused on Environmental Justice and Spiritual Engagement. He is a Program Director of [Spirit in Education Movement \(SEM\)](#), focusing on empowering civil society in Burma, Laos PDR, Cambodia, and Thailand, and serves as Executive Secretary of [International Network of Engaged Buddhists \(INEB\)](#), a core organization in the well-established [International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations \(BMF\)](#).

Hindu Worldviews and the Religious-Environmental Movement **By Gopal Patel and Mat McDermott**

Hindu worldviews

Hindu environmental action starts with an understanding of the concept of *ṛta*: that there is a highly evolved, purposeful order to the cosmic ecosystem that we inhabit. The worldview engendered by *ṛta* is holistic, with all of us making up this order being interconnected as part of a natural system. It suggests that we should contemplate the manifestation and organization of nature as a whole before we do something that may influence it. As humans, we are not separate from nature. We cannot cause permanent harm to nature without, to some degree, also harming ourselves. This is from where three dynamic ideas in Hindu thought emerge: *dharma*, *karma*, and *ahimsa*.

Dharma, broadly defined, is a set of principles and practices that both sustains the cosmic order and binds us in harmony with that order. It outlines and guides the expectations of how to act in relationship with others. An understanding of *dharma* informs how we behave and guides what we do, on a daily basis as well as throughout our lives, as we attempt to have a good life, look for inspiration and insight, seek to offer love to those around us, and ultimately strive for liberation. Each stage of life has its own *dharma* to follow. *Dharma* also varies based on what one does in life. The welfare of society, the welfare of all beings, depends on the labor, the effort, and the contribution of all its members. Each of us has an important role to play, even if at times our efforts seem to have little effect, so that the welfare of all beings is maintained.

At its most basic, coming from its root in Sanskrit, *karma* is action. Expanded slightly, *karma* is the universal principle of cause and effect. All of our actions have a cause, a long series of events influencing present action. In turn, whatever action we take inevitably has ripple effects, moving outwards influencing future events, with the influence sometimes being obvious and direct, and other times very subtle or indirect. Occasionally the effects are felt relatively quickly. Often though, it may take months, years, or lifetimes to witness the ripening of the fruit of our actions.

None of this is strictly deterministic, contrary to popular perception. Rather, *karma* predisposes us to certain actions and thoughts. It makes certain future choices more likely, easier to be taken, than others. Though our past actions, thoughts, and beliefs create predispositions for certain choices, we do have free will. It is up to each of us to decide to either go along with the sometimes deeply ingrained habits *karma* has created for us, or to go against habit and choose a different course of action. In time, through the effort of breaking from habit, this particular *karmic* tendency is eliminated.

Ahimsa (non-harming) is the development of thoughtfulness. In this worldview, every living being is a spiritual person. To be cruel to another person is to disturb their life and cause them suffering. By considering ourselves and others to be vulnerable to suffering, we can resolve not to be the cause of that suffering. Initially we will stop knowingly and unavoidably killing any life form. Then we will be careful in all our actions, and then our

words, and then even our thoughts, all of which can cause harm. The understanding and practice of *ahimsa* is an essential principle of Hindu environmentalism, focusing on how to appreciate, respect, and serve all life.

This holistic approach to the world has a parallel in a holistic approach to self-awareness. The most basic question in developing this self-awareness is, “Who am I?” In attempting to come up with an answer, Indian thinkers have considered our biological identity, our cultural identity, our psychological identity, our intellectual identity, and our spiritual identity. The first four of these identities are mutable. What does not change, say Hindu sages, is our eternal spiritual nature, the *atma*. Identifying primarily with our biological, cultural, psychological, or intellectual identities is identifying with the temporary, identifying with a type of illusion. This has terrible consequences for our environmental relationships. Identifying with *atma* promotes our spiritual desires, naturally restrains our material desires, and helps us consider another dimension in our relationships. When Hindus join palms together in front of the heart and say “*namaste*,” they are referring, linguistically at least, to the *atma*, the energy of life. Everywhere that we see life, we see spiritual energy, and we offer it respect.

Working in multi-faith environments

Through our experience with the Bhumi Project, we have found that when Hindus engage in environmental action, these teachings significantly underpin their thinking. When we have worked with people from other *dharmic* traditions — Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists — we have found commonality in worldviews that are often in contrast with Abrahamic traditions.

For example, in July 2015, GreenFaith and the OurVoices campaign organized a three-day multi-faith religious environmental leadership training program in Rome, Italy. The event brought together 100 faith leaders from 21 to 40 years old from all over the world. Twenty of the participants were from Hindu backgrounds and came from North America, Europe, India and Australasia. A highlight of the event was a procession through central Rome that culminated in St. Peter’s Square. The procession featured many signs and posters calling for environmental change and action. One prominent banner featured the slogan “Fossil fuels are from hell. Solar power is from the heavens.” When the event was over, many of the Hindu participants expressed their objection to the banner. They expressed that it did not reflect their worldview and that it was overtly Abrahamic in tone.

Hindus are taught to understand that there are always shades of grey, that good and bad are only seen as such in accordance with time, place, and circumstance. Furthermore, just as there is no absolute good or evil, there is absolutely no concept of eternal heaven or hell in Hindu theology. Our actions, individual and collective, may bring about circumstances that we perceive as heavenly or hellish. People may behave in ways that in specific circumstances might be described as good or evil, but these are not inherent characteristics of any action. Hindu theology does set up polarities in descriptions of particular actions—harming versus non-harming, ignorance versus insight, suffering versus non-suffering, for example—but these still are shades of grey conditioned by circumstance. The absoluteness of the terms good and evil rarely if ever enter into a Hindu understanding of existence.

For example, in this instance, although using fossil fuels at the levels of consumption we currently do is undeniably causing harm and suffering (through air pollution, water pollution, and climate change), there is nothing inherently hellish about them. In other circumstances of time and place, used to a lesser degree, fossil fuels have provided many good things to humanity, have in fact alleviated suffering. Conversely, while solar power can be said to be from the heavens, there is nothing inherently heavenly about it. Producing solar panels, while certainly preferable to extracting fossil fuels, is not entirely benign; large-scale solar power plants still disturb habitat for other creatures. Even more importantly, simply replacing electricity produced by coal with electricity produced from the sun will not in itself transform us into more environmentally enlightened individuals or communities.

Undoubtedly, all of that is more difficult to fit on a protest banner than the duality of heaven and hell. But while most Hindus understand the practicality of that, the messaging still fails to grasp the totality of the situation, and does not reflect the more nuanced way that Hindu environmental teachings portray our situation.

Another regular area of tension for Hindu environmentalists is that of animal rights, and more specifically, the environmental impact of the livestock industry. For those Hindus who practice vegetarianism, the killing of animals for food is seen as inflicting needless suffering on innocent beings, in total opposition to the principle of *ahimsa*. Eradicating fossil fuels and switching to renewable energy sources is often promoted by Western environmental groups as the overarching solution to our environmental challenges. From a Hindu perspective, however, meat-eating and using polluting forms of energy can be seen as two sides of the same coin: They arise out of placing human and individual needs above the welfare and happiness of other humans and living beings.

Hindu teachings state that there cannot be peace if humans are engaged in needless violent acts. From this perspective, it may be hard for Hindus to accept that the elimination of fossil fuels alone will end environmental destruction, when 56 billion innocent farm animals are killed each year for food. In our experience, we have found Hindus reluctant to raise this topic in interfaith settings, feeling that their views would not be taken seriously.

Hinduism talks of three energies present in the world: *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (delusion, ignorance). These three energies are present in everyone and significantly shape our thoughts and behavior. The food we eat, the music we hear, the company we keep, and the thoughts we harbor all contribute towards the energy by which we are being controlled. Of the three, goodness is the energy that brings the highest personal contentment and a peaceful, sustainable society. Hindus are therefore encouraged to lead lives of goodness, and help others to do so the same. This help often takes the form of education, while being tolerant, respectful, and compassionate to the individual and the situation.

Within the multi-faith environmental movement, we often find a tendency to blame, judge, and shame others. Such styles of campaigning can make Hindus feel uncomfortable. It again

brings in the polarities of “good” and “bad,” and implies an “us” and “them” mentality--that we are right, and they are wrong. For Hindus, everyone is on their own personal journey--a journey of understanding, self-development, or self-realization. For this reason, to point fingers at others can be seen as arrogant and lacking compassion.

For many Hindus, therefore, the tone and messaging of a campaign is very important. Blaming and judging should be avoided, as should connotations of condemnation, overthrowing, destroying, taking-over, etc. Such messaging does not speak of goodness, but of passion and ignorance. For Hindus, goodness can only be created in the world by activities and action that are also in goodness. Using the energies of passion and ignorance will not bring about the sustainable and peaceful world for which we all aspire.

A common path forward

These examples highlight some of the challenges that Hindus encounter when working in multi-faith settings. Often we’ve found that when discussing in multi-faith settings today’s environmental challenges, and the social challenges that both cause and are caused by them, Hindus have many “yes, but...” thoughts that are not articulated. Or, we have to do some silent translation of the Abrahamic phrasing of the discussion, internally acknowledging our differences in worldview but choosing to not speak up out of recognition of a shared desire to see similar solutions implemented. Nevertheless, there is a great need for Hindus to articulate their worldview in a way that is simultaneously true to their shared traditions and beliefs within the community, as well as clear, decisive, and relevant for non-Hindus.

As humans start to come to terms with how our contemporary lives overburden our shared planet, Hinduism (standing alongside Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) offers ways of understanding the interrelationship of all life, comprehending our place in the cosmos in a way that is uniquely suited to our current predicament, as well as guidance on how we each might live with more compassion for our fellow creatures. Though profoundly ancient in origin—Hinduism today is the evolutionary result of more than 5000 years of spiritual exploration, inquiry, and practice, incorporating multiple diverse lineages and schools of thought—Hinduism is thoroughly modern in its outlook. Its emphasis on the interrelationship of all beings operating within a natural order, individualized paths combined with a focus on community and the common good, the pluralism of practice, and the ideal of minimizing the harm of one’s actions are exactly the messages the world needs to hear if we are to rise to the task of transforming our global society into one living within the ecological limits of Earth.

For the Hindu community, this means their worldview needs to be articulated in ways that are understandable for non-Hindus. This requires a level of maturity and understanding of the core tenets of Hindu thought, some of which have been outlined in this paper. It also requires Hindus to be open to acknowledging points of commonality with other faiths, embracing common desires to live on a beautiful and bountiful planet. Indeed, over the past century or so in particular, Hindus have been at the forefront of proclaiming--paraphrasing our own sacred texts--that the divine is one but paths toward that divinity are many. Hindus must, however, also be willing to accept and articulate, in a spirit of mutual respect,

that there are deep points of theological difference on the nature of manifest existence--the relationship of humans to non-humans, to nature as a whole, and to the divine--between the Abrahamic traditions and the Dharmic paths—even though these differences ought not to get in the way of mutual cooperation and shared ecological action.

Those from Abrahamic traditions need to make room for Hindus to articulate their views. It cannot be assumed that second and third generation Hindus living in the Western world think similarly to those from Abrahamic backgrounds, simply because they live in places where Abrahamic traditions are in the majority. Hindus living in the West straddle two worlds, and there is much to be gained from understanding their worldviews and approaches to environmental care.

There are very few Hindu-based sustainable development organizations, and even fewer Hindu groups working on environmental issues in the Western world. It is therefore especially important for interfaith groups to identify and connect with Hindus who can be active in this space. As the Hindu community continues to grow and find a home outside of India, Hindus will be important participants in worldwide multi-faith efforts to address the ecological problems of our time.

Gopal Patel is the Director of the Bhumi Project, a joint project of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and GreenFaith. **Mat McDermott** is the US-based Advisor for the Bhumi Project, and Director of Communications for the Hindu American Foundation.

Laudato Si': A Catholic and Multi-Faith Conversation **Edited by Fletcher Harper and GreenFaith**

On June 18, 2015, the Vatican released Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si': On the Care For Our Common Home*. In addition to global media coverage, the encyclical evoked responses from Catholics and from people of diverse faiths worldwide. It quickly became the highest profile statement ever by a religious leader on the environment.

In September 2015, GreenFaith hosted two webinars: one featuring Catholic responses to *Laudato Si'*, and a second featuring responses from representatives of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Protestant Christian traditions. The following represents a selection of the comments of each of the participants in the two webinars.

Dr. Jame Schaefer, Associate Professor of Theology, Marquette University

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis underscores Earth as a gift that God lovingly willed into existence. God loves all creatures; each creature--human, animal, and plants--and each ecological system is valued by God, and we should love and value them in themselves, apart from their usefulness to us. Love is the primary theme in this first encyclical dedicated to the ecological crisis and prevails throughout as the motivation for acting responsibly in the world.

Within this context of God's love and the human call to love, the Pope draws from the Bible to emphasize how we humans are interconnected with one another, other species, and Earth. They are all our "neighbors" in the most intimate sense. We humans are creatures among creatures, and our relationships with other creatures need to be cultivated. Pope Francis repeats again and again in his encyclical that everyone and everything is related, everyone and everything is connected, everyone and everything is interdependent. Moreover, we need to recognize that we humans are utterly dependent on other species, as well as the air, land, and waters, for our well-being. How we treat them has ramifications for the human species now, especially the poor and vulnerable, and for future generations. For Pope Francis, ecological problems are social problems, and the ecological problems he explores in *Laudato Si'* affect poor and vulnerable people most adversely.

He also clarifies misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the term "dominion" that appear in the Genesis 1 story of creation. Consistent with biblical scholars, he reminds us that dominion does not mean dominate, degrade, or destroy. Nor does dominion mean that we are lords and masters of God's creation. Instead, dominion is the responsibility God gives us that parallels the Genesis 2 story of creation, in which humans are told to take care of and preserve God's creation. There is no place in the Bible for any kind of tyrannical anthropocentrism, for arrogantly making all that exists revolve around ourselves in order to provide what we want individually or as a species.

Pope Francis urges us to value other creatures and systems of Earth intrinsically for themselves according to their natures, and to restrain ourselves in using them. He uses the

term “sobriety” to emphasize the need to restrain our consumption of the goods of Earth and to avoid wasting them. Overconsumption and wastefulness are prevalent today, especially in materially developed countries, and threaten a life-impooverished planet in the future.

That the visible world manifests God’s presence and tells us about God is a prevalent theme in the Catholic theological tradition, especially during the patristic and medieval periods. The visible world is God’s “book of nature” to be contemplated, and Pope Francis urges us to contemplate the world for signs of God. He wants us to be awed by the magnificence of Earth and the entire universe—the gifts that God made possible. He wants us to live in harmony with God’s creation and to cooperate with God’s creation as a way of cooperating with God.

In addition to the Bible and the Catholic theological tradition, *Laudato Si’* builds upon prior papal teachings. Much of what Pope Francis wrote in this epochal encyclical had been mentioned briefly by Pope Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI in their statements and encyclicals. Pope Francis also draws upon pastoral statements issued by bishops throughout the world. Additionally, he refers to other religious leaders who have inspired concern about threats to Earth, especially Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew who first characterized as sins acts that cause the extinction of species and degrade the environment.

Pope Francis addresses *Laudato Si’* to all people of all faiths, as one human family among many diverse creatures that constitute Earth—our common home. People of all faiths are needed to address the ecological-social problems that are ongoing and threaten a diminished and unsustainable planetary home. He also urges all people to move towards an inner and outer ecological conversion—converting from attitudes and actions that have been ecologically and socially destructive, to attitudes and actions through which we live in cooperation with all other species and systems of Earth in a splendid universal communion.

Our spiritual and religious approach to life is vital for this ecological conversion, Pope Francis insists. We must stop thinking that technology is the only answer to the ecological-social problems in which we are enmeshed today. Some technologies may help, but we need to choose technologies that enhance human dignity and the flourishing of Earth.

Dr. Pablo Canziani, Faculty member at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council in Buenos Aires, member of the Board of the Lay Department of the Argentinian Conference of Bishops

This encyclical really effectively brings back together science and the Catholic Church in the sense that it is the first encyclical in many years where all the arguments start from a scientific analysis. The encyclical basically reviews all scientific knowledge regarding the environment, and it does so in a simple and yet sound manner.

Some time ago, in March 2012, there was a very important scientific meeting in London where over 3,000 scientists from different backgrounds, from different perspectives and

religions and lifestyles met to discuss the state of the planet. The meeting was called “Planet Under Pressure,” and it was interesting to see how this encyclical converges on many of the conclusions that the scientific community reached in that conference. [Both the encyclical and that conference] concluded that we are all dependent upon each other, both the natural aspect and human aspect of life on this planet, and that we are interlinked and have to respect each other and all work together to solve all of the problems we have. Another suggestion from scientific research is that we have to learn to live with what we really need. That is one of the major lessons of the encyclical as well.

And while there are questions, as there are always with scientific issues, we know to a high degree of certainty what is going on, and what I find incredibly valuable in this encyclical is how the Pope doesn’t stay with a traditional breakup of science into, say, for example, meteorology and agriculture and then oceanography, but he tries pulling everything together by using state-of-the-art science. He also links science with social sciences in this encyclical, [showing that] we have to speak about social environmental issues and not just environmental issues or social issues.

Lonnie Ellis, Associate Director, Catholic Climate Covenant

The Pope advances some broader proposals for dialogue and action that would involve each of us as individuals and also affect international policy. There are three things he’s really calling us to here. He talks about honest dialogue, urgent action, and he wants deep solutions. He says we need a conversation that includes everyone and honesty. I counted at least six times in his encyclical that Pope Francis calls for honesty or an honest conversation when talking about climate change, and I think honest dialogue really acknowledges there’s a sense of a [scientific] consensus and moves towards solutions. That’s what honesty, I think, requires, and I think that’s why he needs to say that so many times in the encyclical.

He called us to urgent action. You may recall from the encyclical how many times he uses the words “urgency” or “without delay” or these kinds of words. He says fossil fuels, especially coal, need to be replaced without delay.

There’s a subject heading called “civic and political love,” which is such a great way of talking about political activism. His spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life. We need to redefine what the good life means, what it looks like. [He encourages] a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, capable of deep enjoyment [and] free of obsession with consumption. I’m a lay Franciscan, and one of the things we like to say is that the best things in life aren’t things. The Pope talks about a “rapidization,” [that] our lives have become more and more rapidly oriented, that we just schedule one thing after another. Then he really talks about how much simplifying our lives can lead to fuller lives actually, richer lives.

Maryann Cusimano Love, Associate Professor of International Relations, Catholic University of America

There are many times in the document where Pope Francis discusses the ways in which environmental degradation [has] led to conflict and endanger[s] peace.

He speaks about the four P's - care for the poor, our care for the planet, the impact of planetary and poverty concerns on real people, and the impact on peace. That's really not a surprise given his choice of Francis of Assisi as his name. He's telling us in this document, as he has been throughout his papacy, that we need to be like Saint Francis of Assisi, this man of poverty, this man of peace, this man who loves and protects creation. He says our economy kills, and...the people who are least responsible for both environmental degradation and climate change are the ones most hurt by those problems.

I had a chance this summer to go to Ghana and to see the front lines of climate change, a part of Africa that has been impacted by a very severe drought. Cardinal Turkson, who wrote a draft of *Laudato Si'*, who is an advisor to Pope Francis, is from Ghana. So in a sense I was following his footsteps and seeing what he saw in Ghana and the impact he was seeing climate change having, on people and on peace. The drought there has caused real food shortages. Crops are failing. They can't plant crops because of the drought. And when that happens, who suffers? The poor suffer the most, the small farmers who don't have enough to eat, women and children who are small farmers.

In Ghana, like in many other places in the world, there's a huge part of the population who are very young. 40 percent of the people in Ghana are under the age of 14, but they're not getting enough to eat. [These children], if that doesn't kill them outright, if they aren't dying right away from malnutrition, they're suffering throughout their lifetime from decreased growth, decreased cognitive development and impairment from the lack of vitamins and nutrition in their key formative months and years.

The conflict in Syria is an example [of suffering exacerbated by climate change]. The genocide in Darfur is an example of violence over land and water rights. We're also seeing an increased number of refugees as we see in Europe now, people fleeing conflicts, fleeing drought, trying to find access to water and food. The U.S. Department of Defense has determined that climate change is a security threat.

Francis is also saying that population growth alone is not the cause of these problems. Particularly (in the case of) of climate change, the areas of the world where the population is growing the most are not the ones producing greenhouse gas emissions. The countries that actually have a population decline are the ones who have been producing greenhouse gases and creating the problem of climate change. So he's saying often that [population] is a red herring to draw us away from the issue of consumption. The very poor are not the ones consuming the resources, and it's overconsumption of resources that's causing the problems.

Shaunaka Risi Das, Director, the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

Most Hindus will really welcome this statement from Pope Francis, very well thought through, very universal. Specifically on [the question of human identity in the web of creation from a Hindu perspective], unfortunately, there is a bit of an issue [for Hindus. In the West], since the Enlightenment, we haven't seen the individual so much as sacred, but more as human. We make laws and social policy based on the issues of human dignity.

From a Hindu perspective, being human isn't the all in all. Anywhere there is life, the energy of life, that unique spiritual energy is not considered a material energy. It's considered an *atma*. It's a different type of energy that has to be respected. So Hinduism pulls against any form of speciesism. [In the West, w]e have got[ten] used...to dignifying the human dignity as the greatest dignity, et cetera. In terms of true globalization, we will have to at some stage talk about this bigger issue of human dignity being the common denominator of public discourse.

Dr. Kathleen Deignan, CND, Professor of Religious Studies and Co-Founder of the Thomas Berry Forum for Ecological Dialogue at Iona College

I think Shaunaka [has] opened us up to our second theme or second set of concerns, which actually is Francis' way of talking about concern for all beings. But you note this Christian propensity to be selectively focused on humankind. Francis notes...how all created beings are interconnected to the degree of sharing the same DNA, and yet we give a privileged position to the role of the human throughout the living network of life in several special ways.

And perhaps, Rabbi Troster, you could talk about how your tradition understands the place of the human person in creation. Would you say that the human is superior to creatures? Or is the role to be protective? And we want to focus a bit on Francis' echoing of Pope Benedict's remark. Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship throughout the human sphere also harms the environment. So can you say something about that?

Rabbi Lawrence Troster, Rabbinic Scholar in Residence, GreenFaith

One of the things that I found so interesting and inspiring is how many of the sources from the Hebrew Bible that Pope Francis used, and how many of those same sources are found in Jewish environmental writing of the last 40 years. What you see is within the Hebrew Bible, there's more than one voice and more than one perspective on the human.

While...Jewish tradition has put the human as the steward of creation, being created in the image of God, [saying] that God has made us the caretakers of creation--given human power, [these things] have become in fact a reality. Nonetheless, there are voices within the tradition that move to a more biocentrist position--in Psalm 148, which Pope Francis quotes, also in the latter chapters of the Book of Job, and in certain parts of the mystical tradition as well, which understand that we are deeply embedded in what the rabbis called

the *seder b'reshit*, the order of creation. We are not separate from that order. We are part of that order. That should engender in us a sense of responsibility and humility.

Even if in our ethical systems we do give priority to human suffering, nonetheless, I think we must recognize that the destruction of the natural environment is inevitably going to cause injustice and destruction of the human environment. This is a modern idea that the Pope calls integral ecology, which I fully support as a Jewish theologian.

I think also one of the things that our traditions can give is hope, a sense of hope [in the face of the environmental crisis]. Through meditation and prayer, we can draw upon God for spiritual strength. We have a real opportunity to give people a sense of hope and a sense of purpose because of the moral element of this issue.

Ayya Santussika, Buddhist Nun and Teacher at Karuna Buddhist Vihara (Compassion Monastery) in California

From the Buddhist point of view, and I think this is shared clearly in the encyclical and with other traditions, our very life is dependent on our environment and on other living beings. That awareness of interdependency guides us to caring for rather than using up that which supports life.

Buddhism recognizes the good fortune of being born in the human form and having human capabilities because of what that gives us. We also recognize the responsibility and the opportunity to do good that comes with that. Buddha warned against seeing ourselves as superior to others. So I see in this beautiful letter of Pope Francis that we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others, and we fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea what to do with their possessions. I think that's a very beautiful [section of the encyclical in which the Pope writes] that with disregard for human suffering, there's also a disregard for nature and for all the other living beings.

In Buddhism, there's this effort to cultivate compassion and caring. That caring extends to all of life. The first precept of Buddhism is to not take [the] life of any living creature. There were no exceptions, not for revenge or safety or anything else, and certainly not out of inconvenience or dislike.

[Given the urgency of the climate crisis], I would like to add that when we come to that moment where we feel discouraged, what we can realize is that in some way[s] we're clinging to a prior perception of how our collective human response to the climate crisis should play out. We're clinging to the requirements that we want a certain outcome. And if we let go of that clinging, and we turn our attention to our faith, we re-source ourselves through that faith and through our connection with one another and then act again, and we gain the energy to keep going, to avoid despair, to find new answers.

Kathleen Deignan:

Our next reflection concerns the number of times that Pope Francis articulates the principle of the common good throughout the encyclical. It's a very dominant theme, and he applies it in almost every single facet and feature of the human enterprise and this planetary enterprise. Can we speak about this principle of the common good from your tradition, and especially this notion of justice between generations, which we have to wrestle with?

Imam Zaid Shakir, Scholar and Co-Founder, Zaytuna College, Berkeley CA

In terms of the common good, there's a Quranic injunction, a direct command from the Almighty: Cooperate in all those things that are beneficial. So cooperation is something we're enjoined to do. It should be guided by mercy. The Quran describes the mission of Muhammad, saying, "We have sent you but as the mercy to all of creation." We understand that to mean literally all the world – it means the world of the humans, the world of the animals, the world of the insects. So this has clear ecological implications for us.

In terms of the issue of transgenerational consideration, again there's a saying that's very prominent in our tradition that "he or she is not amongst us who does not respect their elders and who is not merciful to their young generation." So the greatest act of mercy that we can convey to our younger generation is to leave them a livable planet, not a planet that's been ravaged by our greed and our appetites, but a planet that is green and lush and supports and sustains life and beautifies and adorns the life of all of its inhabitants, us ourselves as humans and other creatures.

I think [our actions can begin with] just a small level, from planting trees in our yard, fruit trees, other trees, to help replace what's being lost, engaging in organic gardening, and then forming alliances around those things, working with other gardeners and others who are interested in planting trees in public spaces, vacant lots--things of that nature, and then working up from there.

Ultimately...we have to consciously develop alliances that address issues such as those being spoken about, issues related to waste, extravagance, lifestyle changes, that we can all encourage in our communities, and then [move] beyond that to really address some of the major issues that are contributing disproportionately to the destruction of our planet.

In terms of not being overwhelmed, I think one of the advantages we have as people of faith is that we know that if we're with God and right with God, then everything is manageable. And after that I think we just have to see ourselves as raindrops. Individual raindrops come together, and eventually they form mighty rivers. So if we can just understand that no matter how small what we're doing [is], it might seem very small to us, but as it comes together with others and others and others, eventually it will form that mighty river that can be a force for positive change in the world, God willing.

Shaunaka Risi Das

On the issue of the common good, for Hinduism it's the whole issue of *dharma*. The word *dharma* from Sanskrit means to nourish, and it means to nourish the world around you. It's about service, and it's how you act in the world, and you (are meant to) act in a way that nourishes your environment, be that your family, your community, and obviously all the trees and plants and animals that surround it.

Before you eat every day, you're supposed to go out and make sure that no living being, no birds, deer, or whatever else might be in your area, is going hungry. It's a wonderful teaching. And it's very much intergenerational because you do it for absolutely everybody. It's my *dharma* to take care of my parents. It's my *dharma* to make sure that I have considered the principles necessary to be able to respect and love the world around me. So it's something that is actually passed down from generation to generation, a kind of understanding of how you act in the world.

Interestingly, in Hinduism this is not an issue of theism or atheism necessarily. It can be simply the issue of doing good. Everyone should do good, should do the right thing by the world they live in. But when you speak about it spiritually, it brings in an extra dimension because you would respect the world around you because it belongs to God. And every field you see is God's park. Every tree is part of God's domain, and you would respect it as such and cherish it as such. In developing your love for God, you develop your love for the world around you and the wonderful gifts that that world gives. Instead of detracting from the ecosystem, you would try to find your place within it, so that you can contribute meaningfully and relevantly, which could be a humble offering.

And it's not about science, and it's not about climate change. It's a bigger issue. The fact is we can respond to all these things. But how are we responding? It mightn't be very sexy to say that we should become a bit more renounced, or we should defer our selfishness or give it up altogether, or deal with issues of ego, but someone has to say it because these are the issues that cause the environmental problems. We are the problem. And who's going to say it, and who's going to address it? It is the faiths of the world that are saying these things. If we say it collectively, we have a much stronger voice.

Rev. Dr. Neddy Astudillo, Director of Latin American Outreach, GreenFaith; Co-Director, Angelic Organics Learning Center

I would like to also add the experience of a Latina immigrant into the United States. As Christians we realize that we are called to care for the land in which we live regardless of whether we are necessarily welcome or not in this country as immigrants, for example. But we do find inspiration in scripture, like in Jeremiah where the prophet speaks to those who are in exile and calls them to care for the trees, to plant trees, to eat from the fruit, and to marry and have children and to seek the welfare of the city where God has sent us into exile.

We recognize that we cannot achieve ecological justice without social justice. We cannot achieve social justice or human well-being without also achieving ecological justice and realizing what the Earth is going through. And in that relationship with the Earth, then we ask ourselves, what is the good news that the Earth is waiting to hear from us?

In the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 16, Jesus appears telling his disciples, now go and share and preach the good news to all creation. So somehow our journey with Jesus Christ needs to flow throughout the earth.

It is wonderful to see how our common Mother Earth is bringing us all closer together. We've grown separately as religions. It is wonderful that Mother is calling us to come together again. It's very important because I think we also heal ourselves as we do that. We bring voices that have been silent in society and in our churches in the past, indigenous voices, for example, who surprisingly have a lot to say to teach us how to listen to the earth with them. I think as we come together as religions and include the many voices, we all heal in this process. As a Latina living in the US, it's also a call to connect with my roots as Latin American. We're people of many races with lots of background, lots of wisdom within ourselves. So this is a special moment in all our lives.

Rabbi Troster

In traditional (Jewish) sources you definitely see the interconnection between moral behavior and not only the health of human society, but the health of the natural environment. You see this very often in the prophets who link the devastation of the Earth with immorality in society. For example, in Deuteronomy 11, God promises if (the Israelites) keep the covenant, then the land will have rain in its due season and they will have fertility. But if they don't, it won't.

Even if we do not directly connect the actions of God today with the way climate is changing, nonetheless, we actually know as a fact that humans can devastate the Earth with many of the extractive industries. In modern Jewish tradition we see this not as God punishing us, but rather God giving us responsibility for our actions. In fact we have learned that the Earth is responsive to our actions whether moral or immoral. And we have the ability to do what we call *tikkun olam*, the healing of the Earth, if we choose to do so.

Ayya Santussika

In Buddhism we're taught that there's no lasting happiness in material things. I know that we all know that. It's not just Buddhists. Everything that we acquire is impermanent and ultimately a source of suffering.

Acquiring doesn't fill that void within. Eventually we suffer from grasping after things. In this excessive consumption that we're engaged in in the world now, people are encouraged to buy things even when they don't have the money to do it. With that ability to purchase

and choose, there comes a false sense of individual power and freedom. This also winds up really being a huge disappointment, because it doesn't equate to real power and freedom.

So all of this intoxication with sensual pleasure and indulgence and gaining things, acquiring things, has a serious effect, as we all know, on the environment and on other people and cultures. So Buddha praised simplicity and having few wishes. And he praised renunciation, which is a word that a lot of people nowadays don't like. But it's coming from a misunderstanding of what renunciation actually is. (Renunciation is) the letting go of that which holds us down, and trading up to something that's much more satisfying, lasting, and supportive of our true life and happiness.

Faith Rising: Multi-Faith Millennial Voices on the Climate Crisis
By Lotifa Begum, Allen Ottaro, Nimai Lila Das, Rabbi Yonatan Neril, and
Mélanie Schifter

In June 2015, GreenFaith held the Emerging Leaders Multi-Faith Climate Convergence (the Convergence) in Rome, a gathering of 110 Millennial generation leaders from multiple faiths and more than 30 countries. The Convergence began on June 28 with a dramatic march by several thousand people of diverse faiths as well as environmentalists into St. Peter's Square, to thank Pope Francis for his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. It continued with a three-day series of workshops and trainings at which these young faith leaders shared their passions and concerns with each other, built relationships, and developed climate action plans which they would proceed to implement in their home countries. Convergence participants developed the hashtag #faithrising and launched an active on-line community of mutual encouragement that continues to this day.

To lift up the voices and perspectives of this new generation of multi-faith leaders under age 35, we invited several of them from different countries to share their perspective on the intersection of faith and the climate crisis, bringing their generational identity to bear.

Vulnerability-Inspired Activism: The Perspective of a Young Muslim Climate Activist
Lotifa Begum, Global Campaigns Coordinator, Islamic Relief Worldwide, is based in the UK.

Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries. It is also my family's homeland.

As a young British Muslim woman, I have seen firsthand the impact of climate change on my family and community in Bangladesh. People I know personally struggle to grow sufficient crops every year due to heavy rainfall and floods. In 2009, Cyclone Aila damaged or destroyed 500,000 thatched homes, 7,000 km of roads, and 123,000 hectares of agricultural land.⁵⁵ Many people are still recovering from its devastation.

I visited my home country in the wake of Aila, and could see the poverty and despair of those bearing the brunt of climate change, a crisis to which they had contributed nothing. The visit left me with a huge sense of moral responsibility. I became adamantly committed to raising awareness about the faith-inspired teachings in Islam where the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "God has made the earth green and beautiful, and He has appointed you as stewards over it." Islam teaches that Allah has created the earth in balance and as a unity. Muslims learn that we must be conscious about using the finite resources God has bestowed upon us, and teaches us to be conscious about destroying the earth gifted to us. We need to take these teachings seriously because they are now a matter of life and death.

⁵⁵ <http://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/cyclone-aila-losses-bangladesh-estimated-269-mln-usd> accessed 6.1.16

This prophetic tradition pertinently describes my motivation and sense of custodianship as a Muslim campaigner and climate activist with Islamic Relief. I believe that while the secular environmental movement is powerful, people of faith add a loud and powerful voice in the fight against climate change. Faith communities can be motivated by spiritual teachings to make positive social change and bring about social justice, and can offer a strong and inspiring sense of purpose towards protecting our earth, from which people are often otherwise detached in their day-to-day lives.

I've pushed forward the issue of climate change in the wider Muslim community through initiatives that include an Interfaith Youth lobby at the Houses of Parliament, where 30 young people from the Abrahamic faiths came together to lobby their MPs on climate change. I helped to mobilize Islamic leaders internationally with the launch of the groundbreaking Islamic Climate Change Declaration⁵⁶ last year. I felt privileged, and excited, to be part of these actions.

Within my Muslim community, I see Millennials as more environmentally educated and conscious than preceding generations. I find hope in the actions taken by Millennials to raise awareness about changing our lifestyle and habits, actions which are not always as high a priority for older generations. The direct impact we are already seeing from climate change requires a strong movement created and led by young people of all faiths and no faith to put pressure on decision makers to act before it is too late. Islam teaches that we should leave this world in a better place than we found it, and that there are immense rewards for those who plant even one seed before the earth perishes.

Unlike other issues, addressing climate change and protecting the earth is something that all faiths agree upon. All faiths teach at their core that we are to cherish and care for the earth. This common vision is what has inspired me to work with people of diverse faiths. Governments, multinational corporations, and non-governmental organizations have a great deal of power and influence. However, faith communities reach billions of faithful global citizens who can take action at a local level to have a positive global impact.

The large amount of faith-inspired action in response to last year's Paris Agreement shows how much faith communities can contribute—but we need to do more to move forward as a generation. We need to be well informed about the religious and moral duty to take care of our earth. We need to be better engaged in actions that bring about sustainable change. We need to save more lives from the catastrophe of climate change before it is too late. We must act, now.

Young People of Faith and Climate in an African Context

Allen Ottaro, founder and director of Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa, is based in Kenya.

Four years ago, several friends and I started a conversation about how, as young Catholics in Africa, we could get involved in sustainable development issues. At the time, a series of

⁵⁶ <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/>

forums were running in a number of African countries, in preparation for the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, more popularly known as the Rio+20 Conference.

One such forum was held in Nairobi, specifically for Kenyan youth leaders. I applied to participate as a representative of the youth ministry of my home diocese, and was accepted. As it turned out, I was the only representative of a faith organization, something that was quite perplexing to fellow participants and to me, albeit for different reasons. While participants from secular youth organizations wondered what faith had to do with matters related to sustainable development, I was concerned that not enough faith representatives were at the table. This disconnect fuelled conversations with my Catholic friends, eventually leading to the creation of the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNESA), which I currently lead.

At CYNESA, Catholic Social Teaching on care of creation is a major pillar of our work. Some of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching that have deeply touched and motivated us to get engaged in climate change issues as a young Catholics are teachings on the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, care for God's Creation, and solidarity – the belief that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. I remember clearly coming to the realization that my faith is “a faith that does justice,” and therefore, climate justice has to be part of the expression of my faith.

On a global scale, Africa has contributed the least to global carbon emissions, but is the most vulnerable and hardest hit by the impact of climate change. This is something I have seen close to home. Just a few weeks ago, raging floods caused the collapse of a building in a low-income neighbourhood in Nairobi. Over fifty people were killed. Many others in poorer parts of the city lost their homes. It was yet another reminder of the need to listen to both “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

As a young boy growing up in the small town of Njoro, situated in Rift Valley province of Kenya, I marvelled at the green and forested hills I saw on the horizon. However, I was also perturbed by the many trucks and tractors that I saw ferrying hundreds of logs every hour to local saw mills. As I grew older, I watched the trees I was used to as a young boy disappear, followed soon after by the closure of the saw mills. The forests had been depleted. Water shortages began to afflict Njoro. The variety of vegetables and other farm produce in the local market declined. However, I was not sure if I could do anything about the situation. After re-discovering my faith in my early twenties, Catholic Social Teaching clarified for me the links between my faith and social justice. Gradually, my passion to engage my faith in caring for creation became intense and more concrete.

As our goals and objectives at CYNESA have continued to develop, my colleagues and I have discovered that while our faith as Catholics fires us up to do something about the climate crisis, we can not do it alone. We all grew up and went to school with people from all faiths. In fact, many of the important social developments in Kenya have been realized through interfaith initiatives. Pope Francis underscored this point when he met faith leaders on the first full day of his visit to Kenya in November 2015. He said, “In democratic and pluralistic

societies like Kenya, cooperation between religious leaders and communities becomes an important service to the common good.”

Responding to climate change is certainly “an important service to the common good.” In my context, I see that young people have a great sense of solidarity with their peers from different faiths and understand the importance of cooperation between faith communities. I personally experienced this last summer, when over 100 young people from across the world gathered in Rome for the Emerging Leaders Multi-faith Climate Convergence. In a spirit of mutual respect, we shared experiences of climate change and activism, inspired each other to create action plans, and most importantly, formed deep bonds of friendship. This past May, CYNESA, the United Church of Canada, and the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University co-hosted an interfaith “GreenRoom” event which explored the contributions of faith communities in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals at the recently concluded United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-2).

Young people of faith are showing the way, shifting the conversation on climate change towards hope, and showing that interfaith collaboration is a newly emerging, yet normal form of religious expression.

A New Kind of Target

Nimai Lila Das is a monk in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and Chief Sustainability Officer at Govardhan Ecovillage, in Maharashtra, India.

We are living at a juncture in the history of this planet, a juncture that will define what history books of the future will depict. The story, about our relationship to Mother Bhumi (Sanskrit for Mother Earth), will either describe a phenomenal transformation or a tragically wasted opportunity.

Climate change is no longer an abstract concept. In India, it is a harsh reality. Born in India and belonging to the Millennial generation, I have seen my nation undergo many transformations in the past three decades – from a struggling agrarian economy into a booming technological power house. In the race to catch up with other advanced economies, India has been repeating the same mistakes as others, compromising our ecological health and biodiversity for economic prosperity. But now, the impact of climate change is hitting us hard. In India, more than 60% of the population is dependent on climate sensitive sectors. The global ecological crisis is one we cannot escape.

While respect for nature and reverence for all forms of life has been intrinsic to Indian culture for millennia, it is quite astonishing to see how various ecological systems in India are being degraded. Hindu sacred texts, the Vedas, explain how God expands like creation, and how every element in creation is to be held sacrosanct. It is quite common to see rivers, mountains, forests, and even plants and animals considered holy in India. Traditional Hindu rituals, customs, practices, and lifestyle have been centered on such eco-centric values. At its very heart, Hinduism respects nature’s diversity, and shows us that by living respectfully of nature, we progress towards our divine unity with God.

These traditions have long protected the ecological systems of India. But today, these faith-based values are slowly diminishing. As India surges ahead on the path of economic development, more and more youth of my generation are confused about their cultural identity; a dichotomy in value systems haunts them from within. Often in their pursuit of economic gain, they have lost inner peace; in the quest for higher education, they have not yet explored the depths of their rich spiritual tradition.

Like most youth of this nation, I aspired to socioeconomic betterment through technological advancement. I earned a Master's degree in engineering, feeding my intellect with the best skills from one of the top universities in India. Later I was proud to be involved in one of the pioneering military projects in India. Our team's job was to build a missile launcher, completely based on Indian technologies. As a control engineer, my role was to design a mechanism to control the launcher's movement with the finest degree of precision. After months of hard work we did manage to achieve this goal. It was time for us to rejoice. And amidst all the celebrations, an indomitable thought surged in my heart: "Using all my skills, I can control the launching angle of the missile with the best possible precision, but I have absolutely no control over the person who is going to press the launch button."

I could have very easily disowned the indirect consequences of my actions. But the cosmic laws reveal that if we are not contributing to the solution, we are definitely part of the problem! Based on the Vedic teachings on the law of karma, I understood that I will also be held accountable for the result of the missile attack. It was then that I realized that it is not enough to be a good employee or a righteous individual; one must lead one's life in a way that can make one righteous by a universal standard, and at a wider social and systemic level. It is the books of faith that teach these universal standards by which one can learn to resolve the dichotomies of life and harmonize life's goals.

Often I am asked, "What relevance do these ancient Hindu teachings have in addressing modern day ecological issues? Shouldn't we be focusing our efforts on developing technologies that solve future issues?" The answer is both yes and no. Technological interventions, while important, cannot solve the current crises of the world. Along with engineering, a technological "skill," there is a dire need to foster an eco-friendly "will" among each one of us. We need a will to say NO to high carbon footprint lifestyles and a will to say YES to alternative lifestyles.

Bringing about this change is a big challenge. Even with our existing technologies, so much could be done. Yet to date, we have not mustered the will to use these technologies in meaningful ways. As Gus Speth, a senior advisor on climate change once said, "I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that." As a person of faith, I see that I can contribute my part in bringing this transformation; I see interesting times ahead, where faith can redefine the future.

Why I Care About and Act on Climate Change

Rabbi Yonatan Neril is founder and executive director, The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, based in Jerusalem. (www.interfaithsustain.com)

I care about climate change because God has entrusted us with a gift, Planet Earth. I care because we are facing a spiritual and religious crisis. My soul cares for all of creation-- people, animals, birds, fish, trees, plants, insects, and microorganisms. I care about the Divine vision for Planet Earth, teeming with life, manifesting the wondrous diversity that the Creator has bestowed upon it. I care because the Creator has given human beings abilities unique among all the Earth's creatures, and we are being tested regarding whether or not we will use those abilities in a Divine-aware way. I care because the way we are living and acting is not in resonance with the Higher will.

I care because I want my children to inherit a liveable planet. I do not want them to experience the extreme *Storms of My Grandchildren* that the leading climatologist Dr. James Hansen warns about in his book by this title. I want them to enjoy and appreciate nature, and not for nature to wreak havoc on them. I want them to eat healthy, local foods that are nourished from beneficial rains that come at the right time. I want them to live in peace, and to have positive, peaceful relations with their neighbors. And I desire the same for their children, and their children's children. Older generations were less aware of the magnitude of the problem, and thus less compelled to act. But our generation cannot wait. Unless we radically change our orientation, the life I envision will not be possible for my children and grandchildren.

I care because I fear for my own future. From Jerusalem, I know that in neighbouring Syria, millions of refugees flee a civil war that, research indicates,⁵⁷ was partly fuelled by recent drought⁵⁸ exacerbated by climate change. I care because I do not want to see other countries afflicted by similar levels of disruption and suffering.

Why have I chosen to engage these issues from a faith perspective? Because we must confront irrationality, hatred, and despair with hope and optimism inspired by religious teachings. Because religions can be God's gift to humanity for a sustainable future, containing sacred teachings for how to live in balance on this planet. A 2014 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and the American Academy of Religion found that "most Americans who attend religious services at least once or twice a month hear little from

⁵⁷ Mark Fischetti, *Climate Change Hastened Syria's Civil War*, Scientific American, March 2, 2015, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-change-hastened-the-syrian-war/> citing "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought," Kelly et. al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S., January 30, 2015,

<http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.abstract?sid=c60a6740-eb55-4fb5-a249-615704e6881e>

⁵⁸ Benjamin I. Cook, Kevin J. Anchukaitis, Ramzi Touchan, David M. Meko, Edward R. Cook, *Spatiotemporal drought variability in the Mediterranean over the last 900 years*, Journal of Geophysical Research, First published: 4 March 2016, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/2015JD023929/full>

their clergy leaders about the issue of climate change."⁵⁹ As long as this remains the case, it is unlikely that there will be bipartisan action on climate change – a fact that has been made all too obvious after 30 years of inaction in the US Congress.

I draw on Jewish teachings as a source of inspiration and guidance for sustainability. In *Ethics of the Sages* (Pirkei Avot), it states, “Who is the wise person? The person who can see the effect of their actions.”⁶⁰ Each one of us is called upon today to look into what is likely to be and to try change the way we are living now—to change both our spiritual and physical orientation.

I choose to promote sustainability through interfaith work in order to multiply our impact. I am inspired and energized in working with clergy of many faiths who come together to promote a liveable planet for us and future generations. By working in an interfaith context, I have found common cause with people who think and dress differently than me, yet who share the same home that is Earth. I find this to be energizing and inspiring.

Out of this sense of inspiration, and living in Jerusalem, I founded and direct The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development (ICSD), the largest interfaith environmental organization in the Middle East. Because so many seminarians – myself included – received little seminary education and training on ecological concerns, ICSD encourages and helps seminaries to increase their work in this area. Because my generation recognizes that science and faith absolutely must work in concert to meet the environmental crisis, ICSD convenes clergy and scientists, and creates short videos spread via social media to promote public awareness, political will, and action. Close to home, ICSD engages women of faith in Jerusalem on the intersection of religion, coexistence, and environmental stewardship, and we educate visitors on the connection between the Holy Land, ecology, and faith teachings. In a city that symbolizes the hope and the challenge of our religiously plural world, we do our best to help people of all faiths put theirs into action for the earth.

What About Those Not In The Ark?

Mélanie Schifter is Programme Assistant at the Globethics Leadership Centre in Geneva and is a member of the Climate Change Working Group of the World Council of Churches.

Born in 1988 to an Asian Buddhist mother and a European Christian father, what I call home spans two continents. Experiencing life in beautiful and yet impoverished Thailand, on the one hand, and enjoying life in abundance in developed Germany, on the other, I was confronted with questions of justice from very early on. Growing up, I found that I could not turn a blind eye to either reality—I was and always would be a part of and home in both realities.

⁵⁹ *Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted about Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science*, Nov. 21, 2014, online at <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014-Climate-Change-FINAL1.pdf>

⁶⁰ This translation by the author is based on Maimonides' interpretation of the mishnaic text.

But it was specifically the climate realities in Southeast Asia—and the injustice these realities entail—that has made me an activist on the matter. I share the conviction of Peter Christian, President of Micronesia, that “I need no convincing. I am convinced already that there is danger in the air.”⁶¹ I have seen the negative impacts of climate change that go beyond “nature” and affect issues like food security, peace and war, livelihood, and the dignity of people. If one part of the world is suffering, the other cannot turn a blind eye.

When it comes to climate change, it was much less my environmentalist heart than my drive for justice that pulled me in--a drive that does not only derive from my hybrid heritage but from my Christian faith as well. Faith touches the human heart and is a reminder that we are one human family. As God’s children, our linguistic, racial, cultural, and religious differences are not meant as divisions but as elements of a beautiful mosaic. We are one human family and we are accountable to one another.

The crown of creation is not meant merely as a jewel to hold, but it is a great responsibility. Jesus said: “I have come to give you life in its fullness” (John 10:10). He invited all nations and peoples to participate and enjoy the feast of life, overcoming the powers of death and destruction. When life in its fullness is in danger, the commitment to peace, justice, and the integrity of creation is ultimately an aspect of discipleship. It is a spiritual task.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis presents us with a moral imperative to act. He tells us that questions of social justice must be integrated in debates on the environment, so as to hear “both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”⁶² This defines the intimate relationship that exists between the poor and the fragility of our planet. It emphasizes that human beings are in an interdependent relationship with our common home, the Earth.

Mother Earth has cried out in pain many times, and that call has gone unanswered too often. She has cried out louder, begging us to respond. She cried out to us in 2013 when typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, killing at least 6,300 people. She cried out to us again in 2015 when cyclone Pam hit the South Pacific islands. Meanwhile, the victims in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have joined her voice, with cries of injustice: “God promised to send no more flood, and now those who have caused the climate change seem to be sitting in the ark.” To an apathetic world, they plead in desperation: “Why have you forsaken us?” Victims of climate change are the new face of “the poor, the widow and the stranger” (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). As a Christian, I am called to respond to the pleas of the vulnerable and protect the integrity of creation.

I confess God as creator of heaven and earth, and of all living creatures. This implies that God, as creator of all, is active and present in the life of all people – irrespective of the religion they claim. Confessing the biblical testimony of God as Creator of all things means

⁶¹ cf. Peter M. Christian, Statement made at the COP21 Leaders Event, 30 November 2015, Citing Sources: [http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris_nov_2015/application/pdf/cop21cmp11_leaders_event_micronesia.pdf]: page 1: [May 27, 2016]

⁶² Holy Father Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’: On Care For Our Common Home*, 2015, Citing Sources: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html]: para. 49: [May 27, 2016]

taking seriously the diverse, wholehearted expressions of all faiths around the world. As one human family, there is a special need to collaborate with the “religious other” in the search for a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

There have been wonderful first steps in the global fight on climate change, notably the Paris Agreement adopted at COP21 last year, where faith communities stood together and had a strong voice. The task now – especially for faith communities – is to turn these grand statements into acts of love and charity. Every person of every spiritual community needs to bring his or her principles of justice to the table; together we can turn the tide.

Faiths and Water: The Role of Faith Communities in Water and Sanitation **By Susie Weldon**

Long before international humanitarian agencies were established, faith groups were providing help to those in need – feeding the hungry; providing care for the sick; and offering refuge and hospitality to those uprooted by disasters, persecution, or war. Today, these expressions of charitable service extend to issues around water and sanitation, with faith groups increasingly involved in building wells, water pumps and toilets; advocating rights to water; promoting water conservation; teaching good hygiene practices in their schools and communities; and, in some cases, campaigning against practices such as hydraulic fracking.

This development should come as no surprise. After all, water is not only absolutely essential for human life; it is also central to the scriptures and practices of virtually every major religious tradition. Water is also intrinsically linked to another important religious value, cleanliness, which in many traditions stands as a metaphor for spiritual purity (e.g. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin,” Psalms 51:78).

For these reasons, water has a highly symbolic value in many religions and, together with washing, plays a key role in ceremonies and religious rites. For example, in Christian baptisms, water symbolizes being born into a new spiritual life. Jesus Christ describes himself as “living water” (John 4.14) and says: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5).

For Buddhists, water represents “the sweet nectar” of the Buddha’s teachings, which quench spiritual thirst. For Hindus and Sikhs, water manifests the presence of the Divine, and handwashing is significant in Buddhist practice. The Hindu god Krishna says: “I am the taste in water” (Bhagavad Gita 7.8), which is why devout Hindus repeat the mantra, “Sri Visnu Sri Visnu Sri Visnu,” before drinking a glass of water, to remind themselves that they are about to taste God’s universal presence. Bathing in the sacred Ganges River is an important religious ritual for Hindus who believe it washes away sins.

In Islam, water is considered a gift from God, which is why providing water for others is an important charitable act, and one of the seven acts of virtue that accrue blessings (al-Munawi, Fayd al-Qadir, iv.87). So important is cleanliness in Islam that *wudu*, a ritualistic ablution that includes washing the face, hands, and feet before prayers, is essential to Muslim spiritual practice. As the Hadith states: “The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “The key to Paradise is prayer – and the key to prayer is cleanliness” (Sunan At-Tirmidhi 4).

Water is a particular focus of Jewish thought and law; the latter stipulates that hands should be washed immediately upon awakening and before every meal, and that immersion of the whole body is essential for conversion to Judaism. Water serves as a ubiquitous metaphor for Jewish teaching and learning (Torah). More practically, Jewish law also provides explicit guidance around the protection of water sources and also toilet

practices. The Torah says: “Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself” (Deuteronomy 23:13).

So how do these teachings translate into practical action regarding water and sanitation? In taking action, faith groups are responding to the urgent need of the world’s poorest people, around 650 million of whom do not have access to clean water, and 2.3 billion of whom – one in three of the world’s population – do not have adequate sanitation.⁶³

In particular, they are responding to the suffering masked by these bald statistics, particularly for children. Around 315,000 children under five years of age die every year from diarrheal diseases caused by dirty water and poor sanitation – 900 children every day⁶⁴ – and diarrheal diseases remain the sixth biggest killer of older children aged 10-14.⁶⁵ For every untimely death, many more suffer repeated debilitating infections that stunt their growth and future life chances, and trap them in a cycle of poverty and disease.

Water: “A touchstone of our calling”

The New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore, MD (USA), has been involved in water-related outreach for over a decade, as a result of a new understanding that practical action around water is essential to its core mission to deliver God’s promise of life more abundantly (John 10:10), explains Bishop Walter Scott Thomas, Sr.⁶⁶ NPBC’s journey to this new understanding began after the 2004 Boxing Day Sumantra-Andaman earthquake in the Indian Ocean, which triggered devastating tsunamis in South East Asia and East Africa. Like many faith communities, NPBC sent aid to relief agencies working on the disaster. “In that moment, we believed ourselves to be operating squarely in accordance with our most fundamental tenets; we had empowered members of our congregation to join with others to provide aid and comfort,” says Bishop Thomas.

At the same time, NPBC began a conversation with World Vision on how African-American faith-based organizations could become more engaged outside the United States. As a result of these discussions, NPBC concluded that its notion of empowerment had to change, explains Bishop Thomas: “It followed that where life could not be sustained, then empowerment would not be practical or possible, and where there was no water, life could not be sustained. Water, then, emerged as a touchstone of our effort to live true to our more robustly defined calling.”⁶⁷

How has this manifested itself in practical action? One example is NPBC’s involvement in Shadrack Kimalel Primary School in Nairobi, Kenya.⁶⁸ Today, Shadrack Kimalel is one of Nairobi’s most popular schools, with a long waiting list for its 1,800 places, but just a few years ago, the school had significant problems. Not only was it located in one of Nairobi’s

⁶³ [Wateraid: The crisis](#)

⁶⁴ [Wateraid: The crisis](#)

⁶⁵ WHO (2014): *Health for the World’s Adolescents*, section 3 pg 2.

⁶⁶ Alliance of Religions and Conservation (2009): *Faith in Water* publication

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Faith in Water/UNICEF (2015), *Putting Clean Hands Together*

slums; there was just one water tap for the whole school and almost no functioning toilets. In 2009, Shadrack Kimalel was twinned with the New Psalmist Baptist Church, which began providing toilets, water tanks, and taps. They made sanitary kits for the girls, which meant they were able to stay in education for longer, instead of missing days when they were menstruating. NPBC also joined with other churches to dig six wells for those living in some of the most arid areas of Kenya. Outreach teams distributed food, shoes and hygiene products in local villages. “It took very little time for us to observe that providing clean water had been the essential resource to sustaining community empowerment efforts,” says Bishop Thomas.⁶⁹

NPBC’s involvement in Kenya has transformed Shadrack Kimalel Primary School and the lives of its pupils and wider community. It has also had an impact on the congregation back home, says Bishop Thomas: “As our exposure to and participation in efforts to address people’s most fundamental needs have grown, and as our partnerships have continued to develop, we have found the context in which to live out the rest of our charge – to express the good news of God’s promise, to help individuals find His path to each of their next great places of revelation.”⁷⁰

Finding water in Vrindavan

On another continent entirely, a Hindu initiative has been working since 1990 to bring clean water to villages surrounding Vrindavan, a town in Uttar Pradesh, India, and an important Hindu pilgrimage site. According to Hindu teaching, Vrindavan is where Lord Krishna spent his childhood days and it is said that when he left, the cowherd girls cried so hard their tears mixed with the water, making it salty. Today much of Vrindavan’s ground water is indeed salty, not fit for drinking, but its rivers are also highly polluted by the dumping of toxic waste.

The Hindu program Food for Life Vrindavan began by distributing food to the poor, but has expanded to many more activities, from providing free education to approximately 1,000 children to providing water to villages. One of those villages is Javat, where women used to have to walk nearly three kilometers to fetch water from a muddy water source. Girls often missed school because they were collecting water, and people frequently fell ill.

The Food for Life team consulted with the village *panchayat*, or governing body. They dug a well to reach fresh ground water, and built a pump house and water tanks. Pipes were laid to three water taps in the village itself, and every household pays a small monthly pump maintenance fee to keep the project sustainable.

When Food for Life Vrindavan built its Sandipani Muni School, serving the poorest children in the area, it included water harvesting in its construction. Rainwater is collected via the roof and stored in a 100,000-liter underground link, and used for irrigation and cleaning, while wastewater is used for flushing toilets. A reverse osmosis water filtration plant

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

provides clean water for drinking, bringing the harmful TDS (total dissolved solids) count down from 2,200 milligrams per liter to 85mg/L (the Environmental Protection Agency has prescribed an acceptable limit of 500mg/L). “When we started our school, we saw the incredible potential: 1,000 children who do not litter, who close taps and are careful not to waste water,” says director Rupa Ragnath Das.⁷¹

A “universal and inalienable right”

Both NPBC and Food for Life Vrindavan have taken pragmatic approaches to water problems, building facilities to provide clean water and adequate sanitation. In El Salvador, the Catholic Church played a prominent role in advocating for people’s rights to water that gave one community the support it needed to take matters into its own hands. In taking action, the Church was responding to its own social teachings on justice. As the Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church notes: “Without water, life is threatened. Therefore the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right” (paragraph 485).

El Salvador’s Lower Lempa region has plenty of water, but a long history of contamination by agrochemicals from cotton and sugar plantations, as well as from untreated waste, means most of it is contaminated. Local people knew they could not rely on politicians for help; the government wanted people to abandon the land – a position many suspected had more to do with the desires of wealthy cotton and sugar barons to expand their operations than any concern for the rural poor.

Local people formed community organizations, supported by international NGOs and, crucially, the Catholic Church. The Church lobbied hard on the issue, and also undertook a massive awareness raising campaign to highlight the dangers of drinking contaminated water. Together, they launched an autonomous water project, run by the local community, in which piping was laid to deliver clean water directly to people’s homes.

Each family committed a certain amount of time and labor to dig and lay the piping, and today, most people living in Lower Lempa region have access to clean water. The Church’s support was vital in giving the community the confidence it needed to address the situation; without it, they would almost certainly have lost the land to the government or corporations.

In November 2015, on a visit to Kenya’s Kangemi slum in Nairobi, Pope Francis reiterated the social teaching that had motivated the Church’s involvement in Lower Lempa region: “Access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival,” he said, adding that people needed access to infrastructures and basic services. “By this I mean toilets, sewers, drains, refuse collection, electricity, roads, as well as schools, hospitals, recreational and sport centers, studios and workshops for artists and craftsmen.”⁷²

⁷¹ Alliance of Religions and Conservation (2009): [Faith in Water](#)

⁷² *Laudato Si'*, 30.

Clean water for prayer

The conflict between water pollution and the need for clean water for religious rituals was a major driver behind a campaign by *pondok pesentren* (religious boarding schools) in the Batang Gadis watershed area in North Sumatra, Indonesia.⁷³ The Batang Gadis river flows like a major artery through the forests of six different watershed areas, spreading out into smaller streams and creeks for more than 137.5 kilometers. This watershed system supplies almost all of the domestic water needs of 400,000 people in the region. Around 13,000 students attend Islamic boarding schools across Sumatra and rely on the river for bathing, and to perform *wudu*, ritual washing before prayers, five times a day.

When Conservation International began an effort to conserve a large tract of forest rich in wildlife but at risk from proposed logging and gold mining concessions, it began by approaching the most influential person in the community: the imam of one of the biggest and best known boarding schools in the region, Al Mustafawitah, which had more than 7,000 students. Initially, the imam was skeptical about Conservation International's claims that the river would become polluted if the proposed mining and logging activities went ahead as planned – the same water that he and thousands of students relied upon for *wudu*. But after Conservation International took him to the upper part of the Batang Gadis River to see the results of these activities with his own eyes, he agreed they were polluting the river and that this contaminated water would not be at all suitable for performing *wudu*. He began discussing the issue with his students and the wider community. As awareness of the issue spread, concern grew from the bottom up and resulted in intense lobbying by Muslim leaders and secular agencies working together. Eventually, after a long and arduous process, Batang Gadis was awarded National Park status and in 2003, more than 13,000 Muslim students and leaders gathered with other civil society groups to celebrate the river's protection.

India's disappearing groundwater

In another part of Asia, concerns about diminishing groundwater in the Punjab, India, is fuelling a water conservation campaign among young people by the Sikh environmental movement, [EcoSikh](#). Groundwater supplies in northern India, probably the most heavily irrigated region in the world, are dwindling at an alarming rate. Satellite gravity observations⁷⁴ show that between 2002 and 2008, more groundwater was lost from this area than from any other comparable-sized region on Earth.

The Punjab is the bread basket of India, and Sikhs are the main farmers in the Punjab, so they are on the frontline of concerns that this non-renewable resource is rapidly becoming exhausted and that soon there will not be enough water for human and animal use.

⁷³ [Alliance of Religions and Conservation](#) case study

⁷⁴ Tiwari, VM, Wahr, J, Swenson, S (2009), [Dwindling groundwater resources in Northern India](#), Geophysical Research Letters, Vol 36

EcoSikh's Punjab team teaches adults and children about how and why they should conserve and protect water as part of its program to "green" Sikh practice.

These principles have been extended to Sikhism's holiest site, Sri Harmandir Sahib, or the Golden Temple, which is visited by around 100,000 people each day to make devotional offerings and bathe in its holy waters. Plastic water bottles are banned here and instead water stations, staffed by volunteers as part of the Sikh principle of service, provide visitors with cups of clean, fresh water.

Working with faith schools on WASH

Some faith-based initiatives on water and sanitation have their roots in the growing faith engagement with environmental matters; EcoSikh is one such example. Others have arisen out of the faiths' extensive role as providers of education around the world, with faith traditions linked to up to 50% of schools worldwide,⁷⁵ whether because they founded them, run them, or fund them. When in 2010, the [Alliance of Religions and Conservation](#) (ARC) was tasked by the World Bank and Government of Norway with engaging religious groups in sub-Saharan Africa on sustainable land and water management, its faith partners were keen to include their schools.

But when it came to developing pilot climate change or environmental projects in faith-based schools in Africa, ARC found that all of them wanted to focus on water and sanitation. It's a measure of the scale of the water problems they faced that it was hard to persuade them to look at other issues such as waste or energy. And so in 2015, a new charity, [Faith in Water](#), was launched out by ARC, specifically to work with faith schools on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and to broker partnerships between religious groups and secular organizations.

How is it doing so? Take Ebukooka Primary School of 890 pupils, founded by the Anglican Church of Kenya and located in a poor rural area in Kisumu, Kenya.⁷⁶ Ebukooka's toilet facilities were a disaster; some had collapsed and were completely unusable while others were poorly constructed; for example, doors opened inwards towards the toilet, which meant any feces on the floor could easily be spread by the door over a larger area. Also, there were just 15 toilets for 570 girls and six for 320 boys. Crowding at the latrines meant boys frequently urinated or defecated outside. As a result pupils suffered high levels of water-related illnesses such as diarrhea, and absenteeism rates were high.

In Phase One of the project in 2013, organized while Faith in Water was part of ARC, the number of toilets was increased to 25 for girls and 15 for boys, and new wash points (with soap) were installed. The following year, the school reported that the incidence of diarrhea among pupils had decreased, and its exam results had improved.

⁷⁵ USAID (2013), [Faith, Water and Development](#)

⁷⁶ Ebukooka Primary School case study, www.faithinwater.org

In Phase Two, in July 2015, a hand-washing campaign was organized to reinforce the messages around hygiene and cleanliness that had been delivered two years earlier. Teachers attended a WASH workshop and the school held a public hand washing awareness day, which was attended by representatives of the Anglican Church, local government, chiefs, and dignitaries. Two new wash points (with soap) were established next to the toilets and everyone took part in lessons in proper hand washing.

Making a real difference

Solving the world's water and sanitation problems is not easy, nor is it simply about infrastructure. In fact, it is sobering to realize how frequently the shiny new toilets and recently installed water facilities fail. USAID says that, over the last 20 years, failed hand pumps in Africa represent a total lost investment of between \$1.2 and \$1.5 billion, with 30-40% of rural water systems failing prematurely. It estimates that more than half of all subsidized toilets are unused, misused, or abandoned. This astonishing figure could be even higher; fewer than 5% of WASH projects are visited after the project has concluded.⁷⁷

Add to this the fact that when it comes to saving children's lives, simple behavior changes go a very long way, such as washing hands with soap after going to the toilet or before preparing food. In fact, studies show that washing hands at critical times can cut rates of diarrheal diseases by up to 35%.⁷⁸ But changing behavior is even more complex and difficult than getting a new toilet block or water pump to stay in good working order.

If the global WASH sector has failed to achieve this, despite all its investments and effort, can the world's faith communities do better? Time will tell, but that is the hope and the promise. Religious leaders are among the most trusted individuals worldwide, and faith groups are not only present in the communities they serve, they are there for the long-term. As faiths increasingly make the link between their spiritual teachings around water and cleanliness and practical action on the ground, their engagement can only be a positive development in the water and sanitation sector.

Not only can faith groups make a significant impact in leading their own communities into the kind of behavior change and practical action needed, but there are real opportunities for interfaith collaboration. Water crosses religious as well as geographical boundaries. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation has seen how bringing faith groups together to discuss a shared interest – the land we depend on, the air we breathe – opens all sorts of possibilities for peace building and greater understanding between communities. That is also true of water, perhaps more so because its impact is so immediate and the need so obvious.

But if water can bring people together, it can also divide. Tensions over water resources have long been predicted as the next major driver of international conflict. Take a look at the [map](#) created by Popular Science in 2014, predicting where the next water wars will

⁷⁷ USAID: Call for partners to create [sustainable WASH systems](#), February 2016

⁷⁸ IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (2006): *Review of Handwashing Programs*, www.ircwash.org

begin, and you are immediately struck by hot spots such as the Middle East and the Horn of Africa – already flashpoints of conflict. If faiths do not get involved in interfaith efforts to deal with these issues now, such conflicts have the potential of spiraling out of control into full-blown wars. For all these reasons, the growing engagement of faith groups in water issues is both urgent and welcome.

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A Review of Kabbalah and Ecology by David Seidenberg **By Jeremy Benstein**

David Mevorach Seidenberg. 2015. *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 420 pages. ISBN: 9781107081338. (Hardback). UK£65.00; US \$99.00

Introduction

In my book, *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (Benstein, 2006), I very consciously did *not* explore or even, beyond a few cursory exceptions, mention Kabbalistic sources. There were two reasons for that egregious omission. One was my personal lack of familiarity with the classics of Kabbalistic literature: Zohar, the Sefer Yetzira ("The Book of Creation"), the works of the Ari and his circle, and Hasidic works. In this I was a faithful product of my upbringing in a standard American Jewish community, where the major denominations are all essentially variations on, and responses to, the heavily German, Enlightenment-inflected rationally-justified Judaism of the 19th century. And that is of course the second reason: my target audience was that same mainstream Jewish community who were on the whole not familiar with Kabbalistic sources, nor did they see them as authoritative.

The unchallenged supremacy of a rationalist, anti-mystical form of Judaism in all the major branches has been undergoing a gradual shift over the last generation or so. Much of this could be attributed to the figure of the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Native of Poland, scion of a Hasidic dynasty, holder of the rather unlikely named chair of Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary (of the Conservative movement), Heschel integrated Hasidic texts and teachings in his work and inspired a generation of scholars, practitioners and activists who brought that perspective more into the mainstream of non-Orthodox Judaism in general. Some remained active in their respective denominations, while for others this new approach meant the founding of a new form of Judaism that would be termed "Jewish Renewal."

It is important to note the inclusion here of "activists," because Heschel was noted for his uniquely stirring combination of spiritually infused teaching with political engagement, which inspired activism in areas including Vietnam war protests, combating racism, and the environment. While Heschel taught in New York beginning in 1945, one could say that his heyday was in the 1960s until his death in 1972, precisely in the generation that became engaged politically in those issues as Jews and also pioneered new or renewed forms of Jewish expression, such as the Havurah movement, the Kabbalistic Tu Bishvat Seder (in honor of the "birthday of the trees"), the use of *niggunim* (Hasidic melodies), and other aspects of Jewish observance that could be termed "neo-hasidic" in nature.ⁱ

Rabbi David Seidenberg, the author of *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World*, is a definite product of those trends. He was ordained first at the Conservative JTS, and later by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and his website is called "www.neohasid.org."ⁱⁱ If any reader's initial association with the phenomenon of Jewish

Renewal, or "neo-" anything, is that of a certain sort of "guilt by association" with New Age *faux* spirituality, or shoddy syncretistic pseudo-scholarship, then regarding this work, nothing could be further from the truth.

This tome, put out by the venerable Cambridge University Press, is based on Seidenberg's doctoral dissertation at JTS, and represents a pioneering and wide-ranging study of key concepts in Kabbalistic thought that have direct relevance for "ecology"ⁱⁱⁱ – that is, how we conceive our relationship with the world, and our responsibilities toward it.

It will be noted at the outset, then, that while this is indeed a work of scholarship, it is a work of engaged scholarship. And while there is much philosophical archaeology, and textual and other history, not to mention traditionally-informed exegesis in its 418 pages (and 1124 sequentially numbered footnotes), Seidenberg is very open about this work being an exercise in creative theology (see e.g., p. 7, 19, and especially 35-37, *inter alia*). He is not content with describing how people have thought about this issue in the past; rather, he is primarily concerned with using those texts and contexts in ways that can inform how we think and act today. As scholar and (Christian) theologian Matthew Fox put it in his review of this book (Fox, 2015):

David Seidenberg is a man on a mission. It is a good and needed mission. Indeed, it's the primary mission of our time: to save Mother Earth from human rapacity, denial, ignorance, and selfishness, and to relearn in the process the beauty and grace of our humanity and the Earth we all share.

As Seidenberg writes (14)^{iv}:

Generally, Jewish environmental ethics is an area in which both traditional and academic scholars have been content to describe what Judaism already says. But Jewish theology needs to catch up with the urgency of the times, the "*et la'asot*" [literally, "time for action"-JB]. One purpose of theology is to ask, What *should* Judaism say? or, How should we revise what Judaism says in light of what we now know?"

On the Validity of the Project

As Seidenberg is eminently aware, some may cast aspersions on this project of constructive or creative theology as a work of valid scholarship. He explains (35-6):

Fundamentally, constructing theology is an act of rereading. This can be done in a way that conflicts with academic analysis and ignores contrary evidence in order to make the texts and practices of a religious tradition fit one's understanding of truth. Or, one can subject oneself to stumbling on uneven ground, examining each stone and rock, whether or not it fits one's ideology, reading and interpreting both the texts that fit one's perspective and the texts

that contradict it. I anticipate that some people who think of themselves as pure scholars will believe I have taken the former path. However, even though I can only assume that I have overlooked some important texts, it has been my goal to stay faithful to the texture, topography, and “canonized dissensus” [the term is Daniel Boyarin's – JB] of the sources examined here.

He doesn't claim that fulfilling that goal is somehow automatic or unconscious – he has a method (ibid):

In all cases, I have taken pains to use historical and philological methods to first analyze the texts, before using the texts themselves theologically. By completing this level of analysis first, it is possible to “do” theology in a deliberate way, to not distort the texts or override their historical meaning. I focus on pre-modern texts because they can be thought of as “objective,” since they are not inflected by ecological concerns (This is similar to the way *poskim*, halakhic decisors, use precedent). Even though my ultimate goal is theological, I also use this methodology to reach insights that may be significant for Jewish intellectual history. Those precedents that lead to an expanded interpretation of God's image can then be used, after academic analysis, to construct a lens through which to read Judaism in ecological terms, and to revalue the significance of God's image and the sacredness of human life. This book therefore aims to open up new ways of interpreting the tradition that may affect both the way we understand the past and the way we live in the present.

Tselem: *God's Image*

The key concept of Seidenberg's work, the idea of *tselem*, the divine image, has until now been understood in mainstream Jewish thought to apply only to the human being. His *hiddush*, innovation, is that this category is the key concept in rethinking attitudes to the natural world, for the simple reason that it has been and should be used to denote elements in the natural world, and to the natural world, *beriah*, Creation, itself (xvii):

This book examines precedents in Jewish thought for going beyond the strictly anthropocentric interpretation of the cosmos that characterizes Judaism and the Abrahamic traditions. The fulcrum for this examination is the idea of God's image, or *tselem*, and the ways it has been stretched in both Midrash and Kabbalah to include more than human beings. At the book's core is a transvaluation of the human–Nature relationship, indicated by a relatively new term for Nature: the “more-than-human world.”^v

Moreover, in sum (40): "We cannot know ourselves fully as human beings in God's image without seeing the image of God in the world around us. That is the fundamental message of this book."

An anthropocentric worldview is one that puts human beings and our project of species survival and flourishing at the center of our view on the world. This is opposed to a biocentric approach, which puts the natural world and its holistic flourishing at the center, with us being a part of that whole. While there can be ecologically enlightened, pro-environmental anthropocentric reasoning (for more on that, see below), Seidenberg generally sides with those who claim that only a radical reevaluation can change human thought and action enough to address the severity of the crisis at hand (14-5):

"[C]ontemporary Jewish thought has limited itself to a particular understanding of the meaning of God's image, rooted in modernist and humanist ideologies, walled in by assumptions that stand in direct contradiction to deep ecology and most ecotheology. We – Jews, Christians, and all for whom the Hebrew Bible is a touchstone – need to be able to peer beyond this wall, to pass beyond it, in order to create a sustainable world. There are no other significant obstacles to a free discussion within Judaism about what is our rightful place on the Earth as a people, as human beings, and as creatures."

How to do this (xvii)?

One central focus is to establish a theology grounded entirely in traditional texts that envisions Creation and all creatures as participating in the divine image. Throughout, I examine precedents from Midrash, Kabbalah, and *Chasidut* (Hasidism) that differ from modernist or humanist anthropocentrism and that point toward alternative anthropologies or ways of understanding humanity. While in each case I am interested in the historical meaning of the texts, and there are many insights that I hope will make a meaningful contribution to the history of Jewish thought, the overarching purpose is to enable Jewish theology to sustain a more biocentric reading of Torah and the Jewish tradition.

What the rabbis and the mystics did with the idea of the human being as (exclusively) created in the divine image (Gen. 1:26-27) is an instructive example in the uniquely Jewish type of reading known as Midrash. Genesis seems unambiguous in its regard for humankind and its distinctiveness, yet already in early midrashim, Seidenberg notes, the boundaries between humans and angels on the one hand and the animals on the other were beginning to blur. The human being was created with qualities of both (see, e.g., Genesis Rabbah, 8:11), and therefore the idea of *tselem* expanded as well. This expansion is virtually exploded in the Kabbalistic literature that Seidenberg brings in Part II of the book,

where the divine image is already understood to include a synthesis of male and female, and of various components and dimensions of creation.

The Structure of the Work

The book is structured with four main parts. The first is a 40-page introduction, which gives as good a summary as I've seen anywhere of the engagement of Jews, both scholars and activists, with growing environmental challenges over the past 50 years or so. The beginning of this engagement was in the late 1960s, when historian Lynn White Jr. wrote his now well-known essay "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (White, 1967),^{vi} which laid the responsibility for eco-crisis squarely at the feet of the Western religions, and in particular the highly anthropocentric Creation story at the beginning of Genesis. Seidenberg then deals in turn with the central concepts of the good of creation, biodiversity, subjecthood (or moral agency) of non-human nature, and the twin ideas of evolution and progress.

He lays out the problematic at the outset (31):

Certain assumptions fundamental to both Christian and Jewish tradition appear to run counter to the creation of a sustainable human society. These assumptions about the human relationship to God, to other creatures, and to the Earth can be characterized by three ideas: (1) human beings alone are 'created in God's image,' (2) this divine image is an essence or soul that elevates human value immeasurably or 'infinitely' above other creatures, and (3) the true home or destiny of this soul is not found on Earth. These assumptions are also congruent with Islam's understanding of humanity's place in Creation and the soul's course.

According to Seidenberg, "these three assumptions form the bedrock of radical anthropocentrism in our culture," and while "the latter two assumptions are easily critiqued from within the sources of the Jewish tradition," the first, the idea that humans are in God's image is "firmly grounded in the Torah, the foundation of all three Abrahamic religions" (31-2).

Why is this important?

The anthropoarchic^{vii} interpretation of this image has been a touchstone for ethics, political and social theory, and secular and religious ideology in the medieval and modern periods. This trope has been used to justify the division between humanity and Nature and the hierarchy of human beings over other creatures on the one hand, and universal human rights on the other. If we understand humans to be the only creatures in God's image, then we also isolate those qualities that set human beings apart, and we similarly ignore or subjugate the qualities that we hold in common with other creatures. Thus, the idea of God's image not only justifies the

subjugation of other species, it also becomes an instrument for repressing those aspects of our own being that unite us with all life.

Lest one think that this is just a question of a marginal theological point, this whole complex of ideas goes to the essence of Judaism itself – the Judaism with which I began this essay (23):

Modern Judaism has tended to label any attribution of subjectivity or moral standing to the natural world as 'pagan.' This misconception is a direct result of the revision of Judaism according to Hegelian ideas of the evolution of Spirit. This revision posited that Judaism was about the triumph of history over Nature.

As opposed to this (255; 342):

The motif of the world being in God's image is woven throughout the history of Jewish thought and Kabbalah...It is completely consonant with the rabbinic tradition and Kabbalah to regard both the whole universe and the Earth as being created in God's image... [A]s Kabbalah and Maimonides^{viii} taught, the body of Creation in its entirety and its unity is the greatest possible image of God.

These then are the other three divisions of the work. After the comprehensive intellectual-history introduction about recent Jewish ecotheology and polemics, the first section is entitled Midrash and focuses essentially on the concept of *tselem* and human and non-human spirit in rabbinic literature, followed by the largest section, on Kabbalah (including Hasidut). This includes in-depth explorations of the *sefirot* – the "divine emanations" through which the Infinite gradually unfolds into the world – and the relevant concepts in the thought of Shneur Zalman of Liady and Yaakov Lainer (son of the Ishbitzer Rebbe). Particularly creative in this regard is connecting traditional concepts such as the idea of primordial Adam, *Adam Qadmon*, with contemporary ecological theories, such as Gaia (or earth systems) theory.

Why Kabbalah? Seidenberg makes reference to and uses Kabbalistic precedents in establishing the following ideas (37):

(1) that specific earthly non-human creatures are in God's image, (2) that the whole of Creation is the image of God, (3) that the earth itself can powerfully manifest that image, (4) that within each creature lives a potential to express God's image, and (5) that humanity can, through right intent and consciousness, help reveal that image. But there is a greater reason why Kabbalah can be used as a vessel for so many ecologically important ideas. The Kabbalistic tradition is already aligned with a holistic sense of human purpose, because from its very origins in *Sefer Bahir*, it held that the Jewish covenant and

human action serve to bring blessing to all of Creation, not just to the Jewish people, and not just to humanity.

Part III ranges more broadly, with essays on language and song (*niggun*), and returns to contemporary ecotheology in the works of Rebbe Nachman, Martin Buber, Arthur Green, and more. Likewise, for those needing a little more background in esoterica, there are excursuses and an appendix on important philosophical and Kabbalistic terms.

Biocentrism vs Anthropocentrism

Most of the book is an extended diatribe against anthropocentrism. Seidenberg explains that, usually the best anthropocentric thought can do regarding the moral and political challenge of ecocide is to promote an ethic of stewardship. But stewardship, he writes, based on hierarchy and human dominance (even if compassionate) is "an extremely limited basis for the changing the way we live" (150).

Thus the biocentric alternative. This might be difficult for some, who associate alternatives to anthropocentric thought with the aforementioned, very non-Jewish paganism (9):

Even one of the best scholars on the subject, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, writes that, 'From a Jewish perspective, "biocentrism" is just another form of paganism that must result in idolatrous worship of nature...

He counters (*ibid.*):

Now, biocentrism simply means the belief that all living things have some intrinsic moral standing; there is hardly an idea that could be more compatible with ancient Jewish tradition.

For those, like Tirosh-Samuelson, troubled by this "flirtation" with paganism, an interesting voice on the more Orthodox side of the spectrum is the recently departed Michael Wyschogrod (1991):

It is difficult to return to the religion of nature...At the same time the destruction of nature, which seems to follow to some extent from the desacralization of nature, has reached a stage that cannot continue. So we must try to combine these two themes. To be perfectly honest, I have long felt that the religion against which the prophets expounded so eloquently in the Hebrew Bible did not get a full hearing from them. I wonder whether the prophets gave a really fair representation of the point of view and theology of the worshippers of Baal and Ashteret . . . Perhaps it would have been better if the prophets had occasionally sat down with them and said, "Tell us how you see the world." Could there be some insights in what they taught which we need to learn? I am convinced there were; and even if we don't agree with much of what they believed, I think we would profit by better understanding their point of view.

But one might also make do with one of Seidenberg's own conclusions, wherein he takes a step back from the radical biocentrism that characterizes much of the book, and affirms that (347):

[a] 'weak' anthropocentrism rooted in tradition, which makes sense of the human role in Creation, may in fact be the most transformative theology. The idea of God's image suggests a model based neither on stewardship and control, nor on completely eschewing human power. Instead, our purpose is to bring blessing into the world through *avodah*, service.

While Seidenberg terms this approach "weak" (because it deemphasizes the absolute centrality of the human, and particularly human-centered concerns, in the world) as he himself admits – it is strong indeed. In that, it is similar to Bryan Norton's proposal for an extended *cultural* anthropocentrism that recognizes that humans have a wide range of needs beyond the mere physical, including cultural and spiritual, one of which may indeed be: to serve.

Whichever, both the theological and ecological messages of the book are not only well presented and argued, but supremely important for our lives and our times.

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ⁱ Though this is not even a thumbnail history of these developments, other names that should be mentioned in this context include: Rabbis Shlomo Carlebach, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Lawrence Kushner, Arthur Green (see note 1) now of Boston's Hebrew College, Arthur Waskow, and Michael Lerner of *Tikkun* Magazine.

ⁱⁱ He also has a strong grounding in disciplines relevant to his environmental activism: he studied physics and mathematics at Dartmouth College, and interned in social ecology at Murray Bookchin's Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ecology strictly construed is actually a branch of the biological sciences, dealing with populations of organisms and their inter-relations with each other and their environments. For several decades, though, it has been used in a broader philosophical context in terms such as Deep Ecology (a school of environmental thought founded by Norwegian Arne Naess in 1973), Social Ecology (a more politically left-wing approach pioneered by Murray Bookchin in the 60s and 70s) and even in contexts that aren't about questions of eco-crisis and human response at all, such as in anthropologist's Gregory Bateson's 1973 work, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

^{iv} All numbers introducing quotes from the book are page or footnote numbers from the printed edition.

^v As Seidenberg notes, the term "more-than-human world" was coined by David Abram (Abram, 1996) to replace the term "Nature." Both Abram and Seidenberg intend to uproot the culture/nature dichotomy, since "more-than-human" includes the human, and conceptualizes the global environment that surrounds us as inclusive of humanity.

^{vi} He was not however the first to deal with these questions. Preceding him were the Islamic scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Nasr, 1967), and certain essays before that by the Buddhist writer D. T. Suzuki. The historian Arnold Toynbee and architect Ian McHarg also wrote in a similar vein during that period.

^{vii} Another anthropo- term, this time referring to the "rule of humans" over the rest of the natural world.

^{viii} Seidenberg has done work on the thought of Maimonides, and though he is usually seen as rationalist and not mystical, Maimonidean thought does express many of the central themes of the book. As Seidenberg writes in footnote 53: "Though *Kabbalah and Ecology* focuses on Kabbalah, Maimonides could be seen as this book's most important protagonist."