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# Religion & Development

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**SPECIAL ISSUE**

**CARE FOR THE POOR, CARE FOR THE EARTH: CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM  
DIALOGUE ON DEVELOPMENT**

*Issue Editors: Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano*

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# Care for the Poor, Care for the Earth: Christian-Muslim Dialogue on Development

## *Introduction*

*Séverine Deneulin*

Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, University of Oxford,  
Oxford, United Kingdom  
*severine.deneulin@campion.ox.ac.uk*

*Masooda Bano*

Oxford Development of International Development, University of Oxford,  
Oxford, United Kingdom  
*masooda.bano@qeh.ox.ac.uk*

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## **Abstract**

Concerns for the vulnerable, the poor and marginalised, both human and non-human, are central to the Christian and Muslim religions. This special issue focuses on the one hand on Catholic social thought and practice with regard to care for the poor and care for the earth, and on the other hand on historical and contemporary Islamic social thought and practice. In this introduction, we set the context of the dialogue and of this special issue. At a general level, we emphasise the centrality of love of God and love of neighbour in both Christianity and Islam. We then focus on the Catholic and Sunni traditions. We discuss how each understands the relationship between love of God/love of neighbour and the different organisational structures and practices which express this love. We highlight some commonalities and differences between teachings, organisational structures and historical and social contexts. We conclude by outlining some areas of mutual learning with regard to the centrality of care for the poor and for the earth in both religions.

## Keywords

inter-religious dialogue – ecology – poverty – social justice

### 1 Setting the Context

Care for the poor and care for the earth have been central concerns in the world's major religions well before the advent of development in the decolonisation era and the Sustainable Development Goals today. Despite a long tradition of teachings and practices in relation to poverty reduction and environmental protection, the research area of religion and development has so far little explored the rich body of knowledge, analytical insights, institutions and practices which religious traditions have developed over centuries vis-à-vis these contemporary development challenges. What can we learn from how religious traditions have responded historically, and are responding today, to these challenges of poverty and environmental destruction? This special issue seeks to address this question through adopting a comparative perspective between the Christian (Catholic) and Muslim (Sunni) traditions.

Along with Judaism, Christianity and Islam are part of the same Abrahamic faith family, tracing their roots to the iron-age patriarch of Abram in Mesopotamia. They exhibit commonalities in their religious texts, liturgies and teachings; and they share the common belief in a God who created the world and continues to be present in and to act in it (Peters 2018). It is not until the second century that the small Jewish sect which gathered around the teachings of a Jewish rabbi, Jesus, gradually separated from Judaism and became a religious tradition on its own (Chadwick 1993; Denova 2021). Islam was born in seventh-century Arabia, and the Qur'an – Islam's sacred text – contains many references to the Christian sacred text, such as the biblical figures of Abraham, Moses, Mary, Jesus and the angel Gabriel (Heck 2009).

In 2007, 138 Islamic scholars issued a document entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You*, which highlighted that the command to love God and one's neighbour was central to both the Christian and Muslim traditions (ACW 2007). *A Common Word* argued that love of God and neighbour ought to be the common ground on which both could dialogue, understand each other, and act together. Deepening the declaration in *A Common Word*, Pope Francis signed in February 2019 a declaration with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, on *Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*. The latter declaration reinforced the common centrality of love of God, of neighbour, and of creation:

Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need. (Francis 2019)

During his visit to Iraq in March 2021, Pope Francis met Iraq Shia leader, Al-Sistani, and both re-affirmed their commitment to work together to promote fraternity, united by the common Abrahamic heritage of Christianity and Islam (Al Jazeera 2021).

Being the largest group within Islam, this special issue focuses on the teachings, organisations and practices of the Sunni Muslim tradition. Where possible, references are made to the Shia tradition, the second major group in Islam, comprising an estimated 15 per cent of the global Muslim population.<sup>1</sup> For Christianity, we focus on the Catholic tradition given it is the largest Christian denomination,<sup>2</sup> and has developed over the last 150 years a consistent body of social thought, known as Catholic Social Teaching. This body of thought, addressed to “all people of good will” regardless of religious affiliation, seeks to analyse social, political and economic realities from the perspective of the Gospel (Dorr 2016; Rowlands 2021). One of the landmark documents of Catholic Social Teaching is Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home* published in 2015 (cf. infra).

As the articles and introduction in this special issue show, both Catholic and Muslim social thought share similar social and environmental teachings and a similar urge to shift the narrative of development from limitless material growth on a finite planet to one of balance between people and ecosystems (Mayer 2023). However, they embody different forms of transformative action at the policy level given their different modes of involvement with governments and civil society. The Catholic tradition has had a different engagement with secular thought and Western liberal democracies from the Muslim one, starting from the early nineteenth century when many Muslim countries were under colonial rule. This led to the development of a distinctive Catholic

1 According to the Pew Research Centre, there were 1.6 billion Muslims at the end of 2010, representing about 23% of the global population, with the proportion of adherents to Islam estimated to grow twice as fast as the global population rate. See <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/religions/muslims>.

2 According to the Statistical Office of the Catholic Church, the number of Catholics worldwide was estimated to be about 1.329 billion in 2018, just under 18% of the global population (Salvini 2020).

social thought. One aspect of this engagement was a too-comfortable accommodation of colonial thinking from which it is slowly liberating itself – the convocation of a Synod on the Amazon by Pope Francis in October 2019 has been in that regard a significant step towards decolonising and embracing local indigenous cosmologies (cf. *infra*). The history of colonialism and the colonial status of Muslim-majority countries has, on the other hand, made the development of a Muslim social thought more difficult. The introduction of Western schooling and universities in the Muslim world under colonial rule marginalised Islamic educational platforms: official sources of patronage for *madrasas* (Islamic places of learning) dried up and degrees from the newly established Western education institutions, instead of qualifications from the *madrasas*, became the route for securing employment and upwards social mobility (Bano 2017). These socio-political developments severely restricted the authority of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) to the domain of religious teachings around beliefs, rituals and piety. The dynamism marking earlier Islamic scholarly debates, where *madrasas* and the *ulama* were expected to produce socially relevant knowledge to answer questions in all domains of life, disappeared; the state and society no longer expected them to answer these questions (Bano 2017). These same patterns of knowledge production continued in post-colonial Muslim societies. The environment, being a relatively modern concern, has thus received little attention from traditional Islamic scholars and institutions; nor do we find political leaders or civil society groups in Muslim societies actively seeking advice from Islamic scholars on Islamic eco-theology. In the past two decades, however, we have seen an increasing number of contributions being made to this field mainly through the work of scholars based in Western universities (Ali 2017; Foltz 2000; Khalid 2019; Ramadan 2009; Saniotis 2012). These contributions, which draw on traditional Islamic sources but are written for a wider Western academic audience, help establish the potential of Islamic theology to cultivate within Muslims a serious sense of responsibility towards the environment; however, these works currently have limited reach amongst the Muslim public.

Catholic and Muslim traditions also privilege different channels of policy influence due to their different historical and organisational trajectories. The Catholic Church functions both as a state and as a global civil society organisation. In the Muslim world, contrary to popular perception, Islamic actors have comparatively fewer channels of policy influence at national or international level. As mentioned above, the colonial period dramatically changed the nature of the relationship between religious scholars and the state, restricting the influence of the former to matters of religious piety. Consequently, today, Islamic scholars can mobilise the public around religious causes, and

organise street protests, be it against cartoons of the Prophet or social liberalisation policies, but their ability to influence state policy or lobby international organisations around socio-economic and environmental concerns remains very limited. Yet, as the articles in this issue discuss, Islamic theology is heavily focused on developing a just society. It offers guidance that, to date, remain highly relevant but underutilised. Such differences in socio-ecological and policy engagement between Catholicism and Islam could be an opportunity to learn from each other, and for common actions to emerge.

## 2 The Special Issue

This special issue examines how Catholic and Muslim social thought have understood love of God/love of neighbour, and the practices and institutions that have been developed over the centuries to express that love in actions. The paper by Minlib Dhal discusses a privileged institution through which Muslim communities have lived the teachings of love of God and neighbour in the pre-colonial period, namely *waqf*. A *waqf* is a charitable trust or pious endowed property, which functions to provide a safety net for vulnerable members of their communities. Dhal examines how the institution, which was once a material pillar of Muslim communities and one in which women played a leading role, nearly disappeared during the colonial and post-colonial period. He argues how its revival could be a valuable instrument available to Muslim societies today to address poverty and environmental degradation. The establishment of *waqf* as a means of achieving closeness to God and expressing devotion to the divine could be especially important in bringing a social and ecological dimension to Muslim piety.

Munjed Murad continues on the theme of the resources available within the Muslim tradition itself to respond to the current ecological crisis. Most environmental organisations and movements in Muslim-majority countries draw on secular environmental discourses and fail to connect with the rich spiritual resources that the Qur'an, the writing of Islamic scholars, and past Muslim practices can offer to respond to contemporary development challenges. This has led to a too-ready dismissal of ecological action as being "Western" and an unfortunate disconnection between Muslim piety and spirituality and ecological action. Murad explores how the indifference of political and religious leaders today in Muslim populations in non-Western countries could be overcome by a revival of the Islamic tradition and a reconsideration of the modernity-tradition dichotomy.

An attempt to link Muslim piety with a concrete environmental action is critically examined by Naiyerah Kolkailah. She discusses the reach of the Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG) project in Doha, Qatar, to marry Islamic beliefs and teachings with environmental action, and to make Qatar a more just and sustainable society. On the basis of interviews and field research, Kolkailah explores the ways in which the QBG draws on Islamic scripture, beliefs, and values to articulate its vision and objectives. She explores how such garden projects could foster environmental advocacy, but highlights its limited reach in embedding Islamic teachings on care for the poor and care for the earth at the wider social level. She concludes, like Murad's paper, that much more needs to be done within Muslim societies to rediscover their Islamic intellectual and institutional heritage to address climate change and biodiversity loss.

The second part of this special issue explores how the theological and organisational resources of Catholic tradition have been leveraged for social and ecological change. James Bailey examines the social teachings on private property – or the principle of the “universal destination of goods” – with a focus on the Latin American context. Despite its Catholic-majority countries, the continent exhibits large levels of land and wealth inequality, with private property and land concentrated in the hands of a few. Bailey discusses how Catholic teachings on the social use of private property and land ownership – land is entrusted by God for the use of all so that each creature can flourish – have been used historically by Catholic social actors, and how they have been rediscovered, and expanded, in recent years, especially under the leadership of Pope Francis.

Adrian Beling continues to explore the influence of the Catholic Church, as both a global and local social actor, in changing social and economic structures towards greater care for the poor and for the earth. He highlights the unique potential of the Catholic Church to create “a global platform for communication, learning and concerted action”, capable of transforming social discourses and practices towards socio-ecological transformation along the lines of *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2015). By fostering not only the integration of the spiritual, social and ecological dimensions, but also the cultural assimilation of such integration, such transformation goes beyond mainstream approaches to sustainable development, which often remain ineffective. Beling concludes that the involvement of the Catholic Church in socio-ecological transformation is, however, not without risks and limitations.

One institutional expression of the Catholic tradition throughout its history has been its educational institutions. In the last paper of this special issue, Simon McGrath explores some of the roles that education can play in socio-ecological transformation. His paper looks in particular at the role of

vocational education and training (VET), and the social teachings about the dignity of work. McGrath discusses the Church's educational response to the industrial revolution, and explores what can be learned from it in the current ecological context. It then examines the contemporary Church's summons to an "education for ecological conversion", observing that it still falls short of being institutionalised in educational settings. McGrath argues for combining the experience of VET and education for sustainable development to support new curriculum and pedagogies, and to develop types of education that go beyond knowing to the forming of people as better caretakers of creation.

Before concluding this introduction, we would like to briefly discuss the wider context of the teachings and practices of each tradition on care for the poor and care for the earth. As the above summaries of each contribution have already hinted, there are synergies to be found as well as opportunities for mutual learning. We would like to focus on two areas of special relevance for development studies: the teachings on love of neighbour, and the organisational structures through which these teachings are developed and expressed.

### 3 Love of God and Love of Neighbour

The word "love" may not be mentioned often in the literature of development studies. Yet, concern for the poor, for those who suffer from injustice, and concern for the earth and the balance of all ecosystems – what Christians and Muslims would call "love of neighbour" – is its defining characteristic.<sup>3</sup> The joint declaration *A Common Word Between Us* details the many parallels between love of God and love of neighbour in the Qur'an and the Bible, and its direct bearing on care for the poor (ACW 2007).

Within the Christian tradition, Jesus answers the question of "Who is my neighbour?" with the parable of *The Good Samaritan*. In the Gospel of Luke (10:29–37), a fellow rabbi asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by asking the rabbi what is written in the Law, to which the rabbi answers: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself". But the rabbi adds, "And who is my neighbour?". This time, Jesus does not respond by referring him back to the Law but by telling him a story. A priest and a Levite both saw a wounded man lying half-dead along a road and

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3 The UK Development Studies Association defines development studies as an interdisciplinary field of study concerned with "the global challenge of combatting poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation" (DSA 2023).

passed by on the opposite side. In contrast, a Samaritan – Samaritans were seen as inferior by those to whom the parable is addressed – passed by, saw the victim, treated his wounds, lifted him onto his own animal, took him to an inn and paid for his care. After telling the story, Jesus asks the rabbi “Which of these three, do you think, proved himself the neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits’ hands?”. To which the rabbi replies: “The one who showed pity [or compassion] towards him”, and Jesus concludes: “Go, and do the same yourself”.

In his latest encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, Pope Francis (2020b) discusses at length the biblical parable of the Samaritan as a paradigmatic story for how we are to live our relations with fellow beings, human and non-human. The parable is an invitation to be attentive to those who are in vulnerable conditions, to those wounded along the road, and to respond in a way that embodies God’s compassion. Among the groups in vulnerable conditions today, Francis (2020b) mentions the elderly, the unemployed, the unborn, migrants and refugees, and those denied access to food, education, health, adequate housing, and other human rights.

The title of the document, which is taken from an admonition of St Francis of Assisi to his “brothers all”, also makes direct reference to his *Canticle of the Sun*, whose first words in Old Italian gave the title to another document of Catholic Social Teaching, *Laudato Si’ (Praise Be): On Care for Our Common Home* (hereafter referred to as LS).<sup>4</sup> In his *Canticle*, St Francis refers to the earth, our common home, as “a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs” (LS 1). In the *Canticle*, water is referred to as a sister, air as a brother.<sup>5</sup> Catholic social thought has evolved to include all living beings as neighbour to whom compassion has to be shown, for we are “siblings all” as per a more inclusive English translation of *Fratelli Tutti* (Czerny and Barone 2022). Our compassionate response towards humans who live in conditions of vulnerability is inseparable to that towards all endangered animal and plant species, and which “because of us, will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us” (LS 33). Actions towards “combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded” have to go hand in hand with actions towards protecting nature (LS 139). The seeing and hearing of the

4 Following convention for citation of papal encyclicals, the text is cited by the title’s initials and paragraph number.

5 The full text of the *Canticle* can be found at <https://cafod.org.uk/Pray/Prayer-resources/Canticle-of-the-sun>.



wounded human on the road is extended to wounded ecosystems to which all humans are bound. We need to hear “*both* the cry of the earth and of the poor” (LS 49, italics original). Like the Samaritan who lifts the wounded man upon his own mount, Pope Francis asks us “to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (LS 19).

This inseparability between care for the poor and care for the earth is what *Laudato Si'* refers to as “integral ecology”:<sup>6</sup> “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS 139). We need an “integrated approach” (LS 139) which addresses both crises at once. In Catholic social thought, the roots of the ecological crisis are anthropological. The solution does not lie only in technology but in a “change of humanity” (LS 9), a “renewal of our relationship with nature” (LS 118). We need to rediscover that humans are not separate from nature, and that there is an “intimate connection between God and all beings” (LS 243).

Combatting poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation – development studies’ key concern – is thus a central expression of the Christian faith. It is an expression of love of God and love of neighbour. This relationship between spirituality, closeness to the divine, and closeness to our neighbour, to the woman or man or child or elderly person suffering or the plant or animal in danger of extinction, is fundamental in both Catholic and Islamic social thought. Each article in this special issue deals in one or way or another with this relationship between closeness to the divine and closeness to neighbour, with each informing the other.

In the Islamic tradition, there is a similar emphasis on being good to one’s neighbour. Muslims are expected to be kind, generous, and caring towards their neighbours by sharing food, keeping informed of one another’s problems, and offering assistance when someone is in need. Like in the parable of the Samaritan, where “neighbour” means universal obligation (Sen 2009, 170–3), this emphasis on being kind to one’s neighbour is similarly widely interpreted as referring to the whole of humanity. Scholars refer to the Qur’anic verse – “Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbour, and the neighbour farther away” (Verse 4:36) – to highlight that the requirement to be good to one’s neighbour refers not just to those in our immediate proximity but to all of humanity, including those who are distant in religion and belief. One of the oft-quoted

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6 For further discussions on integral ecology, see Castillo (2019), Deneulin (2021a, b) and Kureethadam (2014).

hadiths (sayings or practices of Prophet Muhammad) notes: “Gabriel continued to advise me to treat neighbours well until I thought he would make them my heirs”; while another hadith notes: “He will not enter Paradise whose neighbour is not secure from his evil”. More importantly, Prophet Muhammad himself identified good behaviour towards fellow humans as being the route to finding closeness to God: “The best companion to Allah is the best to his companions, and the best neighbour to Allah is the best to his neighbours”.

This emphasis on being good to fellow human beings is thus indicative of the strong sense of social responsibility Islam cultivates within the believer. This obligation to do good is also reflected in the clear distinction between *Haqooq ul Allah* (Rights of God) versus *Haqooq ul Ibad* (Rights of Humanity). *Haqooq ul Allah* include the rights that Allah has over humans. As their creator, Allah requires humans to worship him and show him obedience through following five core religious obligations: *tawhid* (belief in oneness of God), performing five daily prayers, giving zakat (charity), fasting during the month of Ramadan, and going to Mecca to perform the religious pilgrimage *Hajj*. *Huqooq ul Ibad*, on the other hand, require the believer to be good to fellow humans by being kind, not violating anyone’s rights, and ensuring that one’s actions do not cause anyone harm. The most striking aspect of Islamic teachings on these two sets of obligations is that God is expected to forgive violation of *Huqooq ul Allah* but not *Huqooq ul Ibad*, thereby indicating the centrality of good behaviour towards others in the Muslim tradition.

This responsibility of care, however, is not restricted to fellow humans. According to Islamic teachings, humans are God’s vicegerent (*khalifa*) on earth by virtue of being gifted with intellect. They are thus also burdened with the responsibility to take care of other species and the environment. This divinely bestowed trust or responsibility to act as God’s representative on earth is referred to as *amāna*. Islamic teachings encourage humans to use the natural resources for human flourishing but to do so responsibly, as noted in the Qur’an: “Eat and drink from the provision of Allah, and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption” (Verse 2:60). Islam requires individuals to be mindful of their environment, and discourages unnecessarily chopping down trees and plants and the polluting of rivers, lakes, and oceans. There is a particular emphasis in Islamic teachings on preserving drinkable water as a precious resource and on avoiding all forms of wastage. Furthermore, the concept of *halal* meat is much more complex than simply ensuring the animal is slaughtered in the name of God; it requires rearing the animal in the most humane way following practices associated with organic farming. It is thus not surprising that some Islamic movements emerging in the West have a strong overlap with environmental movements, whereby they critique heavy

consumerism in general and argue for consuming less and paying for organically grown produce (Bano 2020). The Islamic tradition, however, does not have strong organisational structures through which these movements can mobilise Muslim communities worldwide towards sustainable consumption and production, as the next section discusses.

#### 4 Organisational Structures and Dynamics of Change

Within development studies, the concern for combatting poverty, injustice and environmental degradation has been institutionalised since the end of the Second World War in a large array of organisations. Within religious traditions, care for the poor and care for the earth likewise relies on the existence of organisational structures. As all the articles of this special issue illustrate, the teachings on care for the poor and care for the earth have evolved alongside organisational developments across different historical contexts. This is especially so for the Muslim tradition, where the colonial and post-colonial contexts radically changed the shape and expression of closeness to the divine, and with the current ecological crisis and ever-tightening grip of climate change on humanity shaping the tradition, albeit slowly, towards ecological awakening. A similar process is taking place within the Catholic Church with a re-interpretation of the Creation narratives away from humans having dominion over the Earth – an interpretation which it now views as incorrect<sup>7</sup> – to humans being one creature amongst others yet carrying a special responsibility of care (LS 67).

It is impossible to list all the organisations acting as channels through which teachings are developed and expressed within the Catholic tradition. They range from religious orders (nuns, monks, brothers, priests) and hospitals and schools, to diocesan structures (bishops and priests) and Vatican dicasteries which function like government ministries, and others. According to the Vatican news agency (FIDES 2019), the Catholic Church today includes more than 5,000 hospitals, 16,000 dispensaries, more than 5,000 bishops and 3,000

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7 “Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.” (LS 67).

ecclesiastical circumscriptions, each with its own administrative and organisational structures.<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the scope of this introduction to review the historical foundations and evolution of the Catholic Church (Tanner 2014). It suffices to say that its organisational structure has been profoundly shaped by the Roman Empire. Its rituals such as that of priestly ordination, the priestly vestments, and the basilica as church building, for example, are all modelled on the Roman Empire's administration, including the organisation of the Empire with "overseers" or bishops (*episcopai*) (MacCulloch 2010). In addition, the expansion of the Catholic Church from Europe and the Middle East to the Americas and to some extent Asia and Africa is linked to the political colonisation project; although Christianity in some parts of Africa and Asia predate colonisation, such as in Ethiopia, India or China where Christianity spread through trade routes in the first millennium (MacCulloch 2010).

Of interest to this special issue is how the teachings on care for the poor and for the earth are shaped in interaction with the organisations that seek to embody these teachings and in interaction with the new realities that these organisations are facing. Within the Catholic tradition, we can highlight the organisational structure of the Church in its dioceses (led by bishops) and the papal office, as well as the dual identity of the Catholic Church as a state (with the Vatican or Holy See having diplomatic relations to states) and as civil society actor.

The Catholic Church comprises more than 3,000 dioceses, structured in organisations national (national bishops conference) and regional (such as the Latin American bishops conference), and linked via the papal office which convokes at regular times in Rome all the bishops for general assemblies ("synod of bishops"). This means that what is happening at the grassroots level in one part of the world feeds into its global structures. The papal letter (or encyclical) *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, which is addressed to "every person living on this planet" (LS 3), refers many times to documents produced by national bishops' conferences. It is the bishops conference of the Philippines in 1988 who first raised the alarm about "what is happening to our beautiful land", asking: "Who turned the wonderworld of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of colour and life?" (LS 41). The convocation in October 2019 of the Synod on the Amazon exemplifies this evolution of teachings in the light of what is happening to our world.<sup>9</sup> The one-month long assembly analysed the

8 For a detailed survey of 85 Catholic religious orders and the organisations they run among the poorest of the poor in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, see Barrera (2019).

9 For a discussion of the Amazon Synod in the context of development studies, see Deneulin (2021b).

situation of the Amazon basin and discussed possible responses to “the colonizing interests that have continued to expand ...[that] have expelled or marginalized the indigenous peoples ... and [that] are provoking a cry that rises up to heaven” (Francis 2020a, 9). It led to a gradual shift in the Catholic Church embracing indigenous cosmologies:

The aboriginal peoples give us the example of a joyful sobriety and in this sense, “they have much to teach us”. They know how to be content with little; they enjoy God’s little gifts without accumulating great possessions; they do not destroy things needlessly; they care for ecosystems and they recognize that the earth, while serving as a generous source of support for their life, also has a maternal dimension that evokes respect and tender love. (Francis 2020a, 79)

The Church, and its 1.4 billion members, are invited “to esteem the indigenous mysticism that sees the interconnection and interdependence of the whole of creation, the mysticism of gratuitousness that loves life as a gift, the mysticism of a sacred wonder before nature and all its forms of life” (Francis 2020a, 73). How this invitation is filtering into each parish or Catholic school or other organisations among all continents remains uneven, with large groups in the Catholic Church rejecting the teachings developed under Pope Francis (Faggioli 2022).

As a diplomatic actor, the Catholic Church can leverage considerable influence in international policy platforms on issues such as disarmament, refugees, health, rights of indigenous peoples, freedom of conscience and beliefs, and other areas in defence of the dignity of the human person and the common good (Tomasi 2017). As the UN Secretary-General writes, “The Holy See serves a double mission: to help humanity from plunging into the dark abysses of destruction and war and to promote a culture of dialogue and respect. ... The Holy See calls particular attention to the suffering of the most vulnerable and upholds the most fundamental and non-negotiable human right, the right to life” (Guterres 2017, 831).

As a civil society actor, the Catholic Church includes tens of thousands of civil society organisations, or “faith-based organisations” as they are known in development studies (Clarke and Jennings 2008; Clarke and Ware 2015). There is also an emerging social movement around the encyclical *Laudato Si’*. How, and whether, each organisation or movement is responding to the cry of the earth and of the poor are questions that can only be answered by looking at them individually. All contributors to this special issue deal in one way

or another with the organisational structures of each tradition and how they facilitate, or hinder, the expression of love of neighbour in actions.

Sunni Islam, unlike the Catholic tradition, does not have a central authority. However, it similarly has a vast network of mosques like parish churches, which are embedded within Muslim communities. The mosque is primarily a place for prayer, but it has from the time of the Prophet also been an important social space where the community comes together to build a sense of belonging. The mosque is equally used as a space for deliberating on common social concerns, offering family-oriented social activities, and providing social services especially in the area of education and health. Mosques are historically run on community donations given under three Islamic charitable heads: *kheerat*, *sadaqa*, and *zakat*. *Zakat* is one of the five core pillars of Islam and captures Islamic emphasis on giving in charity – *zakat* is a tax amounting to 2.5 per cent of one's savings and is also applied to assets of certain value. As an obligatory ritual, its performance is compulsory only for those who have certain amounts of wealth. The other two charitable heads are voluntary and encourage everyone to give to help others in whatever way they can. Consequently, even those with limited means try to help those less privileged than themselves.

This heavy emphasis on giving has led to a rich tradition of charitable organisations in the Muslim world. These organisations have been particularly active in the area of health, education, and preservation of water and cultivable areas of community land. Due to Qur'anic emphasis on feeding the poor and taking care of orphans, orphanages and *lungar* (free food stalls) feature prominently in this landscape. Thus, some aspects of environmental concerns, especially linked to water preservation, are already addressed by existing charity organisations in the Muslim world, even if these efforts might not be labelled within an explicitly environmental discourse.<sup>10</sup> Some of these charities also operate as *waqaf*, Islamic endowments, which as Minlib Dhal's paper discusses in this issue historically sustained an extensive network of welfare and development activities in Muslim-majority countries. Yet, as will become clear through the articles on the Islamic tradition presented in this volume, in the post-colonial world, Muslim-majority countries have lost connections with both the intellectual ideas of their own tradition as well as the old institutional arrangements that sustained much of this welfare and development work. In doing so, the articles establish the potential for these connections to be revived to enable Islamic thought and practice to once again confidently contribute to promoting social and environmental justice.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the initiative to avoid waste and water protection when doing the Haj (Eco Hajj 2023).

Another common characteristic to both traditions is that neither separates actions from spirituality. The onus of change is on us, it is “we human beings above all who need to change” (LS 202), and this is a “cultural, spiritual and educational challenge” (LS 202). Policies and economic structures need to change but there is no structural change without a “change of heart” (LS 218), a “profound interior conversion” (LS 217), an “ecological conversion” (LS 219); that is, a change of one’s way of relating with the earth and other people, from domination to care, from indifference to love (LS 217–219). This echoes the notion of *tawbah* in Islam, which expresses people turning back to God in repentance, and God turning to people in forgiveness.<sup>11</sup>

Both traditions emphasise the importance of virtues. *Laudato Si’* emphasises the importance of ecological virtues (LS 88) such as praise, gratitude, care, justice, sobriety, and humility (Kureethadam 2016). The Qur’an similarly emphasises praise to God, gratitude, moderation, sustainable consumption, and not disrupting the earth’s balance. The organisational structures of both traditions – in terms of their liturgies, rituals and prayers, the meditation on sacred texts such as biblical or Qur’anic parables or the sung recitation of psalms or Qur’anic verses – are an important vehicle for education in ecological virtues, as are the many social and environmental projects attached to places of ritual. As McGrath asks in his contribution: “How do we move from knowing to doing and then to being?”. Religious traditions have something to contribute to answering that question. We hope that this special issue is the beginning of further transformative dialogue between both traditions for the sake of socio-ecological change. Rediscovering the heritage and potential of religious traditions as catalysts for the deep transformation required at all levels of society, so that planet Earth can continue to be a liveable home for humans and non-humans, is not a mere academic exercise. It is an existential necessity.

### Issue and Editors

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11 We thank Farhana Mayer for pointing out the relation between the idea of *metanoia* (conversion) in Christianity and that of *tawbah* in Islam.

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*Research Articles*







# Accumulate but Distribute: Islamic Emphasis on the Establishment of *Waqf* (Pious Endowment)

## Research Article

*Minlib Dallh*

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA  
*mdallh@hotmail.com*

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### Abstract

Islamic jurisprudence and scriptural tradition have numerous compulsory and voluntary obligations to provide a safety net for the less fortunate in their communities. One particularly important instrument for solidarity and social development is the establishment of *waqf* (charitable trust or pious endowed property). Among many charitable faith-based organizations and institutions, *waqf* is an important option available to devout Muslims concerned with care for the poor and the earth, closeness to and love of God, as well as love of kin and neighbour. In this paper, I first present the institution of *waqf* and how it functioned historically. Second, I point to the crucial role of women as founders and managers of *waqf*. Third, I examine *waqf* amidst the whirlwind of modernity and colonialism. In conclusion, I affirm the significance of *waqf* today for Muslim societies in difficult political and socio-economic situations.

### Keywords

Pious endowment (*waqf*) – women – Mamluk – Ottoman – liberal-capitalism – postcolonial countries

## 1 Introduction

In the context of triumphant neoliberalism and ecological catastrophes, all papers in this volume address in one way or another the question of how land and capital are distributed and used, and how wealth is accumulated. Regarding care for the earth and the poor in the Global South, secular and faith-based organizations have a long way to go to embody this care in their projects. Their achievements notwithstanding, western-based NGOs in most developing countries must recognize their limitations and the various criticisms levelled against them. Many serve as Trojan horses for western powers or use poor countries as compelling reasons for obtaining funding for their organizations (Hearn 2007). The Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck refers to this practice as “fatal assistance”.<sup>1</sup> Western development institutions also often regard Muslim faith-based NGOs and charitable institutions as being hostile to secular-western modernity.

In most postcolonial majority Muslim countries, the presence of NGOs is increasing while the institution of *waqf* faces tremendous obstacles. In this paper, I propose that this *sui generis* Islamic institution should be reconsidered for its potential for social welfare and ecological pertinence. Like other Muslim faith-based institutions, *waqf* mobilizes key concepts: closeness to God (*qurba*), reward in the hereafter (*thawāb*), and works for the sake of God (*fī sabīl Allah*). The concept of closeness to God is the key characteristic of the friends of God (*awliyā*) in the Islamic mystical tradition. From this perspective, one can argue that the core motivation of the founders of *waqf* is not only a concern for the afterlife but also to evoke in pious Muslims a conscious love of God, kin, and neighbour. In addition, Muslims believe that care for the needy is a divinely ordained path to counter greed and egotism and to purify one’s wealth. The eschatological dimension of *waqf* can be useful today in the context of various forms of revival of Muslim piety.

The institution of *waqf*, which Marshall Hodgson (1974, 124) described as “the material foundation of Islamic society” and Nada Moumtaz (2021a, 3) refers to as “God’s property”, offers a serious challenge to the dominant capitalist and productivist forms of economic development, as well as a possible remedy for our current abysmal inequality of wealth and power distribution within and beyond individual countries. For Muslims, the founding of *waqf* is encouraged because it grants earthly and eschatological rewards for meritorious pious acts. These acts of charity reinforce the relations between the believer and

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1 See Peck’s movie of the same name on the rebuilding of Haiti after the devastating earthquake of 2010. See also Edmonds (2013).

God (love of God and closeness to God) and perpetuate the bond between the founder and the beneficiaries (love of family/kin and community/neighbour).

In this paper, I will follow a historical approach. I take an interest in a few enduring and valuable aspects of *waqf* without underestimating its considerable challenges. First, I offer a short overview of the history of this pious endowment. Second, I highlight its potential for gender equality by reviewing the role of women as founders and managers of *waqf*. Third, I explore the ill effects of modernity and colonialism. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the institution's significance for Muslim societies today in difficult political and socio-economic situations. In the modern Muslim world, this powerful instrument seems to have lost its vitality, visibility, and effectiveness. My argument is the revival of *waqf* could be a valuable instrument available to Muslim societies to ensure solidarity, cohesion, and above all the preservation of the common good.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 *Waqf*: Origin and Development in the Classical Period

In Islamic jurisprudence, the term *waqf* (pl. *awqāf*) or *ḥabs*, *ḥubs*, *ḥubūs*, *ḥabīs* (pl. *aḥbās*) in North Africa, or *bonyad* charitable trust in Iran, refers to the act of founding charitable endowment, the endowment itself, and the endowment institution. The root meaning of the term is to “stop”, “block” or “suspend” something. Thus, *waqf* is blocked (suspended) from taking part in any commercial transaction, while its yields (*al-manfaʿah*) are devoted to charitable purposes. These acts of charity reinforce the relations between the believer and God and perpetuate the bond between the founder and the beneficiaries (family and/or community). Charitable endowments reflect Muslims' view of death itself, preparation for the afterlife, and transmission of wealth. Various Qur'anic verses and hadiths strongly enjoin Muslims to practise individual and collective charity. According to Zarinebaf (2005, 90), “The institution of *waqf* developed in time to provide the framework for the realization of this important Qur'anic individual and communal obligation to help the needy, the orphan, and the weak”.

2 *Waqf* as an institution went through multiple phases of success and failure. If institutional failure is a compelling reason to give up support, I wonder what would have happened to the institution of banks at the heart of liberal capitalist economies. From the late 1920s to the last debacle in 2008, banks have failed several times. Yet every collapse was followed by a bailout using taxpayers' money, and a return to the problematic practices which caused the catastrophe in the first place. If the institution of *waqf* received similar support, one can only imagine its potential success.

In his paper “Financing Kindness as a Society” Abdurrashid (2019, 3) observes that “charitable foundations and endowments would become fundamental to the conceptualization and manifestation of an Islamic society to such an extent that it would become nearly impossible to envision the Muslim world without *waqf*s. They had become the thread that stitched together the diverse tapestry of the Islamic civilization”. In their endeavour to codify *waqf*, Muslim jurists required four elements in the deed for the establishment of the institution: first, a written declaration recorded as an official document; second, the wealth or property endowed had to be designated for a particular purpose; third, a beneficiary or beneficiaries had to be named, whether a person or persons, a category of people (orphans, the poor) or the public; and fourth, a living benefactor/founder of the *waqf* had to be named. In theory, once the *waqf* is officially established, it cannot be revoked, sold, gifted, or inherited (Abdurrashid 2019, 20).

By the 10th century, laws were established regarding the beneficiaries, the administrators, and the type of property that can legally be a *waqf*. During the Ottoman Empire, *waqf* became the most popular form of voluntary charity in the Muslim world. In the Mamluk and Ottoman periods,<sup>3</sup> the institution of *waqf* played a crucial role in the urban renewal and physical economy of major Islamic cities such as Cairo, Istanbul, Damascus, Beirut and Aleppo. By the early 1800s, according to one conservative estimate, more than half of the real estate in the Ottoman Empire was classified as endowed (*waqf*) (Abdurrashid 2019, 3).

*Waqfs* were made by all strata of the population – rulers, high officials, men and women, rich people, as well as people of modest means. Endowed assets covered considerable proportions of all kinds of properties in every Muslim town, as well as vast agricultural areas (Deguilhem 2008, 929–56). These endowments also became the principal vehicle for financing public services and political and economic interests, including religious cults, education and learning, welfare and health services, municipal services, urbanization, and economic infrastructure. The scope of voluntary charity in Islam, the purposes it served, and its importance in the public sphere thus reached proportions beyond what was common in other civilizations. Abdurrashid writes:

The institutionalization of charity in Islam became a defining factor that would exert dominating influence on urban planning and the

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3 The Mamluk Sultanate ruled Egypt, Syria, Levant and part of the Arabian Peninsula from 1250 to 1517. The Ottoman Empire ruled from the 14th to the 20th centuries. Here I am interested in the 15th to the 18th centuries.



development of cities and towns, social welfare, religious habits and practice, the production of art and the development of aesthetics, the structure and stability of markets and economic forces, political stability, as well as the production of Muslim culture in all its diverse representations. (Abdurrashid 2019, 3)

Over the centuries *waqf* foundation took on a complex heterogeneous structure which incorporated various types of institutions within it. As we will see later, the success of the institution did not prevent founders (the elite or commoners), administrators, or even beneficiaries from abusing and manipulating the system for personal, political, and religious gain. Nevertheless, it is remarkable to see how this institution became “the material foundation and an important means to live as a good Muslim – to get close to God, to care for one’s family as charity in Islamic society centuries after the death of Muhammad” (Moumtaz 2021b, 1). The short history presented here does not do justice to the complexity and conceptualization of *waqf* in classical Islamic centuries. But there is one even more remarkable aspect that is crucial to the re-imagining of *waqf* today: the involvement of women.

### 3 Women Founders and Managers of *Waqf*

When it comes to gender justice and equality in Islamic tradition, the institution of *waqf* held tremendous promise. The historical role of women as founders and managers of *waqf* presents a different picture from the more familiar entrenched patriarchal rules. The financial capacity of Muslim women and their important contributions to Moghul, Mamluk, Ottoman, and Safavid societies, to name but a few, in the form of pious charitable endowments was significant. *Waqf* endowed and managed by women provided most needed services in major cities such as Cairo, Aleppo, Istanbul, and Damascus. During periods of socio-economic and political crisis, the welfare role of public and private *waqf* provided relief for the poor, the destitute, and vulnerable women in rural and urban areas. The picture presented in archival research differs from the widespread view that pre- and early modern Muslim women were excluded from the economic and political spheres with little to no involvement outside their domestic life. Pious endowment thus has the potential to restore the economic and religious agency of Muslim women in most majority Muslim post-colonial countries.

*Waqf* was an institution of gender equality in contradistinction to some aspects of Islamic inheritance laws. Julien Loiseau in “Boy and Girl on Equal

Terms: Women, Waqf and Wealth Transmission in Mamluk Egypt” notes that on the one hand, Islamic laws of inheritance are based on testamentary freedom (Q.2, 180) and compulsory inheritance verses (Q.4, 8 and 11–12), yet on the other hand, based on the prophetic reports (hadith) “a bequest may not exceed one-third of the estate” and “no bequest [must be made] to an heir” (Loiseau 2019, 2–3). Testamentary freedom prevents favouring one heir at the expense of the others. Inheritance laws stipulate that at least two-thirds of the estate is shared among various heirs: sons and daughters as well as parents, spouses, brothers, and sisters. There are two issues with inheritance law: the fragmentation of the estate, and in certain cases gender inequality. Indeed, inheritance verses in the Qur’an stipulate that male heirs are granted a share worth that of two daughters of the deceased (“*li-l-dhakar mithl ḥazz al-unthayn*”). Therefore, not only is the wealth fragmented, but in some cases it is divided unequally among male and female heirs.

Inheritance rules in Islam might seem unjust in some situations because males and females do not always receive equal shares. While females receive equal or greater shares than males in numerous cases, in some cases (e.g. a son and daughter inheriting from their deceased father) males receive double the share of females. There is a reason for this difference. In Islam, males are financially responsible for the women in their families, while women have no obligation to use their inheritance or any income they earn to contribute to household/living expenses. Thus, one could argue that inheritance laws are concerned with equity instead of equality; that is, not distributing equal shares but achieving fairness by considering gender roles and responsibilities. Muslim women beneficiaries of *waqf* can therefore choose to use any amount of their funds – from inheritance or their own incomes – to establish charitable endowments because they are not obliged to use those funds for household expenses. On the other hand, men who choose to establish a *waqf* must ensure they are fulfilling their financial obligations toward their families when they consider making charitable donations.

The traditional use of *waqf* to protect and pass on property and wealth was consistent with the economic needs of women, congruent with the socio-political culture, and did not violate Islamic inheritance laws. Even though legally only one-third of the family estate can be endowed, *waqf* foundation provided an opportunity for many Muslims to circumvent Islamic inheritance laws. *Waqf* allowed the founders to choose the administrator of the estate and to transfer income and usufruct to beneficiaries of the founder’s choice. They could thus easily circumvent Islam laws of inheritance and any unsatisfactory or adverse effects. Not bound by inheritance laws, the *waqf* founder can include or exclude without restriction some categories of legal

heirs or freely divide income and yields among several heirs. In several *waqf* deeds, the founder shared the benefit equally among his sons and daughters, and among both male and female descendants of his children. Loiseau draws our attention to a third discrepancy, concerning the legal norms of inheritance. A *waqf* founder freely chooses the holders (*mustahiqqun*) of his/her foundation subject only to their legal capacity. Such freedom allows a founder to include among the beneficiaries people who do not belong to his/her kin, such as manumitted slaves and concubines (Loiseau 2019, 8).

Under the *waqf* system, women not only inherited wealth; many of them (wealthy or less fortunate) were also founders and managers of *waqf*. In fact, by the Mamluk period in the 16th century, *waqf* had a long history as a legal institution. After six centuries the institution had matured and now included unmovable and movable goods. Archived legal documents offer us the opportunity to better understand the position of women and their economic roles. We are fortunate that there is enough documentation underpinning the social history of Mamluk women in Egypt and Syria on the accumulation and transmission of wealth.<sup>4</sup>

The example of women in Mamluk society is instructive. Analyses of endowment deeds during these periods yield crucial information about family and asset management. *Waqf* was a major instrument for wealth accumulation and transmission. In his article, Loiseau (2019, 6) speaks of “*waqf* as an alternative channel of wealth transmission”, particularly for Muslim women. Rapoport’s multiple publications (e.g. Rapoport 2007, 2009) show that Mamluk women were autonomous agents and managed their wealth while married or even after divorce. Many wealthy Mamluk women acted as investors in many sectors, including *waqf* foundation. According to Loiseau (2019), Mamluk society of Egypt and Syria at the time demonstrated a tendency towards equality between male and female in wealth transmission.

In his paper, Deguilhem (2005, 102) speaks of “gender blindness”.<sup>5</sup> Like Loiseau, he shows the role of women in founding and managing *waqf* under the Mamluk Sultanate. He sees the *waqf* institution as a means of understanding women’s history, family genealogy, and political alliances. Along with many

4 See the case of Sitt al-Halab (d. 1526), the powerful and rich wife of Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Aja (d. 1519) who was the confidential secretary and head of chancery for Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri (d. 1516). Sitt al-Halab inherited a considerable amount of wealth after her father’s death and became the overseer of substantial religious endowments he had founded during his lifetime. Her situation was not an outlier but the norm during the 16th-century Mamluk period (see Emil Homerin 2019, 124).

5 See also Deguilhem (2003) for a discussion of women as creators and managers of endowments.

others, Deguilhem recognizes the significant economic and political role of women in Mamluk and Ottoman societies. His paper scrutinizes source material like *adab* literature (etiquettes or good manners) and court records to prove that Muslim women accumulated wealth and power in their societies. In her introduction to Deguilhem's article, Sonbol notes:

Even more remarkable, the *awqaf* records did not differentiate between male and female activities, they were "gender blind". *Awqaf* records illustrate the multiplicity of roles women played and often in conjoined role with men. Gender differences might be deciphered in the types of *waqf* and pattern of control between men and women, but there was a great cooperation between men and women and most *waqf* were endowed for the benefit of men and women. Personal, network, and family relations, as well as the wish to provide particular services to their communities, provided the structure of *waqf* established by women, gender played no role in such decisions. (Sonbol 2005, 336)

Focusing on 18th- and 19th-century *waqf* documents in Damascus, Deguilhem concludes that pious foundations were gender neutral (or blind) institutions. The role of women as founders and managers of *waqf* developed organically:

analogous to her male counterparts, the Muslim woman created *waqf* foundations in her own name. And, like any man, she frequently appointed herself as top manager (*nazir* or *mutawalli*) of her foundation as well as one of its beneficiaries. In this capacity, the female founder of a foundation, theoretically and doubtless in practice, did in certain instances exercise individual decision-making control over the management of the *waqf* which she had created. (Sonbol 2005, xxv)

In her research, Zarinebaf (2005) alerts us to not only small family and charitable *waqfs* but also royal and elite women's endowments. Above all, women were active in the Ottoman Empire across all strata of life in building the rural and urban spaces of their communities via pious charitable endowments. In the case of Istanbul, the context is important to understand. In the 18th century, the Ottoman Empire experienced periods of social, political, and military crises. During these difficult periods, women of higher and lower social rank set up large and small family trusts to ensure the survival of their families and descendants. In particular, women of modest pedigree, whether widowed or divorced, were keen to establish small *waqfs* for the benefit of their relatives.

Already in 1546, 36 per cent of *waqf* in Istanbul were set up by women, many not from the ruling class nor elite women. Zarinebaf (2005, 94–95) writes:

“women were both founders and beneficiaries of *khairy* (charitable), *evladlik* (family), and *para* (money) *waqfs*. All three were designed to circumvent the Islamic inheritance laws and the ban on usury and interest”.

An important point is in order here. Zarinebaf includes in her different types of *waqf* movable property like money, while the classical concept of *waqf* was mainly concerned with unmovable property. Money was particularly problematic because of the scriptural prohibition on interest and usury. However, as early as the 16th century, *waqfs* in Anatolia included “movable property like books, candles, furniture, and sums of money to be lent out at interest” (Sonbol 2005, xxiv).

According to Abdurrashid (2019, 24), “cash *waqf* essentially involved the use of interest-based lending of the proceeds earned from an investment. This new transformation created lines of credit that were endemic to the empire, long before modern banking emerged”. In Istanbul alone, in 1546, 46 per cent of all *waqfs* were made up of movable property notwithstanding the fierce opposition of religious scholars to any financial practices that resembled usury or interest-producing (Sonbol 2005, xxv). Cash *waqf* was largely confined to Anatolian regions (the Asian part of today’s Turkey) and did not reach Arabic-speaking regions of the Ottoman Empire.

These Mamluk and Ottoman women show that the persistent view of Muslim women as submissive and homebound should be laid to rest. The role of women as *waqf* founders and managers is yet another crucial and valuable aspect needing attention in modern Muslim societies. However, before assessing the pertinence of *waqf* for post-colonial majority Muslim nations, we should not underestimate the historical failures and reforms of *waqf* prompted by modernity and colonialism.

#### 4 *Waqf* in the Maelstrom of Modernity: Ottoman and Colonial Reforms

This section focuses on a few relevant aspects of the failures of *waqf* and the history of its reforms. It is important to remind ourselves that the Qur’anic *welthanschauung* (or worldview) and the prophetic *sitz im leben* (or context) uphold the centrality of charity and almsgiving, which are the foundation of *waqf*. In its classical approach, *waqf* was understood as an important way of living as a pious Muslim, getting close to God, and caring for one’s community as well as kin and kith.

At the beginning of the 19th century, pious charitable endowments constituted almost two-thirds of the land in the Ottoman Empire. For example, *waqf* foundations controlled about half of the land in Algeria, a third in Tunisia,

and one-fifth in Egypt. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, at least one-tenth to one-fifth of cultivated land were *waqf* (Pianciola and Sartori 2007, 475–98). I agree with Timur Kuran that for centuries *waqf* was a key organizational tool for socio-economic progress. It played an important role as an institution in the decentralization of social services, and the transformation of major cities and villages (Kuran 2016, 419).

However, the history of *waqf* took a dramatic turn in the modern Muslim world. This powerful Islamic instrument declined for various reasons. Even before western colonial encroachment, *waqf* underwent serious reform during the Ottoman Empire. From the 16th century onwards, *waqf* was extended to movable property, including money. Legal rigidities, lack of self-governance, and several abuses of the institutions were recognized, and numerous reforms took effect. Under the Ottomans, the state seized the administration, supervision, and revenues of many *waqf*, and in the name of good administration subjected them to a systematized regime of accounting and reporting (Moumtaz 2021b, 81).

Remarkable aspects of these reforms were the creation of a ministry for *waqf* in October 1826 in the Ottoman Empire, and of three types of *waqf* depending on the administration: seized, semi-autonomous, and autonomous. In the first case, the ministry of *waqf* was the administrator and supervisor; in the second case, a local administrator was appointed according to the will of the founder but had to report to the ministry of *waqf*; and in the third case, the institution maintained the classical *waqf* formula (Moumtaz 2021a, 78–9). In Egypt, the reforms were tumultuous. Muhammad Ali established a central administration for *waqf* there in 1835 but it was abolished shortly after. In 1851, Abbas I of Egypt re-established the central administration of *waqf*, and in 1864 it became the ministry of *waqf* (Pianciola and Sartori 2007, 477). In the 20th century, *waqf* reforms across the Ottoman Empire reached unprecedented proportions. In Kemalist Turkey, the caliphate and the ministry of Islamic Law were abolished in 1924, and *waqf* properties and administration were incorporated into the secular state under the supervision of the Board for Pious Endowments. Two years later, public *waqf* were nationalized and family ones simply abolished. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, *waqf* entered a whirlwind of colonial encroachments (Pianciola and Sartori 2007, 477).

From the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (officially dissolved in 1922) to the end of the Second World War, the French, British, and Russians imposed their respective rule on former Ottoman territories in the Middle East and elsewhere. So while *waqf* reforms started under the Ottomans, they subsequently accelerated across predominantly Muslim colonies. The British in India and

Zanzibar, the French in Lebanon and Algeria, and the Russians in the Caucasus all sought to control and manage *waqf* institutions for their own benefit. For example, Norbert Oberauer argues that in Zanzibar, colonial policy towards *waqf* did not aim to dismantle *waqf* as such, but he admits that British policies disrupted traditional patterns of *waqf* practice. He writes:

Traditionally, *waqf* was controlled by wealthy patron families who used endowments to foster bonds of dependence and loyalty with manifold clientele and to maintain mosques representing the patron's social status. This practice was antithetical to British political and economic ideas, which were modern and capitalist. British officials insisted that patrons must use their wealth as a business resource and that the maintenance of mosques was a responsibility of the state. Accordingly, the British controlled *waqf* administration classified endowments as either "family *waqf*" or "mosque *waqf*". The first was fully exploited in favour of the founder's family, while the latter was turned into revenue for public mosque upkeep. As a result, *waqf* ceased to be an economic base for patron-client relationships and clients were transformed into a modern working class entirely dependent on wage labour. (Oberauer 2008, 315)

Oberauer seems to suggest that the colonial British power came to save *waqf* from an economy based on patron-client nepotism. In the classical understanding of *waqf*, the beneficiaries defined the type of *waqf* in question. But in turning beneficiaries into a working class, the British destroyed a crucial aspect of *waqf* and completely neglected its religious component. Oberauer (2008, 315) nevertheless recognizes that "[*waqf*] practice was antithetical to British political and economic ideas, which were modern and capitalist" and based on its colonialist view of local and Islamic institutions.

In Algeria, the situation was even worse because of the actions of the French colonial settlers. As pointed out earlier, *waqf* largely held a considerable amount of landed property; the French in Algeria found countless reasons to dismantle *waqf* and distribute land to European settlers. This was a systematic practice found in all settler colonies, which devastated the pious endowments. In this context, *waqf* institutions stood little chance of survival (Pianciola and Sartori 2007, 478).

In Lebanon, Moumtaz notes that the French registration process transformed *waqf* into a legal person. She writes that in the colonial view, "*waqf* tied in eternity to the particular purposes willed by founders and involving multiple claims to revenues had to be liberated" (Moumtaz 2021b, 1). Driven by French

secularism, religion and culture were confined to the private sphere, while universal reason and economy belonged to the public realm. The dichotomy of public and private spheres imposed by the French mandate resulted in *waqf* being “conceptualized in French mandatory legislation as either real-state wealth or religious space and charitable foundations. Only the latter came to be categorized as charitable” (Moumtaz 2021a, 12).

For the French in Lebanon and the British in Zanzibar, or the Russians in the Caucasus, *waqf* perpetuated a particular social order that was contrary to their modern and colonial vision. Oberauer (2008, 316) concludes that in Zanzibar, the British wanted families to either be autonomous units, wage-laborers or owners of capitalist enterprises, “un-hampered by bonds of dependence and loyalty”. Under colonial domination, the conceptualization of *waqf* as perpetuating relations between founders, God, and public and private beneficiaries – as an act of pious endowment – was suspended. Colonial powers disregarded godliness, closeness to God, and above all the way in which *waqf* articulated a different understanding of charity, religion, and economy.

In his various writings, Timur Kuran proposes a dire diagnosis but from a different perspective. In his book *The Long Divergence*, Kuran (2011) locates the lack of democracy and the economic failure of predominantly Muslim countries in Islamic legal arrangements themselves, which he claims laid the basis for underdevelopment and economic stagnation. A particularly relevant analysis here is Kuran’s (2016) article entitled “Legal Roots of Authoritarian Rule in the Middle East: Civic Legacies of the Islamic *Waqf*”. In it, he insists that the institution of *waqf* did not curb corruption, was inflexible, and above all stifled the growth of a civil society. In his article, he gives a series of reasons showing the ineptitude of the institution in preparing modern Muslim nation-states for economic growth and political democratization.

These are valid criticisms of pre-modern *waqf* when compared with modern western conceptions of charitable endowment. Kuran (2016, 421) speculates that *waqf*, which is the closest institution to an independent private organization, “could have served as a tool for organized political participation, mass collective action, and political accountability, or generated a vibrant civil society capable of constraining rulers and majorities”. Instead, he believes that *waqf* impoverished civil society and made democratization more difficult by inhibiting political participation, collective action, and the rule of law (Kuran 2014).

Another important aspect of *waqf* failures that Kuran discusses is Muslim rulers’ and elites’ abuse of the institution for their own benefit. Indeed, in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, it is undeniable that *waqf* structured elite relationships, and performed a vital political and religious function. The pious endowment generated rents to build a loyalist class of officials, and enlisted



the support of a religious class for the rulers. Military and civil officials in the Ottoman era used *waqf* for protecting wealth and enriching their kith and kin. Ottoman nobility used *waqf* for asset laundering, which entailed acquiring public properties and legitimizing them as family charities. Most *waqf* founders in the Ottoman Empire amassed fortunes through granted privileges (Kuran 2014, 420; Malik 2012, 12).

Adeel Malik offers a critical appraisal of Kuran's arguments. Malik agrees that *waqf* was one of the most important institutions of Muslim civilization, but recognizes that the adverse features of *waqf* – “their relative inflexibility, lack of self-governance and absence of separate legal personality – rendered them inferior to Western corporations and trusts” (Malik 2012, 11). Certainly, Kuran (2014, 423) is correct in pointing out that *waqf* served as a “credible commitment device”. The state used *waqfs* to outsource its responsibility for providing essential public goods, and the association of rules with religious charities bolstered their public legitimacy. However, Malik (2012, 12) reminds us that “in the Ottoman Empire, Islamic charities operated within the parameters of state power; their growth did not represent any real ceding of power to civic actors”.

Furthermore, Malik notes that Islamic legal arrangements in the pre-modern period cannot be exclusively responsible for the modern economic failures of Muslim countries. Law cannot be divorced from politics. He believes that the impact of Islamic law depended on the political environment. In his view, law was only one part of the institutional framework. The enforcement environment, the way in which the political structures were organized, mattered much more than the law *per se* (Malik 2012, 13).

Regarding Kuran's arguments, a few further observations must be made. First, Kuran seems to follow a trend that Shahab Ahmad (2016, 117) calls “the legal supremacist conceptualization of Islam”. By this Ahmad means “the widespread tendency to identify authentic and normative Islam with Islamic law and to constitute the ‘Islamic’ in terms of conformity to the law” (Ahmad 2016, 117). Even in the case of *waqf*, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is not the only key element. Muslim conceptualization of the institution included theological, eschatological, and political considerations as well.

Second, Kuran makes no critical assessment of western conceptualizations of the capitalist economy, which fuelled the imperial impetus, productivist drive, and a problematic sense of development largely responsible for the current ecological catastrophes. Given current levels of consumption and ecological footprints, there would be no planet Earth if Chinese and Indians sought to live at the same socio-economic level as people in the USA and Australia. Regarding democracy, it seems lost on Kuran that those same western societies

were responsible for world wars, mass murders, genocides, and imperial and colonial devastations. The picture is far more uncomfortable than the one Kuran describes.

Third, as Malik notes, Kuran divorces the functioning of *waqfs* from the surrounding institutional framework. He writes, “Given the perverse incentive structure in which they operated, it hardly surprising that waqfs failed to: a) enhance the productive capacity, b) emerge as a constituency for social change. Divorcing the functioning of waqfs from the surrounding institutional framework is unconvincing.” (Malik, 2012,13). In the pre-modern Islamic world, centralized dynastic rule often failed to improve the “functional characteristics” of economies. Islamic charities functioned within the contours of state power, and unfortunately, the growth of waqfs did not entail a real transfer of power to civic actors (Malik 2012, 12–13).

Even though Kuran’s comparison of *waqf* to similar institutions in Europe seems reasonable, his conclusions are unsatisfactory. There is no doubt that *waqf* controlled considerable resources, but it does not follow that the institution was therefore uniquely positioned to build a vibrant civil society and prepare Muslim societies for a western type of capitalist economy and democratic regime. It is hard to believe that a single institution like *waqf* bears the degree of responsibility that Kuran ascribes to it, “As a core element of Islam’s classical institutional complex, *waqf* perpetuated authoritarian rule by keeping the state largely unrestrained. Therein lies a key reason for the slow pace of the Middle East’s democratization process” (Kuran 2016, 419). Despite all its historical woes, I contend in the next section that pious endowments can contribute to a better distribution of wealth, care for the most vulnerable, and preservation of the environment and common good in majority Muslim countries today.

## 5 Post-colonial Waqf in a Globalized Market Economy

Following the colonial period, majority Muslim countries established institutions to control *waqf* resources. Modern states sought to seize these resources and deploy them for their own projects: agrarian reform, creating a more open land market, and curtailing the revenues of the traditional elites (Pianciola and Satori 2007, 477). Like many developing nations, Muslim countries are overwhelmed by the need to increase the wealth of their economies to lift people out of poverty. In this regard, land and other *waqf*-generated wealth are regarded as financial assets. Theological and eschatological considerations have little impact on modern forms of property distribution. *Waqf* and the

entanglement of the religious, social, economic, and political spheres it traditionally promoted have to compete with capitalist and nation-building ideologies, and a strong religion-society separation.

Furthermore, since the 1980s, the world has been in the thrall of neoliberal globalization, which means a generalized process of deregulating the global market. In a globalized world, competition is intensified, border customs tolls are abolished, obstacles impeding free circulation of wares (people, goods, and services) are eliminated, and direct investments flow unrestrained. Public services are privatized and compete against one another. Even more problematically, financial deregulation means all capital flow is free and finance achieves a hegemonic position in all capitalist social relationships.

In this context what role can *waqf* play in majority Muslim countries? Although the institution is not a panacea, it has the potential to rekindle the Islamic legacy of solidarity between the poor and the rich, of sustainable development, preservation of biodiversity, the common good, and women's economic agency. I suggest that pre-modern pious endowments invite Muslim societies today to harness the potential of *waqf* as a corrective to the dominant forms of economic development that ignore the cry of the poor and of the earth, and above all to revive the role of women as managers and founders of *waqf*. It is unfortunate that in most post-colonial Muslim societies, very little has been accomplished in promoting the role of women in re-imagining *waqf* nationally or transnationally. *Waqf* offers a golden opportunity for Muslims in the Global South and elsewhere to make women key agents of development.

This is urgent because apart from a worldwide discontent with economic liberalism, the Global South, where most Muslims live, suffers disproportionately from ecological devastations. Therefore, the imperative need to care for the planet, foster solidarity among nations, create a safety net for the most vulnerable, and protect the common good are no longer optional. On the one hand, the institution of *waqf* provides a viable tool to deeply rethink economic progress and development. On the other hand, *waqf* is a pathway for Muslims to get closer to God and care for family and neighbours. The modern management of *waqf* in many countries suggests that in post-colonial majority Muslim societies, despite its diminished state *waqf* still merits serious consideration. As a pious charitable endowment, *waqf* could help mitigate the drastic consequences of a vision of human societies ruled by greed and unrestrained financial power.

Luckily, in most majority Muslim countries, including Turkey, the practice of pious endowments has survived, albeit in a considerably diminished form. The persistence of endowment practices perpetuates classical Islamic ways of relating to the divine and thinking about individuals' and society's

responsibilities to family and communities. From Malaysia to Nigeria, and from Egypt to Turkey via Iran and the oil-rich Gulf States, *waqf* funds continue to play some role in the socio-economic development of Muslim countries.<sup>6</sup> However, the issue of managing *waqf* funds efficiently is the major challenge faced by *waqf* institution in most Muslim societies. Unfortunately, most of these countries are engulfed by the neoliberal world market economy. Despite their efforts to utilize modern financial and economic tools to solve the pressing development challenges of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation, major countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Nigeria are struggling to reduce poverty, tackle inequality, and avoid environmental degradation. Even in oil-rich countries, sustainable development, equal wealth distribution, and preservation of the common good are wanting.

Since its inception, *waqf* was an indisputable instrument for financing and preserving the common good. *Waqf* maintained places of worship such as mosques, funded educational institutions, hospitals, and libraries, or was used for the preservation of land and water and even the protection of animals. *Waqf* also served to ensure pensions for descendants, and build shelters for widows and divorced and single women and their children. In most Muslim countries, *waqf* continues to be used for the protection and preservation of the common good in perpetuity. The real challenge for these countries is how to sustain such a role for *waqf* in a liberal-capitalist and globalized world. One could argue that in terms of the protection of the environment and the preservation of the common good, *waqf* endowed for perpetuity or a long period of time are far more reliable than many modern institutions whose survival rests on short-term funding and squaring up to political vicissitudes.

The vast majority of Muslims live in low- and low-middle income countries where the basic amenities of life are lacking. The challenges reach herculean proportions when one considers the levels of bad governance and the pressures of rapid population growth and ecological devastations. Since their independence, Muslim-majority countries continue to utilize *waqf* in many ways, for microfinancing, banking, and financing agriculture, education, and different forms of economic development. They have developed transnational *waqf* as well as national ones. The renewal of *waqf* needs a web of transnational actors who are best equipped to address the socio-economic ills of Muslim

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6 In most predominantly Muslim countries, there is a ministry of *awqaf* and religious affairs, which oversees myriad charitable endowments dealing with education, healthcare, land and water management, etc.

communities in a globalized environment. Attempts made to develop transnational *waqf* can unify and serve, but the results are so far disappointing (Tarak 2016).<sup>7</sup>

Sadly, while demand for *waqf* services have not diminished in most Muslim societies, the supply of funds falls short to meet the demand. The traditional rules of *waqf* governance systems have failed to introduce innovative marketing tools and efficient management of assets, and to increase the flow of funds to keep pace with the growing demand for *waqf* services. Nevertheless, some Muslim societies have adopted new models of efficient *waqf* governance and set best practice standards for others. Kuwait seems to have a viable model of *waqf* management many other countries could emulate. Despite being an oil-rich country endowed with more economic resources than other Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and others, Kuwait's effort to reconceptualize and re-imagine *waqf* for post-colonial majority Muslim societies is commendable.

In the 1930s, Kuwait initiated a serious rethinking of *waqf* establishment and management. This resulted in the creation of the Kuwait Awqaf Public Foundation (KAPF) in 1993 (Khalil, Ali and Shaiban 2014, 70). Following this vision, the country enacted *awqaf* institution laws for efficient governance and a strategic direction for *waqf* institutions was established. These laws provided the necessary platform for all matters relating to *waqf*, particularly investment and transparent management of funds. Since its creation, the KAPF has played an essential role in consolidating the values and purposes of *waqf*. In fact, Kuwait was chosen by the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) to be the coordinator of *waqf* institutions in the entire Muslim world (Khalil, Ali and Shaiban 2014, 70), demonstrating the country's success in this area.

In Kuwait, the KAPF effectively restored the trust relationships and solidarity between the people and the ruling elites via *waqf*. Modern adaptations were introduced, and the government created a "waqf fund". This modern approach to *waqf* relied on an independent administrative branch for decision making. This new body promotes and engages in various socio-economic activities falling under a specifically funded project, without losing sight of broader national and transnational interests.

The goals of Kuwait's *waqf* fund are cultural, economic, moral, and social. Its economic objective is to use a Shari'a-compliant institution for the development of the country. KAPF funds are subject to modern methods of regulation

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7 Tarak (2016) dedicates an entire section in his book to "Quel rôle aujourd'hui pour les awqaf transnationaux ?" (Which role today for the transnational *waqfs*?). He presents different attempts to create transnational *waqf* and the disappointing results.

which allow them to maximize their yield, which in turn boosts the country's economic development. The *waqf* fund covers all aspects of the society's needs, such as promoting Qur'anic and secular sciences, building and maintaining mosques, providing social services and healthcare in different regions, protecting the environment, promoting cultural events and institutions, establishing facilities for the care of the mentally ill and disabled people, and providing foreign assistance to other Muslim countries.

## 6 Conclusion

*Waqf*, as a pious endowment, is well suited to the idea of accumulating and redistributing wealth for the sake of responding to the cries of the poor and of the earth. From its inception to its various modern forms, *waqf* in Islamic tradition offers a promising worldview whereby solidarity, care for the environment, and preservation of the common good are taken seriously. *Waqf* provides a pathway for Muslims to be close to and love God, to care for and love their neighbour, and in short to be a faithful viceregent of God's creation. In this sense, the revival of *waqf* could demonstrate Muslims' confidence in their own faith-based charitable institutions, instead of relying on NGOs and other external organizations. A revival of *waqf* could also rekindle women's economic agency in the Muslim societies of the Global South. The institution of *waqf* is thus a valuable instrument available to Muslim societies for ensuring a more just redistribution of wealth, in contradistinction to the predominant neoliberal capitalist model of individualist hoarding and accumulation of material wealth which disregards our obligations toward God and neighbour.

### Issue and Editors

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# The Western Orientation of Environmentalism in the Islamic World Today

## *Research Article*

*Munjed M. Murad* | ORCID: 0000-0003-0949-1208

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities,  
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA  
*mmurad@unitedseminary.edu*

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## Abstract

Why is so much of official environmental action in the Islamic world Western-oriented? This article investigates this topic by first examining inherited resources in the Islamic tradition that could contribute to an environmentalism. It then proceeds to explain the peripheralization of these resources and the engagement of environmentalist methods of particularly modern and Western origin. A variety of factors are at play, including the large-scale indifference of religious scholars and politicians to the environment in the Islamic world; postcolonial attitudes of inferiority in the East that champion Western views and methodologies over local, traditional ones; the relative compatibility of Western environmentalist means with modernization; and the secularization of the acquisition of knowledge and its applications. In juxtaposition with concerns of romanticizing the traditional or the modern, the present article also examines the relevance of traditional Islamic methods of environmental action.

## Keywords

Islamic environmentalism – tradition – modernity – Western environmentalism – postcolonialism

## 1 Introduction

The Middle East Green Initiatives, launched by the Saudi Arabian government, has proposed a number of methods for battling climate change, including reforestation, a cloud-seeding programme, and investing in “cutting-edge carbon capture solutions”.<sup>1</sup> Its website displays a backdrop of green hills upon which stand modern wind turbines and solar panels (Green Initiatives 2022a,b). Similarly, across the Islamic world, governmental environmental agencies adopt modern technologies thoroughly and describe much of their work in modern scientific language. The Department of the Environment in Bangladesh, for example, responds to the problem of air pollution by reporting on the presence of particulate matter PM<sub>2.5</sub>, an inhalable pollutant, in a “daily air quality index” (Bangladeshi Department of the Environment 2023). In their self-descriptions, moreover, both governmental and nongovernmental environmental organizations often use Western terms such as “biodiversity” and “development”. For example, the name of a particular Senegalese avian and environmental conservationist organization – Nature-Communautés-Développement (NCD) – appears to be a meeting of fashionable terms in modernist environmentalist discourses. Its website features the words “Bénévolat pour la biodiversité” [Volunteering for Biodiversity] on its welcome banner (NCD n.d.). Similarly, the mission of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) in Jordan is to “create, manage and advocate for a national network of protected areas to conserve Jordan’s biodiversity and support local community development, while promoting wider public support and action for the protection of the natural environment within Jordan and neighboring countries” (RSCN n.d.).

There are exceptions.<sup>2</sup> It is also worth noting that the inclination towards conservation and planting trees in numerous nongovernmental organizations in the Islamic world seems to build on a societal-psychological inheritance

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- 1 While the practice of planting trees is not a modernist method of environmentalist intervention, the use of and emphasis on modern technology and modern science is. Moreover, it is worth noting that, ironically, the Saudi Arabian government is one of the greatest facilitators of anthropogenic climate change through its central role in the industrial extraction of petroleum. This is one among very many instantiations of a prevalent paradox in modern environmentalisms that seek to curtail environmental damage within a paradigm that is altogether unsustainable environmentally.
  - 2 Despite its apparent application of a Western academic misunderstanding of the roles of mysticism, metaphysics, and philosophy in Islamic communities, for examples of environmentalist activities that attempt to build on Islamic foundations see Gade (2019). See also the brief note on Islamic permaculture in Faruque (2020: 13–15) and the examples mentioned in Quadir (2017). Perhaps it is also worth mentioning that at the behest of the Qatar

of Islamic approaches to the environment that are specifically conservatory, some of which are mentioned briefly below. Moreover, there remain traditional Islamic qualities in the aforementioned examples. That the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature is supported by royalty continues an Islamic theme of royal stewardship of land. Furthermore, this article does not assume that the goals of such organizations are not Islamic, nor does it make that claim about governmental initiatives and departments such as the Bangladeshi Department of the Environment or the Pakistani Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination. On the contrary, environmental protection is a shared goal between traditional Islamic and modernist environmentalisms, although the reasoning and processes behind the two can differ from each other extremely. Furthermore, this article is not concerned primarily with the compatibility or incompatibility of modern Western environmentalisms with traditional Islamic ones, nor is it a condemnation of the use of specifically modern environmentalist methods, which are necessary practically; rather, it explores why the modernist paradigm appears to have been so prevalent among environmentalist initiatives in the Islamic world.

While topics such as natural conservation and community development are not exclusive to modern thinking, invocation of them in brief mission statements signals Western influence. Although one might expect that the diversity of present-day traditions and cultures would entail a diversity of methodological responses to the global environmental crisis, responses from around the world appear for the most part to resort to the same paradigm and the application of the same methods of intervention, that is, the modern paradigm and its environmentalist thought and practices, ranging from environmental engineering to the technical terms used in discourses.<sup>3</sup> This is the case despite the unique resources present within each of these traditions and the potential benefits of drawing on local methods that have been developed indigenously and used in relationship with the particular local environment for long periods of time already.

It is important to note that while I juxtapose “Western” with “the Islamic world” or “the Muslim world”, Islamic initiatives are taking place in the West

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Foundation I am working presently with Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr on developing an Islamic framework for environmental sustainability today.

3 I use “tradition” here as defined in religious studies. Specifically, it is an intergenerational chain rooted in the sacred, connecting a sacred revelation or beginning with the present moment. Therefore, it concerns not only the past but arguably even more so the present – the ever-present moment. Throughout history tradition develops responses and practices appropriate to each present moment in light of the respective tradition’s timeless principles as they had been received and applied across generations.

by relatively young Western Muslim communities (Hancock 2018). Examples include the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences in the UK and Green Muslims in the US, as well as the general efforts of Muslim environmentalists in the West such as Fazlun Khalid and Ibrahim Abdul-Matin (Khalid 2019; Abdul-Matin 2010). Despite some opposition in religious studies to the use of “the Islamic world” in light of assumptions of essentialist thinking, I find the term helpful when used with nuance to describe cases where there is a principle or history shared by Islamic cultures ranging from Southeast Asia to West Africa. The reality of “the Islamic world” and of its shared heritage exists despite colonial and postcolonial efforts to divide and conquer – at the same time notwithstanding the great diversity of Islamic doctrines, schools, practices, and experiences that persist despite efforts at masking diversities through various exclusivisms. In contrast, my use of “Muslim world” refers to Muslim populations around the world regardless of their specific frameworks of operation (e.g. “traditional Islam”, “Western modernism”, “fundamentalist Islam”).<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Some Traditional Islamic Environmentalist Resources

Although “environmentalism” is itself a Western word and perhaps even Western concept originally, arising likely in response to the global environmental crisis, one can nonetheless speak of a traditional Islamic environmentalism embedded within traditional Islam through its guiding principles and in the traditional Islamic world’s daily operations. Examining reasons behind the prevalence of the modernist paradigm among environmentalist initiatives in the Islamic world necessitates mention of its alternatives, that is, of examples of traditional Islamic environmentalist resources, beginning with Islamic views of the environment. This can be done only briefly and certainly not thoroughly in such a short space.<sup>5</sup> The practical application of these teachings in step-by-step processes for re-introducing or developing traditional Islamic environmentalist systems today is beyond the scope of this article, which can be concerned with these topics in principle only.<sup>6</sup>

In the Quran, natural phenomena are signs of God, and nature encompasses many communities that worship Him. God swears by parts of nature, several

4 See Dagli (forthcoming) for more on the definitions of “the Islamic world” and similar terms.

5 Examples of longer or other studies on the topic include Ibrahim (1989), Nasr (2003, 2010a; 2016), Izzī Dien (2003), and Murad (2022a: 116–47).

6 See Nasr (2003) for practical suggestions for an Islamic response to the environmental crisis.

Quranic chapters bear the names of natural phenomena, and human beings are encouraged to contemplate nature. The holy book that is foundational to the *Sharī'ah* appears to mention nature more than it does the law. According to Mohammad Aijazul Khatib, of the over 6,200 verses of the Qur'an, 750 verses encourage Muslims to contemplate nature while only 250 verses are legislative (Salam 1989: 344). The *Ḥadīth* and *Sīrah* literature, comprised of statements made by the Prophet and his biography respectively, contain many episodes of the Prophet being merciful and compassionate towards nonhuman creatures (Masri 2007). This includes, among much more, teachings against overworking animals of burden, episodes of reuniting mother animals with their young, concern for the wellbeing of sacrificial animals even at the moment of slaughter, prohibitions against wasting water, and encouragement to plant a tree even at the world's end. Moreover, Islamic rituals are seen metaphysically as being not only individual and personal but also as re-establishing cosmic harmony (Nasr 2007: 34).

Islamic metaphysical and cosmological traditions have developed intricate doctrines of environmental significance. This includes doctrines on humanity's function as vicegerent of God on earth and the Sufi doctrine of *al-insān al-kāmil* ("the Universal Man"), according to which the very presence of *al-insān al-kāmil* protects nature (Murad 2019). Sufi teachings, such as those of the Persian Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), also explain how the whole of the cosmos is conscious, in love, and in prayer, and even that it is theophanic (Murad 2022b; Nasr 2017; Rustom 2017). Moreover, many Islamic ethical treatises encourage the remembrance of God in the encounter with nature, cultivating awe and wonder in one's relationship with creation for what it reveals about the Wisdom of the Creator (Murad 2022b: 190–91; Khalil 2014: 378–79). The ecological ethical force in Islam, however, is perhaps most present in its poetry, such as that of the Persian poets Rūmī and Sa'dī (d. 691/1292), which is significant ecologically given the nearly pervasive presence of poetry in traditional Islamic life (Murad 2022a: 200–35).

According to the *Sharī'ah*, nature has rights (*ḥuqūq*).<sup>7</sup> There also exist many Islamic legal instruments that can be utilized for the preservation of nature. It is impossible to mention in detail here the many examples of traditional Islamic means of maintaining ecological balance, but perhaps it suffices to mention a few examples. They include the *ḥimā'* system that not only protects natural sites but also takes into account the needs of human populations sustainably, as well as the *ḥarīm* system that for many centuries functioned similarly to the

7 For example, concerning the rights of livestock in particular, see Ibn 'Abd al-Salām (2000: 239), which has been translated in Winter (2019: 169–70) and Llewellyn (2003: 233).

present-day concept of a national park.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, some applications of religious endowments (sg. *waqf*, pl. *awqāf*) protect nature in perpetuity. Religious endowments exist within the Islamic world already, although they appear not to be as widespread as they were previously, which is likely the result of the use of secular modern versions of endowments instead.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the *waqf* system is very promising as an environmentalist intervention given that it invokes the moral force of religion and that the goal of environmental protection necessitates interventions that are long-term by nature (Llewellyn 2003).

For a recent example of an environmentalist use of an Islamic legal instrument, we can look to the island of Misali, off the coast of Tanzania. As a result of overfishing caused by the fishing industry, local fishermen were driven by desperation to use guns and dynamite in their practice. Despite governmental prohibitions, it was only in response to a *fatwā* (Islamic ruling) that they stopped doing so. One fisherman said: “It is easy to ignore the government, but no-one can break God’s law”.<sup>10</sup> This may help to explain why a country such as Egypt can have remarkably stringent governmental (rather than religious) laws concerning the environment that are not followed or enforced.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, annual governmental tree-planting campaigns in Nigeria proved ineffective with trees dying shortly after having been planted; in contrast, campaigns in the country that invoked the Islamic virtue of tenderness towards creation and the Islamic encouragement towards planting trees proved successful (Ahmad 2005: 81–2, found in El-Ansary 2010: 143).

Of arguably greater significance, quotidian traditional life in the Islamic world is/was sustainable environmentally.<sup>12</sup> It was not the product of a world in conformity with sacred revelation (i.e. tradition) but the secularized West that abandoned a theocentric view of the cosmos for anthropocentric humanism and that produced in the Enlightenment the philosophical view of the cosmos as not sacred and inherently dignified but as secular and mechanical. This view led to the Scientific Revolution, which in turn produced the Industrial Revolution and its continued dominance over nature today (Nasr 1997).

8 For contemporary applications of *ḥimā'* and *ḥarīm* as well as discussions on the topics see Gade (2019: 189–93), Ibrahim et al. (2013), Llewellyn (2003), Hamed (1993), and Zahran and Younes (1990).

9 See Minlib Dallh’s article in the present issue.

10 Dickinson (2005) found in El-Ansary (2017: 5).

11 I am grateful to Dr. Waleed El-Ansary for this observation, as well as others.

12 I use “is/was” to account for the observation that modernism appears to have affected practically every aspect of traditional Islam today, seemingly rendering a *fully* traditional Islamic community a matter of the past in a sense. As explained in an earlier footnote, “tradition” is not “the past” per se but a particular way of life that bridges “timeless” revelation with the present through an intergenerational chain.

Traditional life in the Islamic world – as in traditional Chinese, Hindu Indian, and other traditional civilizations – did not transgress the resilience of the global environment, despite the genius of its civilization which could have certainly produced extreme technological methods of dominance over nature (Nasr 1996, 1997). Needless to say, to equate inevitable exceptions in the form of momentary transgressions against the environment in traditional Islamic history with the pervasiveness of the present ecological crisis is to lack a sense of proportion and to ignore the systematic checks that ultimately kept traditional Islamic populations in harmonious relationship with the natural environment.

Beyond Islamic legal measures, such as the aforementioned *ḥimā'*, *ḥarīm*, *waqf*, and *fatwā* systems, the Islamic world has a rich history of holistic scientific study of the cosmos. Islamic traditional sciences of nature are rooted in Islamic metaphysics. They study a natural world that has inherent spiritual worth. In these sciences findings are wedded to symbolic truths, the study of which supports humanity's quest for meaning as well as an understanding of nonhuman others for more than just their corporeality. Moreover, the visible world that human beings encounter is connected intimately to other worlds, and all that is within the visible world itself is deeply interconnected, reflecting Divine Oneness in the world of manifestation (Nasr 1999). Rooting scientific research and technological production in metaphysics is not simply an intellectual exercise, but has, among other things, profound ethical consequences (Murad 2022a: 263–316). How we perceive something determines how we treat it. The axiomatic principles shaping our frameworks determine ultimately what is produced within them. Environmentalisms built on secular foundations thus differ drastically from those built on Islamic metaphysical principles. This signals an inevitable incompatibility between the Islamic tradition and a modern environmentalism that utilizes the science and technologies of only a secular framework, despite overlap in environmentalist goals.

The Western worldview that separates religion and science, value and fact, in particular differs from Islamic tradition, which sees all facets of life and affairs as interconnected by virtue of their common source – the Creator. As traditional Islamic values have been abandoned to adopt modern Western technologies, environmental problems have intensified in the Muslim world. (Wersal 1995: 451)

In fact, the whole environmental crisis has been described in present-day traditional Islamic thought – especially in the writings of the Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr – as being rooted in the separation of the realm of knowledge from the sacred. The rebellion against Heaven in the name of human

reason in the Enlightenment, in Renaissance Humanism, and beyond has led to an aggrandizement of the human in the markedly anthropocentric modern paradigm. In Nasr's contemporary exposition of Islamic metaphysics, the problem is the result of a turning away from the sacred, and the solution cannot be found but in returning to the sacred (Nasr 1997 [1967], 1996). Summarizing a long history of events both leading up to and within modern philosophy and science, he writes: "In a metaphorical sense, modern man having surrendered heaven to gain the earth, is now losing the earth because of the loss of heaven. And that is the incredible verdict of history upon him" (Nasr 1991: 113). I return to the desacralization of knowledge and its applications below.

In the Islamic view of the cosmos, nature is not fallen but is itself spiritual by virtue of remaining in a state of primordality (*fiṭrah*). Moreover, "natural" and "supernatural" are not opposed to each other in Islamic cosmology; rather, in the Quran, there is no clear line of demarcation between the two, nor between humanity and nature (Nasr 1992: 88). The Islamic tradition recognizes also the waywardness of human beings and seeks to enable Muslims' return to their primordial states. Therefore, in Islamic formulation, our primordial nature is our true nature, to which we seek to return spiritually, and the whole of the natural world is itself primordial, thus connecting nature, primordality, and spirituality in traditional Islamic thinking. By virtue of Islam's identity as not only Abrahamic but also primordial, being *dīn al-fiṭrah* (the primordial religion), Islamic metaphysics and cosmology ensured that Islamic civilization developed overall in conscious harmony with its natural environment so long as Islamic processes were governed by traditional principles. A traditional mosque is meant to be an extension of nature – and the Prophet said famously that the earth is itself a mosque (*ju'ila'l-arḍa lī masjidā*). That one formulation of the Islamic goal is for Muslims to return to their primordial nature means ultimately that when a Muslim produces things in accordance with traditional Islamic principles those outputs – from buildings to textiles – are not only artifice but ultimately also "natural". These principles are/were not known to all traditional Muslims, but the conformity to a framework determined by these principles helped to ensure harmonious relationship between a human collectivity and its natural environment. Again, it is worth contemplating the fact there was no global ecological crisis throughout traditional Islamic history despite the Islamic world's great geographical breadth and its development into a full civilization with populous cities around the world. For example, the Persian city of Nishapur, as well as others, had reportedly over one million residents prior to the Mongol invasion in the early 13th century (Cooper 2009: 133).

That technologies used in traditional Islamic quotidian life appear to have been developed and used in overall harmony with nature prompts inquiry



into their absence, especially at a time when the Islamic world seeks environmentalist solutions yet resorts primarily to modernist interventions that at best only slow down the pace of global environmental disaster. Even electric cars, the recycling industry, and modern engineering labelled “green” have negative consequences for the natural environment. In most cases, they are “eco-friendly” not in and of themselves but in relation to the use of fossil fuels, single-use plastics, and highly energy-inefficient skyscrapers. Moreover, so much of modern environmentalist intervention does not apply the precautionary principle – that products be used *en masse* only when it is certain that their effects are benign. The record of modern science and technology shows clearly that this principle has not been applied nearly enough. Therefore, for example, the genetic editing of animal species in order to “help” the environment is incalculably dangerous given the intricate interdependence of natural phenomena, taking into account that the results reached in the controlled environment of a laboratory are ultimately just about useless in the face of a natural world encompassing indefinite factors (Sculpting Evolution n.d.). With the extremely limited success of innovative “green” technologies and methods of the modern paradigm, we are compelled to ask why it is that environmentalisms in the Muslim world today seem to favour them over traditional Islamic technologies and methods that enjoy a long-standing record of environmental sustainability.

### 3 The Peripheralization of Traditional Islamic Environmentalist Resources

Tarik M. Quadir, a scholar of Islam and the environment, has mentioned four major hindrances to the development of an effective Islamic environmentalism. They are: 1. “lack of sufficient awareness of the environmental crisis and about Islamic environmental teachings”; 2. “not seeing the crisis as Muslims’ responsibility to solve”; 3. “modern capitalism”; and 4. “scientism, the assumption that modern science is the ... only means of [discovering] true knowledge” (Quadir 2017: 126). The following complements this list.

The reasons for favouring modernist environmental interventions over traditional methods in the Islamic world are many. Among them is the fact that not only did the global environmental crisis begin in the modern West but so too did largescale efforts at developing solutions to it. This head-start is arguably a factor, but this explanation alone is insufficient. There remains, for example, the fact that so much of the Islamic world has been indifferent to the environmental crisis, even as the alarms sounded in the modern West.

One major, if not central, factor behind the general lack of a traditional Islamic quality in environmentalist responses in the Islamic world is the lack of attention paid by religious authorities to the environment. This may be difficult to understand, especially in light of the spiritual value of nature asserted within the Islamic tradition over the centuries. Factors that may account for this indifference appear to be rooted in the recent and largescale paradigmatic shifts in the Islamic world towards fundamentalism and/or modernism, which generally prioritize individual human piety and/or social issues over metaphysics, cosmology, and the spiritual significance of the environment.<sup>13</sup> It appears that religious authorities who have responded to the environmental crisis have usually not been modernist or fundamentalist Islamic authorities but those of a specifically traditional and even esoteric (rather than only exoteric) orientation, namely authorities who know traditional Sufism well and appreciate it.<sup>14</sup> That they have esoteric knowledge – in addition to being knowledgeable of or even authorities on exoteric Islamic matters – enables their application of Islamic metaphysics which is itself esoteric.

In fact, Quadir has mentioned Sufism in his list of three categorical sources for “environment-sustaining norms of the Islamic tradition.” They are: 1. “[the Islamic view of] the nature of reality”; 2. “environmental ethics, *Shari‘ah* laws, legal principles, and institutions”; and 3. “the living tradition of ... Sufism”. That the last of these enables direct realization of “the metaphysical verities of the worldview (that) Islam proclaims”, means that a loss of the esoteric ultimately compromises the ability to appreciate the metaphysical underpinnings of even exoteric environmental matters in Islam, which helps to explain why authoritative Islamic responses to the environmental crisis appear to have come mostly from Sufi-oriented thinkers and authorities (Quadir 2017: 120). Decreased attention paid in the Islamic world to traditional means for discovering esoteric knowledge is certainly cause for a decreased appreciation for the esoteric, inherent value of nature.

The Islamic world has also suffered from a postcolonial inferiority complex in the face of Western economic, technological, and military development. Many politicians and other prominent forces have sought to Westernize and to “develop” the Islamic world through industrialization and modernization, which of course has had environmental consequences. The pursuit of

13 For more on the distinction between tradition, modernism, and fundamentalism in the Islamic world, see Nasr (2010b).

14 See, for example, efforts of the former Grand Mufti of Egypt Shaykh ‘Ali Gomaa and the Jordanian Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, such as Bin Muhammad et al. (2010) and Gomaa (2009). I thank Dr. W. El-Ansary for bringing this to my attention.

modernization necessitated that the inherent value of the natural environment in the Islamic world be lessened or overlooked in national efforts. As a result, relative to the goals of industrialization and economic growth, maintaining or returning to ecological balance has been given very little priority by governments in the Islamic world. This inferiority complex is itself compounded by the fact that countries throughout it have been dominated by more powerful forces militarily and industrially – and thus also technologically – motivating governments to pursue modern technological advancement. While traditional technologies in general have proven to be beneficial and sustainable in the long run, modern technologies offer immediate and extremely amplified power. Of course, the latter has proven attractive to governments of countries that were or still are dominated by technologically advanced Western countries. Favouring modernist technologies over traditional ones necessarily came at the expense of maintaining Islamic technological practices, from the building of traditional plumbing systems to the use of tools in various sorts of traditional crafts.

The drastic social conditions of much of the Islamic world, mired in material poverty, also further peripheralizes environmental goals for the sake of immediate economic progress. It is difficult to focus on the environment when one has to feed one's family or nation, despite the danger that ignoring environmental issues poses to future generations. The use of specifically modern methods in the Islamic world – as well as the use of Western environmental language by many governmental and nongovernmental institutions in articulating their goals – is also connected to the fact that so many of these organizations depend on the West for financial aid to support their operations. Even international organizations that do not describe themselves as Western nevertheless operate in a Western paradigm, from the United Nations to various nongovernmental organizations. Therefore, in most cases, applying for monetary aid from international organizations inevitably requires conforming to Western ways (e.g. in the use of modern science) and using specifically Western terms. There are, however, cases of international efforts that have preserved local cultures or aspects of them, such as Titus Burckhardt's protection of the traditional Moroccan city of Fez – nearly bifurcated by a new highway – by facilitating its designation as a global heritage site through The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.<sup>15</sup>

Not only is the Islamic world dependent on the West financially, but it also appears to have faith in its methods. It seems that many Muslims and

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15 Burckhardt, himself a Muslim convert rooted in the Sufi tradition, also authored a book on the traditional Islamic profundity of the city of Fez (Burckhardt 1992).

non-Muslims believe that modern science will one day, perhaps in the not-too-distant future, discover some scientific or technological solution to the global environmental crisis. From this perspective, what is necessary at the moment is the development and application of modern scientific ways of slowing down the rate of environmental damage until we innovate ways that would allow us to maintain our modernist lifestyles without harming the environment – despite the alarming rate of ecological deterioration that our ecocide has produced through our modernist lifestyles and modern science. It is essentially a matter of faith.

In any case, the detrimental environmental consequences of the application of modern technology are evident – from operating modern factories to building highways to using cellular phones, all of which demand the destruction of so many ecological habitats. Again, much of “green” technology is also disastrous. Electric cars may be better ecologically than diesel-fuelled cars but the mining needed to produce electric car batteries alone has been catastrophic, notwithstanding efforts to minimize the damage (Institute for Energy Research 2020; International Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2020).

One other reason that Western environmentalist practices are favoured over traditional ones is their relative compatibility with modernization, as well as the overall association of the traditional with the past and the modern with the future in a world of progress. The incompatibility of specifically modern technology with traditional Islamic frameworks, which has been explained in Qadir (2017: 181–202), is a great obstacle to the use of traditional methods in a world so dependent on the powers of modern technology. Moreover, practically any effort at making modern technology and traditional Islamic processes somewhat compatible, that is, not completely but at least relatively so, is inhibited by the pace of modern technological change. The desire in the Islamic world to keep up with the rapid pace of modern technological development prohibits the adjustment of new technological products to make them better conform (if only somewhat) to Islamic principles, as traditional Islamic technologies do fully. For example, over just the last few decades, music was played through vinyl record players that provided stereo playback, then through cassette-tape players, then through various successive digital formats and devices – from CD players to MP3 players to different devices requiring different electric ports every few years – all in one person’s lifetime. Putting aside the colossal waste of materials with each succession, especially taking into account that each form of technology was mass-produced for worldwide markets and outdated a few years later, the untamed desire in the Islamic world to attain modern scientific and technological power and to keep up with

rapidly changing industries prohibits any process of somewhat although not completely “Islamicizing” modern technology and of lessening its unsustainable demand on the environment. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes:

Modern science and technology also provide those who possess them with power and are in fact the main reason the West can exercise domination over other societies, including the Islamic countries. Consequently, both Muslim governments and many Muslim individuals want to gain access to the very technology which has had devastating environmental consequences. Seeking to gain power for themselves in the intricate political and economic situation of today’s world, they are, at best, always at the receiving end of a technology that is ever changing and needs to be constantly borrowed anew from the West and, to some extent, Japan. There is no pause in the development of ever newer forms of technology, a pause that might allow Islamic societies to create some form of equilibrium with the technology that is borrowed, to “humanize” certain aspects of it to the degree possible, and to minimize its negative environmental impact. The governing classes in the Islamic world have their eyes only on emulating the West when it comes to the question of science and technology, but they are emulating an ever-changing model. They therefore remain constantly on the receiving end in a situation in which it is difficult, although not impossible, to apply Islamic principles to the economic and environmental fields while still being part of what is euphemistically called the global economic order. (Nasr 2008: 16)

The attractive power of modern technology and the inability to process and modify (or even reject) it according to Islamic metaphysical and cosmological teachings is one factor behind the adoption of Western environmental technology over traditional ones.

Such a filtration process would necessarily consider not only quantitative criteria, such as the impact of the production process on the sizes of forested areas, but also qualitative criteria, such as the beauty of the technology itself and its objective spiritual effects. This is an impossible task within a Cartesian framework that recognizes only *res extensa* (extended and quantifiable thing) outside of the human mind, and that considers the evaluation of qualities such as beauty to be only a matter of personal opinion. In contrast, for example, the Prophetic teaching that “God is beautiful and He loves beauty” implies that beauty in the world has an objective nature, being that which is God-like and loved by God. Both quantity and quality are real and objective in Islamic

metaphysics.<sup>16</sup> This applies across the board in a traditional Islamic universe. A thoroughly Islamic economics, for example, would take into account not only such quantitative factors as supply and demand but also factors that resist association with any numerical value, such as morality and the inherent spiritual integrity of the natural environment (El-Ansary 2019, 2010).

Perhaps the most subtle and central reason for the preference of modern Western environmentalisms over traditional Islamic ones is the secularization of the acquisition of knowledge and of its applications. Many of the richest and most powerful classes in the Islamic world – from South Asia to North Africa – are educated in Western schools, not only in the West but also in the Islamic world itself. That the curricula of these schools are secular is of great environmental significance since it is precisely religion that offers an objective view of nature as sacred and as having inherent spiritual value. It was the Cartesian paradigm that bifurcated reality into *res cogitans* (thinking thing) and the aforementioned *res extensa* (extended thing), rendering the human mind the unique conscious entity and the rest of the cosmos strictly quantitative and mechanical. It is this paradigm within which takes place not only the laboratorial imprisonment of animals worldwide, but also the industrial destruction of so many habitats and the resultant displacement, killing, and even extinction of many creatures. It is the secularization of the cosmos that blinded humanity to nature's spiritual integrity, which traditional Islamic metaphysics, cosmology, and ethics had affirmed for centuries.

The Islamic sciences can provide a metaphysical foundation with which Muslims can make sense of and respond to modern scientific findings about nature, as alluded to previously. Muslim sages' "symbolic knowledge of nature" is capable of "[revealing] the meta-scientific or metaphysical significance of scientific facts, theories, and laws, discovered through empirical study of the natural world" (Bakar 1991: 93). Rather than automatic acceptance of all modern scientific theories, however, this would entail, among other things, a filtering process through rigorous empirical study and the provision of symbolic meaning to verified information.

The secularization of the acquisition of knowledge by fundamentalist Islamic schools that would teach Islamic law and the exoteric exegesis of Islamic scripture but that would cede other sciences to secular modern disciplines informed by the Cartesian paradigm meant that the study of the cosmos was itself secular. So too has the application of knowledge been secularized.

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16 On the religious and environmental qualitative effects of technology, as well as more on what makes a technology "Islamic", see Quadir (2013: 171–202), especially his juxtaposition of the qualitative effect of *tawhīd* (making one/centering) of traditional tools with that of *takhīr* (making many/dispersive) of modern machines.

Engineering, architecture, and medicine, for example, seem to be taught nearly everywhere today from a purely secular perspective that cannot account objectively for the sacredness of nature that is affirmed in and central to the Islamic perspective. The ignorance of sacred principles concerning nature in the applied sciences diminishes consequently the value of traditional methods of environmentalism which would have otherwise been championed for their use of applied sciences formed by the recognition of not only the corporeal but also the spiritual reality of nature. The modern secularization of knowledge and of its applications countenances the other aforementioned factors behind the turn to secular environmentalist methods over traditional Islamic ones. The countenance of these factors then further reifies the secularization of knowledge in a vicious cycle.

Few know that traditional Islamic architecture presented Islamic cosmology in built form and that it was developed with an awareness of not just human needs but also cosmic rights in an effort to extend Islamic teachings to all aspects of human life, including the quotidian.<sup>17</sup> As a result, traditional Islamic architecture has been given little value today other than for its cultural heritage and aesthetics. Therefore, when it comes to “eco-friendly” architecture in the Islamic world, it seems that the World Green Building Council, a Western-based sustainability certifying agency, is much more likely to be taken as a precedent than local architectural traditions. This issue was voiced decades ago, in the writings of Nasr from 1967 onwards, as well as by others, in at times apparently harsh but sobering words. Wersal summarizes one perspective:

S. Parvez Manzoor sends a strong message to Muslim nations for the revitalization of Islamic consciousness in addressing environmental concerns (Manzoor 1989: 60). He urges the Muslim world to ‘end its debilitating fascination with the West and make a genuine rediscovery of its authentic self.’ He points out that nearly all Islamic discourse, including that about environmental ethics, is ‘a pathetic exercise in apology’; it is reactionary to Western ideas. Manzoor calls the Muslim thinkers’ preoccupation with the West ‘obsessional and neurotic’ and points to what he believes to be a deleterious overemphasis of Western ideas in Muslim societies, particularly in the form of scientific and technological development. He charges, ‘The rapid deterioration of human environment is one of the most striking manifestations of the crisis of Western science and technology’ (Manzoor 1984: 150). (Wersal 1995: 455)

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17 For more on the relationship between the cosmos and traditional art and architecture, see Burckhardt (2009) and Nasr (1989: 253–79).

This is a matter, moreover, that concerns all religious civilizations, not just the Islamic civilization. As a single paradigm dominates across the world in its manifold applications, from clothing to agriculture to science, the loss of traditional modes of operation is cause for concern, not least because these modes are shaped by their respective sacred centres and have a critical function of echoing that civilization's central sacred teaching in all parts of life, including in being in relationship with the natural environment. These traditions can learn from each other as well. For example, the papal encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Pope Francis 2015) inspired Muslim responses to the environmental crisis (e.g. Mayer 2023). The encyclical's mention of the technocratic paradigm is helpful for thinking about humanity's domination over nature today. Of course, disagreements are inevitable, including, in this example, how the encyclical could be regarded from the Islamic philosophical perspective of Nasr as not being radical enough. Christian responses to the environmental crisis can also benefit from Islamic and other religious examples, given especially that the Islamic world developed sciences of nature rooted in the sacred whereas Western Christianity did not, or at least not to the same degree as the Islamic and Hindu worlds, for example. Similarly, the modern West can learn much from religions, especially Eastern religions that developed sciences of nature oriented by metaphysical teachings. The dominant use of a single paradigm to respond to the global environmental crisis despite the diversity of traditions in the world suggests a great loss of opportunity.

#### 4 Conclusion

Modernist and traditional Islamic environmentalist methods each have advantages over the other. The latter translates Islamic teachings into a response to the environment and has a centuries-old history of proven environmental sustainability, while the former is relatively compatible with the modernist lifestyle, making its widespread use much more realistic. But this compatibility is also its disadvantage. Modernist environmentalism conforms largely to a paradigm that has given so much power to human beings, even if it lessens that power while maintaining much of it. Although the modern recycling industry is premised upon the ecological damage caused by plastics and maintains awareness of such damage, it nevertheless enables the continued use of plastics that necessarily entail considerable environmental destruction in an industry that uses trucks, highways, and factories to recycle.

In our attempt to understand why Western environmentalisms have been favoured systematically over traditional Islamic ones, have we romanticized



the traditional? This concern stems usually from an attitude that favours dynamic change and that fears stagnant imitation, in addition to thinking poorly of the past in light of an assumed civilizational progress of humanity over time. “Traditional” as it has been used here and in the context of religious studies, however, does not imply intergenerational heritage only. Primarily, “traditional” signifies rootedness in a sacred tradition, which normally entails an intergenerational chain of transmission as well as responsiveness to the particularities of the day. As mentioned above, the “traditional” bridges sacred revelation with the present moment; therefore, the term “traditional methods” invokes practices that apply sacred teachings through an intergenerational chain that maintains or develops methods for responding to contemporary issues. So, tradition is not confined to the past in its methods; it may also produce or integrate new methods in accordance with religious teachings. Certainly, traditional methods have limitations, especially in that they often do not offer the same power to satiate (momentarily) human desires and oftentimes even human needs, as can be the case in such a critical field as medicine, for example. Nonetheless, that is, despite its limitations to meet certain needs and wants, unlike modernist methods traditional methods have a record of environmental sustainability spanning many centuries. In many ways, traditional environmentalisms are not able to do as much in a single generation as the amplified powers of modernist methods, but they have proven capable of maintaining the succession of generations indefinitely, that is, of being sustainable environmentally in the long-term.

Again, this article is not an attack on the use of specifically modern environmentalist methods per se; rather, it is an attempt at understanding their widespread use at the expense of traditional methods. In doing so, it necessarily entails an examination of some promises and limitations of modernist environmentalisms and those of environmentalisms embedded within traditional attitudes and methods of operation. Of course, modern science and its affiliated technologies are necessary to help abate the environmental crisis in an age in which a radical turn to traditional sciences and methods appears extremely difficult to carry out. If thoroughly incorporated into an Islamic framework, however, modern environmentalist methods could in principle share in the promise of traditional Islamic methods in that perhaps they too could be sustainable upon being incorporated thoroughly into a sacred framework. Again, as they are now, neither Toyota Priuses and recycled plastics nor the (promethean) gene-editing of species have proven to be sustainable environmentally. Moreover, if environmentalist methods such as the establishment of national parks were more integrated into Islamic legal systems, such as the *ḥimā'* or the *ḥarīm*, they could help to garner the moral spirit of Muslims

in different parts of the world, as well as signal the religious significance of environmental protection.<sup>18</sup>

The example of the fishermen on the island of Misali speaks to the importance of developing specifically religious environmentalisms. Social persuasion, however, is only one advantage to the use of traditional environmental media, teachings, and operations, another being their long record of sustainable application. Perhaps the Islamic world today can better orient itself by turning to the Orient, so to speak; that is, by turning to its own sciences and methods of interacting with the environment, thereby responding to the environmental crisis with more resources, interacting with nature in the light of its own sacred teachings, and reviving or maintaining local practices that have proven to be sustainable over centuries. Despite the practical need for the use of modern Western environmentalist methods in the Islamic world today, a brief study of the present topic suggests that there are riches upon which the Muslim world sleeps as it just about only mimics the modern West.

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# The Qur'anic Botanic Garden in Qatar: Challenges and Opportunities for Islamic Environmentalism

## *Research Article*

*Naiyerah Kolkailah* | ORCID: 0000-0002-3472-1207

Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford,  
Oxford, United Kingdom

*naiyerah.kolkailah@sant.ox.ac.uk*

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## Abstract

Islamic environmentalism has increased within the last several decades in the Muslim world and in Muslim-minority countries. The Arab Gulf is one of the regions in which environmentalism – let alone Islamic environmentalism – has been greatly understudied. This paper aims to partially fill this gap by exploring the Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG) in Qatar as an illustrative – albeit imperfect – example of Islamic environmentalism, combining environmental aspirations of many modern botanic gardens with religious and cultural aims. After briefly introducing Islamic environmentalism and the significance of environmentalism in the Arab Gulf region, I draw on field research conducted in Qatar to elucidate how the QBG utilizes Islamic scripture, beliefs, and values to articulate its vision and objectives. This paper also examines how QBG leaders' religious and cultural views influence environmental advocacy within the QBG and beyond. Finally, this research critically explores the QBG's potential impact on socio-environmental realities in Qatar. While the QBG may succeed in making intellectual advancements and promoting religious and ecological values, this paper posits that such a state-sponsored institution's inability to politicize ecological degradation demonstrates the difficulty of reforming development models to achieve more socially just and sustainable ends. I conclude that the broader potential of Islamic environmentalism lies in its ability to unite Muslims and people in the Arab Gulf region behind a shared socio-environmental vision. Its efficacy also comes from mobilizing people to advocate alternative development models prioritizing the integrity of all people and honouring planetary boundaries over economic growth or political gain.

## Keywords

Islam – environmentalism – Qatar – Qur'an – gardens

### 1 Introduction

Religious environmentalism can be studied in juxtaposition with secular forms of environmentalism characterizing more dominant strands of the modern environmental movement (Smith and Pulver 2009; Gottlieb 2017).<sup>1</sup> Although Islamic environmentalism has increased throughout the world over the last several decades, studies in this field constitute a small segment of the wider body of literature on religious environmentalism. Classical and contemporary Muslim scholars have written extensively on the significance of the natural world in Islam, and many eco-theologians and environmentalists have delineated Islamic concepts and ethical principles pertaining to people's relationship with the natural world (Ouis 1998; Izzi Dien 2000; Llewellyn 2003; Özdemir 2003; Redwan 2018).<sup>2</sup> Although some scholars have attempted to shed light on Islamic environmental activism and religious commitments to the natural world (Hancock 2018; Gade 2019), relatively little is written on how Islamic environmental thought practically influences Muslims' outlook and advocacy for the natural environment in contemporary times. This paper considers Islamic environmentalism a distinct form of religious environmentalism clearly rooted in an Islamic worldview and inspired by Islamic beliefs, principles, and teachings derived from the Qur'an and/or Sunnah. Islamic environmentalism does not apply to Muslims' involvement in secular environmental

1 While Religious ideas have arguably shaped conceptions of nature and environmental thought more generally in Europe and the US since the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Berry 2014), religious communities began addressing environmental issues more prominently in the 1960s and 1970s (Carlisle and Clark 2018).

2 Some noteworthy Islamic eco-theological principles discussed in Islamic environmentalist literature include: divine Oneness (*tawhīd*) and the related unity/interconnectedness of nature as God's creation constantly engaged in *tasbīh* or praising and glorifying God; trusteeship (*ʾitīmāniyya*); stewardship (*khilāfa*); care for creation (*riʾāya*); exhibiting gratitude (*ḥamd* and *shukr*) for nature's bounties and appreciating God's myriad signs (*āyāt*) in nature intended to direct people toward Him. Other religious directives encourage the pursuit of justice (*ʿadl/ʿadāla*), mercy (*rahma*), gentleness (*rifq*), and goodness or excellence (*ihsān*) with God's creation, as well as avoiding harm (*darar*) and wastefulness (*isrāf*) while practicing moderation with God's blessings and provisions. See, among others, Izzi Dien (2000) and Mayer (2023).



causes solely for the environment's sake (Foltz 2003). Rather, it refers to environmental advocacy intended to actualize particular Islamic socio-ethical ideals (e.g. justice, mercy, equity) or to achieve higher religious ends (e.g. pleasing God, safeguarding God's creation).

## 2 Environmentalism in the Arab Gulf Region

One of the regions of the Muslim world in which environmentalism – let alone Islamic environmentalism – has been greatly understudied is the Arab Gulf. This region is of particular interest for Islamic environmentalist discourses for numerous reasons, including the shared overarching religious and cultural identity (as Arab Muslims) in Gulf countries as well as the similarities – particularly across Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – in political structures/economies heavily influenced by the presence of abundant petroleum reserves and wealth afforded by fossil fuel rents. Arab Gulf countries also exhibit common environmental vulnerabilities, including water scarcity, increasing temperatures, air and water pollution, desertification, biodiversity loss, and sea level rise. While these countries differ in many ways, including particular religious and cultural demographics (e.g. ratio/distribution of Sunni and Shi'i populations, tribal affiliations), degrees of political stability, types/quantities of natural resources, as well as levels of wealth, their close proximity and shared climatic/environmental conditions, geographic borders, and bodies of water make them not only susceptible to similar environmental threats. These factors also make some countries more partially and collectively responsible for the environmental risks – not to mention civil strife and humanitarian crises (as in Yemen) – faced by their regional neighbours. Although Arab Gulf countries share many environmental vulnerabilities, environmental advocacy within the region cannot be treated monolithically and understanding various manifestations of religious and/or secular environmentalism in each country necessitates studying particular institutions, environmental discourses, and practices within their respective socio-cultural and political contexts.

Despite its relatively small population and geographic size, Qatar holds significant status as one of the wealthiest Gulf countries seeking to balance its religious/cultural identity with modernity while asserting its autonomy, (soft) power, and leadership regionally and globally through various cultural, social, and economic projects and investments (Al-Horr et al. 2016). Field research and interviews I conducted with leaders and representatives of many prominent environmental groups and institutions in Qatar revealed many state and

non-state actors contributing to environmental discourses and/or tackling a myriad of social and environmental issues.<sup>3</sup> These issues range from food waste, littering, and plastic pollution to climate change, habitat loss, and biodiversity conservation.

Environmental actors in Qatar differed considerably in their perceived (and actual) power to influence environmental realities in the region, which depended on numerous factors including their institutional capacities, level of funding received from the state, and their proximity to government agencies or access to policy makers. Prior awareness of environmental issues also appeared to influence many actors' involvement in environmental initiatives in Qatar. Among my interviewees, some leaders were already active in their home countries or had witnessed environmental injustices, hardships, or social inequities before they came to Qatar, which provided the impetus to join or initiate their own environmental organizations when they moved to Qatar. Other activists who were Qatari or GCC nationals had studied in Europe and/or the US, and wished to bring some of their knowledge and awareness of global environmental challenges back to the region.

One of the striking differences I observed between environmental advocates in Qatar is the extent to which religious beliefs and values influenced their perspectives and involvement in environmental programmes. This variation was based partly on the religious identity of environmental leaders, some of whom were devout Muslims while others were Christians, and/or their religious affiliation – or lack thereof – did not appear to play a role in their environmental advocacy. The latter may reflect implicit or “embedded environmentalism” (Baugh 2019), or demonstrate the influence of Western secular education on environmental thought and practice in the region. Environmentalists who

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3 These interviews were conducted in 2019 as part of my doctoral research, which examined the different expressions of environmentalism in Qatar with a particular focus on how Islamic ethics influence environmental thought and practice in the country. I conducted a total of thirty-one semi-structured interviews with environmental scientists, activists, and representatives of different environmental groups and organizations, including the Qur'anic Botanic Garden. Interviewees also included academics and scholars specialized in various fields including Islamic law, Islamic ethics, Gulf studies, and public policy. Interviews explored a range of topics, including Islamic environmental thought, eco-theological principles and conceptions of the natural world; local and regional environmental vulnerabilities; environmental initiatives and strategies; socio-political challenges for environmental advocates; personal motivations for engaging in environmental advocacy; and effective approaches to increasing environmental consciousness, mobilizing the public, and advocating for eco-friendly policies and practices. Following field research, interviews were transcribed and coded to categorize informants' responses by topic or subject. This data was analyzed to identify emergent themes, patterns, and convergent or divergent perspectives.

exhibited neutral/agnostic views with respect to the role of religion tended to provide more pragmatic explanations – as opposed to religiously or spiritually rooted incentives – for their involvement in environmental initiatives in Qatar. Based on my interviews, many environmentalists engaging in secular environmental discourses also described an intimate relationship with nature in their childhood or personal hobbies/interests connected to the natural world motivating them to engage in environmental advocacy. Despite evident differences in personal reasons and incentives, many environmentalists' views tended to converge on the urgency of tackling certain socio-environmental problems and adopting more environmentally sustainable development in Qatar.

The remainder of this paper focuses on the Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG) as one of the clearest – albeit imperfect – examples of Islamic environmentalism in Qatar. The next section introduces the QBG's unique vision, objectives and strategies. The paper then examines the personal and religious motives of some of its leaders and explores how Islamic and cultural values influence the institution's ethos and environmental programmes. The last section critiques the QBG's efficacy by examining its achievements and assessing its ability to influence environmental decisions and socio-environmental relations in Qatar. Although the QBG appears to be planned strategically and progressing steadily toward its numerous scientific, cultural, and religious objectives, the research I conducted elucidates some critical gaps between its lofty aspirations and its practical achievements. While interviews with QBG leaders and representatives reveal the institution's heavy reliance on religious and cultural values, as well as its pedagogical importance and contribution to environmental education (particularly for children and future generations), interviews with other environmentalists reveal some disparities between the QBG's work and the top environmental challenges of the country (e.g. water scarcity, rising temperatures, air and water pollution). Moreover, some interviewees who do not represent the QBG perceive this project – along with other government-sponsored projects – as an instrument to promote Qatar's green image throughout the world without truly advancing the country's environmental sustainability.

These perspectives cast some doubt on the promising discourse and aims of the QBG. While the QBG can further align its mission with Qatar's environmental priorities, this paper asserts that such state-sponsored institutions – despite their promotion of noble religious and ecological virtues – are not strategically positioned to challenge dominant economic models of development or remedy social or environmental inequities maintained by the status quo. These institutions may, indeed, succeed in making intellectual, cultural, and scientific contributions. Yet, their inability to politicize environmental issues reveals the difficulty of critiquing and reforming development models

and environmental policies to achieve more socially just and sustainable ends. Furthermore, such limitations demonstrate the stunted potential of Islamic environmental activism more broadly, since non-state actors – who are prohibited by law from engaging in politics – can promote religious and ecological values without criticizing the political economy of the state and the root causes of environmental degradation and social injustice.

### 3 Introducing the Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG)

The Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG) is one of the most established, well-funded, and overtly Islamic environmental institutions in Qatar. Founded in 2008 through a UNESCO project in Doha, the QBG is a member of the non-profit and semi-private organization known as Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. Adopting a hybridized garden vision, the QBG combines the environmental aspirations of many modern botanic gardens with explicitly religious and cultural aims. The QBG marks its distinctiveness from other gardens with the botanical content it seeks to house and the values it wishes to promote. While historic gardens in the Muslim world feature recurrent stylistic designs that garden historians have studied for their real or imagined religious symbolism and metaphorical meanings (Ruggles 2008), the QBG demonstrates its rootedness in the Islamic tradition by stating that the plants it aims to identify, collect, and research for their religious, cultural, and/or medicinal value are those mentioned in the Qur'an and/or Hadith literature.<sup>4</sup>

The QBG's primary goal is to build an educational programme capable of producing and transferring knowledge in the fields of botany, conservation, horticulture, and natural heritage to all schools and the general public in Qatar, as well as to the global community (QBG 2015a,b). The QBG fulfils its educational role through holding numerous community engagement programmes and producing educational literature for adults and small, interactive workbooks in Arabic for children. Along with its educational objectives, the QBG seeks to advance a scientific programme in which research is conducted in multiple fields including horticulture, agriculture, biotechnology, medicine, and conservation (QBG 2015a,b). The QBG adopts a two-pronged approach to conservation with *ex situ* and *in situ* programmes.

4 Some of this vegetation includes the acacia (*'urfiṭ*), date palms (*nakhīl*), olive (*zaytūn*), fig (*tīn*), grape (*'inab*), lentil (*'adas*), garlic (*fūm/tawm*), onion (*baṣal*), ginger (*zanjabīl*), saffron (*za'farān*), sweet basil (*raiḥān*), pumpkin (*dubbā'/qar' 'asalī*), black seed (*ḥabbah sawdā'*), and mustard (*khardal*) – among many others (QBG 2015a).

As part of its *ex situ* conservation strategy, the QBG maintains a nursery where Mediterranean, tropical, and desert plants and saplings from Qatar and different regions of the world are grown, preserved, and studied. The QBG also maintains an herbarium and seed unit, which seeks to collect the seeds and herbs mentioned in Islam's scriptural texts along with other endangered species in Qatar (ElGharib and Al-Khulaifi 2020). The QBG's *in situ* conservation programme focuses on ecological studies to conserve plants within their natural habitats in Qatar (QBG 2015a). The QBG team includes scientists specialized in botany and horticulture who conduct field surveys and use various techniques such as geographic information system (GIS) mapping to collect and analyze data on endogenous plants in Qatar.<sup>5</sup> This field research enables studying Qatar's flora in order to preserve Qatar's biodiversity and protect native plants and habitats from anthropogenic threats (QBG 2015a).

To fulfil its educational and scientific objectives, the QBG organizes international forums and conferences focusing on different botanical and environmental themes. It also compiles and publishes abstracts, academic papers, and recommendations based on conference sessions and roundtable discussions. The QBG's first international forum was held in Doha in 2009, convening Muslim and non-Muslim professors, scholars, scientists, and environmentalists from numerous countries including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Spain, Turkey, USA, and UK.

In 2018, the QBG collaborated with several universities in Oman as well as the Oman Animal and Plant Genetic Resources Center (OAPGRC) to organize and sponsor another scientific conference in Muscat, Oman entitled "International Conference on Frankincense and Medicinal Plants: Recent Developments in Scientific Research and Industry" (QBG 2023). The QBG sent representatives to present at this conference, which aimed at providing a platform for exchanging scientific knowledge as well as an opportunity for networking and strengthening relations between Qatar and Oman (QBG 2023). In partnership with the Islamic Culture Foundation (FUNCI) in Madrid, the QBG also hosted a "Gardens of Al-Andalus" exhibition in 2018 at Hamad Bin Khalifa University's College of Islamic Studies (ElGharib and Al-Khulaifi 2020). Highlighting the importance of gardens in Islam, this exhibition featured Andalusian garden models, explanatory panels, and ethnographic elements and tools to educate audiences about the history of agriculture and garden designs during the

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5 These surveys were explained to me in an interview I conducted with botanist Ahmed ElGharib. At the time of my fieldwork in 2019, ElGharib was a graduate student and research assistant conducting field research in Qatar for the QBG.

Andalusian period (QBG 2023). These local and regional initiatives reveal the QBG's multifaceted approach to fulfilling its educational, cultural, and scientific objectives in various academic, professional, and collaborative capacities.

#### 4 Religious and Cultural Values of QBG Leaders

My interviews with QBG leaders and scientists covered numerous topics including the founding history of the QBG; its aims and objectives; scientific research and educational programmes; and the role of religious and cultural values in motivating its leaders and shaping the ethos and vision of the institution.<sup>6</sup> One of the individuals I interviewed<sup>7</sup> at the QBG Management Office in Doha is Saif Al-Hajari.<sup>8</sup> He described to me the disparity he observed in the 1990s upon his return from the US between older and younger generations in Qatar as follows:

If I look to my parents, my father and grandfather in the past, they did not go to school. They didn't do any training in environment. They were just people living naturally. They were living close to nature. They had more skills to deal with nature. They were more positive to the environment than our children. Our children have more science, more technology, more ideas, but they don't care about anything. They don't care about flora. They don't care about wildlife. They don't care about water. They are throwing garbage everywhere.

What Al-Hajari found missing was good behaviour and values, and this observation motivated him to start an institute (FEC) focusing on values.<sup>9</sup> He then

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6 Some responses were given partially or entirely in Arabic, particularly when discussing Islamic and cultural values. I have translated into English any quotations or content from these interviews included in this section.

7 My interview with Saif Al-Hajari was conducted in person 21 October 2019.

8 Saif Al-Hajari is a Muslim Qatari scientist who studied geology and marine science at Qatar University. He completed his graduate studies in hydrogeology in the US. He is the former Vice Chairman of Qatar Foundation and also the former general manager of Qatar Foundation. He helped establish the Qur'anic Botanic Garden. Al-Hajari is also the founder of Friends of the Environment Center (FEC) and was chairman of Friends of Nature at the time of writing. Having led numerous environmental initiatives over several decades, he is considered one of the most respected environmental scientists and advocates in Qatar.

9 According to Al-Hajari, he founded FEC initially as a non-governmental organization in 1992, but after two years the Ministry of Culture and Sports asked FEC to work under the ministry's umbrella. Al-Hajari worked with FEC as part of this ministry for 22 years, but was dissatisfied

reflected on past civilizations and the reasons for their demise. He said their problem was not a lack of knowledge or information. Rather, these civilizations collapsed because they started losing their values. He emphasized that knowledge is insufficient without values and having both knowledge and values is what allows a society and civilization to flourish.

After some discussion about Al-Hajari's various environmental initiatives, he expressed delight at knowing my research project focused on the role of Islamic ethics in environmental advocacy:

If you look to Islam (as well as other religions), you will find that it is very rich in the relation between people and living things; between people and people; and between people and non-living things (*jamād*) like water and rocks. People have a responsibility toward everything that comes from Allah, Glorified and Exalted (*subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*), and people's relationships with His creation must be in a state of balance. This is the divine way or universal order (*sunnatu'l-ḥayāh* or *sunnatu'l-kawn*). When environmental problems arise, you are outside this balance.

Al-Hajari stated that in Islam environmental protection or preserving God's blessing is not considered legally recommended (*mustaḥab*) or a matter of personal preference, but is rather an obligation (*wājib*). He explained that the *āyāt* in the Qur'an and prophetic teachings are very clear regarding how to conserve water and how to interact with other creatures. He quoted an oft-cited *ḥadīth* conveying the prohibition of wasting water, even if you are on the bank of a flowing river.<sup>10</sup> Then, he quoted another *ḥadīth* saying that even when Judgement Day comes and you are holding a seedling, you should still plant it. This concept of valuing nature, he said, has existed for over 1,400 years. He also noted that Islam prohibits killing living creatures unjustly (i.e. for sport) because God did not create them in vain (Qur'an 3:191). Even if a person does not know or has not discovered these creatures' ecological value or role, he said it is considered sinful to take their life unjustly. He noted that these conservational values and teachings show how the Messenger trained his companions to follow Islamic ethics in their relationship with the environment.

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with its bureaucracy and FEC's inability to operate freely as an organization. He decided to part ways with FEC and started another independent group called Friends of Nature.

10 This *ḥadīth* is found in several Hadith compilations including *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, but it is classified as a weak hadith due to a weak chain of transmission. The meaning of its text, however, is corroborated by other *aḥādīth* and Qur'anic verses.

When I asked about cultural values that might play a role in environmental advocacy, Al-Hajari stressed the importance of promoting national pride (*wataniyyah*).<sup>11</sup> He said people need to feel proud of their country and their cultural background, and to care about the cleanliness of their country's environment and its beaches – especially in this part of the world because “we are tribes”. He recalled that when he was a child, there was a smaller gap between the younger and older generations, so he benefitted more from the values his father taught him. He argued that the social gap was also smaller between neighbours, and children received a consistent message from both neighbours and the elders in their family. He contrasted this with today's society in which families differ in their values and approach to raising children. He observed:

Children these days receive different messages inside and outside of the home. Technology is there now trying to get too close to the children's behaviour. This is very tough for children; even the varieties of things surrounding them. We used to build our toys ourselves. Maybe when I go to the supermarket, I find one type of candy, not hundreds. Today, kids are coming across a lot of things.

This kind of endless exposure, according to Al-Hajari, makes it more difficult for parents to instil in their children values related to simplicity, moderation, and conservation. He noted again that good technology and very good education are important, but they will be misused in the absence of positive values. Al-Hajari emphasized the importance of educating the public, especially children, about Arab and Islamic environmental values, especially with a tradition very rich in ecological principles and teachings. His views reflect a holistic understanding of Islamic concepts and elucidate the ways these values and teachings ought to influence environmental thought and behaviour in an Arab and Muslim country like Qatar. His observations and experiences also demonstrate the socio-cultural changes complicating the reform of people's attitudes and behaviours toward the natural environment along with the increased need for environmental initiatives seeking to address these challenges.

Another environmental leader I interviewed was Fatima Al-Khulaifi,<sup>12</sup> a Muslim Qatari who served as QBG's Project Manager from 2013 and currently

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11 Drawing on people's national – as opposed to Arab or Islamic – identity to instil pride demonstrates how nation-state formation influences the conception of socio-environmental relations and circumscribes pro-environmental behaviour within man-made borders.

12 This interview was conducted in person on 17 October 2019.



serves as the QBG Director.<sup>13</sup> When I asked about Islamic values, Al-Khulaifi said the QBG is concerned with ethical principles mentioned in the Qur'an. She stated that food security and moderation are important Qur'anic principles and noted how Prophet Joseph (Yusuf)'s interpretation of the King's dream<sup>14</sup> constituted a strategy that would guarantee food security for Egypt's people. She explained that Yusuf's advice to store what they reap from the first seven years of what they sowed – in preparation for the following seven-year famine – represents a conservational value embodied in the idea of creating a seed bank, which is part of the QBG's conservation programme. She also noted that Yusuf's recommendation to store what is reaped "except the little that you eat" (12:47) reflects the value of moderation (*iqtiṣād*) and not wasting food. Later, she quoted a Qur'anic verse (6:141) recounting some of God's favours (i.e. trellised and untrellised gardens, date palms, crops of diverse flavours, olives, and pomegranates) and emphasized the value of avoiding wastefulness mentioned in this verse. She also stressed the part of the latter verse commanding people to give the right of these crops ("*ḥaqqahu*") in the form of alms (*zakāh*) and stressed the importance of educating farmers about the need to give a portion of their crops as *zakāh*.

Al-Khulaifi said when the QBG designs educational programmes, especially for children, they focus on concepts such as food security and teaching children how to plant seeds and grow food, how to irrigate, how to harvest fruits and vegetables, and how to identify the most suitable environmental conditions for plants to flourish depending on the soil in which they are grown. She remarked that after the recent blockade against Qatar,<sup>15</sup> many schools and institutions are becoming more environmentally aware and open to learning how to become more self-sufficient in growing their own food. Al-Khulaifi also

13 Al-Khulaifi received her undergraduate degree in education from Qatar University and formerly worked in marketing and public relations for Qatar Foundation. She has a personal interest in Islamic history and literature as well as in *shari'a*.

14 According to this Qur'anic narrative (12:43–55), the king of Egypt during the time of Yusuf had a dream of seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean cows as well as seven green ears of corn and seven withered ones. When Yusuf was in prison, he was consulted about the King's dream and upon hearing Yusuf's interpretation, the King summoned him and eventually entrusted him (upon his request) with managing the nation's storehouses.

15 Al-Khulaifi was referring to the blockade imposed on Qatar between May 2017 and January 2021 by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. Led by Saudi Arabia, the quartet severed diplomatic and trade relations with Qatar, claiming Qatar was sponsoring terrorists and forging close relations with Iran. The blockading countries imposed a land, sea, and air embargo, suspending flights to/from Qatar and preventing Qatari ships from using their ports. Saudi Arabia also closed its land border to Qatar, which blocked any cargo from entering Qatar by land.

noted that in all of the QBG activities, including its annual Ghars (planting) community engagement programme, it is important to plant with good intentions, to protect oneself and one's dignity, and to provide food for birds, for example, and shade for people. She said:

These beneficial acts are considered charity according to prophetic teachings. Mindful planting with the intent of implementing one's faith and reaping spiritual rewards is very different from someone who plants while being mindless or heedless (*ghāfil*). The spiritual status and reward for these acts also differs in the hereafter.

In discussing the ethical dimensions of behaviour, Al-Khulaifi mentioned the Qur'anic parable comparing the "good word" to the "good tree" (14:24–25) with firm roots and branches reaching the sky and which constantly yields fruit by God's permission. She said some exegetes say this "word" is the testimony of faith (*shahāda*) while others say it is literally a good word from a believer that makes people feel happy. Unlike the "bad word" likened in the Qur'an to a rotten, uprooted tree (14:26), she said good words have the power to inspire people so they can bear more fruit. She believes this Islamic understanding motivates positivity and encourages sharing more uplifting words with workers or employees, for example, to increase productivity.

Al-Khulaifi argued that in a modern nation such as Qatar, the QBG strives to harmonize the Islamic principles mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith with universal values as embodied in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She stated:

The QBG aims to tie together worldly meanings with religious and spiritual values. We invite scholars with expertise in religion and Islamic studies, like Ali Al-Qaradaghi,<sup>16</sup> to present the Islamic perspective on many topics including plants, trees, gardens, and conservation. It is very important to investigate, from a scientific perspective, references in scriptural texts to certain trees and foods.

She noted, for example, how the Qur'an mentions the olive and fig together in the same verse (95:1) and affirmed the value of researching and comparing/contrasting these fruits and trees with respect to qualities such as seed size, leaf

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<sup>16</sup> Ali Al-Qaradaghi is a scholar of *sharī'a* and law with expertise in field contracts and financial transactions. He is a professor at Qatar University and served as the Secretary General of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) at the time of writing.

size, and environmental value. Al-Khulaifi also explained how the QBG's educational programmes and scientific research aim to convert theoretical Islamic principles and spiritual concepts into practical and tangible outcomes through community engagement, global collaborations, and scientific exchange with other botanic gardens.

Al-Khulaifi's insights on various Qur'anic principles and narratives elucidate apparent linkages between Islamic theoretical ideals and environmental practices adopted by the QBG. Her reflections on some of the QBG's broader objectives also demonstrate how this institution seeks to bridge its scientific research with Islamic ecological concepts and principles as well as universal values. By adopting this multifaceted approach, the QBG affirms its religious character within a Muslim country and region while maintaining global relevance by contributing to contemporary scientific research and pursuing universal goals and objectives. The QBG's attempt to find compatibility between Qur'anic verses and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals also reveals a concerted effort to demonstrate compliance of religious values with universal values and how the state's official religion can play a role in achieving global ambitions. While some may problematize this harmonizing approach for embracing secular ideas and paradigms at the expense of Islam's rich moral tradition, Al-Khulaifi's interview reveals the ways in which the QBG adopts an Islamic frame of reference while consistently relying on religious scholarship and scriptural understandings to advance its contribution to Islamic knowledge and achieve its educational objectives. In addition to offering a critique of the QBG, the next section further explores how the pursuit of QBG's institutional goals contributes to fulfilling Qatar's broader regional and global objectives.

## 5 Critique of the Qur'anic Botanic Garden

Based on my doctoral field research and interviews conducted with environmental leaders and advocates in Qatar, the QBG appears to be one of the most established Islamic institutions with environmental objectives in Qatar. It demonstrates its Islamic character through using religious language and Islamic concepts to articulate its conceptual design and overarching objectives. While the QBG's usage of Islamic terminology and referencing of Islamic scriptural texts may be perceived as symbolic or superficial attempts to legitimize itself within a Muslim country and region, my research reveals, at the minimum, the QBG's genuine interest in making a novel contribution to the concept of gardens influenced by Islamic teachings that distinguish it from

historic gardens in the Muslim world. Moreover, interviews with QBG's founders and leaders demonstrate a shared commitment within the institution to promoting religious and cultural values, including goodness in word and action, environmental responsibility, moderation, conservation, charitable giving, and preservation of the country's Arab and natural heritage. The QBG also possesses multifaceted aims to create an intellectual and scientific space in order to apply Islamic concepts and values through practical, field-based research and through numerous educational and community engagement programmes. In addition, it has succeeded in assembling a strong team of administrators, educators, and scientific experts to conduct research and lead community outreach activities. This core team was composed of only adult Muslim Arabs at the time of my field research, but its leaders and members appeared to work efficiently and harmoniously to produce quality informational and educational publications and achieve the broader goals of the QBG.

Although the QBG executes many of its goals domestically, it also aims to become a global centre of knowledge that allows people throughout the world to experience the richness of the Arab and Islamic culture, while also establishing itself as a reputable modern botanic garden equipped to conduct advanced scientific research through *ex situ* and *in situ* conservation programmes. The QBG has sought to establish its name and status globally as a novel botanic garden partly by conducting international scientific conferences and forging collaborations with other scientific research centres, botanic gardens, and universities supporting the work of botanic gardens. It has also established itself as a modern botanic garden by receiving accreditation from the Botanic Garden Conservation International (BGCI).<sup>17</sup>

The goal of the QBG to gain global prominence aligns not only with some of Qatar Foundation's broader goals, but also with the country's aim of establishing itself as a global actor through investments in education (among other areas) and through building/strengthening relationships with other countries, research institutions, and international organizations to affirm its credibility and establish its power on the global stage (Al-Horr et al. 2016). These global ambitions are reflected in part through the QBG's invitation to numerous embassies and ambassadors to participate in its Ghars (tree-planting) programme in Education City.<sup>18</sup>

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17 The Botanic Garden Conservation International is a networking organization representing and supporting botanic gardens in over 100 countries throughout the world.

18 Education City is the educational programme of the Qatar Foundation, see <https://www.qf.org.qa/about>.

Beyond the QBG's purported scientific, religious, and cultural aims, my research revealed some critical gaps between its lofty ambitions and its practical achievements. One of these gaps relates to the fact that QBG's theoretical aspirations for a physical garden have not been actualized for more than 10 years after its inception. Since its founding in 2008, the QBG maintained an administrative office, nursery, herbarium, and seed bank, and had also planted numerous trees over the years. Yet, its pilot garden was not opened to the public until 2020 and its permanent garden is still under preparation for construction.<sup>19</sup>

The delayed completion of its physical garden has deferred many of the QBG's social aims of attracting local families and children to a beautiful landscape incorporating Islamic architecture and giving people a flavor of the ancient Islamic civilization. The timely completion of the pilot garden before the FIFA World Cup 2022 also reinforces the perception of the Qur'anic Botanic Garden as a tool to advance Qatar's green image to the world while not making a meaningful contribution to the broader critique or reform of development models and policies exacerbating regional environmental vulnerabilities and social inequities.<sup>20</sup> The inability of state-sponsored institutions like the QBG to politicize environmental problems, climate discourses, and social inequities demonstrates the difficulty of dismantling deeply institutionalized and racialized divisions within a country highly dependent on fossil fuels and cheap migrant labour for its continued development.

Although many of the QBG's educational outreach activities target schools and engage young children, the remainder of its scientific programmes and international conferences seem to attract or engage elite scientific and religious academics and specialists and some select international and global institutions, while for the most part not catering its outreach and environmental awareness programmes and campaigns to the general public. Since this study focused on interviewing organizational leaders, scholars, and prominent environmentalists, future research could examine the general public's perceptions of the QBG and the extent to which ordinary citizens, expatriates, and migrant workers find value in the work of the QBG and how they engage in its campaigns and initiatives. When I asked some young Qataris involved in environmental advocacy outside of Education City about the QBG, they described

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19 Information based on email correspondence at the time of writing.

20 As in other Gulf countries, wealthy nationals and high-skilled workers enjoy high standards of living while many low-income migrant workers are not only marginalized through residential segregation, but also through social segregation (Showkath 2014; MDPS 2015).

the institution as being irrelevant to addressing key environmental issues in Qatar. These environmental scientists and activists expressed heightened concern about the country's overall sustainability, climate-related challenges (e.g. rising temperatures, water scarcity, vulnerability to sea level rise), and overwhelming reliance on hydrocarbon exports for its development and economic growth. As such, they did not consider it a priority to develop a botanic garden in an arid region focused on planting trees and educating people about the value of trees. Moreover, they perceived this project as representing an apolitical form of environmental advocacy while remaining oblivious to the country's top environmental priorities.

One Qatari interviewee, an environmental scientist who chose to remain anonymous, problematized desertification in the region and lamented the loss of oases in Qatar, which they explained is due to the country's over-exploitation of its aquifers. They said young people in Qatar do not know their country had huge oases. They believed planting trees through a project like the Qur'anic Botanic Garden does not challenge the underlying causes of desertification and increasing water scarcity in the region compounded by the effects of climate change, which they believed endangers the sustainability of the country and the survival of its population. In expressing their discontent with organizations such as the QBG and the QGBC, the interviewee said, "They are not talking about the *true* and devastating causes of environmental damage; and if you don't raise awareness about the *actual* causes of damage, how do you expect people to come up with solutions?"

In the Qur'anic Botanic Garden's stated goals and objectives, climate change was barely mentioned in informational documents and during interviews I conducted with its leaders and representatives. Whenever it was mentioned, it was never tied to Qatar's vulnerability to the effects of climate change and leaders did not mention how the QBG will contribute to research on its challenges and effects domestically or regionally. As a whole, the QBG does not appear to adopt a problem-solving approach to its objectives and project design, and does not explicitly identify major environmental challenges in Qatar that it aims to address. Although its field research surveys collect information on some environmental threats to plants in Qatar including grazing, camping, and hunting, its educational programmes do not appear to educate the public about the harms of these activities for Qatar's flora. Rather, it seems to take a more general approach to the value of conservation and appreciation for trees and plants as part of Qatar's "natural heritage." Even though the harms of anthropogenic activities from individual citizens or expatriates pale in comparison to major environmental challenges caused/exacerbated by petro-state actors' over-exploitation of natural resources (e.g. water and fossil fuels) for

large-scale development projects (LeQuesne 2018), the QBG does not appear to concern itself with such environmental challenges.

Despite being a well-established institution receiving government funding (through its membership in Qatar Foundation), and despite a prominent member of the royal family playing a major role in its founding and inauguration, the QBG does not appear to use its power and collaboration with governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change<sup>21</sup> to influence environmental decisions related to land use in Qatar and the country's over-exploitation of natural resources. Some may argue that influencing environmental decision-making at the state level is not part of a botanic garden's role, but some modern botanic gardens have become increasingly more involved in influencing environmental policy, and many publicly funded gardens have also become more accountable to the public and their views on the social, educational, and political direction gardens should take (Dodd and Jones 2010).

This shift toward increased public involvement may prove more difficult for the QBG since the conceptualization of its vision, mission, and programmes appear to have already taken place without input from the public. While the QBG projects many noble goals and aspirations, its government funding and patronage from the royal family make it run sufficiently without the need for public support. This self-sufficiency may secure its permanence as a botanic garden, yet it may also decrease its broader efficacy and social influence if even (some) Qataris themselves continue to view it as an elitist, irrelevant institution that overlooks the country's key social and environmental needs. Based on this perspective, some unfortunately consider the QBG as one of many tools the state uses to help advance Qatar's image of sustainability to the world and its symbolic representation of Islam and Arab culture, while actually being an artificial island or oasis of sustainability within a larger desert of unsustainability.

## 6 Conclusion

As a well-funded Islamic environmental institution with far-reaching connections to royal elites, ministries, and policy makers, the QBG has a unique opportunity to play a more instrumental role in influencing environmental

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21 In October of 2021, about two weeks before the convention of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP 26), Qatar renamed the Ministry of Municipality and the Environment to the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change.

decision-making in Qatar. Although the QBG serves an important pedagogic purpose for future generations in Qatar, it has great potential to broaden its scope beyond apolitical scientific research and environmental education toward raising greater awareness about the wider threats that climate change and local environmental degradation pose to Qatar's biodiversity and natural habitats. The QBG could optimize its reputability and social leverage to educate people about the anthropogenic causes of environmental pollution and degradation in Qatar, and to hold government and major corporations accountable for the sake of people's physical and emotional health. It also has a responsibility to demonstrate to the public how people's health and wellbeing are inextricably linked to the integrity of Qatar's flora and fauna, its ecosystems, and the broader region's marine and terrestrial environments.

While Qatar seeks to assert its global power and leadership through numerous educational initiatives, economic investments, and international collaborations, it could further enhance its environmental leadership within Qatar and the broader Gulf region through powerful environmental institutions like the QBG. By utilizing its political connections and social capital to influence environmental policies and praxis in Qatar, the QBG could make a significant contribution to safeguarding the region's natural environment and its population from corporate interests and from over-exploitation of the country's and wider region's shared natural resources. Moreover, advocating for policies that prioritize social and environmental justice, conservation and equity – while promoting environmental consciousness and responsibility within society – might be one of the most effective ways to legitimize itself as an Islamic environmental institution while embodying the Islamic and universal values the QBG wishes to promote.

More broadly, this case study of the Qur'anic Botanic Garden illustrates how Islamic environmentalism in Qatar and the wider region faces a formidable challenge when its logic demands promoting Islamic concepts and socio-ethical ideals (e.g. *khilāfa*, *'adāla*, *amāna*) yet its practice remains stunted due to structural opposition to those who dissent or critique the root causes of environmental destruction and social injustice. Islamic environmentalism may find some success in promoting ecological literacy and consciousness in alignment with Islamic principle and teachings. Yet, its broader potential lies in its ability to unite Muslims and people in the region behind a shared socio-environmental vision. Its efficacy also comes from effectively mobilizing people and amassing sufficient power to negotiate socio-political boundaries and advocate for alternative models of development. These models would prioritize the integrity of all people and honour planetary boundaries over economic growth or financial and political gain. Further research could



be conducted on the various structural and institutional challenges Islamic environmentalism faces and any viable attempts to unite Arabs and Muslims across the region – while respecting and honouring their differences – under a shared religio-cultural identity and socio-environmental vision.

### Issue and Editors

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# Land, Private Property, and the Universal Destination of Goods: A Catholic Perspective on Economic Inequality in Latin America

*Research Article*

*James Bailey* | ORCID: 0009-0001-7263-1114

Department of Theology, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

*baileyj@duq.edu*

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## Abstract

Latin America is plagued by extreme wealth inequality, much of which results from sharp disparities in land ownership. In addition to limiting access of basic goods to millions of Latin Americans, concentrations in land ownership harm the common good. Extreme disparities correlate to sluggish economic growth, inefficient agricultural practices, weakened public institutions, income disparities, and sharp increases in environmental degradation. A related concern is the destruction of indigenous peoples' land in the Amazon and denial of access to land that is rightfully theirs. This paper examines how resources from Catholic Social Teaching help us reflect critically upon and respond to these injustices. It analyzes in particular how Pope Francis and the Amazonian bishops apply the tradition in markedly new ways, ways that are shaped by and directed to this diverse, abundant and unique socio-geographical region. Attention is paid not only to what Catholic Social Teaching can bring to local justice issues, but also lessons indigenous peoples can teach the broader Church.

## Keywords

land – inequality – property – Catholic Social Teaching – Amazon

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Inequality is the root of social ills.

POPE FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §202

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## 1 Introduction

This article focuses on two central commitments found within the social teachings of the Catholic Church – the right to private property and the universal destination of goods – in the context of extreme inequality in Latin America, particularly of land ownership. In Latin America and elsewhere, significant inequalities in land distributions have personal, social, political, and environmental costs that are damaging not only to the wellbeing of persons and human communities, but also to the earth and all its inhabitants.

In what follows, I begin with a brief overview of the extent of and contributing factors to land inequality in Latin America, and the attendant costs. With this overview in mind, I turn to sources and traditions that inform Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on a range of issues, before examining several contemporary expressions of CST, especially in the work of Pope Francis. The last section focuses on the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops (2019; hereafter FD) for the Special Assembly for the Pan Amazon Region and Francis' accompanying apostolic exhortation, *Querida Amazonia* (Francis 2020a, hereafter QA). I analyze in particular how Francis and the Amazonian bishops have applied principles of CST in significantly new ways to address land inequality and other social justice issues that are rooted in this unparalleled region, paying close attention to lessons indigenous peoples of the Amazon can teach the broader Church about our integral relationship to the cosmos; our perverse reverence for consumption and our reckless disregard for our "common home"; the enriching contributions of diverse heritages, cultures, and voices; and the virtues of a simple life that harmoniously communes with the natural world.

## 2 Inequality and Latin America

While economic inequality is a problem in nearly every region of the globe, the distribution of income in Latin America is the second most unequal in the

world, after the Middle East and North African region (UNDP 2021). The concentration of land ownership, a significant form of wealth in Latin America, is extreme. One percent of farm owners in Latin America control more productive land than the other 99 percent who work the land (Guereña and Burgos 2016).

The Second Vatican Council (1965), in its document *Gaudium et Spes*, referenced problems of pronounced land inequality in what was then called “underdeveloped regions”. In these regions, which included Latin America, the Council stated:

there are large or even extensive rural estates which are only slightly cultivated or lie completely idle for the sake of profit, while the majority of the people either are without land or have only very small fields .... Not infrequently those who are hired to work for the landowners or who till a portion of the land as tenants receive a wage or income unworthy of a human being, lack decent housing and are exploited by middlemen .... Indeed, insufficiently cultivated estates should be distributed to those who can make these lands fruitful. (Second Vatican Council 1965, §71)

It is important to note that these inequalities of income and wealth go beyond limiting access to adequate basic goods, such as food, water, and clothing. They also contribute to the social and political marginalization of millions of people – what Francis describes in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francis 2013 §53–54; hereafter EG) as “an economy of exclusion” – while weakening public and cultural institutions necessary for the flourishing of all. Large concentrations of land ownership are correlated to sluggish economic growth, marked disparities in income and wealth, and decreased effectiveness of public institutions such as schools and hospitals. This is due in large part to inadequate funding, which is the result of elite members of society effectively lobbying for lower taxes, leading to reduced revenue flows (Sánchez-Ancochea 2021, 27–45).

Steep income and wealth inequalities (including in land ownership) negatively impact the overall health of the environment, subsequently harming human beings and other living things. A study by Ceddia noted that land inequality especially plays “an important role in the process of agricultural expansion and deforestation” (Ceddia 2019, 2528). The combination of high rates of deforestation and agricultural expansion, in turn, contributes to biodiversity loss, among other things (Holland, Peterson, and Gonzalez 2009). Within Latin America, the most dramatic loss of biodiversity is occurring with the systematic destruction of the Amazon rainforest. Between 1978 and 2021, an estimated one million square kilometers have been destroyed (Butler 2021).

Robust biodiversity has been shown to contribute to healthy ecosystems, including human wellbeing. Indeed, the depletion of biodiversity “is one of the most important environmental threats that humanity [and the earth itself] faces” (Holland, Peterson, and Gonzalez 2009, 1305). Remarking on this, Francis (2015) writes in *Laudato Si'* (hereafter LS), that the Earth

now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. (LS §2)

The burden and destruction Francis speaks of is due primarily to the excessive consumption of the non-poor, especially the insatiable desire for goods that consumerism stimulates.

Consistent with Francis' claim that justice questions must be integrated with debates about the environment is the growing recognition that the mechanism by which inequality contributes to a loss of biodiversity is, in part, a socio-political one (LS §49). Studies have shown that high levels of inequality tend to impede efforts to take the “collective action necessary to prevent environmental degradation” while simultaneously “promoting consumerism” (Ceddia 2019, 2527). As Wilkinson, Pickett, and De Vogli (2010, 1139) explain, “because more equal societies are more cohesive and have higher levels of trust, they are also more public-spirited and better able to act for the common good. The data show that more equal societies have smaller ecological footprints, recycle more, and their populations take less frequent flights, consume less water and less meat, and produce less waste”.

Latin America's extreme inequality helps explain why the destruction of the Amazon rainforest has expanded so dramatically, a situation which portends cataclysmic environmental impacts due, in part, to the fact that it acts as a regional and global climate stabilizer, and consequently plays an irreplaceable role in the health and wellbeing of the planet (Gustin 2021). In short, extreme inequalities in land ownership and income are impacting the common good of all. As Francis argues, “[i]f everything is related, then the health of a society's

institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life. ‘Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment’ (LS §142).

### 3 Catholic Teaching on Care for the Poor, Care for the Earth, and the Limits of Property Ownership

CST has long defended the right of private property ownership, but it has also insisted that land and other forms of private property be widely distributed, often invoking the principle of “the universal destination of created goods” in support of more equal distribution of property and other goods of the earth.

#### 3.1 *Biblical Origins*

The Church’s teachings on poverty, private property ownership and its limits, the universal destination of goods, and even more recent teachings that stress the need to care for what Francis calls “our common home”, can be traced back to influential biblical texts and figures in the tradition (LS §1). The opening chapter of the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible begins with the assertion that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The text also asserts that human beings are to have dominion over the created order. The first of these claims has come to mean that human beings are in some way sacred and should be treated in a way that reflects this. In *Laudato Si’*, Francis, invoking this text, says, “The Bible teaches that every man and woman is created out of love and made in God’s image and likeness. This shows us the immense dignity of each person” (LS §65). Elsewhere, he (Francis 2018) states that our being made in God’s image means our dignity is “inviolable”; that “is why the defense and promotion of human rights is not merely a political duty or a social task, but also and above all a requirement of faith”.

A second claim made in Genesis – that human beings are to have dominion over the created order – has a long, problematic history. At various times, the phrase “have dominion” has been understood to mean “dominate”; so interpreted, this biblical text has been used to legitimize “unbridled exploitation of nature” (LS §67). For Francis, this “is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church” (LS §67). Properly read in the context of the creation narratives, human dominion is best understood as “caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving” (LS §67). Human beings have a “duty to protect the earth and ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations” (LS §67). When read in this way, there is a significant overlap between the principle of the universal



destination of created goods and the responsibility that human beings must care for creation.

Unsurprisingly, not everyone shares the view that all human beings are sacred and should be caretakers of one another and of creation itself, or the view that the earth, as God's gift, does not *belong* to human beings. Indeed, early in Israel's history we are told of the dehumanizing exploitation of the Israelites by their Egyptian taskmasters. God hears their cries and intervenes to liberate them from their oppressive misery, leading them out of Egypt "to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:7). As Exodus tells the story, good and plentiful land, combined with humane work conditions, is integral to the liberation and flourishing of the Israelites. The exploitation described is, sadly, a perennial feature of human history, as we will see when we focus below on the Pan-Amazon region.

Turning to the New Testament, the Gospel narratives portray Jesus as repeatedly attending to the poor and oppressed. He addresses issues that bear directly upon "the least of these": debt, wealth distribution, and the related issue of class, wages, and so on. For instance, although the references to debts in the Lord's Prayer have traditionally been linked to sins of some kind, Sharon Ringe argues that Jesus was likely speaking of forgiving financial debts (Ringe 1986, 77–81). We also find in all four Gospels Jesus angrily rebuking those who use the Temple as a site of commerce and money lending. In Jesus' day, the Temple was a place where "business contracts and oaths, including debt agreements, were sworn to the Lord", thereby sanctifying the repayment of debts (Hudson 2018, 293). Hudson argues that making debt into something holy, sacred, and in that sense authorized by God angered Jesus most since those who were indebted were likely to be poor. Not only were the money lenders defiling a sacred space by using it for commercial transactions, they were using it to exploit the vulnerable.

### 3.2 *Early Church*

A common theme in early Church writings was that the goods of the earth are destined for all. Hoarding wealth when others are impoverished was therefore discouraged. This recognizes that no person has an absolute right to the goods of this world. Ultimately, such goods are seen as gifts from God. Consistent with the notion of the universal destination of goods that we find in modern CST, influential figures in the early Church urged those who were well-to-do to share with those in need. They must do so because what they have belongs to them in only a conditional, not an absolute, way. Saint Ambrose teaches that when you donate to the poor, "you are not giving a gift of what is yours

to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his" (quoted in Paul VI 1967 §23). Similarly, John Chrysostom declares that the failure to share one's wealth with the poor "is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs" (Chrysostom 1984, 55).

Centuries later, Thomas Aquinas addresses whether a person in extreme need can take from another to provide for themselves. Ordinarily, taking someone's property without payment or permission would be considered theft. Yet Aquinas (1920), argues that whether this should be described as theft depends upon the needs of the person taking the property. "It is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and use another's property in a case of extreme need: because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need".

### 3.3 *Catholic Social Teaching and Private Property*

The moral obligations emphasized in these ancient writings remain authoritative in modern CST. This is not to say that these teachings are imported without revision. They shape how the tradition reflects on private property and the obligations of those who own property. While the tradition recognizes a right to private property, it places certain limits on it. These are grounded by two different convictions: First, that the created order is a gift from God, with the implicit claim that persons do not have an absolute right to an unlimited portion of the gift God has provided. A second and related conviction is that the needs of all human beings must be prioritized over the wants and desires of some. It is this understanding of the created order as a gift and the correlative obligation to meet the basic needs of all that underlies CST's commitment to the universal destination of created goods. So, for example, *Gaudium et Spes* (Second Vatican Council 1965) argues that "man should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others" (GS §69). Similarly, Pope Paul VI (1967 §23), in *Populorum Progressio*, addressing the situation of land distribution in Latin America, writes, "No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life". And Pope John Paul II (1981 §31) argued in *Centesimus annus* that "God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone".

The Church's commitment to a conditional right to private property sits uneasily with many contemporary understandings, which tend toward an absolute right to what one owns. Matthew Whelan argues, for example, that notions of private property in the US and Europe have been shaped by several centuries of law that endorse the idea that persons have an absolute and

inviolable right to that which they own. Much of contemporary property law in the West, Whelan contends, has been influenced by a definition of private property first promulgated by William Blackstone in his 1765 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Private property ownership, Blackstone says, is “that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe” (quoted in Whelan 2020, 95). In Blackstone’s view of property, writes Whelan, “ownership of land becomes synonymous with the exclusive right to its use” (Whelan 2020, 95).

As we have seen, CST and much of the Christian tradition repudiates this unconditional right to private property. We hear it in Francis’ (2020b) encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (hereafter *FT*): “the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable” (*FT* §120). The “principle of the common use of created goods is the ‘first principle of the whole ethical and social order’” (*FT* §120, citing John Paul II 1981 §19). It is a natural and inherent right that takes priority over other rights, including the right to property. Emphasizing a conditional right, Francis suggests that “the principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use is a golden rule of social conduct” (*LS* §93). It is perhaps unsurprising that the words of this first Latin American pope also have great resonance with the martyred saint of Latin America, Óscar Romero (*Homilias*, Vol. v, 209, cited in Whelan 2019, 652): “What we have is not for ourselves alone. What we have is a gift of God, to be managed in the service of the common good. It is unjust that a few have everything and absolutize it in such a manner that no one can touch it, and that the marginalized majority is dying of hunger”.

#### 4 Pope Francis, Latin America, and the Pan-Amazon Territory: Everything is Connected

Although Francis endorses CST’s consensus about limitations placed on private property rights, his papacy has included a heightened emphasis on the principles of subsidiarity and the universal destination of goods. This has important implications for the Church’s understanding of private property and land inequality in Latin America. For much of the history of CST on private property, emphasis was placed on the ways in which ownership could enhance the wellbeing of individuals and families. More recent teaching has highlighted the interconnectedness of all life. While CST has for some time stressed that private property is under a “social mortgage” (a term coined by John Paul

II 1987, §42; cf. LS §93), and to that extent, recognized the social dimensions of property ownership, Francis has raised awareness of the complex ways in which all forms of ownership and land use have polyvalent effects.

For example, when property is conceptualized as a private good whose sole purpose is to satisfy individual desires, the social, ecological, and relational effects of ownership tend to be downplayed or marginalized altogether. Francis' fundamentally relational and ecological perspective – what he calls “integral ecology” – expands care and concern beyond the confines of one's own individual property and serial acquisitiveness, toward greater concern for every person and for the created order itself. As he puts it: “creation is not a possession that we can dispose of as we wish; much less is it the property of some, of only a few. Creation is a gift ... given to us by God so that we might care for it and use it, always gratefully and always respectfully, for the benefit of everyone” (Francis 2014). Further, he argues that the limitless drive for profits and governments that privilege business interests trample on inhabitants' rights, misappropriating and contaminating precious natural resources that belong to all: “When certain businesses out for quick profit appropriate lands and end up privatizing even potable water, or when local authorities give free access to the timber companies, mining or oil projects, and other businesses that raze the forest and pollute the environment, economic relationships are unduly altered and become an instrument of death” (QA §14). Francis illuminates in stark terms the reality that human beings do not exist *outside* of nature, but rather as part of it. It follows that wanton destruction of the “natural world” inevitably has deleterious consequences for *all* peoples.

The magnitude of such destruction is both devastating and alarming in the world's largest rainforest. The Pan-Amazon region extends over parts of nine South American countries: Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Columbia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. As mentioned previously, this natural wonder helps maintain the global balance of carbon, oxygen, and freshwater. Importantly, indigenous populations have for centuries cared for these forests (Hughes 2018, 101). In recent decades, predatory industries – from mining, to clear-cutting forests, to agribusiness, and more – combined with “infrastructural mega-project developments” (e.g. dams, power lines, and roadways) have wreaked environmental devastation on this region and beyond (FD §66). Given that this region significantly mitigates factors that contribute to global climate change, the impact that these industries and projects have on the flourishing of Amazon rainforests will be felt by persons around the globe far into the future.

Those in the immediate vicinity of the forests are already bearing the brunt of the negative effects of these industries, which go well beyond environmental

degradation. Indigenous populations are experiencing “grave and widespread impunity in the region regarding human rights violations and obstacles to obtaining justice” (FD §69). These injustices can be traced to non-indigenous actors who see the Amazon as nothing more than “an enormous empty space to be filled, a source of raw resources to be developed, a wild expanse to be domesticated” (QA §12). The diverse indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon, and their right to this land, are simply ignored, or worse. Those plundering behave as if they “do not exist” and “as if lands on which they [the indigenous peoples] live do not belong to them”. For those interested in extracting natural resources, the original inhabitants are “considered more an obstacle needing to be eliminated than as human beings with the same dignity as others and possessed of their own acquired rights” (QA §12).

This stance taken toward the Amazon is a noxious form of what Francis terms the “technocratic paradigm” (LS §101 and *passim*). It “encourages people to see the world as formless, without any inherent guidelines as to how it is to be used”, and so treats “the entire world [as] open to human mastery, control, and manipulation” (Scheid and Scheid 2022, 118). By contrast, “integral ecology configures the world ... as holistic, interconnected, fundamentally relational” (Scheid and Scheid 2022, 118). Through the lens of integral ecology, one must always consider the impact one’s actions have, not only on other people, but on the biosphere as a whole. The biosphere, having intrinsic value, belongs to a shared circle of justice concerns and obligations that individuals and communities alone are usually afforded. It can be lovingly revered, helped to flourish, disparaged and abused, as any person, created in the image of God, can be.

Francis has special concern for the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, whom he recognizes as among the poorest of the poor, since they have suffered at the brutal hands of governments and large corporations. His reflections in *Querida Amazonia* illuminate the need to learn from and follow the lead of those closest to the land, rather than exercising the longstanding practice of monarchical, top-down leadership that has dominated the Church hierarchy for centuries. The Pan-Amazon Synod was preceded by two years of consultations in the Amazon region, and attended by a delegation of more than 100 indigenous peoples. Since indigenous peoples are intimately familiar with the devastating effects of these environmentally destructive practices, they are best positioned to provide vital information about what is happening to them and their lands, to guide how we might best help them, and to develop their own local organizations and projects to address specific problems. The bishops participating in the Pan-Amazon Synod aspired to reflect this new, more humble and attentive understanding of leadership in how the consultations of the 2019 Synod were conducted. That same spirit suffuses the final report (cf. FD §73, among many examples).

Reinforcing this view of leadership as service, Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (QA) did not supersede the final report. He expressly stated that his exhortation should be read as accompanying it. This is the first time that a post-synodal apostolic exhortation refrains from determining what is to be regarded as the core teaching of a given synod. Rather, Francis implicitly accepts the entire final document, encouraging readers to return to it again and again as part of an ongoing conversation about the Pan-Amazonian region.

The participants in the Pan-Amazon Synod shared Francis' deep concerns about the region and its peoples. They reminded everyone that "the promotion and respect for human rights, both individual and collective, is not optional" (FD §70). They call on all people of goodwill to undergo "an individual and communal ecological conversion that upholds an integral ecology and a model of development in which commercial criteria are not above environmental and human rights criteria" (FD §73). They note that the technocratic paradigm's narrow-minded concentration on mastering our world to maximize profits has profoundly deleterious effects in this region. For instance, "extractive activities, such as large-scale mining, particularly illegal mining, substantially diminish the value of life in the Amazon. Indeed, they uproot the lives of peoples and the common goods of the earth, concentrating economic and political power in the hands of a few. Worse still, many of these destructive projects are carried out in the name of progress and are supported – or permitted – by local, national and foreign governments" (FD §72).

Sadly, the people who know best how to protect and care for the Amazon at the very moment that such care is critical to the health of the planet are themselves being marginalized by those who would destroy the gift that God has bequeathed to all of humanity: "The harm done to nature affects [indigenous] people in a very direct and verifiable way, since, in their words, 'we are water, air, earth and life of the environment created by God .... The land has blood, and it is bleeding; the multinationals have cut the veins of our mother earth'" (QA §42). This is a familiar story. Those with power and wealth are appropriating land that is not theirs and mistreating its inhabitants. Indeed, the synod's final document drew parallels between the mistreatment of indigenous people of the Amazon and that of the Israelites persecuted in Egypt: "Today the cry of the Amazonia to the Creator is similar to the cry of God's People in Egypt (cf. Exodus 3:7). It is a cry of slavery and abandonment, which clamors for freedom and God's care" (FD §8). Indigenous peoples who have found their ravaged lands no longer productive or who have been violently forced from their homes are migrating to urban areas, where their rights are denied and they are being systematically mistreated. Forced off the land that has been their

home for centuries, they are also all too often subjected to “xenophobia, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking” (QA §11).

What, then, should the Church be doing about this situation? Necessary changes cannot be effected simply by invoking the authority of the Church hierarchy. And it is increasingly clear that even well-intentioned, transnational actors (like the United Nations) are struggling to bring about constructive structural changes that address pressing issues like climate change, persistent poverty, and toxic pollution. Francis understands, “in a way revolutionary for CST, that effective political action must be broad-based and multi-layered, gathering energy and strength among affected populations” (Cahill 2021, 112). We see this insight put into practice in Francis’ commitment to the synodal process, which involves accompaniment, listening, and inculturation.

Francis believes the Church, at this moment, must accompany the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, as well as anyone who is marginalized, mistreated, and exploited. Accompaniment, says Francis, is an “art” that “teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other” (EG §169). It is also a form of journeying *with* others that acknowledges the “equal dignity of every person in a way that insists on promoting the[ir] subjective human agency” (Pope 2019, 123). This combination of treating all persons with equal dignity while recognizing and promoting human agency comes across again and again in Francis’ engagement with others. At the 2021 World Meeting of Popular Movements, he addressed attendees as “social poets” because, he said, “you have the ability and the courage to create hope where there appears to be only waste and exclusion. Poetry means creativity, and you create hope. With your hands, you know how to forge the dignity of each person, of families and of society as a whole, with land, shelter, work, care, and community” (Francis 2021). A desire to accompany the Amazonian peoples is also evident in the Synod’s final report: indigenous peoples “have clearly stated that they want the Church to accompany them, to walk with them, and not to impose on them a particular way of being, a specific form of development that has little to do with their cultures, traditions and spiritualities. They know how to take care of the Amazon, how to love and protect it; what they need is for the Church to support them” (FD §74).

For such accompaniment to be genuine, leaders in the Church must listen to indigenous peoples. To that end, the Pan-Amazon Synod relied upon the “active participation of more than 87,000 people ... from cities and from different cultures, along with numerous groups from other ecclesial sectors and the contributions of academics and civil society organizations” (FD §3). Participants called attention to “incidents of injustice and cruelty that took place in the Amazon region even in the last century”, while also stressing the

need for everyone to recognize and challenge ongoing forms of “human exploitation, abuse, and killing” (QA §15). As Francis said, there are significant efforts underway to listen to and support those who “fight for the rights of the poor, the original peoples and the least of our brothers and sisters” in the hopes that “their voices can be heard and their dignity advanced” (QA §7). He made clear he supports those who aim to preserve “the distinctive cultural riches” and the “overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forest” (QA §7). The Church “needs to listen to [indigenous] ancestral wisdom, listen once more to the voice of [their] elders, recognize the values present in the way of life of the original communities, and recover the rich stories of its peoples” (QA §70).

Such accompaniment and listening are constitutive of what Francis calls “paths of inculturation”, the perennial necessity of which he argues, quoting John Paul II, is grounded in the incarnation. The Church “does not have simply one cultural expression’, and ‘we would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous” (QA §69). That is why the final document of the Pan-Amazon Synod declared that a Church seeking to deepen its appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in all cultures must in the Amazon have “an indigenous, peasant and afro-descendant face” (FD §27). The Church must realize that it has “inherited great riches from the pre-Columbian cultures” and that, therefore, it must “reject nothing of the goodness that already exists in Amazonian cultures, but [bring] it to fulfillment in the light of the Gospel” (QA §69 and §66). Thus, Francis hopes the whole People of God will share with the indigenous peoples of the Amazon their “openness to the action of God, a sense of gratitude for the fruits of the earth, the sacred character of human life and esteem for the family, a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility in common work” (QA §70). These values include, especially, a sense of proportion, balance and simplicity, which Francis believes will help weaken the grip of consumerism.

Together, accompaniment, listening, and inculturation are central to the synodal process that Francis has emphasized. He urges the Church to free itself from its obsession with mere ideas and reliance on a rigidly hierarchical exercise of power in order to respond to concrete needs of local churches, benefiting from their lived experiences. Strikingly, he said in *Querida Amazonia*, “the Synod ... profited from the participation of many people who know better than myself or the Roman Curia the problems and issues of the Amazon region, since they live there, they experience its suffering and they love it passionately” (QA §3). It is partly for this reason he has placed a renewed emphasis on synodality. The Pan-Amazonian Synod’s final document describes synodality as “the way of being of the early Church (cf. *Acts 15*)” (FD §87). And they insist



that “it must be ours. ... Synodality also characterizes the Church of the Second Vatican Council, understood as the People of God in their equality and common dignity with regard to the diversity of ministries, charisms and services” (FD §87).

Although synodality was endorsed by the Second Vatican Council, it has not been fully realized in the decades since. The essence of synodality is to welcome conversation and discussion about matters of which the Church is concerned from a broad array of voices, especially those who have direct experiences of problems that must be addressed. Speaking to participants in the 2014 World Meeting of Popular Movements, Francis captures this practical aspect of synodality: “You do not work with abstract ideas; you work with realities ... that you have told me about. You have your feet in the mud, you are up to your elbows in flesh-and-blood reality. You carry the smell of your neighbourhood, your people, your struggle! We want your voices to be heard – voices that are rarely heard. ... [W]ithout your presence, without truly going to the fringes, the good proposals and projects we often hear about at international conferences remain stuck in the realm of ideas and wishful thinking” (Francis 2014).

Francis’ distinctive contributions to and reorientation of CST can be well understood apart from any reference to his indebtedness to liberation theology. Still, since he *is* the first pope from Latin America, it is natural to wonder to what extent his perspective resonates with some of liberation theology’s core principles. The most obvious conceptual indebtedness can be found in liberation theology’s emphasis on the preferential option for the poor. The term was coined in 1968 by the Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, in a letter to his confreres, and was highlighted at the Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops the same year. Even though its origins and early use are not exclusively tied to liberation theology, it captures a central hermeneutical principle in liberation theology, namely, that the Bible should be understood from the perspective of the poor and marginalized. While it is true that papal thought prior to the Pan-Amazon Synod had already “moved decisively in the direction of liberation theology’s ‘preferential option for the poor’ to define what the common good means concretely” and that Francis had himself “applied the preferential option not only to disenfranchised populations most vulnerable to climate change but to the Earth itself and all creatures harmed by selfish interests” (Cahill 2021, 107), it is also true that the Pan-Amazon Synod initiated by Francis marked an important methodological shift in papal social teaching.

Many of the methodological approaches that liberation theologians stressed over the past several decades are far more integral to the work of this synod than we have seen in the past. In particular, the synod and Francis reflect

liberation theology's reliance on natural and social sciences to shed light on those social structures, institutions and practices that contribute to economic and social inequality, particularly involving abuses of the poorest and most vulnerable, including the earth itself. Addressing the Amazon's complex social and environmental problems entails attending carefully to the ancient traditions, customs, and practices of indigenous peoples, as well as the best insights offered by science and technology: "To protect the Amazon region, it is good to combine ancestral wisdom with contemporary technical knowledge, always working for a sustainable management of the land while also preserving the lifestyle and value systems of those who live there" (QA §51). Such inclusiveness is central to the synod's final document: "The new paradigm of sustainable development must be socially inclusive, combining scientific and traditional knowledge to empower traditional and indigenous communities, women in their majority, and make these technologies serve the wellbeing and protection of the forests" (FD §71).

The synodal process itself – with its emphasis on greater inclusion of previously marginalized voices and perspectives – is perhaps the most outwardly visible sign of Francis' methodological indebtedness to liberation theology. As we have seen, he shifts the direction of CST away from a "top-down teaching approach" and instead listens closely to "local, bottom-up, and diverse" voices (Cahill 2021, 108). Local communities and organizations are usually better suited to identify and take the lead in addressing social and environmental problems. As already noted, this approach reflects a key commitment of CST, the principle of subsidiarity, which encourages decision-making at the most local level possible, while stressing that higher levels of authority should only intervene when necessary because those nearest to the problem are unable to effectively address it.

An additional advantage to this bottom-up approach is that those of us in the developed world who typically are estranged from our natural environments can benefit from hearing indigenous peoples' stories. They can significantly enrich and transform our relationship to the land and cosmos in their spiritual dimensions. Since we cannot merely invent our way out of the problems of environmental degradation, we need a transformation of the heart and a "bold cultural revolution" (LS §114). The purpose of accompanying, listening, and being open to inculturation is not reducible to how it might benefit those in the Amazon; it also benefits the rest of us, perhaps even more so. In Francis' words, "[f]rom the original peoples, we can learn to *contemplate* the Amazon region and not simply analyze it, and thus appreciate this precious mystery that transcends us. We can *love* it, not simply use it, with the result that love can awaken a deep and sincere interest. Even more, we can *feel intimately*

*a part of it* and not only defend it; then the Amazon region will once more become like a mother to us” (QA §55).

## 5 Conclusion

In the 16th century, King Ferdinand of Spain instructed his conquistadors, upon arriving in what would later be called Latin America: “Get the gold, humanely if possible; but, at any cost, get the gold” (Perlez and Johnson 2005). Although in many ways such conquest has never stopped, it has taken new forms. No longer directed by popes and kings, today’s exploits are organized and funded by multinational corporations and assisted by political leaders who are indebted to them for the power they hold. The Church too has changed, and with it, CST. It no longer supports, or stands by silently, as non-European lands and peoples are exploited. Nor does it view private property rights as affecting merely humans. Importantly, the definition of the common good has expanded to include all creation.

In Francis’ view, this is how it should be. CST is not a museum piece; nor is it a collection of arid principles that are to be applied univocally, regardless of local variations in geography, history, and culture. He insists that it grows and deepens in its encounters with people around the globe in their unique settings. It is an ongoing journey that demands the global Church interpret its authoritative sources and traditions in fresh, illuminating ways. Not all agree. The perspective of Francis’ relatively few critics among the episcopate can be summed up by the American, Raymond Cardinal Burke: “They say that the Amazon region is a fount of divine revelation, and therefore when the Church goes there in her missionary capacity, she should learn from the culture. This denies the fact that the Church brings the message of Christ, who alone is our salvation, and addresses that message to the culture – not the other way around!” (Burke 2019).

Francis maintains – without responding directly to critics – that encounters with those who are different strengthens and enriches the Church and, thereby, is essential to the proper development and application of CST. “Starting from our roots, let us sit around the common table, a place of conversation and of shared hopes. In this way, our differences, which could seem like a banner or a wall, can become a bridge. Identity and dialogue are not enemies” (QA §37). The Pan-Amazon Synod is a groundbreaking local example of this. But it also lays the foundation for initiating dialogue in new venues to hear new voices from around the earth. Let us hope for synods in other places, especially North America, Africa, and Australia, where indigenous peoples and the natural world continue to suffer profound injustices shaped by their unique situations.

## Issue and Editors

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# The Catholic Church in Times of Ecological Crisis: An “Unusual Suspect” in Advancing the Transition to Sustainability?

## *Research Article*

*Adrian Beling* | ORCID: 0000-0002-6658-6310  
Sociology and Environmental Studies, The Kings University,  
Edmonton (AB), Canada\*  
*Adrian.Beling@kingsu.ca*

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## Abstract

Religious traditions and institutions have historically played a significant role in shaping cultural scaffoldings and social practices. Can they also help re-shape the unsustainable world humans have made for themselves, which is now undermining not only the actual and prospective minimum standards of dignified life for the many, but also the basic fabric of Earth's life support? From an approach critical of mainstream sustainability and looking to the example of the Catholic Church and Pope Francis' vision of an “integral ecology”, this article argues that, in spite of being a latecomer to the global sustainability debate, the Church is structurally uniquely positioned to play the role of a global sustainability governance agent in the necessary transition to future-able way(s) of societal organization. It can, however, do so only if it proves capable of avoiding the risks of corporatist takeover, instrumentalisation for economic and political purposes, and assimilation of the integral ecology narrative used by the overall ineffective approaches of mainstream sustainable development.

## Keywords

ecological conversion – degrowth – transition – consumption – social movement

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\* Canada Research Chair in Transition to Sustainability.

## 1 Introduction

The socio-environmental challenges facing the world today require more than technical, legal, and political answers. We need broader existential responses, both individual and collective, to the questions resulting from the dominant way of life<sup>1</sup> based on a *habitus* of externalisation (Brand and Wissen 2013; Lessenich 2016); that is, a pattern of social reproduction that cannot be generalized without severely jeopardizing the Earth's life-support systems. This pattern, however, has become synonymous with the “good life” for a minority of the world's population who currently reap its short-term benefits as well as for a majority who aspire to do so in the future.

This thus engenders a seemingly unsolvable political dilemma: Societies either continue to grow their economies at the expense of the earth's biosphere, or else depart from the expansion pattern, thus risking short-term social, economic and political instability (Jackson 2009). The default answer to this dilemma has been to rely on techno-economic approaches under the aegis of “ecological modernisation” (Mol 2010) to decouple the relentless pursuit of economic growth from its adverse ecological impact. After half a century, such an approach has overall achieved no progress in halting – let alone reversing – the degradation of the global biosphere (IPCC 2014 UNDP 2019). Indeed: in the techno-economic policies that characterise conventional approaches to the current global socio-ecological crisis, the premise underlying the above-described political dilemma remains largely unquestioned: Is it possible to pursue a good life for all beyond the currently dominant social imaginary,<sup>2</sup> which relies on expanding capital accumulation and consumption opportunities *ad absurdum* (Woodward 2015)?<sup>3</sup> In other words, can we purposely promote the emergence of synergistic social imaginaries, practices, and institutions that could transform our unsustainable hegemonic model of social organization into one that can be sustained into the future? This paper addresses this question in relation to the role of religion as a

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1 Following the terminological distinction proposed by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2013), I use the concept of “way of life” as distinct from “lifestyle”. While the latter refers to the conscious and deliberate consumption-related choices and behaviours by individuals or groups, the former designates socio-structural patterns of production, distribution, and consumption, as well as their underpinning cultural imaginaries.

2 The term “social imaginary” in sociology refers broadly to how meaning and understanding shape social action and interaction, as well as their institutionalization.

3 It is often contended that the urgency of ecological challenges does not allow for the allegedly long timeframe required for cultural change. A persuasive argument on why center-staging cultural change may not only be more effective but also faster than technological and market-based approaches can be found in Schneidewind and Zahrt (2014).



potentially important trigger and regulator of a far-reaching societal sustainability transition.

Indeed, religious traditions have profoundly influenced psychosocial ways of feeling, thinking, and acting throughout history, and can potentially offer an effective alternative (or complement) to currently dominant techno-centered, rationalistic, and utilitarian governance approaches. Religion, I argue, is well-suited to filling the current void in addressing the neglected transformation of cultural and social practices in larger social contexts (Brulle and Dunlap 2015; Habermas 2012; Shove 2010). This paper focuses specifically on the Catholic tradition and the role of the Catholic Church.

The role of the Church and religious traditions in advancing a sustainability transition is a promising yet virtually unexplored scholarly field (Gudynas 2018; Köhrsen 2018a; Schneidewind 2018; UNEP 2016; Veldman et al. 2012; Vogt 2018). Indeed, the relationship between religion and the environment has hitherto been thematized almost exclusively in theological literature, while the other humanities and the social sciences have only started to explore how religion can have an impact on sustainability transitions (Glaab 2019, 143). Furthermore, research has focused on the different ontological and ethical considerations of diverse religions regarding nature (Tucker 2010), the support that believers lend to environmental causes (Berry 2014), the contribution of religious actors to socio-ecological discourses (Berry 2014; Glaab and Fuchs 2018), or the question of the admissibility of religious discourse in the public sphere (Bals 2016; Dunlap 2006; Habermas 2012).

In contrast to the above strands of discussion, which arguably share the common assumption that “the environment” is an ontologically separate category for religious thought in general,<sup>4</sup> and for the Catholic faith in particular, I will draw from Pope Francis’ landmark encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015) in framing “[c]oncerns about technology, water, power, climate, slavery, biodiversity, and greed [as] woven together into an inspirational account of ... healthy human living” (Hulme 2015, 18). In this regard, Hulme says,

[the Pope’s] Encyclical offers a powerful critique not simply therefore of climate change, but of the world humans have made for themselves. It is a world driven by a pathological techno-economic paradigm and a

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4 Moreover, according to Frank Biermann (2020, 7–8), the artificial encircling of an “environmental” domain as separate from other human affairs inherently “lends itself to a technocratic approach that focusses on reducing emissions or managing ‘nature areas’, as opposed to a deeper critique of underlying societal conflicts and injustices; and it might entrench hubris (‘we can manage all problems’) and human mastery over a non-human world”.

“deified market”, in which the poor are marginalized, solidarity is undermined, and greed triumphs over justice. (Hulme 2015, 17)

This redirects the focus from “religious environmentalism” towards the role of religious traditions and institutions in addressing the prevalent model of social organization and its techno-economic and cultural underpinnings, which as noted earlier, is leading to the destruction of Earth’s life support. In this regard, the leading question of concern is reversed: It is not so much about what society can do to address the ecological crisis, but about what the ecological crisis reveals about what needs to be addressed in society (Hulme 2010).

I will therefore analyze the current and potential functions of the Catholic Church, which is understood here as a multi-level actor capable of intervening at different levels/ societal spheres, whose synergic interaction can bring about change in society at large, but who also undergoes transformation in its own institutional and discursive identity in the process (Burch et al. 2019; Köhler et al. 2019; Ostheimer and Blanc 2021). These interventions can range from introducing discourses and norms, experimenting in niches of social innovation, to bringing innovations to scale and challenging current regimes (Köhrsen 2018a). This paper adopts a perspective critical of mainstream sustainability which has been laid out in more detail elsewhere (Beling et al. 2018; Beling and Vanhulst 2019; Vanhulst and Beling 2019). It seeks to develop theoretical hypotheses about the potentials and risks of the Church’s role in advancing more radical societal transformation pathways than those found in mainstream sustainability governance agendas, drawing on the integral ecology narrative outlined in Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*. The following section first explores in more detail the normative vision of sustainability emerging from *Laudato Si’*.

## 2 *Laudato Si’* or the Catholic Church Coming to Terms with the Global Socio-Ecological Crisis

Pope Francis’ (2015) encyclical letter, *Laudato Si’: On Care for the Common Home* can be understood as a spiritual, moral, practical, and institutional tool,<sup>5</sup>

5 In this article, *Laudato Si’* is framed as an institutional *dispositif* marking a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church’s engagement with the global social-ecological predicament, which, in turn, underpins a plethora of emergent institutional arrangements and practices that justify the framing of the Catholic Church as a sustainability governance agent (Beling and Vanhulst 2019). Following convention, this paper refers to the text with the initial of its title (LS) and the paragraph quoted.

which adds to the existing repertoire of responses by civil society to the global socio-environmental crisis.

With *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis has surprised all, both inside and outside the Church, crossing religious and ideological boundaries. He has put on the table of political and social debate urgent issues and questions regarding the historical dilemma facing modern societies in our ways of relating to non-human nature (LS 66) and to one another. The encyclical frames the current social and environmental predicament as two faces of the same civilizational crisis in our expansive modernity (LS 49). The Pope raises questions such as: how to overcome global poverty in a hyper-economised world in accelerated ecological degradation, how to achieve socio-ecologically sustainable ways of life, how to limit human-induced climate change, how to ensure a dignified life in rural and sprawling cities, etc.

The encyclical not only opens up questions but also offers guidelines to reflect on them. Thus, the crisis of an “expansive modernity” (Welzer and Sommer 2014) is understood as a product of the *hubris* characterising not only the dominant culture (LS 46, 197) but also its systemic conditioning factors, insofar as the horizons of social emancipation are subordinated to an economic and technological infrastructure that is monolithic, deterministic and divorced from social reality (e.g. LS 101 ssq.). Indeed, *Laudato Si'* takes a highly critical stance towards the current model of industrial capitalist society and its modes of production, consumption, and distribution (LS 50, 52). It takes a firm stand in favour of those most affected by this economic system which it describes as a predator of people and nature.

*Laudato Si'* is thus a social and ecological encyclical that is as much about social *justice* as it is about the *pathologies* of contemporary society. Indeed, by presenting the ecological crisis and the social crisis as two sides of the same coin, the encyclical implicitly subverts the question of the “inclusion” of those marginalised in society, in line with Miriam Lang (2019, 114) who argues that

taking the crisis of civilisation as point of departure ... obliges us to ask to what it is that we intend to include the excluded, since the omission of this question would easily present the hegemonic way of life as a horizon of inclusion of a greater number of people ..., which would undoubtedly aggravate the crisis. (translation mine)

Rather than the inclusion of the poor into a planetary model of society that manifests “suicidal behaviour” (LS 55), the Pope promotes an “integral ecology” approach to address interdependent socio-environmental issues, since “everything in the world is connected” (LS 16).

But *Laudato Si'* is not an isolated expression. The religious narrative of “integral ecology” also informs, for example, the Stockholm+50 Interfaith Statement signed jointly by representatives from the Catholic, Muslim, and other religious traditions in May 2022 (Stockholm+50 2022), as well as a growing collection of interreligious statements on the ecological crisis. The narrative of integral ecology is in a line of continuity within Christianity’s traditional orientation towards sobriety, justice, and the protection of the marginalised or vulnerable. Moreover, even though long neglected and often misinterpreted (Vogt 2018), the concern with care for the “common home” and the “ecological” links between environmental destruction and social justice can arguably be added to the above-mentioned list of traditional Christian themes. These themes have featured in contemporary Catholic doctrine as well as in ecumenical dialogue since the very inception of the environmental debate in the 1960s, even if it is hardly ever properly acknowledged or emphasized (Johnston 2013; Stierle et al. 1996).<sup>6</sup> What is singularly novel in *Laudato Si'*, however, in terms of both content and emphasis, is the inexorable critique of economism and blind techno-optimism as determining drivers of the current, unsustainable global development trajectory. These drivers lie at the root of the inextricably intertwined environmental and social crisis (LS 92, 139).<sup>7</sup>

However, none of this is fundamentally new in the field of social-ecological political and cultural discourses. Systemic and critical perspectives born out of the global social-ecological crisis were rather prominent in the 1970s and early 1980s (Dryzek and Pickering 2019; Hopwood et al. 2005). They largely lost their influence with the mainstreaming of the “neoliberal” Thatcherite ‘There Is No Alternative’ narrative over the past four decades. However, the systematic overshoot of planetary boundaries, and the dire implications thereof for the future of life on Earth (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015), has led to a renewed and growing chorus of academics, civil society actors, and social movements calling for a fundamental transformation of the social, political, and economic arrangements established by industrial and consumer societies. The fact that the Pope is endorsing this call signals, at the minimum, an

6 According to Johnston (2013, 55), “ecumenical groups were some of the first to use the term *sustainable* as a shorthand reference for a socially equitable and ecologically responsible global community”.

7 “It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (LS 139).

unprecedented opportunity for an institutional alliance that could potentially bring 1.3 billion Catholics worldwide into the fold, plus potentially 590 million Christians from other traditions (United Nations 2019), and many more from other religious denominations (such as Islam, as highlighted in this special issue) to push for a global sustainability transition. The following question, however, remains to be answered: In which particular way could the Church fruitfully contribute to the socio-ecological debate and to global sustainability governance? I lay out 10 theses which seek to answer this question, with both pointers of hope and caution.

### 3 The Catholic Church's Actual and Potential Contributions as a Sustainability Transition Agent

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) published in November 2013, Pope Francis speaks of the necessary conversion towards a “Church which goes forth” (EG 20–24) and which promotes the “ecological conversion” of society as a whole (LS 216, 221), understood as a call to change unjust and nature-degrading lifestyles and social structures (Rincón Andrade 2018). In many respects, global religions in general and the Catholic Church in particular are uniquely positioned to act as institutional agents of transformation. In the following, I explore some aspects of that unique agent profile in a non-exhaustive way. I present seven theses for the positive potential of the Catholic Church as an historical actor of socio-ecological transformation, followed by the consideration of three associated theses in relation to risks. Both the positive potential and the risks are illustrated with ongoing real-world applications.<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.1 First Thesis: ‘Glocal’ Scale

In terms of scale, the Catholic Church comprises an institutional network that combines a global scope and outlook. Its emphasis – unlike that of inter-state bodies, for example, which function as coordination platforms

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8 One should note that the argument advanced here is not necessarily supportive of the “greening of religion hypothesis” (Koehrsen 2018; Ostheimer and Blanc 2021; Taylor et al. 2016), i.e. the assumption that major faith traditions are overall becoming more environmentally friendly at the discursive, practical, and institutional level. Rather, the emphasis here is on the role that religious institutions in general, and the Catholic Church in particular, are structurally capable of playing as sustainability transition agents vis-à-vis other agents usually foregrounded in the literature, such as states, international organisations, private businesses, or individual citizen-consumers.

among particular parties and “national interests” – is on the “common good of humanity” as a whole and our planetary “common home” (Schilder 2013). In addition, the Catholic Church, as well as other large religious institutions, have entered into multiple alliances with specialized agencies and programmes, including with inter-state bodies such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (Glaab 2019), helping to bridge differences and galvanize conversations (Hulme 2015).

To its global networks one can add the dense networks of the Catholic Church’s institutional and pastoral presence at the territorial level, which is hardly matched by any other organisation. This includes a stable presence in territories marked by violence and the systematic violation and disregard for human rights (Spiegel 2019). Given the systemic nature of the global crisis and its diverse territorial manifestations, this unique capacity to link and mediate the global and the local scales – including community practices and individual action – is of utmost significance for advancing a socio-ecological sustainability transition. Sociologist Ronald Robertson (2012) terms this “glocalization”.

### 3.2 *Second Thesis: Cultural and Behavioural Influence*

In terms of its sphere of incidence, through channels such as participation in community life, catechesis, or socio-political action, religions have a direct impact on people’s subjectivation processes throughout their entire life cycle.<sup>9</sup> This influences the formation of moral, aesthetic, aspirational values, etc., as well as individual behaviour and the emergence of community practices. This feature equips people not only to promote the scaling up of social innovations, influence laws and policies, and scale out to reach larger numbers of people, but also to “scale deep” into the society’s cultural matrix, the terrain of values, beliefs, and symbolic frameworks (Moore et al. 2015; Köhrsen 2018b). For example, the organisation of weeks with a day of rest (e.g. Sundays in the Catholic tradition, Fridays in the Muslim tradition), or the structuring of the calendar according to religious feasts (e.g. Easter, Christmas, Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-al-Adha).

Moreover, for Karlberg (2014), religious traditions not only contribute to the transformation of socio-cognitive and cultural codes at the macro-scale, but also provide an organic framework of global unity capable of accommodating

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9 The term “subjectivation”, widely used in the humanities and in the social sciences, broadly refers to the socialization process by which an individual becomes a subject; in other words, to “the genesis of experiential capacities as well as behavioural dispositions under the influence of certain entities or circumstances” (Traue and Pfahl 2022, 25).

the plurality of the contemporary social world (*e pluribus unum*), whereby widely accepted normative concepts such as emancipation, justice, participation, prosperity, sustainability, etc., can be endowed with new meaning as new social practices emerge. A clear example is the mainstreaming of indigenous cultural and socioeconomic practices in recent approaches to justice and ecological sustainability, which would have been unthinkable only a few decades ago.

### 3.3 *Third Thesis: Source of Existential Meaning*

Religion can also become a source of ontological meaning and existential sense, with the capacity to energise the collective spirit, at least in non-secularised or post-secular societies (Habermas 2012; Joas 2015). *Laudato Si'* emphasises that “a commitment this lofty cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an ‘interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity’” (LS 216).

In largely secularised societies, on the other hand, the Churches' commitment to a transition to sustainability can contribute to justifying the social relevance of religion (Bals 2016), providing a platform for restoring dialogue between religion and secularized culture.

### 3.4 *Fourth Thesis: (Relative) Political and Economic Independence*

In contrast to other major global players, religious institutions – at least in the case of the Catholic Church – enjoy greater political and economic independence compared to political systems, which are governed by electoral short-termism, and compared to the business world, which is governed by the imperative of competition and profitability. This relative independence appears to be a structural enabler for the emergence of spaces of radical difference, beyond political and business discourse. A study by Katharina Glaab and Doris Fuchs (2018), for example, compares the discourse of religious actors with that of secular civil society organisations on the basis of representative documents from multilateral summits on development and the environment. It concludes that the former conveys a more critical discourse (as compared to the latter) that more closely follows the lines of the integral ecology narrative of *Laudato Si'*.

### 3.5 *Fifth Thesis: Ontological and Epistemic Repository for Socio-Ecological “Retro-innovations”*

The “production of difference” or counterculture referred to above is not only favoured for reasons of relative financial autarchy or of independence from

political discourse, but also for reasons of sheer institutional longevity. In the course of its two-millennia-long history and local adaptation to the world's cultural diversity, the Catholic Church has accumulated a treasure trove of epistemological and ontological resources. These can be managed as a repository of "retro-innovations" (de la Cadena 2010), as an "ecology of knowledges" (Santos 2008) which offers contrasting points of reference to the dominant culture.

Peter Hersche (2011), for instance, describes how the economy and way of life of the baroque epoch in Counter-Reformation Europe showcases alternatives to today's often-lamented economisation of more and more areas of individual and social life, but also offers an anchor for historical memory that facilitates active resistance to the forces of cultural assimilation and homogenisation. The importance of shifting cultural premises underpinning unsustainability has recently been streamlined in the sustainability transitions literature, where it is referred to as "scaling deep" (Moore et al. 2015), as already mentioned in my second thesis, or as "deep transitions" (Köhler et al. 2019).

### 3.6 *Sixth Thesis: The Church as a Simmelian "Stranger"*

The political independence and moral authority historically accorded to the papacy and to the Catholic Church, allow them to play the credible role of an "external" authority, capable of apprehending social actors in a way they could not apprehend one another. This unique social role, which reflects the Gospel's mandate to "be *in* the world without being *of* the world", was studied by Georg Simmel (2012 [1908]), who metaphorically equated this kind of agency with that characteristic of the "stranger", a foreigner, who is seen as being typically well-suited to play the role of a mediator. Indeed, by virtue of their simultaneous nearness and distance from others, the stranger possesses a unique capacity for taking an unprejudiced and dispassionate stance, while at the same time being immersed in (and thus understanding) a particular social context. In the case of the Church, this is exemplified, *inter alia*, by the historical success and global prestige of Vatican diplomacy. The Church's potential contribution to the global sustainability debate is thus not only to add a particular religious or ethical perspective to the chorus of voices disputing the concrete significations of sustainability and development (Deneulin 2021), but rather to fundamentally transform the terms of the debate (Bergmann and Gerten 2011, 11).

### 3.7 *Seventh Thesis: Capacity for Socio-Political Activation*

Finally, as a socio-political actor, the Catholic Church intervenes in public affairs in a variety of ways. These include transferring legitimacy (Köhren 2018a), building (or breaking!) alliances and networks, shaping



agendas, influencing the direction of social debate, driving faith-based activism, as well as (co-)designing, funding, and implementing socioeconomic intervention programmes in communities around the world. The following section provides empirical examples underpinning the theses outlined above.

#### 4 Empirical Pointers of Hope

Having presented the potential of the Catholic Church as a historical actor of socio-ecological transformation, the question arises: Is it possible to identify an empirical anchor for the above theses? Roger Gottlieb (2006) offers the first overview of the actual role that religions are playing around the globe in promoting socio-environmental transformations, both in the ethical-theological and in the socio-political realm.

In the case of the Catholic Church, this is manifested today, for example, in its forerunner role in an aggressive “divestment” campaign from fossil fuel industries, together with more than 300 Christian denominations under the umbrella of the World Council of Churches. The first announcement of Catholic divestment coincided with the first anniversary of the publication of *Laudato Si'*. It has since led to more than 250 Catholic organizations joining the disinvestment campaign, including Bishops' Conferences, religious orders, Catholic colleges and universities, donor institutions, and others (InvestDivest 2021, 13). This constitutes a prime example of how religious institutions can effectively transform spiritual beliefs and ethical principles into large-scale practices and political impact (Glaab 2019). The impulse provided by *Laudato Si'* has also led to the emergence of many social and environmental movements, as illustrated by the case of the *Laudato Si' Movement* (formerly Global Catholic Climate Movement), which to date has a membership of over 730 Catholic organisations and which has spearheaded the Church's divestment campaign for years.<sup>10</sup>

This example can be seen as illustrative of at least the first, second, and seventh theses, but also of the sixth, since many of the actions referred to above are not sourced from the repository of mainstream climate and environmental actions; rather, they appear as striking (or shocking) to many due to their “radicalness”. Hans-Joachim Schellnhuber, for example, one of the world's leading climate scientists, deemed the divestment campaign to be “the most important action that ever happened on climate change” (DivestInvest official

<sup>10</sup> See the *Laudato Si' Movement* official website: <https://laudatosimovement.org/act/member-organizations/>.

website n.d.), with around US\$14.5 trillion having been shifted away from fossil fuels to date. From the 1,550 divesting organizations, over 35% are faith-based, of which roughly 50% are Catholic (Global Fossil Fuel Commitments Database n.d.; Roewe 2021). This, in turn, leads to the fourth thesis, insofar as the direct confrontation with the global fossil industry lobby arguably presupposes a degree of institutional independence from the constellations of political and economic power.

On the spiritual-theological level, the field of eco-theology and a plethora of “transcendent engagement” (Peet 2019) practices with nature and the diverse beings that populate it (understood holistically as an integrated entity we call “creation”) is currently being rediscovered as a “religion-productive field” (Vogt 2018). In 2020, for the first time, Pope Francis formally invited Catholics to participate in the ecumenical “Season of Creation”, which was born in 1989 at the behest of Orthodox Christianity. Running from 1 September to 4 October (Feast of St Francis of Assisi), Season of Creation is an entire month dedicated to the spiritual sensitisation of the faithful to the relationality of all creation in order to foster an “ecological conversion”. This level of action relates to the second, third, and fifth theses.

Turning our attention to the institutional level, we can observe innovations which have emerged within the Catholic sphere and which have significant potential as governance devices for socio-ecological sustainability, thus giving substance to the first and seventh theses. Examples are the so-called “territorial ecclesial networks” and “thematic ecclesial networks”. The latter are emerging as a coordinated response of Church actors to some of the challenges of the times in different parts of the world. An example in Latin America is the Network CLAMOR (Latin American and Caribbean Ecclesial Network on Migration, Displacement, Refuge and Human Trafficking), created in 2017 (Pontifical Commission for Latin-America n.d.). Territorial ecclesial networks, on the other hand, are configured as a response to the socio-ecological challenges of a particular territory. The most paradigmatic case here is undoubtedly that of the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM 2014), both because of its pioneering and model character and because of the importance of the Amazon for the global biosphere and the human habitat of many of its inhabitants; indeed: “the Amazon constitutes a decisive test, a litmus test for the Church” (Spiegel 2019, 274).

REPAM – formally begun in 2014 as a result of a long interaction between local Churches, religious congregations, and a broad array of ecclesial and secular organisations – is a Church service and platform to promote integrated cooperation at different scales between Church organisations, civil society actors, and the diverse groups and communities that inhabit Pan-Amazonia. One of its missions is the defence of cultural and biological diversity in the

face of an ever-expanding extractive frontier in the Amazon. REPAM can thus be understood as a pioneering trans-scalar experiment in Church-mediated commons management, or *commoning* (Gibson-Graham et al. 2016), in a vast area with a human population of around 34 million. REPAM also constitutes an innovative experiment in inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue, particularly in its explicit upholding of local indigenous spiritualities and ways of being-in-the-world, which has been a blind spot in studies on religion and sustainability (Glaab 2019; Taylor et al. 2016).

Additionally, far from being viewed as a solo venture, the REPAM experience has triggered a ripple-effect of (self-)reflection and transformation across geographical scales and institutional levels. First, the concept of territorial ecclesial networks is spreading to several “other biomes/territories that are essential for the planetary future” (REPAM 2019): the Congo River Basin (REBAC), the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (REMAM), the tropical forests of the Asia Pacific region (RAOEN), as well as the Gran Chaco and Guarani Aquifer (REGCHAG), among others. These regional networks are beginning to build *glocal* synergies by cooperating in a common space under the name Ecclesial Networks Alliance (ENA).

Furthermore, REPAM (and the Church experience in the Amazon region more generally) has motivated a process of self-reflection and institutional learning in the Catholic Church worldwide, towards an “enculturated and intercultural Church with an Amazonian face” (López Oropeza 2021). The Special Synod “Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology”, held in Rome in October 2019, constituted an “historic occasion to encourage profound changes in the way the Church can accompany and respond to the signs of the present times that threaten life” on Earth (REPAM 2019).

This paper has hitherto highlighted the potential and promising aspects of a greater involvement by the Catholic Church in advancing a socio-ecological transformation towards a sustainable model of social organization. However, we can also identify barriers and risks associated with the Church adopting a sustainability transition agent role, explored in the next section.

## 5 Risks of the Catholic Church Taking on a Sustainability Transition Agent Role

### 5.1 *Eighth Thesis: Watering Down the Creative-Disruptive Potential of the Integral Ecology Paradigm*

The first risk is the co-optation, dilution, or trivialisation of the “inconvenient truths” of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* or, more generally, of the approach of an “integral ecology” to advance social transformations in the cultural, political,

and especially in the techno-economic realm – which is the main target of the Pope’s critique in *Laudato Si’*. This risk becomes particularly potent in the current discursive context, where the centripetal force of the (much less daring) UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework threatens to colonise the social imagination around issues of development and ecology, and thus to crowd out Pope Francis’ disruptive message on hyper-consumption (LS 5, 26, 50, *inter alia*), the alliance between technology and a disembedded economy (LS 53, 111), the impossibility of an ecological economy perpetually oriented towards GDP growth (LS 106, 193), the historical and current responsibility of affluent nations and population groups in deepening poverty and inequality (LS 95), and the need to set limits to their power (LS 129). None of these issues so central to the argumentative line of *Laudato Si’* is properly addressed in the UN Agenda 2030.

While the reference to the SDGs as the overarching institutional platform for global sustainability governance is unavoidable in global sustainability debates the Church’s specific contribution alongside the narrative of an “integral ecology” would arguably be to constructively challenge the discursive and institutional inertias of mainstream sustainability debates. This would make room for (and ideally help connect) currently marginalized approaches such as degrowth in the global north or *buen vivir* in the South (Beling et al. 2018), instead of resorting to overly abstract (and therefore rather unpromising) attempts at moralizing current arrangements.

The risk is that the message of *Laudato Si’* is downplayed from a systemic critique to a mere call for more “environmental awareness” (Cuda 2016; Sachs 2018), while the ecological question is reduced to a pietistic form of religiosity which incorporates “creation” as a new devotional object in its purely ritual dimension without encouraging the necessary changes in (collective) structures and (individual) lifestyles. Analogous to what has happened with charitable religiosity in its response to poverty, this would only reinforce the conventional discourse of sustainability which, “as a kind of secularised promise of salvation, confuses the rhetoric of holism with the claim of an all-encompassing solution. In the yearning for harmony between environmental, economic and social goals, the necessarily conflicting character of any serious sustainability policy is softened” (Vogt 2018, 2).

## 5.2 *Ninth Thesis: Corporatist Takeover of Religious Power*

A second risk is associated with fundamentalist and corporatist drifts within religious traditions. Integralism revives the spectre of schism within Christian denominations themselves. This is illustrated by the conservative critique within the Catholic Church of Pope Francis’ reformist policy (Politi 2020).

There has also been a conservative critique of Pope Francis from beyond the Church, where right-leaning journalists and opinion leaders openly challenging and criticizing the Pope above and beyond what has ever been done against any modern Pontiff (ORF 2020). Corporatist drifts, in turn, are visible especially in the form of demagogic “post-truth” coalitions between re-emerging right-wing political extremism and likeminded, rapidly expanding religious formations in both the global north and south. This is evident in the dogmatist and self-referential narratives of certain Pentecostalist currents (Escobar et al. 2019) – especially in the United States, but increasingly also in Latin America and Africa. These groups are overly concerned with what they perceive as threats to their subcultural matrices and overly condescending towards those who positively feedback into “the suicidal behaviour of planetary society” (LS 55). An observable consequence of this is the reinforcement of so-called “climate denialism”, as well as various social forms of symbolic and physical violence towards immigrants and people of unconventional sexual orientation, among others (Ostheimer and Blanc 2021).

### 5.3 *Tenth Thesis: Instrumentalization of Religious Sentiment to Advance Political Agendas*

Finally, a third risk is the instrumentalization of religious sentiment to support activities that undermine the sustainability transition in the service of political or economic interests, of which there are many examples, both historical and current (Köhrsen 2018b). However, it has to be emphasized that the stabilization and reproduction of ecologically unsustainable social structures does not result singly from the actions of those with vested interests in the existing system, but also from those who “in their everyday practices, simply follow the rules and cognitive frameworks of the dominant socio-technical regime” (Köhrsen 2018a, 7), as anticipated in the eighth thesis above.

## 6 Conclusion and Outlook

In a world on the verge of ecological collapse and mounting social instability, both science and international governance institutions have acknowledged that radical changes to current socioeconomic arrangements are required. We need a deep societal transition that brings the material footprint of human societies back to a range consistent with planetary ecological boundaries. As the United Nations Agenda 2030 demonstrates, however, the approaches currently dominating the “geopolitics of a slow catastrophe” (Northcott 2013) bear striking resemblance with those that have been implemented in the past

decades – approaches which have consistently failed to slow down the degradation of the biosphere, let alone reverse it. These approaches highlight the need to adopt sustainable technologies, advance science and knowledge for sustainability, advocate for improved governance and incentives to sustainable investment, and urge for a global decoupling of GDP growth from overuse of environmental resources.

Notwithstanding the importance of these key levers and goals, their mechanistic reassertion reveals the limits of the current political consensus to push the necessary changes. Indeed, these approaches sweep the structural contradictions between conventionally defined economic, social, and environmental goals under the cover of development orthodoxy. Their stubborn refusal to acknowledge the need for redesigning economic systems away from their current structural compulsion towards unlimited growth is a case in point (Hickel 2019).

This is the political and cultural context in which the Catholic Church makes its appearance on the stage of the global sustainability debate with the publication of *Laudato Si'*. This article has sought to highlight the potential of the Church's role in helping to break this stalemate of political imagination and to advance a deep, or what Pope Francis calls “radical”, social-ecological transition to sustainability (LS 4, 11, 171). Within the Catholic world, as in the religious sphere more generally, some do indeed advocate for more radical changes in the global economic order and its logic, whereas others seek to accommodate ecological concerns to the existing order and infrastructures (Glaab and Fuchs 2018). However, *Laudato Si'* decidedly tips the scale towards the former, even if its reception has been marked by ambiguity.

This hermeneutic ambiguity notwithstanding, there is little doubt that the publication of *Laudato Si'* indicates that the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Francis, is seeking to orient both its discourse and action in the direction of a more radical transformative change than prevails in the political mainstream. Moreover, the “integral ecology” promoted by *Laudato Si'* claims the inseparability of a Christian religious worldview from social and global ecological issues, making it clear that the socio-ecological crisis of our civilisation is not a secondary issue, but a central and constitutive one for the Christian faith (LS 221). Francis (2018, para. 3) says in the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* that

today we are not only living in a time of changes but are experiencing a true epochal shift ... In a word, this calls for “changing the models of global development” and “redefining our notion of progress” ... Yet “the problem is that we still lack the culture necessary to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths” ... This vast and

pressing task requires ... a broad and generous effort at a radical paradigm shift, or rather – dare I say – at “a bold cultural revolution”.

The vision of pushing a “radical paradigm shift” and daring “a bold cultural revolution” (LS 114) is unambiguously ambitious. However, given the intensity and acceleration of the rate of deterioration of the global biosphere and the impending social catastrophe that goes hand in hand with it, an adequate scale of response would require that Pope Francis’ wake-up call be streamlined in a global platform for communication, collective learning, and concerted action.

As Pope Francis (2015) puts it: “Interdependence compels us to think of *a single world, a common project*” (LS 194, emphasis in original). In other words, for the Church to make a meaningful contribution to realising this vision would arguably require an institution at the Church-global level to promote the implementation of *Laudato Si’*, analogous to the role played by the then Commission *Justitia et Pax* (now transformed into the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development). The Commission was created after the Second Vatican Council to streamline the developmentalist framework described in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. Whether or not as effective a platform will emerge for the implementation of *Laudato Si’* is a question that can, of course, only be answered retrospectively.

This article had a humbler purpose; namely, to point out pathways and orientations – as well as risks – for the Catholic Church to become “an emerging actor in the global debate on the future of the planet” (Beling and Vanhulst 2019). For now, what can be confidently asserted is that, among world leaders, Pope Francis appears as the main herald of a major socio-ecological transformation in line with both the science and the lofty rhetoric of the international political consensus (Sachs 2019). He offers a compelling narrative not only for the “Catholic world”, but indeed for “every person living on this planet” (LS 3). More importantly, perhaps, the Catholic Church, under his leadership, offers a *glocal* platform for an authentically pluralistic debate about the broader range of options available for moving towards a model of society that is “future-able”, beyond the narrow limits of the current mainstream discourse in multilateral policy forums on sustainable development.

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# Education for the Great Socio-Ecological Transition

## *Research Article*

*Simon McGrath* | ORCID: 0000-0003-2312-5378

School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

*Simon.McGrath@glasgow.ac.uk*

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### Abstract

In this paper I explore some of the roles that education can and needs to play in supporting “the great socio-ecological transition”, with particular emphasis on adult and vocational education and training. After briefly outlining some of the facets of the current pluricrisis, I examine a set of intersecting debates about transformation and transition(s) towards a more sustainable future, which is necessarily also more just. In this analysis, I build beyond the social science traditions usually evoked in these debates to draw on Catholic analyses of the nature of the problem. Catholic Social Teaching began with a concern about the effects of the transition to industrialisation, with *Rerum Novarum* (published by Pope Leo XIII in 1891), and increasingly has sought to address the need for the next transition beyond the Capitalocene, especially in *Laudato Si'* (published by Pope Francis in 2015). It has always placed workers, work and learning at its core. Thus, there is much potentially to be gained from bringing together conventional educational research perspectives on education for sustainable development and education for human development with a Catholic Social Teaching lens in thinking about the possible roles for education in supporting just transitions.

### Keywords

Catholic Social Teaching – ecological transition – sustainability – vocational education – human development – skills

## 1 Introduction

As humans, we face an acute set of intersecting crises. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has had the most visible global effects, more chronically we face crises of climate, democracy and inequality. It is increasingly clear in social science terms that we need another great transformation (cf. Polanyi 1944; Boulding 1964) or what has been more recently described as a set of just transitions (cf. Swilling 2020). Whilst there is a large secular literature on these issues, the whole of a century-and-a-third of writing of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has engaged with aspects of what some now call the Capitalocene, insisting that the problem is with capitalism, not people (Moore 2016). This paper starts from the assumption that this perspective can inform mainstream debates about education for just transitions. As the introduction to this special issue points out, we must be wary of talking of a single Catholic position. Nonetheless, CST's core is a set of papal encyclicals that come from both the central authority of the Church and new encyclicals consciously seeking to form part of a consistent, though evolving, tradition.

The dangers of capitalism for humanity were at the heart of the initial impetus for CST, as represented by the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII 1891), with its powerful condemnation of what capitalism did to individuals, families and communities. It was re-presented in the aftermath of the wave of political decolonisation in the critique of “underdevelopment” and “superdevelopment” in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI 1967). More recently, especially in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2015), it has developed into a focus on the environmental dimension of this wider crisis for humanity. Together, these and other texts from CST form the heart of integral human development (Deneulin 2021) – integral human development is the Church's normative account of what a just transition would look like – reflected since 2017 in a dicastery (equivalent of a government ministry) in the Vatican.

Both Catholic and social science blueprints for a better future are centred on notions of radical change, whether this be radical incrementalism (Swilling 2020) or theological notions of *metanoia* and ecological conversion. Whilst some approaches to transitions tend towards techno-utopianism (Anderson 2016), I will focus on a shared understanding that “The Great Transition is a human event and humans are at its centre” (Raskin et al. 2002, 60).

Written from the perspective of a Catholic social scientist (who has no formal theological training), this paper looks at what potential roles education can play in bringing about these radical changes leading towards a flourishing future for people and planet (Sen 1993), and at the obstacles along the way towards this normative goal. By education, I expressly do not mean schooling,

which too often is the understanding of the word by bishops and educationists alike. Rather, I mean the full range of informal, non-formal and formal learning opportunities that exist, including within Catholic parishes and movements, such as the recently launched *Laudato Si'* Action Platform.<sup>1</sup> Adult and vocational education literatures will be central in the discussion that follows, as their resonance for CST is both powerful and understated. By looking both at CST and a broad notion of learning, I will offer an original angle on an issue of great importance to the education and development constituency.

Education's interrelationship with just transitions has conventionally coalesced around two aspects. Aspect one is concerned with learning for the work of the future. I will consider in that regard what a radical view of the education-work relationship might look like in support of just transitions, and how this relates to dignity of work as a central theme of Catholic Social Teaching since *Rerum Novarum*. Given my concern with work, my principal focus will be on vocational education, and I will briefly explore UNESCO's (2012) notion of double transformation.

Aspect two considers how we learn to be more sustainable in our daily lives. In terms of literatures, I will primarily draw upon the adult education for sustainable development tradition and how it intersects with an approach to education for ecological conversion. I will place the rather underdeveloped *Laudato Si'* account of ecological conversion (Francis 2015) within a wider Catholic theological tradition. This account has largely focused on the individual level, but this is inadequate in the light of structural sin, as I will argue. This will lead into some proposals and practices related to both pedagogies for ecological conversion and secular equivalents in sustainable education and transgressive pedagogies, viewed primarily through an adult education literature.

However, whilst this distinction between the two aspects is a useful tool, we should be mindful of how well it conforms to neoliberal orthodoxy, where, as Raworth (2017) notes, we are primarily understood as only producers (aspect one) or consumers and investors (aspect two), and not carers, parents, neighbours, citizens or activists. Therefore, in the final section, I briefly consider new directions in thinking about the possibilities for education for just transitions.

## 2 Learning for Just, Transitioned Work

### 2.1 *What Are Just Transitions?*

Before proceeding any further, I need to be clear what I mean by a transition. Indeed, it is probably better to talk about transitions in the plural as this gives

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://laudatosiactionplatform.org>.



a better sense both of the indeterminacy of what exactly is the destination, and the need to see this as having multiple elements at different scalar levels and spatial contexts. However, Swilling's singular definition is a good working one:

just transition is a process of increasingly radical incremental changes that accumulate over time in the actually emergent transformed world envisaged by the SDGs and sustainability. The outcome is a state of well-being founded on greater environmental sustainability and social justice (including the eradication of poverty). These changes arise from a vast multiplicity of struggles, each with their own context-specific temporal and spatial dimensions. (Swilling 2020, 7)

As Bennie and Satgoor (2018, 293) note, such transitions are inherently political, and moves towards just transitions face both active opposition and structural barriers: "Realising a 'just transition' requires movement from below that mobilises to contest and reshape relations to overcome the structural barriers to such a transition".

In Catholic Social Teaching, the need for a transition runs deep, as I have already noted. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (PCJP)'s *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004) makes clear that what it terms "the ecological question" is fundamentally about the unjust distribution of resources (cf. John Paul II 1989). Whilst it sees individual greed and sin as central to the problem, the *Compendium* notes that the resultant crisis is of planetary scale, but needs resolution across all scales, a point to which I will return below. The PCJP views climate crisis and poverty as inseparable:

The present environmental crisis affects those who are poorest in a particular way, whether they live in those lands subject to erosion and desertification, are involved in armed conflicts or subject to forced immigration, or because they do not have the economic and technological means to protect themselves from other calamities. (PCJP 2004, 482)<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, it is clear that this is not simply about addressing the needs of the present generation. Popes Paul VI (1967) and John Paul II (1991), for instance, stress the responsibility of the present generation to those who come after us. This is synthesised by the PCJP:

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2 Whereas references to academic sources use date and page number, for Church documents, the latter number refers to the paragraph, which is always clearly numbered in such texts.

Responsibility for the environment, the common heritage of mankind, extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future. We have inherited from past generations, and we have benefited from the work of our contemporaries: for this reason we have obligations towards all, and we cannot refuse to interest ourselves in those who will come after us, to enlarge the human family. This is a responsibility that present generations have towards those of the future. (PCJP 2004, 467)

One of the important aspects that marks this out as a theological rather than a secular account is the emphasis on the world as created (cf. Johnson 2019). The approach taken in CST firmly places God's relationship to humanity at its centre. This results in an emphasis on the unconditional value of the human person and a focus on all aspects of humanity, rather than just economic growth or poverty reduction:

It is not just a question of eliminating hunger and reducing poverty. It is not just a question of fighting wretched conditions, though this is an urgent and necessary task. It involves building a human community where men [*sic*] can live truly human lives, free from discrimination on account of race, religion or nationality, free from servitude to other men or to natural forces which they cannot yet control satisfactorily. It involves building a human community where liberty is not an idle word. (Paul VI 1967, 47)

## 2.2 *The Centrality of Work*

Work sits at the heart of the CST approach to realising the above vision and has been there from CST's origins. Workers, and hence work, were at the centre of the polycrisis of the late nineteenth century to which Pope Leo XIII was responding with his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. As capitalism evolved, so did Leo XIII (1891, 3) bemoan a situation in which "a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself". Beyond the injustice of this, Leo XIII was concerned with both its direct effects on the family and the Catholic community, and the danger that it would lead workers into the arms of communism. (Catholic) trade unions were seen by Leo XIII as crucial to a just society.

This defensive account of work's place in the polycrisis of early industrialisation is made more positive through a response that builds on the longer-standing notion of *ora et labora*, prayer and work. Here, whilst work is understood to be part of our fallen human nature, it is also identified as a source of dignity, of human development and of becoming more in touch with God's transcendence. As the PCJP puts it, work is not only

the “essential key” to the whole social question and is the condition not only for economic development but also for the cultural and moral development of persons, the family, society and the entire human race. (PCJP 2004, 269)

Indeed, in the *Compendium*, work gets as much attention as the family, more conventionally seen as the core of Catholic social thinking.

Moreover, this concern with work is fundamentally linked to an ecological perspective, though this is rarely brought to the fore. In this light, it is striking that in the *Compendium* the first subsection of the work chapter is about the “duty to cultivate and care for the earth” (PCJP 2004, 6.1.a). This is an important subtheme of *Laudato Si'*, receiving six paragraphs. Francis (2015, 124) argues that “Any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour”.

And work is relational in the sense that its meaning and value derive from its placing of the individual in relationship with other individuals on whom the work impacts. As Pope John Paul II (1991, 832) put it, “work is work with others and work for others. It is a matter of doing something for someone else”. Pope Francis (2015, 125) returns to this when he writes, “Underlying every form of work is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves”. Incidentally, this is an increasingly important theme of secular research on Vocational Education Training (VET) and on sustainability (cf. De Jaeghere 2020; McGrath 2020). Equally, Tim Jackson’s language as an environmental economist is very close to that of Pope Francis:

Work matters. It’s more than just the means to a livelihood. It is also a vital ingredient in our connection to each other – part of the “glue” of society. Good work offers respect, motivation, fulfilment, involvement in community and, in the best cases, a sense of meaning and purpose in life. (Jackson 2017, 144)

As a result of this theological perspective, the Vatican has been a very vocal support of the decent work campaign of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (e.g. Benedict XVI 2009). The ILO argues:

Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the

decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. (ILO, n.d.)

The debate about decent work has generated a huge literature on how to operationalise and measure the notion, and how to examine policies and practices for their adherence to and/or promotion of decent work standards. As the quotation above makes clear, the challenge is not simply about minimum labour standards, important though these are, but about how to develop an expansive, humanistic view of what work should be about as a key component of human life.

Importantly, this approach sees employment and work in an expended way that includes the informal economy. It has been slower, however, to embrace certain other debates about the nature of work such as those emanating from feminist economics (e.g. Donath 2000). Indeed, the debate needs to go further, to engage with approaches such as that of Raworth's (2017) when she argues that there are four realms of the economy: household, market, economy and state. We need to think more about what kind of work, and skills, are needed in each of these.

More recently, the debate has begun to shift to the challenge of transforming work as part of a wider move towards just transitions. This is seen, for instance, in the heavy involvement of trade unions in theorising the "green new deal" (e.g. Cha et al. 2022).

### 2.3 *The Place and Potential of Vocational Education and Training*

However, there is far to go in realising this vision. One part of the problem is vocational education and training (VET). Mainstream, formal VET is complicit in unsustainable practices that were integral to industrialisation and the emergence of the Capitalocene (McGrath and Russon 2023). In colonised parts of the South, a combination of the negative effects of global industrialised capitalism and the particular inflection of colonialism in different settings, including whether the economy was a settler one, produced a form of vocationalism that was tied to the extractive logic of colonial capitalism and to the wider Northern paradigm of fossil capitalism (Malm 2016). As a result, the key trades of early vocationalism were attached to metals, mining, motors and manufacturing, in both North and South. As part of the later neoliberal turn, public forms of VET were reformed to reduce their educational and public good components and to focus more narrowly on economic rationales. The heightened focus on securing or self-creating jobs had nothing to say about the decency or sustainability of work (McGrath and Russon 2023).

In response, in 2012, UNESCO committed to the notion of VET that was doubly transformational – seeking to transform itself in order to contribute to a wider transformation towards sustainable development (UNESCO 2012).

Since then, a number of strands of academic literature have developed that seek to consider what forms of skills, work and industries are developing and need to develop to support just transitions (e.g. McGrath and Powell 2016; Rosenberg, Ramsarup, and Lotz-Sisitka 2020; VET Africa 4.0 Collective 2023). Whilst some of this literature focuses on existing formal sector industries, other aspects look more broadly at sustainable livelihoods (McGrath 2020). Some of this work draws explicitly on the human development tradition and envisages an approach

that supports the rights, freedoms and capabilities of existing and future generations to live the lives they have reason to value whilst protecting and coevolving in a more harmonious relationship with the natural environment of which human beings are an integral part so that natural and social systems may flourish. (Tikly et al. 2020, 3)

As part of its wider commitment to transformative VET, UNESCO has been at the forefront of an approach to greening vocational learning institutions, drawing on wider education for sustainability traditions. This is particularly apparent in the work of its International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (UNEVOC).<sup>3</sup> Its second director, Majumdar, proposes a five-stage model of greening VET institutions.

TABLE 1      Greening VET institutions

| Green campus    | Green curriculum  | Green community    | Green research     | Green culture     |
|-----------------|---|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Managing campus | Integrating Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) into the curriculum | Adapting community | Fostering research | Promoting culture |

<sup>3</sup> See <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home>.

TABLE 1 Greening VET institutions (*cont.*)

| Green campus           | Green curriculum         | Green community        | Green research      | Green culture     |
|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| – Energy management    | – Green technology       | – Capacity building    | – Renewable energy  | – Green values    |
| – Water management     | – Clean technology       | – Renewable technology | – Water treatment   | – Green attitude  |
| – Waste management     | – Green jobs             | – Resource support     | – Green innovations | – Green ethics    |
| – Pollution management | – Greening existing jobs | – Unique practices     | – Waste recycling   | – Green practices |

SOURCE: MAJUMDAR (2010, 6)

This is a comprehensive model. Moving through all of these dimensions would appear to generate what Sterling (2008) describes as sustainable education institutions or providers that are sustaining, tenable, healthy and durable; that is, are capable not just of introducing positive changes but of maintaining them over time. We can see parallel trends in Catholic VET, as key education providers seek to strengthen the environmental dimension of formal and non-formal programmes in the light of *Laudato Si'*.

### 3 Education for Sustainable Development and Ecological Conversion

Whilst these moves towards a transformed approach to how we become and remain sustainable producers are welcome, they do not get to the heart of the challenge. As Gough (2017) reminds us, any just transition requires a radical change in consumption, not just production. Hence, individuals and communities need to address this aspect of transition and where their agency lies therein.

In this section, I will extend the analysis to consider the challenge of educating people to be better consumers and investors, to be actors in promoting sustainable development, to become ecologically converted. I will start with the last of these, the most theological dimension, before coming back to the secular adult education for sustainable development tradition.

### 3.1 *Ecological Conversion*

*Laudato Si'* has an explicit focus on education as a means of rebuilding the covenant between humanity and the environment. This is seen as being threefold in nature. First, education is needed to reduce the belief in and practices of consumerism, individualism, competition and the free market. Second, education is required to support greater harmony with ourselves, others, nature and God. Third, education has a role to play in promoting ecological citizenship and conversion.

Pope Francis explicitly celebrates that

Environmental education has broadened its goals. Whereas in the beginning it was mainly centred on scientific information, consciousness-raising and the prevention of environmental risks, it tends now to include a critique of the “myths” of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market). It seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God. (Francis 2015, 210)

However, he wants to go further, in keeping with a Catholic view of transcendence, as the rest of his paragraph makes clear:

Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care. (Francis 2015, 210)

One challenge, however, with the call of *Laudato Si'* for education for ecological conversion is that the notion of ecological conversion is rather underdeveloped in the encyclical. Therefore, it is important to locate the encyclical text within a wider Catholic theological tradition on the topic.

Although the need for ecological conversion is certainly implicit in Pope Paul VI's address to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 1970 in which he warned that “the carrying out of these technical possibilities [such as irrigation and reclaiming of marshes] at an accelerated pace is not accomplished without dangerous repercussions on the balance of our natural surroundings”, and that there was an “urgent need of a radical change in the conduct of humanity if it wishes to assure its survival” (Paul VI 1970).

The first explicit reference to the concept of ecological conversion is generally believed to be by John Paul II at a General Audience in January 2001, where he spoke about transformation of our relationship with nature:

Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, degrading that "flowerbed" – to use an image from Dante Alighieri (*Paradiso*, XXII, 151) – which is the earth, our dwelling-place. We must therefore encourage and support the "ecological conversion" which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. Man is no longer the Creator's "steward", but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss. (John Paul II 2001)

It is useful here to consider the wider modern Catholic theology of conversion for what it can tell us about the ecological dimension. This wider approach is grounded in the work of Lonergan (1972), expanded upon by Doran (1981). Lonergan distinguishes between religious, moral and intellectual conversion, to which Doran added psychic. According to Lonergan (1972, 330), "Conversion is a radical shift of one's fundamental orientation, one's horizon, an ongoing process toward consistent self-transcendence and authenticity". He argues that this is about love:

Being in love with God opens up the possibility not only of loving God, but of loving all that God loves, and loving as God loves. Our human loving has the potential to become unconditional. Ecological conversion pushes the boundaries of that unconditionality to include the whole universe. (Lonergan 1972, 334)

In considering an ecological dimension, Johnson (2014) sees this as a process of

falling in love with the earth as an inherently valuable, living community in which we participate, and bending every effort to be creatively faithful to its well-being, in tune with the living God who brought it into being and cherishes it with unconditional love. (Johnson 2014, 259)



As Deneulin and Bano note in their introduction, love is a key contribution of both Catholic and Muslim traditions to debates around development and sustainability.

In considering the place of *Laudato Si'* in the Catholic tradition, Ormerod and Vanin (2016) stress the moral dimension as being the most important. They argue that a moral conversion entails a transformation from basing choices on satisfactions to putting values first. This is crucial to notions of green behaviour. They argue:

The presenting problem that ecological conversion is seeking to address (environmental degradation) arises primarily from human decisions, and these decisions are either informed by values, or fall back onto mere satisfactions, to the detriment of human as well as other-than-human flourishing. The present environmental destruction is the end product of generations of decisions based on a failure to attend to the ecological impact of those decisions, either initially through ignorance, or, as evidence of that impact has accumulated, wilfully and maliciously. To choose satisfactions over genuine values is to choose without question what has gone before, to continue in patterns of routine and comfort, even in the face of mounting evidence that doing so is destroying our delicate ecological balance upon which human life depends. (Ormerod and Vanin 2016: 336)

This challenge highlights a key tension that permeates the adult education literature: how do we move from knowing to doing and then to being? In Catholic terms, it can be thought of in terms of *metanoia*, a turning away from the sins of the past and a turning towards God (Hanchin and Hearlson 2020).

Hanchin and Hearlson ask what this means in pedagogical terms. They note the deeply problematic nature of many past programmes on conversion, which have done significant violence to individuals, communities and cultures. However, they stress that we do need an education for conversion. They see this as having two main elements. First, they argue that the rationalistic classroom is a major barrier to moving from knowing to being. They suggest that we need an approach that allows space for feelings and facilitates the re-establishment of broken connections between the rational and the emotional. This clearly relates back to Lonergan and Johnson in their talking of ecological conversion in terms of love (cf. introduction to this special issue). Secondly, Hanchin and Hearlson advocate a focus on encounter, explicitly drawing on Lonergan. In this, “the educator invites learners to discover what they had previously failed to notice” (Hanchin and Hearlson 2020, 264). This

necessitates spaces for encounter with the other in the form of the earth, or the poor if we are dealing with affluent students.

Although *metanoia* is often discussed in terms of an individual's relationship with God, an important theological strand, beginning in the Old Testament, emphasises the collective dimension of sin and *metanoia*. This leads Deneulin and Zampini Davies (2016) to argue that whilst sin is always personal, depending as it does on individual free will, it is also always social. They see this operating at three levels. First, the consequences of sin are always relational, being essentially a turning away from both God and others, as well as being a form of self-alienation. Second, sins often cause direct harm to others. Third, sins can become so powerful and generative of further sins that they constrain the ability of individuals and communities to avoid committing other sins. Returning to the core focus of this paper, the sin of environmental degradation is so powerful and pervasive that it is far from simple to effect an individual ecological conversion or for such individual conversions to aggregate towards the overcoming of socio-structural sins. This is addressed by Pope Francis when he writes:

self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today. Isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds. ... The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion. (Francis 2015, 219)

Thus, the “ecstatic pedagogy” that Hanchin and Hearlson (2020) advocate needs to be thought of as both individual and collective. This is important for thinking about a just transition, which must involve individual change but be situated relationally within wider collective practices and understandings of transformation.

### 3.2 *Transformative and Transgressive Learning*

Parallel debates are also part of the adult education tradition, though discussed in a different language. Perhaps the most important related notion in this tradition is transformative learning (Mezirow 1991). Mezirow's approach stresses the importance of critical reflection on past experiences in developing new frames of reference to guide future actions. Although, over time, Mezirow modified his approach to respond to critiques that his work was too rational

and cognitive, he does not go as far as some critics argue is necessary regarding the transformation of the interior self. For instance, in a dialogical article with Mezirow, Dirkx argues that transformative learning involves “deepening our understanding of ourselves, of the inner worlds which seem so much a part of us but yet so distant from the everydayness of our normal, waking lives” (Dirkx, Mezirow, and Cranton 2006, 129). Clearly, this perspective is close to that of CST.

In the context of just transitions, a sizeable literature on transformative learning for sustainable development has emerged (McGrath and Deneulin 2021). Moyer, Sinclair, and Quinn (2016) argue for a stronger focus on the learning – action nexus. They suggest that action is pivotal to learning because it allows for embodied learning, which they propose is key to learning the skills necessary to address the challenges related to just transitions (Moyer, Sinclair, and Quinn 2016, 323). In a more recent paper, the same team reflect on how their transformative learning lens initially led them to understand the “instrumental” aspects of environmental learning as less meaningful than “transformative” elements (Moyer and Sinclair 2020). They recount how they have come to realise that both interact and, indeed, more practical learning can be foundational to further, more critically reflexive, learning. This has echoes of Hanchin and Hearlson’s argument about encounter, who assert that participation in projects to restore habitats quickly move from action on to communion with.

The adult education and education for sustainable development literatures initially evolved in isolation from each other. However, whilst the bulk of work on education for sustainable development (ESD) remains focused on the school sector, there has been a recent growth of work on ESD in adult, community and non-formal education (Wals, Mochizuki, and Leicht 2017). This work typically addresses the relationships between learning and community. Whether we are considering existing communities faced with an environmental challenge or new groups formed to learn about and act in response to an environmental challenge, this literature makes it clear that such learning often needs to be enabled (Didham, Ofei-Manu, and Nagareo 2017). The relational insights of this approach appear congruent with those of CST.

Recently, there has been a growth of a new notion of transgressive learning. Macintyre, Tassone, and Wals (2020, 2) describe this as “radical forms of learning-based change for socio-ecological change within the framework of climate change ... a form of learning which encourages transformation and seeks to disrupt norms and structures which maintain an unsustainable status quo”. Drawing on Engeström’s (2016) work on expansive learning, this approach of transgressive learning seeks to go beyond what it sees as the individualist and cognitive biases of transformative learning. Engeström’s approach is explicitly

about “what is not yet there” and how to nurture this. Again, the theological resonance of this stance is obvious.

The transgressive learning approach also finds echoes in the social movement literature on hope (Dinerstein and Deneulin 2012; Ojala 2017). This focuses on how to imagine and create new forms of relationships and models of production around the values of solidarity, equality and sustainability, key concepts also of CST. More broadly, there is a growing literature on transgressive social movements (Espinosa 2014; Rosset et al. 2019; Walters and von Kotze 2019).

Circling back round to the religious dimension, it is increasingly being realised that faith communities are integral to both the social movements and adult education traditions (Kidwell 2020; McGrath and Deneulin 2021). As Streck and Zanini Moretti (2017) note, the roots of many social movements in the Americas were in the emancipatory reading of religious texts. And, of course, the seminal adult education text of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1972) must be understood in the context of the Brazilian and Latin American liberation theology of the 1960s.

#### 4 Imagining Futures for Education for Just Transitions

There is much to approve of in existing efforts to build skills for sustainable futures and to encourage education for sustainable development. Though Catholic and secular developments in both areas have been largely independent of each other, they are also largely complementary. However, is this enough? If not, what else might be done? It is clear that a focus on knowledge is not sufficient. For several decades, the adult education tradition has placed much emphasis on the challenge of moving from knowing to doing to being. It makes clear that transformation of knowledge in itself is not enough. Work such as that of Moyer and Sinclair highlights that doing can be important in knowing and ultimately can be a key element of personal transformation. The transformative is clearly at the core of the CST account. Notions of sin, conversion and *metanoia* all point to the importance of not simply knowing or doing but of becoming a new person, someone who has turned away from sin and towards God, creation and the rest of humanity. Hanchin and Hearlson (2020) point us towards a pedagogy for ecological conversion.

Equally, the secular tradition is increasingly following the insight of the Catholic (and wider religious) tradition that sees relationality as key. Individual

action can do little in the face of the size of the challenges. Conversely, understanding ourselves to be connected to others (and to God, and increasingly to other species in both Catholic and Muslim traditions) brings strength in facing the scale and uncertainty of the required transformation. This points us to relational pedagogies and to the centrality of love.

However, the process of developing pedagogies of hope and transformation is still weakly developed. In the formal education system, the space for transformation is still small and contested in the face of the power of education as a conservative force. Formal education, even in Catholic schooling, is dominated by a drive to reproduce society and to build investments in human capital as part of a wider process of reinforcing the dynamics of the Capitalocene. Moreover, it is a site of violence, both symbolic and physical (McGrath 2018), which is particularly powerfully directed at the most marginalised and vulnerable. Whilst there are important efforts to transform formal education (e.g. Renouard et al. 2021), we are very far from a generalised transformative formal education. Much of the most promising practice, rather, lies in non-formal spaces. However, here questions of scale and sustainability are always at the fore. The biggest challenge and opportunity may instead lie in informal learning spaces. The literature on social movement learning may be instructive here. Within the Catholic tradition there are sites of exciting social movement learning initiatives, with the aforementioned *Laudato Si'* Action Platform perhaps being the most ambitious, though still in its very early stages of development (cf. McGrath and Deneulin 2021). The Church has the potential to enable informal learning in the ways outlined by Didham, Ofei-Manu, and Nagareo (2017) but, like schooling, it has to break free from the shackles of its patriarchal tradition. As McGrath and Deneulin (2021, 653) note:

the authority of Pope Francis has been a key factor in facilitating such learning, and has enabled community members to bypass unsupportive leadership at the local level – typically parish priests who see environmental activism as alien to Christian faith and contest the authority of Pope Francis.

A Catholic approach to informal learning for just transitions cannot be so dependent on papal authority if it is to be sustained. Nor can it go to the necessary scale if, like CST more broadly, it is the “church’s best-kept secret” (Shea 2020).

## Issue and Editors

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*Review Articles*







# Christianity and Ecology

## Review Article

*Abel Tabalaka*

Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana,

Gaborone, Botswana

*tabalakaab@ub.ac.bw*

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This review covers three recently published edited volumes on religion and development, with a particular attention to religion and environmentalism. While each book is comprehensively reviewed, this review also makes a comparative analysis of the three books. In addressing the same subject, each book offers a particular emphasis. The first book highlights how various religious traditions might contribute towards the protection of the environment and reduce the impacts of climate change (“greening” of religion). The second book differs slightly from the first in specifically highlighting the challenges that hinder or might hinder the contribution of religion on environmentalism. The third book approximates the approach taken by the first but differs in that it focuses on responding to Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si*. Because of their varying emphasis, reading these works together may provide interested readers with a robust appreciation of the recent dialogue on religion and environmentalism.

*African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*, edited by Ezra Chitando, Ernst M. Conradie and Susan M. Kilonzo. Routledge: Abingdon, 2022. Pp. 254.  
Hardback: £130, Ebook: open access, ISBN 9780367616076.

This 14-chapter edited volume brings together thoughts on religion and climate change from different African perspectives. In the introduction, Ezra Chitando provides a strong justification for why scholarly attention on climate change is important and why a focus on the African region is necessary. He notes that given numerous challenges such as its socio-economic and meteorological

conditions, the African continent is one of the geographical regions that has been adversely affected and impacted by climate change. Other contributors similarly note that Africa, while not at the forefront of environmental degradation, remains vulnerable (Siwila in chapter 4). The authors call for a multi-sectoral approach, including investigating the contribution of religion to debates on how to address climate change. While there is an acknowledgement that religion and religious beliefs have been used to promote anthropocentric tendencies resulting in adverse climatic conditions, the volume discusses more liberating approaches to religion and climate change. For example, the authors suggest that Ubuntu and other African Indigenous Knowledge Systems should be at the centre of African perspectives in dealing with climate change and protecting the environment. This is because Ubuntu is about human relations and their interaction within and with the natural space in which they exist.

The section (at the end of the introduction) on how knowledge on religion and climate change may be inculcated through theological and religious studies in Africa came across to me as strikingly inviting, especially because it reflects the views discussed across the various chapters of the volume. It particularly underscores the need for decolonizing, localizing, and contextualizing debates on religion and climate change. This volume calls for a shift from Global North perspectives, which are male dominated, to include African views, especially the views of women and other groups which have been marginalized within these debates. The first five chapters deal with the role of African traditional religions and indigenous knowledge, together with the role of women in religion and climate change, thus addressing the quest to decolonize and contextualize discussions on religion and climate change.

What makes this volume outstanding is the fact that, while arguing for the positive contribution of religion to climate change, the contributors avoid romanticizing religious views found in the African region. They present a balanced approach to the religion and climate change dialogue, which integrates African indigenous views with scientific knowledge (Nyawo in chapter 2), or Western and African perspectives (Siwila in chapter 4). The authors also discuss indigenous practices and beliefs that might be harmful to the environment and the climate. For example, Shoko in chapter one discusses the negative effects of the traditional religion of the Karanga in Zimbabwe on climatic and environmental conditions. However, instead of seeing religion as the “historical roots of our ecologic crisis” (in the words of Lynn White 1967), the contributors argue that some religious beliefs, values, and practices can actually help us in fighting the crisis.

While chapter 10 discusses the views of Hinduism and chapter 11 those of Islam, there is a clear overemphasis on African traditional religions and on

Christian thought, almost at the expense of other religious traditions in Africa. The title of the volume, together with the inclusion of reflections on “world” religions (Islam, Christianity and Hinduism) not historically of African origin, suggests that this book was intended to deal not only with religious views of traditional African origin. Rather, it suggests a coverage of extant religious views in the region. Paradoxically, however, while the volume is titled *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*, some significant religious views on the continent are excluded. In fact, even within Christianity, which is specifically discussed in at least four chapters, some Christian views such as those of the New Religious movements in the region, especially the Pentecostal and charismatic movements presently playing a significant role in the life and beliefs of people across Africa, are left out. It seems desirable that a compendium such as this would include how these new spiritualities may contribute to environmental and climate dialogue.

Furthermore, chapters that specifically address the role of the Christian church in climate change mainly focus on mainline church denominations such as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a mainline Protestant church in Ghana (Okyere-Manu and Morgan in chapter 6), the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant church (Omana in chapter 7, and Nche in chapter 8). The inclusion of African Independent churches, whose doctrine and practices reflect traditional African culture would make a volume that seeks to discuss “African perspectives” even richer. In fact, in the introduction, Chitando points out this limitation while simultaneously arguing that the volume will serve as motivation for more dialogue on religion and climate within the African region.

Religious Environmental Activism: Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship, edited by Jens Köhrsen, Julia Blanc and Fabian Huber. Editors. Routledge: Abingdon, 2021. Pp. 340. Hardback: £120, Ebook: open access, ISBN 9780367862534.

Unlike the first book reviewed above which focused on Africa, this volume is a cross-continental and interreligious assessment of the various tensions and difficulties arising in the relationship between religion and environmental issues. The perspectives discussed are drawn widely from regions across the Global North and Global South divide. Furthermore, unlike the first book which dwelt more on how religion might contribute to the protection of the environment and reduce the impacts of climate change, this volume specifically invokes caution towards such an optimistic position by emphasizing the problems that might make it difficult for religion to achieve these objectives.

This volume critically presents composite details on religious commitments to environmentalism drawn from the various religious actors across the globe, such as mainline Christianity groups like Catholicism (Gojowczyk in chapter 2, Monnot in chapter 4), Islam (Jamil in chapter 5), African independent churches (Stork and de Toit in chapter 10), and Judaism (Herman in chapter 11). While the volume seems to be focused on what is often called “world religions”, in particular mainstream Christianity, it is worth noting that even the views of alternative spiritualities usually regarded as non-mainstream religions, such as Anthroposophy (see Majerus in chapter 3), are featured here as well.

The contributions generally bring to the fore the problematic nature of religion and environment interactions, whether within a given religion or among different religions. Within a given religion, examples are provided to show that due to the differing views of adherents and structural or hierarchical institutional obstructions, positive efforts geared towards promoting religious environmentalism may not succeed. Such is the case with Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*, which is the Catholic Church’s call for everyone to address the impending environmental challenges. However, such a positive position has unfortunately provoked seemingly unquenchable tensions and debates among both believers and academics within the religious denomination.

Challenges in the greening of religion could be the failure to actualize positive views that religions may have toward the environment, or debilitating and incapacitating beliefs of perceiving climate change as a matter of fate or as fulfilment of prophecy. The volume thus manages to show that while there is a growing voice that sees religion as a solution to, or a possible driver of, dealing with environmental problems, religion is itself a problem and an impediment to the solution. Overall, the volume seems to suggest that religion might promote negative attitudes towards environmental issues, such as “denial” of environmental problems, “accepting” the status quo of negative climate change trends, promoting “inaction” towards ecological challenges, “discouraging” efforts to alleviate environmental challenges, and sponsoring practices that aggravate the problem.

More investigations are needed in order to uncover the root causes of these conflicts and tensions that clearly hinder the environmentalism agenda. For example, studies should seek to discover whether these tensions are based purely on religious grounds, or whether there is in fact a link between these views and other external motives such as political and socio-economic interests. This is not a far-fetched suggestion because many religious institutions continue to be close to state administrations, influencing and being influenced by the latter (Monnot in chapter 4). Furthermore, these tensions should be



expected, especially since religious organizations are made up of and run by people with diverse interests and experiences. If environmental degradation is linked to some form of human interest (such as excessive use of natural resources) which prioritises profit, and those who benefit are part of or even leaders in religions, then the ambivalence towards religious greening is unsurprising. If individual interests are one of the root causes impeding the “greening” of religion, then the challenge goes beyond the beliefs of the religion to the core of human nature – whereby both religious values and the environment are sacrificed for immediate personal gain.

African Ecological Ethics and Spirituality for Cosmic Flourishing: An African Commentary on *Laudato Si'*, edited by Stan Chu Ilo. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022. Pp. 190. Paperback: \$26. ISBN: 9781666738711.

Of the three edited volumes under review, this is the shortest, comprising eight chapters. Contributions here are fundamentally responses to and thoughts on Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*. In this encyclical, Pope Francis argues for the relatedness of all living beings in the world, plants, animals and humans, in our interdependence on one another. He problematizes human behaviour that negatively affects the environment and causes problems such as global warming. He calls all people, and in particular adherents of Catholicism, to reconsider our attitude towards the environment, which he calls “our common home”. The encyclical thus echoes principles espoused in Catholic Social Thought such as the common good, solidarity, and social justice.

The book brings together responses to Pope Francis' arguments. Like the first volume discussed above, the discussions are drawn specifically from within the African continent. Pope Francis' “our common home” is unpacked, interpreted, and contextualised by drawing parallels with African experiences, for example on the basis of African beliefs and ethics. Several contributors attempt to show links between African eco-spiritual ethics, such as the African ethics of Ubuntu, with those sentiments expressed in *Laudato Si*, especially the African notion emphasizing the oneness of people with each other and with the whole creation (Mubangizi in chapter 5).

Other authors reflect on the socio-political experiences of Africa and its relationship with the world. They problematize the pursuit of peace for and the development of Africa. For example, they argue that peace among people might not be realized when we ignore peace with the earth, i.e. the natural environment, and when we fail to adequately address justice for poor populations of the world, in this case the poor in Africa (Namakula in chapter 4).

### **Issue and Editors**

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# Islam and Ecology

## Review Article

Mona Feise-Nasr | ORCID: 0000-0003-0666-2761

Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin,

Berlin, Germany

[mona.feise@hu-berlin.de](mailto:mona.feise@hu-berlin.de)

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The following book review deals with a Claremont Graduate University doctoral dissertation and two monographs in Islamic theology and Islamic studies, focusing on ecological and ethical matters in these fields. While the publications differ in their foci and modes of application, they all examine motivations in Islamic theology and ethics for the development of an environmentally aware hermeneutics. Nayawiyyah U. Muhammad's dissertation searches for a paradigmatic shift in Islamic theology through synthesizing Islamic feminism and ecological matters, while Asmaa El Maaroufi outlines an Islamic animal ethics based on an "ethic of being-with". Anna Gade investigates Muslim perspectives on environmentalism and environmental humanities. One commonality among them is that they all consider the principle of *tawhīd*, the indivisible oneness of God, which is the core of Islamic monotheism. In Islamic intellectual history, the understanding of the meaning and implication of God's oneness has expanded in successive generations. Contemporary Islamic environmentalists highlight the unity between God and human beings, other beings, and the unanimated environment as part of God's creation. Another central term in the publications is *khalifa*, which designates the status of the human as responsible carer for God's creation. Re-imagining and re-conceptualising the *khalifa* status of human beings as a critique of an anthropocentric reading is especially present in both Muhammad's and El Maaroufi's work. Both also address to some extent the issues raised by Gade about the disparate approach to authoritative Islamic sources and the call for developing an extensive and conclusive hermeneutics.

Theology in Islam: The Process and Application of Synthesizing Rosemary Radford Ruether's Insights, Islamic Feminist Aspirations, and Ecological Concerns, by Nayawiyah U. Muhammad. CGU Theses & Dissertations, 404: Claremont Graduate University, Spring 2022. Pp. 222. Open Access. [https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu\\_etd/404](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd/404).

Muhammad's dissertation aims to develop a constructive theology that synthesizes issues of gender disparity and environmental degradation. She argues that the interconnections between gender and ecological disaster have not been sufficiently addressed by Islamic feminists and environmentalists. Her research questions are: Is it possible to construct an ecofeminist theology in Islam? What would be its contours, constraints, and applicability? How can the ideas of the Christian theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether be utilized to construct an Islamic ecofeminist theology? Ruether's ecofeminist theories are central to Muhammad's research. The former engages with feminist theories to construct a gender-equal and environmental approach to Christian theology and its authoritative sources. Muhammad's research further inquires into the theological implications of Qur'an-based narratives on vicegerency (*khalifa*) and Adam and Eve. She questions the implications of these narratives for the construction of the hierarchy of the Divine over the human, of men over women, and of humans over the non-human creation. She argues that "the engendered body is directly related to resulting environmental degradation and human societal injustices influenced by religious narratives. Therefore, discussion on Islam and the engendered body is a relevant topic" (p. 28).

Muhammad employs discourse analysis, close reading, textual analysis and hermeneutics, and engages with the Islamic primary sources of the Qur'an and Sunna. In so doing, she provides an analytical overview of post-prophetic and contemporary perspectives, including those focused on and written by Muslim feminists and environmentalists.

Muhammad's dissertation consists of three parts. Part one examines contemporary Islamic discourses on ecology and women separately. She draws on Nawal Ammar's and Anna M. Gade's ideas to assess whether there is a significant difference between "greening" Islam and "Islamizing" environmental efforts, and how the response impacts gender disparity. Muhammad concludes that actors of ecological destruction and social injustices are inseparable (following Nawal Ammar), and demonstrates that gender, social disparities and ecological degradation are interconnected and multi-layered. At the end of part one, she asks how and why the intersection of environmental destruction and gender disparities is critical to understanding the dynamics of both. The development of this claim is the focus of the second part.

In Part two, Muhammad illustrates how feminists – such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Sa'diyyah Shaikh, as well as Fatima Mernissi, Kecia Ali, Aysha A. Hidayatullah and Riffat Hassan – have taken an active lead in questioning and dismantling normative patriarchal structures and reconstructing various theologies. She highlights the recovery of stories of female figures in early Islamic religious history, criticizing male normativity, questioning male constructions of the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women, as well as inquiring into the centrality of the *tawhīdic* principle. She engages with Islamic environmentalists Nomanul Haq and Kaveh L. Afrasiabi. The latter addresses anthropocentric criticisms levelled at monotheism by other environmentalists, and scrutinizes anthropocentric perspectives on Islam by scholars such as Seyyed Hussein Nasr.

Part three contains the core of Muhammad's research, synthesizing Islamic feminists' and environmentalists' ideas to produce an ecofeminist theological rationale for Islamic contexts. Muhammad's point of departure is an ecofeminist analysis of *khalīfa*. By outlining the historical development and application of the term, she argues that the ecofeminist perspective of *khalīfa* requires correction through utilizing the *tawhīdic* principle in order to circumvent an anthropocentric and therefore limited view on environmentalism. She concludes: "Humanity's place in creation does not take centre stage. Qur'an 40:57 states: 'The creation of the heavens and earth is greater by far than the creation of mankind, though most' people do not know it' (p. 152). Relating to Q 3:137, 6:11, and 10:6, Muhammad argues that "[it] supports the view that humanity is irrelevant to God's authority, and that God's creation is entirely independent of humanity" (p. 153). The primary focus of chapter five is an ecofeminist analysis of Adam, Eve, Eden, Heaven, and Hell in Islamic cosmology, cosmogony, and eschatology.

Muhammad's contribution is a significant paradigm shift to engage the field of Islamic theology in ecological challenges and gender inequalities. Overall, it would have been preferable if she had focused on one transformative aspect instead of spanning several subjects. She stays somewhat descriptive where a deeper analytical engagement would have been more fruitful. If this dissertation is to be published as a monograph, I suggest she expands the analysis and includes a critical assessment of the regimes of knowledge. For instance, one question implied in her work but is never fully addressed is: What is "genuinely Islamic"? She might discuss whether there is a body of knowledge generated through the interpretation of the authoritative sources of the Qur'an and Sunna which should be considered as genuinely Islamic. Such an enquiry means to further the critical engagement with the history of Qur'anic and hadith exegesis and to strengthen a systematic approach to the utilization of

these sources for Islamic environmental ethics. Otherwise, her work risks arguing for an essentialized conceptualization of Islam and therefore of Muslim environmentalism(s). In fact, all three reviewed contributions here – in terms of both Islamic feminist aspirations and an Islamic ecological ethics – would benefit from a consistent Qur’anic hermeneutics, as references to Qur’anic verses on environmental issues still seem quite disparate and arbitrary.

*Ethik des Mitseins: Grundlinien einer Islamisch-Theologischen Tierethik*,  
by Asmaa El Maaroufi. Verlag Karl Alber: Freiburg/München, 2021. Pp. 240.  
Hardback: 49,00€, ISBN 9783495492277.

El Maaroufi’s work focuses on the idea that the human as vicegerent should no longer occupy a special status in Islamic thought and relations between humans and animals should be de-hierarchized. The overarching aim of her book is to question subject-object dichotomies between humans and other beings created by God and to reintroduce into the field of Islamic ethics the idea of animals as subjects. El Maaroufi makes clear there are several points of reference in the Islamic tradition for the advancement of an Islamically informed animal ethics. She argues that while earlier works have ethical implications, they took reductionist perspectives insofar as animals were routinely imagined as tokens for divine qualities without any intrinsic value. This perspective on animals, amongst others, is derived from Islamic theological and philosophical works focusing on humans as the central being. In this cosmology, the animal is constructed as the subordinate other, as a kind of inferior antithesis from which a natural hierarchy was deduced. El Maaroufi demonstrates how the theologian and philosopher al-Ġazzālī refers to animals as the miraculous work of God. But they remain objectively and ethically conceptualized insofar as they function only as a means to an end. According to al-Ġazzālī, animals facilitate the recognition of divine traces in creation and thereby help humans attain knowledge of God. Consequently, El Maaroufi demands: “Would it not be necessary to always consider one’s own actions in order to respect those creatures to which God turned in the act of creation (with the imperative: Be!)” (p. 40). This appeal to consider the animal itself in its own right beyond an oppositional binary subject-object distinction is the primary focus in El Maaroufi’s work.

She starts with a descriptive and multi-perspective methodological approach to systematically develop the basic ideas. She then engages hermeneutically and phenomeno-logically with the possibility that there are concrete, relevant Qur’anic narratives. Rather than an argumentative presentation exploring various concepts, it is the examination of these Qur’anic narratives

on nature-related subjects which makes the applicability of authoritative knowledge for environmental issues tangible and concrete. For El Maaroufi, determining what “the human” is not the end goal but a means by which to develop her argument for the inclusion of animals as subjects of ethical consideration. Her awareness and methodological scrutiny is missing in prior works in this field, and fundamentally make her work innovative and an incentive for further research.

The author engages with Qur’anic and Prophetic materials by Islamic scholars such as Milad Ahmed Karimi, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Sarra Tlili. She furthermore draws on concepts by classic, modern, and postmodern philosophers like Aristoteles, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. Through this, El Maaroufi bases her argument on the Islamic concept of *tawhīd* and demands that animals should be regarded within their own subjective realities. Her argument to rethink and re-evaluate the encounters and relationships between human beings and animals in terms of their ethical implications makes this work profoundly relevant to the fields of normative and applied Islamic ethics. A point for deeper discussion could be whether the office of *khalīfa* as governor can be reformed along the lines El Maaroufi suggests, or if it should be reinterpreted in a manner that excludes human exceptionalism altogether like Nayawiyyah Muhammad argues in her aforementioned thesis.

Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations, by

Anna M. Gade. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. 336.

Paperback: US\$35.00, ISBN: 9780231191050.

In this book, Gade investigates Islamic perspectives on environmentalism and environmental humanities. The author combines textual and ethnographic examples with a focus on religious and cultural foundations. She offers a thorough genealogy of Muslim approaches to the environment, demonstrating the diversity of Muslim communities and schools of thought.

Her book contains seven chapters. In the first chapter, Gade circles the history of religions, Islam, and environmental humanities. She lays out how the genealogy of the term “environmentalism” developed from the 1970s in cultural anthropology and the social sciences to the interdisciplinary setting of environmental studies and its ethical commitments today. She also depicts how religion has been framed and given changing roles in environmental studies during the last decades. Chapter two presents NGOs that strive to include Muslims in their environmental projects within the framework of Islam and development. It focuses on the different angles represented by programs initiated within a secular framework to encourage Muslim involvement in

environmental causes. The author contrasts these with projects launched by Muslims who engage in environmentalism from a religious motivation. Gade discusses ideas in the commonly held discourse of Islam and the environment, which are filtered through secular, non-Muslim, Anglophone NGOs such as Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC), or the World Wildlife Federation's (WWF) construction programs premised on a universalist agenda. Gade argues that to Islamize prescribed environmentalist ideas "requires an essentialization of Islam to assert authority to the desired degree" (p. 40) and that "Islam is expected to become ... subordinated to dominant global environmental frameworks" (p. 42).

In the third chapter, Gade looks at the systematic theology and ethics within the discourse of "environmental Islam", which reflect both secular and inner-Islamic attempts to ecologize the pillars of Islam. The chapter concludes with Muslim environmentalist voices discussing environmental issues within humanities such as nature conservation studies and philosophy. The author argues that an overview of the Qur'an's own related themes is a more suitable place to theorize Muslims' religious environmentalisms than recent notions within environmental humanities such as the Anthropocene. Environmental verses in the Qur'an, often employed by Muslim environmentalists like Fazlun Khalid, appear arbitrary without an accompanying hermeneutic. Establishing such a hermeneutic is therefore a central task for contemporary Islamic environmental theology. Efforts within the field of Islamic environmental ethics will need to be gauged against Gade's critique of mapping "the environment onto an alternative and limited array of decontextualized terms without considering how much emphasize they receive in the authoritative text" (p. 85). Her fourth chapter is dedicated to Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh* and ethics. She traces the efforts to create an Islamic environmental law and authoritative legal opinions. Legal reasoning on resources like water management reveals the existence of implicit principles of environmentalism within Islamic law.

In chapter five Gade demonstrates how an empirical ethos links scientific, symbolic, and soteriological dimensions of Islamic humanities, illustrating how religion directs both scientific and aesthetic dimensions of Muslim environmentalisms. In the last two chapters, Gade again turns to her initial argument and shows how, for committed Muslims, environmental practices are religious practices. She gives examples of how Muslims engage with the environment for the sake of Islam. In doing so she also directs awareness to the fact that the academic mainstream, especially environmental ethics, produces and reproduces limiting conceptions of "authenticity" in Islam and Islamic sources and the erasure of Muslims in the field in general.



This book is an essential contribution to Islamic Studies and neighbouring fields, and delivers an enlightening critique of the boundaries between the disciplines. Gade's work encourages us to reflect on the regimes of knowledge that are at work and about our complicity in interpreting something as "natural". Anyone interested in Gade's fieldwork is advised to have a look at her website where she discusses details of her research. Also worth listening to is her contribution to the *religious studies project* podcast (<https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/persons/anna-gade/>) where she strives to decentralize conversations long dominated by Western ecological models.

### Issue and Editors

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