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Religion and Ecology: Perspectives on Environment and Sustainability across Religious Traditions

Editorial

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Abstract

This editorial introduces *Religion & Development* Vol. 2, Issue 3 – Special Issue on "Religion and Ecology: Perspectives on Environment and Sustainability across Religious Traditions." The articles delve into the intricate relationship between religion and ecology from diverse perspectives. The prevailing academic discourse on religion and ecology is centered on three fundamental aspects. Firstly, it underscores the potential of religious communities to actively combat climate change by shaping worldviews and guiding community and personal activities. Secondly, it scrutinizes the practical

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implementation of these contributions by religious communities, exploring both obstacles and facilitators for their environmental engagement. Lastly, it emphasizes how religious communities furnish theological and spiritual arguments in support of environmental protection, thereby motivating believers to take proactive measures. This special issue contributes to these ongoing discussions by presenting insights from all three perspectives, enhancing the discourse with distinctive viewpoints from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, African Traditional Religions, Indigenous Religious Traditions, and interfaith perspectives. The incorporation of diverse religious traditions complements recent dialogues on development and sustainability, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between religion and ecology.

Keywords

religion and ecology – climate change – environmental engagement – sustainable development – interfaith – comparative religion

This special issue on "Religion and Ecology: Perspectives on Environment and Sustainability across Religious Traditions" explores perspectives on ecology in a range of religious traditions. Contributing to the academic field of religion and ecology as well as the debate on religion and (sustainable) development, the issue includes six articles written by distinguished experts: Iyad Abumoghli, James Amanze, Lidia Guzy, Tava Hirosh-Samuelson, Dan Smyer Yü, and Emma Tomalin.

The field of religion and ecology has recently been gaining increasing interest within the domains of religious studies and theology, predominantly due to heightened current public discourse surrounding climate change. However, scholarly discussions on this topic have been taking place for several decades. One of the early milestones in the Christian context was the Fifth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi in 1975, in which debates on sustainability played an important role. The call for a "sustainable global society" surfaced in many of the assembly's debates (WCC 1975), echoing the Club of Rome's startling and famous findings on the "Limits to Growth" in 1972 (Meadows et al. 1972). Likewise, academic scholarship began to engage with the role of religion and culture for ecological sustainability and the environment – sparked inter alia by historian Lynn White's famous hypothesis on Christian religious roots of the ecological crisis (White 1967). Since then a vivid field of research on the relationship of religion and ecology has emerged, which has seen particularly dynamic growth in recent years

and cross-fertilizes with the debate on religion and sustainable development (Öhlmann and Swart 2022). At the same time, an "ecological turn" (Öhlmann and Swart 2022, 312) indicating increased concern with the environment and ecological sustainability is visible in many religious communities themselves. One aspect of this ecological turn are the frequent new theological texts on climate change and environmental degradation that have emerged in the past years (The Holy Father Francis 2015; "The Time to Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change" 2015; "Islamic Declaration on Climate Change" 2015). Taylor prominently coined the term "greening of religion hypothesis" (2011, 254) to describe the increasing body of scholarship arguing that ecology is becoming more and more central to religious communities – to the point of some maintaining 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" (Gottlieb 2006, 6). Empirical evidence on the greening of religion is, however, mixed (Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016) and it remains up for debate how sharp the ecological turn really is.

The current academic discussion on religion and ecology focuses mainly on three issues. Firstly, establishing that religious communities have the potential to significantly contribute to combating climate change by shaping worldviews and providing guidance for community and personal activities (Gottlieb 2006; Tucker 2009). Secondly, empirically analyzing whether religious communities are effectively implementing these contributions, as well as deciphering the hindrances and enablers for the environmental engagement by religious communities (Nche 2020; Köhrsen, Blanc, and F. Huber 2022). Thirdly, religious communities offer theological and/or spiritual arguments in support of environmental protection, urging believers to take action (e.g., Gräb-Schmidt 2015; Vogt 2021). This special issue presents contributions from all three strands of argumentation, therefore engaging in ongoing debates regarding religion and ecology.

In their respective contributions, the authors provide valuable insights regarding the linkages between religion on the one hand and ecology, environmental sustainability, and the environment on the other.[1] The religious traditions presented in this special issue offer unique perspectives on environmental issues. As much of the religion and ecology debate has focused on Christianity

1 While the primary focus of this special issue is on ecological sustainability, we as editors as well as the authors acknowledge that sustainability also encompasses social and economic dimensions. As such, this special collection focuses on the interplay between religion and ecological sustainability, but also includes the social and economic/political aspects of the debates on sustainability and ecology.

and Islam, we made the deliberate decision to enrich the debate by elucidating the topic with perspectives on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism, and the at times marginalized perspectives of African Traditional Religion and Indigenous Religious Traditions, and to include interfaith perspectives. In this way, this special issue also complements *Religion & Development*'s recent special issue on "Care for the Poor, Care for the Earth: Christian-Muslim Dialogue on Development" edited by Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano, which focuses on Christian–Muslim Dialogues on development and sustainability (cf. Deneulin and Bano 2023).

The present issue is based on a Lecture Series on Religion and Ecology in 2022 hosted by the three issue editors as a cooperation between Forum Internationale Wissenschaft at the University of Bonn and the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. It took place in the context of the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (IN//RCSD), specifically in the framework of the South African–German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability (SAGRaS). All three editors are part of the Research Programme RCSD as well as the SAGRaS project. Through the initiative for this special issue and the lecture series it emerged from, we seek to contribute to further the IN//RCSD network's aim

> to actively contribute to finding solutions to the fundamental challenges of our time. The IN//RCSD does so with a focus on religious communities in different contexts – investigating their potential to foster development, equality, social cohesion and ecological sustainability, but also analyzing their role as possible sources of exclusion and marginalization. (IN//RCSD n.d.)

In 2021/22, when Almut-Barbara Renger was invited to the Forum Internationale Wissenschaft of the University of Bonn as a Visiting Professor for Religion and Society, Philipp Öhlmann went to the University of Botswana as Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Feodor Lynen Research Fellow, and Juliane Stork continued her fellowship as John S. Mbiti Research Fellow in the Research Programme RCSD, we took the opportunity to expand our cooperation. Together, we organized a seminar for master's students on the topic of religion and sustainability and invited international guests to a lecture series on religion and ecology, which took place digitally between Berlin and Bonn on May 20, June 25, and July 8, 2022. Through the SAGRaS and the editors' institutional affiliations, the lecture series was linked inter alia to the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Botswana, the Faculty of

Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, and the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Basel. In the lecture series, key international experts from academia and practice were invited to speak about different religious perspectives on ecological sustainability. The lectures constitute the basis of the articles in this special issue and are accessible on YouTube.[2] In the following, we provide brief summaries of the six articles in this issue.

Dan Smyer Yü's article is a contribution to the debate about whether we are living in a geological epoch that is primarily influenced by humans. This debate began at least as early as 2000, when atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen, Nobel laureate, and botanist Eugene F. Stoermer argued that the world has entered a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Smyer Yü takes up the debate with the aim of initiating what he terms a "public theology of the Anthropocene." He starts by noting the growing traction of religious practices and academic research on the environment as part of a global push to cultivate new environmental ethics. As an example, Smyer Yü cites the UN Environment Programme's Faith for Earth Initiative, which suggests that religious and spiritual convictions provide valuable insight for protecting and conserving our planet. In this regard, the author considers it vital for a public theology of the Anthropocene to investigate the environmental values and ecological implications of religious and spiritual views of the planet as "sacred" and "sentient." In pursuit of this aim, he compares Buddhist and Christian approaches to environmental sustainability as case studies. He contends that the Christian notion of "the sacred" and the Buddhist perception of "sentience" as the fundamental essence animating all life on Earth are complementary from a theological and ecological perspective. Together, he argues, they provide a spiritually dynamic understanding of "deep time," a scientific concept that allows the intrinsic value of the Earth as a living planet to be recognized. Smyer Yü emphasizes how important he believes it is for humans, whose religious traditions are comparatively young compared to the 4.5-billion-year-old Earth, to come to such an understanding. In his view, the Christian and Buddhist sense of the sacredness and sentience of the Earth is a gateway to a deeper ethical understanding and emotional appreciation for "the life of the Earth."

In her article, **Hava Tirosh-Samuelson** provides an overview of Jewish theological environmental positions and of Jewish environmental initiatives since the 1970s. Focusing on the USA, she describes official Jewish environmental

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMDn9FrZ1ig&list=PLflnFQxEIn96g1ziGsl4q_dwXZ6hX7Zqy.

resolutions, environmental activities, and the academic discourse on Judaism and ecology. Tirosh-Samuelson finds a distinctive Judaic perspective on the environment and points out that the "development of the physical world is religiously permissible" if it coheres "with the ethical values and legal principles of Judaism." The Jewish environmental initiatives she highlights concentrate on education, identity formation and community-building, advocacy work, and the food and farming movement in the USA. Tirosh-Samuelson underlines the significance of environmental concerns in contemporary Judaism amid the escalating environmental crisis. Contemporary Judaism, she shows, is reinterpreting religious texts, formulating new eco-theologies, and rethinking traditional rituals as a response to climate change. As part of this, Jewish environmentalists are using the social justice concepts of *tzedek* (justice) and of *tikkum olam* (repair of the world) to sustain their claims for environmental protection. Although, in her opinion, a cohesive environmental movement cannot be made out as it is only a small cadre of a few hundred Jewish environmental activists that run the activities, Tirosh-Samuelson finds overall an increased Jewish environmental sensibility. However, she also recognizes persistent challenges to the Jewish environmental movement, like the decentralized structure of American Jewry.

Lidia Guzy's article posits the substantial value inherent in indigenous practices for shaping the future trajectory of our planet, a perspective that is progressively gaining recognition. Recent research indicates that ancient methods of cultivating crops, managing forest fires, and safeguarding endangered species, some of which extend back millennia, harbor considerable potential for mitigating what is frequently termed "the decline of nature." Guzy amplifies this viewpoint by delving into the dynamic oral culture of shamanic worldviews and life worlds, where indigenous wisdom is conveyed through dreams and visions, songs, performances, and trance dances. Theoretically and empirically grounding her discourse in extensive comparative studies conducted in rural areas of Odisha, India, she focuses on local eco-cosmological perspectives manifest in trance traditions, construing these as manifestations of contemporary shamanic worldviews and conduits for the transmission of indigenous knowledge. Cited examples encompass the shamanic traditions of the *nag bacca* (snake children) and the *alekh gurumai* (ritual specialists), which Guzy portrays as instances of transformative healing through trance rituals founded on both the concepts of sacred madness and sacred play (*baaya/kheelo*) and on rites of spirit possession (*boil*). Guzy advocates for the acknowledgment of such manifestations of shamanism as "eco-cosmologies," a term she uses to delineate indigenous knowledge systems on sustainability. According to Guzy, eco-cosmologies embody a non-dualistic perspective on human and nonhuman actors within a shared world and cosmos. This perspective is deemed

particularly invaluable by Guzy due to the perilous separation between humans and nonhumans instigated by the modern rationalization project. This schism has concurrently accompanied the idealization of the scientific and materialist worldview within urban Western knowledge cultures, thereby marginalizing indigenous knowledge resources and eco-cosmological worldviews. In contrast, Guzy contends that indigenous knowledge traditions and ritual practices are pivotal in realizing sustainable solutions conducive to fostering cultural and eco-biological diversity and reciprocity at both local and global echelons. She posits that these practices facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives from humans, nonhuman entities, and other-than-human elements.

In a similar vein, the contribution by **James N. Amanze** explores the intricate relationship between African Traditional Religions and environmental conservation. Employing Mircea Eliade's concept of the sacred, the article underlines profound differences between African and Western perceptions of sacredness, emphasizing the holistic veneration of nature in African religious traditions. African conceptions of the sacred, as Amanze argues, stand in contrast to Western dichotomies of the sacred and the profane. In African contexts, spiritual realms of life intersect with other realms such as the social, political, economic, and, significantly, the environmental. Particularly the environment and nature are considered to have an inherent sacrality. This sacrality is for instance visible through specific taboos, notions of the sacredness of specific plants, places, or animals, religious guidelines for using environmental resources, and religious rituals relating to nature. According to Amanze, the interconnectedness of the social, physical, and spiritual realms characteristic for African Traditional Religious worldviews emphasizes being "in communion" with the natural environment instead of dominating it, which has contributed to safeguarding the diverse flora and fauna in many African communities. He provides various brief case studies on this from different contexts across the continent. However, Amanze argues that the efficacy of African Traditional Religions in environmental preservation has eroded. He contends that secularization, Western-style modernization, and extractivist exploitation of natural resources have contributed to what he calls a process of desacralization, in which the sacredness of the environment in African societies has been fading. This is further exacerbated by climate-change-induced destruction of the natural environment. Lastly, Amanze's arguments also resonate with those of White (1967) in that he sees Christianity, with its emphasis on dominating nature (rather than living in community with it), as contributing to and legitimizing the destruction of the environment. In summary, the article vividly shows the potential of African Traditional Religions for environmental protection and ecological sustainability inherent in its notions of the sacredness of

nature. At the same time, however, it highlights the obstructions in realizing this potential, in essence caused by a marginalization of African Traditional Religious belief systems.

Emma Tomalin's article examines the construction of an environmentally friendly Hinduism within the religion and ecology discourses. As a scholar specializing in religion and development, Tomalin positions her analysis of Hindu Nationalism within the broader field of religion and development. She criticizes the construction of a romanticized and essentialized Hinduism that is purportedly inherently eco-friendly. Tomalin views this portrayal of Hinduism as problematic, asserting that it does little to advance climate change policies and instead perpetuates a "myth of primitive ecological wisdom" stemming from a yearning for an "imagined pre-colonial and pre-industrial past." She critiques the political dimension of these discourses, citing the example of how Hinduism in India is being greenwashed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindu Nationalism movement. This "neo-traditionalist" approach, according to Tomalin, primarily serves political rather than environmental goals. She unpacks how Hinduism has been widely constructed as environmentally friendly and how this notion is being deliberately strengthened and appropriated by the BJP. Tomalin also illustrates how the construction of an ostensibly environmentally friendly Hindu Nationalism adversely affects more sustainable traditional communities in India, particularly focusing on nomadic pastoralism and Adivasi tribal economies, along with their religio-cultural traditions. She demonstrates how the government has in fact supported the spread of the market economy instead of more sustainable alternatives while using the image of a traditional and environmentally friendly Hinduism to better their image. Through this critical analysis, Tomalin's article provides a significant counterpoint to the generally positive outlook on ecological engagement in religions presented in other articles in this special issue. Tomalin unfolds pointedly how the timely topic of religious environmental engagement can be misused to achieve other (political) means.

Finally, we are delighted that with **Iyad Abumoghli**'s contribution this special issue also includes a policy and practice note. With this shorter, crispy format, the journal seeks to provide a platform for in-depth reflections from and on policy and practice in the field of religion and development, aiming to expand the knowledge exchange between policy, practice, and academia. There could hardly be anyone better suited than Iyad Abumoghli, as the director of the United Nations Environment Programme's Faith for Earth Initiative, to contribute a policy and practice note to this special issue. In his article, Abumoghli

argues that religions, values, and ethical systems have a highly important role in addressing the complex ecological challenges and in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015). According to Abumoghli, in addition to the three prominent dimensions of sustainability – economic, social, ecological – the fourth dimension of sustainability, the cultural, has received too little attention. It encompasses values and ethics, traditional knowledge as well as religion and spirituality. Not including these factors constitutes a missed opportunity. Importantly, the author underscores the fact that the world does not have to deal with one ecological crisis. Rather, there is a triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. This triple crisis can only be dealt with if the dominant paradigm largely driven by industrialization and economic growth changes. As Abumoghli points out, this requires science and technology, appropriate global policies, but also religious values, beliefs, and ethical principles: religious communities, beliefs, ethics, and values play a crucial role in effecting a transformational shift toward sustainability. Based on several examples from different religious traditions, the article contends that religions across the world share a common value system in their mutual concern for the environment. Abumoghli calls for putting this concern into practice and integrating religious values and ethics with science and technology and global policy to work toward the major paradigm shifts needed for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution as the triple ecological crisis.

Overall, the articles show that religious communities can provide important impetus in the global debate on the ecological crisis. This finding is currently reflected not least by the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28), which took place in Dubai from November 30 to December 12, 2023. Faith-based organizations and religious leaders were strongly represented at the conference with their own faith pavilion (UNEP Faith for Earth 2023). Their common aim was to demonstrate that religious communities are essential in the fight against climate change and for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the goals of the Paris Agreement. Of course, whether they will be achieved remains to be seen.

This special issue demonstrates the potentials and the ways in which different religious traditions can respond to the escalating and manifold global ecological challenges. This is an important finding in view of the need for humanity to search for social, cultural, and moral forces that can raise awareness, shift global policies, and produce action against the current ecological predicament. Given the urgency of environmental and climate action, transdisciplinary academic research on the nexus of religion, ecology, and

sustainability has a crucial role to play. Studies such as the ones in this special issue help to determine the extent to which religious actors and communities see it as their duty to protect and preserve the environment and engage in the fight against climate change, thus contributing to sustainability – or whether they work in the opposite direction. Moreover, academic research in this field provides an important basis for the formulation of policy and of creating multiple-stakeholder approaches to the ecological crises. It is our hope that as academics we thereby are able to point toward the ethical responsibility of sustainability in global policy, public administration, the economy and, not least, individual behavior and to make a contribution to solving one of the major challenges of our time.

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