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## Sustainability and Religion

**Chad Rimmer<sup>1</sup> (guest editor)**  
**Dr. Mary Philip aka Joy<sup>2</sup> (co-editor)**

Activities that devastate the environment and societies continue unabated. Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own – indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. This will happen if we see the need to revive our sense of belonging to a larger family of life, with which we have shared our evolutionary process. In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other.

That time is now.

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Lecture, 2004.

**W**elcome to Volume 41 Issue 1, 2020 of Consensus, titled Sustainability and Religion. This collection is well suited to a Journal of Public Theology. The papers, sermons and artistic reflections curated here is the fruit of a public interdisciplinary, ecumenical and interfaith dialogue about the connection between Sustainability and Religion.

In February 2020, just prior to the emergence of the coronavirus in Europe, 130 professionals and students gathered at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences in Bergen, Norway, for a conference on sustainability and climate in religion. We invited priests and lay leaders from Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches, Islamic lawyers, Indigenous Sami communities, representatives of the Church of Norway, Buddhist practitioners, public-school educators, theology professors and the Mayor of Bergen to participate in this dialogue.

We discussed our concerns, and our common commitment to care for the earth from our respective traditions and disciplines. We explored ways that interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and sustainability discourse can create common approaches to fostering ecological consciousness through education. We affirmed that theologians, scientific researchers, faith leaders, educators, legal experts and climate activists all have a role to play in equipping today's generation to create pathways for sustainable living. The path requires interdisciplinary and interfaith cooperation. This edition of Consensus is one outcome of this shared commitment.

While establishing pathways to sustainable living requires a web of technical, economic and political approaches, a shift in consciousness and values is also needed. Religious educators have a role to play in awakening our consciousness that we are creatures, whose first faithful calling is to care and safeguard the integrity of creation in

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creative ways that sustain the blessing of life as God intended. Our generation is on the cusp of an ecological return to a sustainable understanding of being human. This understanding has always been part of the worldviews and wisdom of Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Indigenous traditions. It is revealed in this rich interdisciplinary conversation. This edition invites you to reflect on the following perspectives from that conference, in alphabetical order:

**Sayed Hassan Akhlaq:** Akhlaq offers a comparative ecotheology, between the Islamic concept of Bismillah and Luther's Small Catechism. This paper is rooted in a dialogical concept that faith is not only for constructing a system that fights against ideologies, but equips the faithful to resist losing themselves within prevailing ideologies. Akhlaq plumbs the depths of the Islamic concept of Bismillah to demonstrate the replete nature of God's mercy as God's being and our experience of it, and seeing God's mercy in nature as grounds for our responsibility to care for creation. He compares it to Luther's explanation of the 10 Commandments in the Large Catechism. This comparison is significant in terms of an interfaith approach to ecotheology and sustainability discourse. Pedagogically, this paper is an example of interfaith dialogue, and the constructive pedagogical value of returning to the gifts of our theological and religious traditions to equip the faithful to resist non-sustainable ideologies and create cosmologies of life, by "re-read[ing] its core precepts and re-examin[ing] its core values." The first step to teaching sustainability from the perspective of religious education is to re-locate Christians and Muslims in the core cosmological and theological framework, vis-à-vis the Creator and the rest of creation.

**Sigurd Bergmann:** Bergmann critiques the fetishization of created beings, and advocates re-embedding creatures in their relational location that give them inherent dignity and value. By doing so, he says, life can be properly evaluated as being animated by the Spirit of God and that our religious narrative can reveal a new hopeful iconography of interdisciplinary sustainability discourse that includes broad alliances of translocal actors, including faith communities. He argues that religious traditions provide the spiritual foundation, or grounding in the Life Giving Spirit of God, which can drive humanity's great turning from the Anthropocene towards the emerging and sustainable Ecocene.

**Ben Willie Golo:** Golo traces the model of stewardship from religious origins through secular sustainability discourse. His basic argument is that religious environmental stewardship motivates religious communities to care for creation. Golo then shows how Sabbath provides a model for conceiving of the limits, restraints, and the religious motivation to live out environmental stewardship in the African (religious) context. He asserts that the Sabbath offers a religiously motivated holistic model of stewardship that can connect to the secular sustainability discourse. Golo invokes humanity's loyalty to God in managing the gift of the nonhuman world so that it does not degenerate into destruction.

**Gunaketu Bjørn Kjønstad:** From his Buddhist perspective, Kjønstad demonstrates how a religion can offer its foundational principles and practices as a way to find common ground for interreligious dialogue and sustainable living. Kjønstad roots his analysis in the experience of an interfaith climate pilgrimage. His presentation grows out of ethical and religious practice within the Buddhist concept of interbeing. Kjønstad creates a parallel

between 5 Buddhist principles and 5 principles of the SDG agenda. These principles inspires an intentionality that overcomes fatigue, and creates the ground of loving kindness, and compassion to sustain the work for sustainability.

**Jean Koulagna:** From the field of Biblical studies, Koulagna conducts a philological exploration of the two Biblical accounts of creation in Genesis, and the anthropological implications. Re-reading Adam, he shows that there is no univocal systematic understanding of human vocation. Rather there is a polyphony of meanings. This diversity of interpretation, he says, helps us resist the desire to push the text too far in a literalist direction, and yet offers a range of entry points for the Christian tradition to interpret theological and ethical conclusions about human vocation vis-a-vis creation. Koulagna concludes with the notion of Sabbath, which, coupled with other creation narratives found throughout the Hebrew Bible (such as Psalm 8) provides a diverse theological framework for teaching sustainability.

**Seyed Masoud Noori and Soheila Ebrahimi Louyeh:** Iranian Islamic legal scholars Noori and Louyeh make the claim that achieving sustainable eco-justice according to the SDGs requires states to consider their right to use natural resources. Through the lens of Islamic jurisprudence and international law Louyeh and Noori explore the Islamic concept of Al-Anfal (natural resources). According to the shari'a concept of Al-Anfal as public goods, Islamic States cannot claim unlimited ownership of natural resources within their territories. Rather, states bear the responsibility to sustainably managing resources for the benefit of future generations. In this way, they argue that predominantly Muslim countries can refer to the concept of Al-Anfal as a comprehensive framework for holding sovereign states accountable to sustainable limits of using natural resources erga omnes (for the good of all).

**Marcel Ngirinshuti:** Ngirinshuti considers the relationship between sustainability and religion through a case study of the Green Churches Network in Africa, TEVA (Toile des Églises Vertes en Afrique). He outlines the history of WCC, and its importance for engaging churches of Africa in the work of safeguarding creation, and promoting a lifestyle in line with the criteria of sustainability and social justice. Rooted in the three principles that underwrite their work, 1) complexity in the African context is an opportunity for mission, 2) the Christian life of faith necessarily integrates ecology into the course of life, and 3) we participate in this mission from our local community, TEVA strives to establish 2020 green parishes by the end of 2020.

**Mary Philip aka Joy:** Philip explores the role of stories in narrating our ecological and intersubjective identities. She demonstrates that while all creatures are connected, we do not all contribute equally to climate change. The global poor and women contribute the least to the causes of climate change, but they suffer the effects of climate change first and most acutely. To overcome this eco-racism and eco-sexism, we must cultivate a human identity as relational beings through new stories of what it means to be human. To nurture that new narrative, Philip reminds us of the need to identify the stories that are missing, particularly the voices of women and indigenous people. Their theological perspectives of care, conservation and sustainable relationships reveal the relationship between SDG 13 and SDG 5. By reclaiming and privileging women's voices, she says, we inspire resilience among the

most affected and heal our human identity by re-storying our lives according to these missing voices.

**Chad Rimmer:** Rimmer sketches the theoretical synergies between sustainability discourse and a Christian ecotheological approach to religious education, and point to pedagogical possibilities for bridging the two disciplines. Rimmer affirms that linking sustainability discourse and religious education is a way to decolonize education and reintegrate our self-understanding within sustainable, transformative, ecological relationships. Pedagogical methods that keep this goal in mind, Rimmer asserts, promote pro-social and sustainable learning. Linking these practices to ecotheological concepts such as the Sabbath or within liturgical context of faith communities affirms the interdisciplinary wisdom of sustainability. The paper concludes with examples of place based ecotheological formation in Muslim, Jewish, Christian and interfaith contexts.

**Einar Tjelle:** Tjelle begins with Pope Francis' historic visit to Abu Dabhi. He uses this message to remind us that interreligious dialogue and diapraxis are not only necessary for sustaining creation, as the common ark of humanity, but interreligious dialogue bears fruits of peace. Tjelle says that a shared commitment to care for the earth yields not only fruits of the Earth, but the fruits of peacemaking and shares examples from the Norwegian context. The Interfaith rain forest initiative, Hope Cathedral and the Church of Norway's Sustainability Book are but a few of the great examples of ways to engage the next 10 years as "the decade of action".

**Tom Sverre Tomren:** Tomren offers a sweeping history of ecotheology and the ways in which various religious traditions have been champions for climate justice and care for creation. Tomren explores broad methodologies from multiple religious traditions, in order to demonstrate how our interfaith witness grows out of shared values, and ethics. Tomren offers the details of a longitudinal case study within the Church of Norway that demonstrates how churches can be most effective in transforming perspectives and opinions when they speak to their own members, out of their traditions. In this way, Tomren encourages churches to continue being strong voices and teachers of environmental education and activism, promoting sustainability and creation care in their parishes.

In addition to these papers, this issue includes short papers from students at Martin Lutheran University College. These theological reflections on the theme "God and the Earth" deepen the discussion about our relationship to the earth through a triangular kaleidoscope of scripture, the Earth Charter and indigenous art. The images that emerge reflect a rich call to reinterpret our human identity and vocation in light of care, relationality, and a solidarity that can hold and honor pain.

- In "Responsibility for Creation", Sarah E. Brown reflects on a painting called the Great Mother of the Ojibwe, by the Canadian First Nations artist Nokomis. Sarah reflects on the nature of God as relationship, in order to understand the nature of our relationship with the earth and all her creatures. From this sense of solidarity that we have with all creatures, Brown finds the motivation to heal the Earth.

- In “God and the Earth”, Michael Hooghiem contemplates Hillary Smith’s Cheerful Sunrise Woman. This passionate painting of weeping Indigenous woman, moves Hooghiem to linger with her pain and generational injustice. Hooghiem hopes this image might be an icon of God’s relationship to creation that moves us to reflect on integral ecology, rooted our advocacy in such deep expressions of solidarity.
- In “And the First [Could] Be Last”, Theresa Klaver reflects on Gillian Genser’s sculpture ‘Adam’. Made from ground blue mussel shells Klaver reflects on the ways that this sculpture invites us to revisit our understanding of the word “dominion”. She rightly critiques the concept of domination, which has been the tool of colonial expansion for exploiting land, resources and people for centuries. Gazing on the rough, degraded, scarred body of ‘Adam’, Klaver notices the integrated and interwoven shells of this sculpture, and calls for a similarly integrated, mutuality based interpretation of dominion.

On one level, this issue is a diverse collection of perspectives on sustainability and religion. But together, they form a mosaic that captures one shared commitment to care for the Earth community. Whether viewed through the lens of human self-understanding, a faithful vocation to care for our neighbour, or legal and technical frameworks, the mosaic affirms the role of constructive dialogue between theology, science, politics and law in the public space. We hope it will encourage people of faith to explore the intersection between ecotheology and the sustainability agenda, to inspire imaginative and faithful solutions to preserving the integrity of the earth and the well-being of all creatures. This is the proper work of theology in the public space.

We wish to thank the Western Norway University, Church of Norway, and The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway, the Lutheran World Federation and the Al Mowafaqa Ecumenical Institute of Theology, in Rabat, Morocco for organizing the Conference in Bergen.

LWF Program Executive Rev. Dr. Chad Rimmer and Dr. Mary Philip aka Joy, professor of Lutheran Global Theology and Mission at Martin Luther University College in Canada, represented the Lutheran World Federation Communion Office in Geneva.