



# THE STATE OF THE EVIDENCE IN RELIGIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

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**Joint Learning Initiative**  
on Faith & Local Communities





# **CHAPTER 3**

## **RELIGIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

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## CHAPTER 3: RELIGIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT, AUTHORS: PHILIPP ÖHLMANN<sup>184</sup> AND IGNATIUS SWART<sup>185</sup>

Religion has a crucial role in the environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Achieving ecological sustainability, combatting climate change, and adopting environmental protection measures “requires not only appropriate policies [and] scientific knowledge but necessitates radical paradigm shifts and changed mindsets and behaviour.”<sup>186</sup>

- The environmental crisis is a spiritual and moral crisis: As Sponsel argues, “ultimately the environmental crisis as a whole is a spiritual and moral crisis and ... it can only be resolved by radical transformations in the ways in which industrial capitalist and consumerist societies, in particular, relate to nature...”<sup>187</sup> This directly points to religion.
- Religious communities can play a fundamental role in such societal and cultural transformations: “[R]eligion shapes social imaginaries, and people’s values and religious communities have the ability to act as agents of social, cultural, economic, political and ecological change.”<sup>188</sup> Consequently, policy makers have increasingly recognized faith actors as crucial actors for ecological sustainability. One of the most prominent examples is the United Nations Environment Program’s (UNEP) Faith for Earth Initiative, which seeks to “encourage, empower and engage with faith-based organizations as partners, at all levels, toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling the 2030 Agenda.”<sup>189</sup>

Against this backdrop, fundamental questions on the role of religion for the environment emerge. This concerns, first, what kind of values and attitudes faith actors bring forward in relation to the environment, climate change, and ecological sustainability. Second, it so far remains unclear whether religions’ theological engagement is reflected in environmental action (e.g., advocacy against climate change) – and whether such theological engagement propels environmental activism by their membership.

A rapidly growing body of evidence has engaged with these questions, focusing on different religious traditions as well as approaching the field from different perspectives.<sup>190</sup> Providing an overview of key strands of the literature is the purpose of this chapter. The chapter is structured into two thematic sections. Section II provides an overview of selected religious traditions, tracing an ecological turn across different religions, while Section III pays closer attention to the religion-environment nexus in recent literature, showing how it provides evidence of an ongoing and intensifying scholarly and strategic interest in this area.

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185 University of the Western Cape. Ignatius Swart’s contribution to this chapter draws from his research work for the project consortium “South African – German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability” (SAGRaS) (2022–2025). SAGRaS is funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and forms part of the South African–German Collaborative Research Programme (SAG-CORE) on “The Interface between Global Change and Social Sciences – post-COVID-19”. Reference: SAG201111573377.

186 Juliane Stork and Philipp Öhlmann, “Religious Communities as Actors for Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond.” Report (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2021): i. <https://doi.org/10.18452/23587>.

187 Leslie Sponsel, “Introduction to Religious Environmental Activism in Asia: Case Studies in Spiritual Ecology,” *Religions* 11, no. 2 (2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020077>.

188 Stork and Öhlmann, *Religious Communities as Actors*, i.

189 United Nation Environment Programme (UNEP), “UNEP Faith for Earth Initiative,” accessed March 4, 2022, <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative>.

190 Willis Jenkins, Evan Berry, and Luke B. Kreider, “Religion and Climate Change,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43 (2018): 85–108, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102017-025855>; Jens Koehrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber, “How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be? Tensions about Religious Environmentalism,” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, (October 1, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-021-00070-4>; Bron Taylor, Gretel van Wieren, and Bernard Zaleha, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr. to Pope Francis,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29011>.

## An overview across different religious traditions

The role of religion and ecology has been debated for several decades and is considered an emerging field.<sup>191</sup>

### Is Western Christianity responsible for the environmental crisis?

A core point of contention was White's assertion, in the 1960s, that the human-focused nature of (Western) Christianity laid the ground for the global environmental crisis. "Christianity," in his view, "not only established a dualism of man (sic) and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man (sic) exploit nature for his (sic) proper ends."<sup>192</sup> White attributed a core responsibility of ecological destruction to Western society's anthropocentrism, which he considered to be shaped by its Judeo-Christian religion and culture.<sup>193</sup> Consequently White argued that, as the root of the ecological crisis lies in religion, it can also play a significant role in its remedy: "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."<sup>194</sup>

### Christian engagement with the environmental crisis

Since then, there has been considerable dynamic and theological debate, leading to the emergence of discussions on eco-theology and sustainability.<sup>195</sup> One of the more recent examples of this engagement is Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*,<sup>196</sup> which has become a cornerstone frame of reference on the need for socio-ecological transformation from a religious point of view far beyond the context of the Catholic Church.

There is also widespread ecological engagement in other religions, for example Islam<sup>197</sup> and Buddhism.<sup>198</sup>

### Islamic engagement with the environmental crisis

Islam has seen the development of an eco-theology and engagement with the environment since the 1960s. These approaches draw on the Islamic concepts of Tawhid, highlighting the unity of all creation, and Khalifa, highlighting the role of humans as stewards of creation.<sup>199</sup> A recent key point of reference for this movement is the "Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change,"<sup>200</sup> which seeks to "create greater awareness for climate change and calls on decision-makers in the Muslim worlds and beyond ... to take sound actions."<sup>201</sup> Moreover, Koehrsen identifies a "rising field of Islamic environmentalism," although this still constitutes a minority phenomenon.<sup>202</sup> One example of such activism is the emergence of the "Eco-Jihad" movement, a global Muslim environmental initiative.<sup>203</sup>

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191 Mary E. Tucker, "Religion and Ecology," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 819–835.

192 Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1205>.

193 Bron Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims that Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29010>.

194 White, *our ecologic crisis*, 1206.

195 Louk Andrianos et al., eds., *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth: The "Wuppertal Call" – Contributions and Recommendations From an International Conference on Eco-Theology and Ethics of Sustainability* (Solingen: Foedus Verlag, 2019); Ernst M. Conradie, "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology: Revisiting the Current Debate," *Scriptura* 119, no. 1 (2020): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.7833/119-1-1566>; Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home* (Rome: Dicastero per la Comunicazione, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015); David Hallman, ed., *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995); David Paton, ed., "Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches," Nairobi, November 23–December 10, 1975 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1976).

196 Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'*.

197 Richard C. Foltz, "Islam," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 207–219; Moegamad R. Gallant, "Sustainable Development: A Challenge to Muslim Countries," PhD diss., (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009), <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/handle/10413/399>; Rosemary Hancock, *Islamic Environmentalism: Activism in the United States and Great Britain* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018); Jens Koehrsen, "Muslims and Climate Change: How Islam, Muslim Organizations, and Religious Leaders Influence Climate Change Perceptions and Mitigation Activities," *WIREs Climate Change* 12, no. 3 (2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.702>; Ursula Kowanda-Yassin, *Öko-Dschihad: Der grüne Islam – Beginn einer globalen Umweltbewegung* (Salzburg, Wien: Residenz Verlag, 2018).

198 Stephanie Kaza, "The Greening of Buddhism: Promise and Perils," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 184–206; Donald K. Swearer, "An Assessment of Buddhist Eco-Philosophy," *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 2 (2006): 123–137; Emma Tomalin, "Gender and the Greening of Buddhism: Exploring Scope for a Buddhist Ecofeminism in an Ultramodern Age," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 11, no. 4 (2018): 455–480, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.32469>.

199 Koehrsen, *Muslims and Climate Change*.

200 United Nations, "Islamic Declaration on Climate Change," External Statement, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, August 18, 2015, accessed March 4, 2022, <https://unfccc.int/news/islamic-declaration-on-climate-change>.

201 Koehrsen, *Muslims and Climate Change*, 4.

202 Koehrsen, *Muslims and Climate Change*, 2–4.

203 Kowanda-Yassin, *Öko-Dschihad*.

## Buddhist engagement with the environmental crisis

There has also been a substantial development of eco-Buddhist thinking and activism, in the context of the wider movement of “engaged Buddhism.” Buddhist perspectives on environmental protection and climate change – deriving from an emphasis on the interdependence of humans and the natural environment<sup>204</sup> – were prominently brought forward in the global statements “Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders”<sup>205</sup> and “The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change”<sup>206</sup> (both in 2015). A concrete example of Buddhist ecological activism is that of Buddhist monks in Thailand, who in the 1980s, began ordaining trees to prevent them from being felled and to raise awareness on environmental destruction.<sup>207</sup>

## Hindu engagement with the environmental crisis

Looking at Hinduism, a key document emerging in the runup to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference, as in other faith traditions, was the “Bhumi Devi Ki Jai! A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change.”<sup>208</sup> While it is difficult to speak of “one” Hinduism in a general way, as is the case with many religions, Chapple highlights that “India, the birthplace of Hinduism, boasts the world’s largest environmental movement.”<sup>209</sup> Chapple and Tucker’s volume and the articles by Dwivedi and Haberman provide further insights into Hinduism’s relationship with the environment.<sup>210</sup> A concrete initiative is the Bhumi Project, which seeks to “engage, educate, and empower people and communities to address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution ... based on Hindu principles of environmental care.”<sup>211</sup>

## Are religions becoming green?

In light of these developments, Gottlieb argues that “world religion has entered into an ‘ecological phase’ in which environmental concern takes its place alongside more traditional religious focus on sexual morality, ritual, helping the poor and preaching the word of God.”<sup>212</sup> Recent scholarship has described this as the “greening of religion hypothesis,”<sup>213</sup> although recent empirical studies have painted a more ambivalent picture.<sup>214</sup> The comprehensive review by Taylor et al. identifies “many themes and dynamics that hinder environmental understanding and mobilization by religious individuals, whether Abrahamic or involved in religions that originated in Asia.” However, there seems to be substantial ecological dynamic at a more local level, with indigenous traditions fostering “pro-environmental perceptions and behaviors.”<sup>215</sup> This resonates with the findings of recent studies from African

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204 Richard Payne, “Buddhism and the Environment,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, (September 13, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393521-0067>; Christopher Ives, “Buddhism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2017), 43–51.

205 Plum Village, “Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders 2015,” Statement, October 31, 2015, accessed March 4, 2022, <https://plumvillage.org/articles/buddhist-climate-change-statement-to-world-leaders-2015/>.

206 One Earth Sangha, “The Time to Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change,” Declaration, September 20, 2015, accessed March 4, 2017, <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/buddhist-declaration-on-climate-change/>.

207 Robekkah Ritchie, “Environmentalism and the Forest in Thai Buddhism,” in *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*, ed. Philipp Öhlmann and Juliane Stork (unpublished manuscript, 2022).

208 Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies/Bhumi Project, “Bhumi Devi Ki Jai! A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change,” Declaration, accessed March 23, 2022, <https://hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english>.

209 Christopher K. Chapple, “Introduction,” in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher K. Chapple and Mary E. Tucker (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), xxxiii–xlxi.

210 O. P. Dwivedi, “Hindu Religion and Environmental Well-Being,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 160–183; Christopher K. Chapple and Mary E. Tucker, eds., *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000); David L. Haberman, “Hinduism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis Jenkins, Mary E. Tucker, and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2017), 35–42.

211 Bhumi Global, “The Hindu Movement for Mother Earth,” accessed February 23, 2022, <https://www.bhumiglobal.org/>.

212 Roger S. Gottlieb, “Introduction: Religion and Ecology—What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

213 Jonathan Chaplin, “The Global Greening of Religion,” *Palgrave Communications* 2, no. 1 (2016): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.47>; Taylor, *Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One)*.

214 Wylie A. Carr et al., “The Faithful Skeptics: Evangelical Religious Beliefs and Perceptions of Climate Change,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 6, no. 3 (2012): 276–299, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v6i3.276>; Randolph Haluza-DeLay, “Religion and Climate Change: Varieties in Viewpoints and Practices,” *WIREs Climate Change* 5, no. 2 (2014): 261–279, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.268>; Jens Koehrsen, “Religious Agency in Sustainability Transitions: Between Experimentation, Upscaling, and Regime Support,” *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 27 (2018): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2017.09.003>; Koehrsen, *Muslims and Climate Change*.

215 Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha, *The Greening of Religion Hypothesis*, 306.

contexts on African Traditional Religion, Spirituality and Philosophy<sup>216</sup> and African Initiated Christianity,<sup>217</sup> which highlight a tension between different approaches to the natural environment from “dominion” over creation to “communion” with the natural environment.<sup>218</sup>

The recent reinvigoration of the sustainability debate, propelled by youth engagement in the Fridays for Future movement, has led to an “ecological turn” in many religious communities. In the wake of the global debate on climate change, environmental degradation and its local effects, concerns with questions on environmental sustainability seem to be on the increase in religious communities. In the survey “Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona” conducted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 77% of religious leaders worldwide who responded considered “strengthen[ing] environmental protection” as highly important for a post-Covid-19 future – environmental concerns thereby constituting the overall highest priority.<sup>219</sup> Even during the height of the pandemic, nearly 50% of the respondents agreed with the statement that “environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus.”<sup>220</sup> A religious leader from Kenya elaborated on the need for fundamental transitions towards sustainability: “A different model for economic development that is green and inclusive. Build back better by adopting sustainable solutions to environmental challenges.”<sup>221</sup>

## The religion-environment nexus in recent literature

A survey of the literature from the last five to six years (2016–2021) that falls within the religion-environment nexus provides noticeable evidence of an ongoing, intensifying scholarly and strategic interest in this issue area. While it is not possible to do justice to the sheer volume of publications that emerged during this period, it seems helpful to distinguish between two strands of scholarly development that substantiate this ever-growing interest. The first consists of debates in the now established field of religion and development<sup>222</sup> and the second of a broader range of debates of inter- and multidisciplinary scope falling outside religion and development as its explicit disciplinary placing.

## Environmental debates specific to religions & development

The United Nations’ launch of the “Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs) as the new framework for development policy worldwide in 2015 provided important momentum to the religion and development field to use the conceptual apparatus of “sustainable development.” A large segment of recent and current scholarship in the field has not only directed its focus to the SDG Agenda, but strategic think tanks such as the Faith 4 Earth initiative at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Environment, Water, and Climate focused workstream at the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) demonstrate the growth of the environment as a focus area.<sup>223</sup>

216 James N. Amanze, “From ‘Dominion’ to ‘In Communion’: Ecotheology from an African Perspective,” *Anglican EcoCare Journal of Ecotheology* 2 (Spring 2016): 11–21; Johannes J. Knoetze, “African Youth, African Faith(s),” *African Environment and Sustainable Development: A Missional Diaconal Calling*, *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2021): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6607>; Jacob K. Olúpòhà, “Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 259–282; Nisbert T. Taringa, “The Potential of Ubuntu Values for a Sustainable Ethic of the Environment and Development,” in *Religion and Development in Africa*, ed. Ezra Chitando, Masiwa R. Gunda and Lovemore Togarasei (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2020), 387–400.

217 Emmanuel Anim, “Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice: Reflections from an African Pentecostal,” in *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth: The “Wuppertal Call” – Contributions and Recommendations from an International Conference on Eco-Theology and Ethics of Sustainability*, ed. Louk Andrianos et al. (Solingen: Foedus Verlag, 2019), 107–120; Marthinus L. Daneel, “African Initiated Churches as Vehicles of Earth-Care in Africa,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 535–567; Juliane Stork and Charel Du Toit, “Finding Ubuntu in the Bible: How the Zion Christian Church in South Africa Relates to Concepts of Ecology in African Traditional Religions,” in *Global Religious Environmental Activism: Case Studies of Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship*, ed. Jens Koehrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber (forthcoming, 2022).

218 Amanze, *From ‘Dominion’ to ‘In Communion’*.

219 Ekkardt Sonntag, Marie-Luise Frost, and Philipp Öhlmann, “Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona – Preliminary Findings,” Policy Brief, Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2020), 6, <https://www.rcsd.hu-berlin.de/en/publications/policy-brief-03-2020-religious-leaders.pdf>.

220 “Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona Survey,” Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, Unpublished data (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2021).

221 Sonntag, Frost, and Öhlmann, *Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona*, 6.

222 See Katherine Marshall, “Impressions & Indications of Religious Engagement in Development,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19, sup1 (2021): 12–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1983358>; Philipp Öhlmann et al., “Inaugural Editorial: A New Journal for a New Space: Introducing *Religion & Development*,” *Religion & Development* 1, no. 1 (Launch Issue 2021): 3–24.

223 See e.g. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Parliament of the World’s Religions, “Faith for Earth: A Call for Action” (Nairobi: UNEP, 2020); “UNEP Faith for Earth Initiative,” United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) “Faith for the Earth: Achievement Report,” Annual Report, February 10, 2021, accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.unep.org/resources/annual-report/faith-earth-achievement-report-2020>; International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), “WECARE: Water, Environment and Climate Action,” accessed March 26, 2022, <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/work-streams/water-environment-and-climate-action-work-stream-wecare>; Ulrich Nitschke and Bennet Gabriel, “The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development/PaRD: A Global and Inclusive Partnership to Harness the Positive Impact on Religion in Development and Humanitarian Assistance,” *The Ecumenical Review* 68, no. 4 (2016): 378–386, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12242>; Khushwant Singh and Judith Steinau-Clark, eds., *Voices from Religions on Sustainable Development* (Bonn: German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation, 2016).



Yet, while “(s)ustainability and environmental issues, including the threat of global warming, are at the core of the ... Sustainable Development Goals,”<sup>224</sup> they have not been the at the forefront of religions and development debates as they intersect with the SDG Agenda. The focus on the environment has so far remained a secondary concern in post-2015 religions and development discussions around the SDG Agenda. This is of course not to say that the political and social aspects prevalent in the discussions are not of considerable importance, but instead that limited attention has been given in comparison to the integrated discussion of the three pillars of the SDG Agenda – environmental sustainability, social sustainability, and economic sustainability.

Nevertheless, we can begin to give due recognition to a number of publications that have contributed to a more concerted environmental related focus in the post-2015 religion and sustainable development/SDGs debates. This has included two World Bank researchers’ use of World Values Survey data to study the (positive) correlation between religious affiliation, religiosity and environmental concerns,<sup>225</sup> a reflection on animal rights/animal-inclusive sustainability as a pertinent religious concern,<sup>226</sup> a Catalanian case study of the practical contribution of religious organizations to “integral sustainability” (i.e. sustainability inclusive of the environmental, social and economic concerns of the SDG Agenda),<sup>227</sup> a consideration of religion as a potential driver of sustainable consumption (with specific reference to SDG 12),<sup>228</sup> as well as Christian theological reflections on the challenge of environmental justice and wholeness in the context of Africa.<sup>229</sup>

### Laudato Si’, integral ecology, and Catholic teachings

However, a far more consolidated picture emerges with the growing body of literature around Catholic social teaching and engagement with the SDG Agenda.<sup>230</sup> At the center of this inspiration is Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*,<sup>231</sup> which was issued in the same year (2015) as the SDGs but in the growing body of literature is also contrasted with the SDGs.<sup>232</sup> Whereas scholars from this body of literature see the SDGs as trapped within the paradigm of global economic development, they praise *Laudato Si’* for its far-reaching conceptual paradigm shift from “integral human development” to “integral ecology.”<sup>233</sup> This implies nothing less than a vision for “a post-capitalist era, based on a cultural shift towards eco-solidarity.”<sup>234</sup> At its core is an integral approach that recognizes the cry of the earth with the cry of the human poor.<sup>235</sup> The idea of development no longer seems to play a role and there are no longer targets to achieve, such as the SDGs.<sup>236</sup> The emphasis falls instead on a call for “ecological conversion,” which is seen to inspire a new worldwide movement of “religious environmentalism on the ground, as well as the field of religion and ecology in academia developing new ecotheologies and ecojustice ethics.”<sup>237</sup>

224 Clarence Tsimpo and Quentin Wodon, “Faith Affiliation, Religiosity, and Attitudes towards the Environment and Climate Change,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 3 (2016): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1215850>.

225 Tsimpo and Wodon, *Faith Affiliation*, 51–64.

226 Yamini Narayanan, “Where Are the Animals in Sustainable Development? Religion and the Case for Ethical Stewardship in Animal Husbandry,” *Sustainable Development* 24, no. 3 (2016): 172–180, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1619>.

227 Montserrat Gas-Aixendri and Silvia Albareda-Tiana, “The Role of Religion in Global Sustainability: A Study on Catalonia’s Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals,” in *Sustainability and the Humanities*, ed. Walter L. Filho and Andriana C. McCrea (Cham: Springer, 2019), 1–18.

228 Anabel Orellano, Carmen Valor, and Emilio Chuvieco, “The Influence of Religion on Sustainable Consumption: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 19 (2020): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197901>.

229 Mwawi N. Chilongozi, “The Role of Religion in Sustainable Development: Theological Reflections on Sustainable Development Goals and Mother Earth,” in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religion*, ed. Nobuntu P. Matholeni, Georgina K. Boateng, and Molly Manyonganise (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2020), 163–177; Dietrich Werner, “The Challenge of Environment and Climate Justice: Imperatives of an Eco-Theological Reformation of Christianity in African Contexts,” in *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development: Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches*, Routledge Research in Religion and Development, ed. Philipp Öhlmann, Wilhelm Gräb, and Marie-Luise Frost (London: Routledge, 2020), 51–72.

230 For a sample from this body of literature, see Ian Christie, Richard M. Gunton, and Adam P. Hejnowicz, “Sustainability and the Common Good: Catholic Social Teaching and ‘Integral Ecology’ as Contributions to a Framework of Social Values for Sustainability Transitions,” *Sustainability Science* 14, no. 5 (2019): 1343–1354, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00691-y>; Séverine Deneulin, “Religion and Development: Integral Ecology and the Catholic Church Amazon Synod,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 10 (2021): 2282–2299, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1948324>; Séverine Deneulin, *Human Development and the Catholic Tradition: Towards Integral Ecology* (London: Routledge, 2021); Paul Freston, “Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals,” in *Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Global Governance Challenges*, Routledge Studies in Sustainable Development, ed. Simon Dalby et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 152–169; Alexandre A. Martins, “*Laudato Si’*: Integral Ecology and Preferential Option for the Poor,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no.3 (2018): 410–424, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12224>; Željko Pavić and Antun Sundalić, “Environmentalism and Development in Catholic Social Teaching: A Case of the Encyclical *Laudato Si’*,” *Ekonomski Vjesnik/Econviews* 29, no. 2 (2016): 323–334; Wolfgang Sachs, “The Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si’*: Varieties of Post-Development?,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 12 (2017): 2573–2587, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1350822>; Jaime Tatay-Nieto, “Sustainability, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and the Catholic Church’s Ecological Turn,” *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100488>.

231 Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, 1st ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

232 See e.g., Freston, *Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 160–161; Sachs, *The Sustainable Development Goals and Laudato Si’*.

233 This does not mean that the concept of integral human development is not still used in Catholic social discourse, but integral ecology has now become the guiding concept that also assumes the former concept. Cf. Deneulin, *Religion and Development*, 2288.

234 Sachs, *The Sustainable Development Goals and Laudato Si’*, 2584.

235 Martins, *Laudato Si’*.

236 Deneulin, *Religion and Development*, 2288; Sachs, *The Sustainable Development Goals and Laudato Si’*, 2579.

237 Mary E. Tucker and John Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and Dynamic Force,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis J. Jenkins, Mary E. Tucker, and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2017), 11–12.

## Religion-environment/ecology nexus (not specific to religion & development)

Research in this area in the last five to six years provides evidence of a proliferation of scholarly output that resonates well with recent claims from the literature that it has now become possible to speak of the “emerging field of religion and ecology.”<sup>238</sup> Accordingly, as the coinage of “religion and ecology” indicates, “ecology” has become the preferred term in the preoccupation with the religion-environment nexus<sup>239</sup> although, as an exploration of the literature suggests, this does not cancel out that “environment” continues to be used in other instances.<sup>240</sup>

It follows that the emerging field of religion and ecology today is typified as a multi-disciplinary field that is wide-ranging in scope. According to one source, it can be described as “an emerging area of study, research, and engagement that embraces multiple disciplines, including environmental studies, geography, history, anthropology, sociology, and politics.”<sup>241</sup> This description certainly fits well with another recent identification, namely the “environmental humanities” as “a growing and diverse area of study within humanistic disciplines.”<sup>242</sup> At the same time, however, it falls short of recognizing the natural sciences<sup>243</sup> and the fields of theology and religious studies as contributing disciplines. In the fields of religion and theology, a review of the most recent literature for instance brings to the fore new engagements with the issues of climate change,<sup>244</sup> sustainability,<sup>245</sup> and religious environmental activism.<sup>246</sup>

There are emerging key concepts in religion and ecology that can help with our understanding of this field. One idea is the distinction between three methodological approaches that are shaping the field in terms of scholarship, debate, and practical consideration: retrieval, reevaluation and reconstruction.<sup>247</sup> Another is the identification of three phenomena that are driving novel thematic developments in the field: climate change, technology, and space/place.<sup>248</sup> Finally, a concept that is also gaining ground and shaping the field is that of “spiritual ecology.”<sup>249</sup> Yet, as suggested by the following quote from the literature, this concept is just one of a range that tie religions and spirituality to ideas of nature, the environment, earth, and ecology. As this field develops, it is helpful to understand that there are many ongoing terms and debates from people of all religious and spiritual perspectives that are shaping the discussions:

As an umbrella term, spiritual ecology may be recognized as a vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with nature, ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms. It embraces other narrower fields, such as dark green religion, deep ecology, earth spirituality, earth mysticism, ecomysticism, ecopsychology, ecospirituality, ecotheology, green religion, green spirituality, nature mysticism, nature religion, nature spirituality, religion and ecology, religion and nature, religious ecology, religious environmentalism, religious naturalism, and sacred ecology. The qualifier spiritual is used instead of religious, because it is far more inclusive. Religion usually includes the spiritual, but some spirituality is not associated with any particular religion... Even some atheists are spiritual.<sup>250</sup>

238 Tucker and Grim, *Movement of Religion and Ecology*, 9.

239 See e.g. John Hart, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017); Jenkins, Tucker, and Grim, *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*.

240 See e.g. Vegard Skirbekk et al., “Religious Affiliation and Environmental Challenges in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Religion and Demography* 7, no. 2 (2020): 238–271, 10.1163/2589742X-12347110; William Avis, “Role of Faith and Belief in Environmental Engagement and Action in MENA Region,” K4D Helpdesk Report no. 1005 (Birmingham: Institute of Development Studies, 2021), DOI: 10.19088/K4D.2021.086; Jesse L. Preston and Adam Baimel, “Towards a Psychology of Religion and the Environment,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 40 (August 2021): 145–149, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.09.013>; Marisa Ronan, “Religion and the Environment: Twenty-first Century American Evangelism and the Anthropocene,” *Humanities* 6, no. 4 (2017): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h6040092>.

241 Mary E. Tucker and John A. Grim, “Ecology and Religion: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia.com* (2005), accessed March 14, 2022, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ecology-and-religion>.

242 Tucker and Grim, *Movement of Religion and Ecology*, 9.

243 See Tucker and Grim, *Movement of Religion and Ecology*, 5–6.

244 See e.g. Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster, eds., *Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2019); Paul Tyson, *Theology and Climate Change* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2021).

245 See e.g. the special issue of 14 articles on the theme of “Religion and Sustainability” in *Consensus: A Canadian Journal of Public Theology* 41, no. 1 (2020), including the forward, Chad R. Rimmer and Mary J. Philip, “Sustainability and Religion,” *Consensus* 41, no. 1 (2020): 1–5.

246 See e.g. Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber, *How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be?*; Louk A. Adrianos and Tom Sverre Tomren, eds., *Contemporary Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Environmental Stewardship in World Religions*, Ecothee Volume 6th-Orthodox of Creta Publication (Steinkjer: Embla Akdemisk, 2021); Jens Koehrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber, eds., *Global Religious Environmental Activism: Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2021/2022); Stork and Öhlmann, *Religious Communities as Actors*.

247 Retrieval involves the exploration of scriptural and other sources in particular religious traditions for evidence of traditional teachings regarding human-Earth relations; reevaluation involves the evaluation of such traditional teachings with respect to their relevance to contemporary circumstances; and reconstruction involves the suggestion of ways that religious traditions might adapt their teachings to current circumstances in new and creative ways. Tucker and Grim, *Movement of Religion and Ecology*, 6–7.

248 Sigurd Bergmann, “Developments in Religion and Ecology,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis J. Jenkins, Mary E. Tucker, and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2017), 14–17.

249 See e.g. Kelly D. Alley, “River Goddesses, Personhood and Rights of Nature: Implications for Spiritual Ecology,” *Religions* 10, no. 9 (2019): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090502>; Elizabeth Allison, “The Reincarnation of Waste: A Case Study of Spiritual Ecology Activism for Household Solid Waste Management: The Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative of Rural Bhutan,” *Religions* 10, no. 9 (2019): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090514>; Sam Mickey, “Spiritual Ecology: On the Way to Ecological Existentialism,” *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110580>; Leslie E. Sponsel, “Spiritual Ecology, Sacred Places, and Biodiversity Conservation,” in *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Anthropology*, ed. Helen Kopnina and Eleanor Shoreman-Quimet (London: Routledge, 2017), 132–149; Sponsel, *Religious Environmental Activism in Asia*, 1–6.

250 Sponsel, *Religious Environmental Activism in Asia*, 1–2.



## Conclusion

In summary, there seems to be a substantially increasing interest in the relationship of religion with the environment, climate change, and ecological sustainability as evidenced by a rapidly growing corpus of literature. At the same time, increasing engagement by faith actors is visible both at the ideological level as well as in concrete environmental action and advocacy. However, this often seems to be a partial movement in religious communities. Speaking of a unanimous “greening of religions,” in the sense that ecological concerns constitute a major focus throughout seems to be premature,<sup>251</sup> perhaps with some pioneering exceptions. A more fitting term might be to speak of an ecological turn in religious communities throughout the globe, indicating increased ecological awareness without this becoming a central element in theological tenets and religious activities. While this ecological turn varies across religions and world regions, the literature suggests that considerable untapped potential for promoting values conducive to environmental protection and socio-ecological transformation exists in traditional and indigenous spiritualities beyond the main religious traditions. However, what clearly emerges from recent reviews is that more research is needed, particularly with respect to the effects of the ecological turn in religious communities on their members’ attitudes, values, and environmental action. Several research initiatives are pursuing a research agenda in this field. Examples are inter alia the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology,<sup>252</sup> the Laudato Si’ Research Institute at Oxford University,<sup>253</sup> and the South-African German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability (SAGRaS), which emerged from a partnership between the University of Pretoria, the University of the Western Cape (South Africa), and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Germany).<sup>254</sup>

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251 Cf. Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber, *How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be?*

252 Yale University, “Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology – About the Forum,” Yale School of the Environment (New Haven: Yale University), accessed March 5, 2022, <https://fore.yale.edu/>.

253 Laudato Si’ Research Institute, “What We Do” (Oxford: University of Oxford), accessed March 6, 2022, <https://lsri.campion.ox.ac.uk/>.

254 See Juliane Stork et al., “The South African-German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability (SAGRaS): An Inter-Contextual Initiative for Transdisciplinary Research on the Role of Religion for Ecological Sustainability,” in *International Handbook on Creation Care & Eco-Diakonia: Concepts and Theological Perspectives of Churches from the Global South*, ed. Daniel Beross et al. (Oxford: Regnum, forthcoming 2022); Jacques Beukes, Juliane Stork, and Ignatius Swart, “Youth, Faith, Climate Change and Environmental Consciousness: A Case for Sustainable Development,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.7085>.

## Chapter 3: Environment

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