THE STATE OF THE EVIDENCE IN RELIGIONS AND DEVELOPMENT
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CHAPTER 3

RELIGIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Religion has a crucial role in the environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Achieving ecological sustainability, combating 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.”

- 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...". 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.” 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.”

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. 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.


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


An overview across different religious traditions
The role of religion and ecology has been debated for several decades and is considered an emerging field.191

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."192 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.193 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."194

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.195 One of the more recent examples of this engagement is Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si',196 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 Islam197 and Buddhism.198

Islamic engagement with the environmental crisis
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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 Khalifah, highlighting the role of humans as stewards of creation.199 A recent key point of reference for this movement is the "Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change,"200 which seeks to "create greater awareness for climate change and calls on decision-makers in the Muslim worlds and beyond ... to take sound actions."201 Moreover, Koehrsen identifies a "rising field of Islamic environmentalism," although this still constitutes a minority phenomenon.202 One example of such activism is the emergence of the "Eco-Jihad" movement, a global Muslim environmental initiative.203

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194 White, our ecologic crisis, 1206.
196 Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’.
199 Koehrsen, Muslims and Climate Change.
200 Koehrsen, Muslims and Climate Change, 2–4.
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205 Koehrsen, Muslims and Climate Change, 4.
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 environment204 – were prominently brought forward in the global statements "Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders"205 and "The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change"206 (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.207

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,"208 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."209 Chapple and Tucker’s volume and the articles by Dwivedi and Haberman provide further insights into Hinduism’s relationship with the environment.210 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."211

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."212 Recent scholarship has described this as the “greening of religion hypothesis,"213 although recent empirical studies have painted a more ambivalent picture.214 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."215 This resonates with the findings of recent studies from African

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contexts on African Traditional Religion, Spirituality and Philosophy\(^\text{216}\) and African Initiated Christianity,\(^\text{217}\) which highlight a tension between different approaches to the natural environment from "dominion" over creation to "communion" with the natural environment.\(^\text{218}\)

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.\(^\text{219}\) 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."\(^\text{220}\) 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."\(^\text{221}\)

**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\(^\text{222}\) 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.\(^\text{223}\)

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218 Amanze, From 'Dominion' to 'In Communion.'


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


Yet, while "sustainability and environmental issues, including the threat of global warming, are at the core of the ... Sustainable Development Goals," they have not been 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, a reflection on animal rights/animal-inclusive sustainability as a pertinent religious concern, a Catalan 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), a consideration of religion as a potential driver of sustainable consumption (with specific reference to SDG 12), as well as Christian theological reflections on the challenge of environmental justice and wholeness in the context of Africa.

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. At the center of this inspiration is Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*, which was issued in the same year (2015) as the SDGs but in the growing body of literature is also contrasted with the SDGs. 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.” This implies nothing less than a vision for “a post-capitalist era, based on a cultural shift towards eco-solidarity.” At its core is an integral approach that recognizes the cry of the earth with the cry of the human poor. The idea of development no longer seems to play a role and there are no longer targets to achieve, such as the SDGs. 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.”

225 Tsimpo and Wodon, Faith Affiliation, 51–64.
232 See e.g., Freiston, *Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 160–161; Sachs, *The Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si*.*
233 This does not mean 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.
235 Martins, *Laudato Si*.
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." Accordingly, as the coinage of "religion and ecology" indicates, "ecology" has become the preferred term in the preoccupation with the religion-environment nexus although, as an exploration of the literature suggests, this does not cancel out that "environment" continues to be used in other instances.

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." This description certainly fits well with another recent identification, namely the "environmental humanities" as "a growing and diverse area of study within humanistic disciplines." At the same time, however, it falls short of recognizing the natural sciences 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, sustainability, and religious environmental activism.

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. Another is the identification of three phenomena that are driving novel thematic developments in the field: climate change, technology, and space/place.

Finally, a concept that is also gaining ground and shaping the field is that of "spiritual ecology." 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, ecopsychology, 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.

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238 Tucker and Grim, Movement of Religion and Ecology, 9.
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).
246 See e.g. Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber, How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be?: Louk A. Adriano and Tom Sverre Tomren, eds., Contemporary Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Environmental Stewardship in World Religions, Ecotehe 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.
248 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, 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, the Laudato Si’ Research Institute at Oxford University, 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).

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://lstri.campion.ox.ac.uk/.
Chapter 3: Environment


