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Towards a green diapraxis: Experiences and reflections from an interfaith journey¹

Einar Tjelle*

Abu Dhabi

... in order to safeguard peace, need to enter together as one family into an ark which can sail the stormy seas of the world: the ark of fraternity. (.....) There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future.

These are the words of Pope Francis, from his visit to Abu Dhabi, The Emirates, a year ago. He was invited by The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. In the introduction to their joint statement, they express:

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. ²

The context of this historic visit to an oil-producing state in the Arabic world was *not* primarily the global climate and environmental emergency, but interreligious bridge building in a context of increasing religious extremism and polarisation in general. Nevertheless, I start here because the processes of interfaith bridge building and environmental peace building are deeply interconnected.

In this brief paper, I will share a few experiences and reflections from my Norwegian context, and also try to interpret these in a wider global perspective.

Emerging green dialogue (1990-)

Our different faith traditions include a range of vital resources to motivate our care for creation. However, these resources and practises are often forgotten. When it comes to *green interfaith collaboration* it is a rather new phenomenon. The initiative of the World Wildlife Fund and H.E. Prince Phillip in Assisi, Italy, back in 1986, gathered leaders from different faith traditions to discuss themes like nature and conservation.³ Some years later, this initiative led to the establishment of the Alliance of Religions and Conservations (ARC), which took place in the mid 90s.

In Norway, the 1990s was the decade of emerging interfaith dialogues. It was also a decade of growing environmental awareness, partly related to a green awakening on the global scene, with the UN Rio Summit in 1992 as a key event.

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The Church of Norway initiated formal dialogues with national Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist communities from 1992 and onwards. Furthermore, the Council on Religions and Life Stance Communities in Norway (STL) was established in 1996. However, even before these formal structures were created, a green interfaith dialogue was established in the capital of Oslo. This was a multi-faith group, in which people from the Baha'i Community, The Jewish Community, Islamic Cultural Centre, Alternative Network (Holism), Hare Krishna, the Catholic Church, and the (Lutheran) Church of Norway took active part. The journey resulted in a report called "A world of life in crisis – a joint call to a spiritual wake-up".⁴ Each faith community contributed from *their own traditions*, along with the signing of a *joint message*. I find this interesting as the interfaith green collaboration was quite unique at this time.

A global green multi-faith decade (2009-)

Let me jump to what I call *the green multi-faith decade*. Throughout the early 2000s, climate and environmental issues were slowly moving up on the political and media agenda. The same happened in most faith communities as well.

An important milestone at the brink of a new decade was the *Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto* from November 2008, initiated by the Church of Sweden Archbishop Anders Wejryd and the Religion for Peace International. Being a global summit and a joint statement from religious leaders as well as indigenous leaders, it intended to send a strong message to politicians, business corporations, and other stakeholders to act on climate justice, particularly with its self-critical language about ecological and spiritual commitments.⁵

The year after the launch in Uppsala, bishops of the Church of Norway, a few imams and other faith leaders in Norway took part in an activist journey on a ferry from Oslo to Copenhagen, organised by the Norwegian Church Aid and the Future in our hands, an environmental NGO. The event turned out to be a significant mobilisation with around 1500 participants, aiming to build networks, raise awareness, and gain influence at the Copenhagen UN Climate Summit in 2009. This summit eventually failed, as you might remember. In spite of wide spread expectations, nothing happened on the political level.

Since this first journey, small interfaith delegations from Norway have attended various UN Climate Summits (UNFCCC). The delegations have consisted of Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists. They meet with other faith actors at the UN meetings and with people of all faiths. However, it has been hard to find other interfaith delegations that do this kind of green advocacy *together*.

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si – On Care for our Common Home*, had a tremendous impact on strengthening global awareness and mobilisation leading up to the Paris Agreement.⁶ This document was also an important source of inspiration for other faith traditions in its explicit invitation to inter-sectoral and interfaith collaboration.

Ahead of Paris, many observed strengthened commitments and global climate declarations from Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, as well as different groups of Christians. Even more important, joint statements joint praxis and symbolic actions were growing in numbers.⁷ It was indeed a moving moment to take part in the interfaith side event prior to the two weeks of negotiations in Paris. At this side event 1,5 million petitions for climate justice were handed over to the UN Climate Executive Director Christiana Figueres. She was deeply moved and inspired, and she has many times highlighted the importance of

the joint interfaith moral push for the final outcome in Paris. On the stage in Paris, along with faith leaders from different religions and from various parts of the world, stood a Lutheran bishop and an imam, both from the Norwegian Interfaith Climate Network.

The Norwegian Interfaith Climate Network

In 2014, a Norwegian Interfaith Climate Network was established, which I currently chair. The network consists of representatives from Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Holistic, and Baha'i communities, as well as members of different Christian denominations and organisations. The aim of the network is twofold: *learn from each other*, and *act together*. Put more concretely: we visit each other, learn from the hosts' particular resources on environmental spirituality and ethics, eat together, share experiences and plan joint actions.

A few examples on joint green actions from our network are articles or letters (advocacy); green interfaith pilgrimages; collaborative projects such as *the Hope Cathedral* (more information below); appeals or input at conferences and demonstrations. In August 2019, a Sikh from our group spoke outside the Parliament in front of more than 50.000 demonstrators in the streets together with the Lutheran bishop of Oslo.⁸ A few in the network are also involved in certain international processes, such as observers at the UN Climate Change Summits, as mentioned above.

Growing more holistic

My experience is that the interfaith green journey has widened the scope of churches and faith traditions. Religions are learning from each other. For instance, environmental theology in Church of Norway during the last decades has been influenced by indigenous Sami culture, with a more holistic and Earth-grounded theology, as well as from other Christian traditions, for example from orthodox tradition.⁹ It is certainly not only climate change policy that has drawn global attention these last years. Issues such as tropical deforestation, plastic and oceans, and loss of biodiversity/biomasses have also received much more attention. However, I think sharing of spiritual, religious, and indigenous resources *contribute to* more holistic and ecological perspectives in these fields. It forms a dynamic circle of learning.

Such holistic perspectives are highlighted in Pope Francis' *encyclical Laudato Si*. It stresses the deep relations between God and her creation, relations between human beings, and the reciprocal relation between all creatures. It is about joy and beauty. We are all woven into this tapestry. As the Mystery of Trinity in itself is about relations, everything is connected. Parts of these reflections echoes processes on "integrity of creation" from the World Council of Churches in the 1980s and following decades.¹⁰

Let me provide three quite different examples of this widening of the scope, *from* an "anthropocentric" climate justice advocacy, towards a more holistic and praxis-oriented journey.

First, the *Interfaith Rainforest Initiative* was initiated in Oslo in 2017¹¹. It has become an international multi-faith alliance that works to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to global efforts to end tropical deforestation. It is a platform for religious leaders to work hand in hand with indigenous peoples, governments, civil society organisations, and businesses on actions that protect rainforests and safeguard the indigenous peoples guarding these forests. The initiative is currently expanding with concrete plans of actions

in Latin America, DR Congo, as well as in Indonesia. It has been a privilege to follow this process from the very start, and to see how this interfaith alliance makes an impact.

Second, *The Hope Cathedral* (Håpets katedral) is a project that focuses on ocean and plastic waste. It was initiated by the diocese of Borg in the Church of Norway in 2018. However, from the very beginning it was framed as an interfaith project with the Interfaith Climate Network being one of the key partners.¹² The Cathedral of Hope rises from an ocean drowning in plastics, turning this waste into tiles and into a common expression of hope. As such, it becomes a powerful symbol that unites people across differences of age, nationality, and religion. Hope Cathedral unites spirituality and politics. Both are important for preserving the planet Earth as our common living space. Even if this is a local initiative, it has received a lot of attention from various national and even international actors, among them the UN Environment (UNEP).

The last example is *The Sustainability book*, a booklet and online-resource provided from churches in Norway¹³. The text studies the Sustainable Developing Goals (SDGs) from a Christian perspective. It is not an interfaith tool but an ecumenical resource that deals with all of the 17 goals. Among them [Life below water](#) (SDG 14), [Life on land](#) (SDG 15), and the [Climate action](#) goal (SDG 13), which has been central to ecumenical work for a long time. This is another illustration of a widening of the perspectives. People of faith develop a broader commitment to care for the oceans, the forests, biodiversity, advocacy for renewable energy, and fight against inequalities. The SDGs as such explore the interface between social, ecological, environmental and economical dimensions, and people of faith join into this journey of praxis. The last SDG goal, number 17, is precisely on cooperation and partnerships for the goals. Here, an intersectional approach is underscored, and the more specific interfaith diapraxis should be understood as part of this holistic response. Globally, there has been an increasing openness from the UN the last decade to work with churches, religions, and faith-based organisations. The UN Environmental Program has recently developed its own strategy on green multi-faith cooperation and is a key partner to the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.

On the brink of the decade of action and green diapraxis (2020-2030)

I chose to call this paper *Towards a green diapraxis*. The concept diapraxis is sometimes used to underline an interfaith *collaboration*, as something other than dialogue.¹⁴ In the last decade, we have experienced a shift from talk to praxis – at least a stronger emphasis on praxis. A similar trend can also be traced in ecumenical efforts among churches. One example is the Reformation Commemoration in 2016 (2017) when Pope Francis visited Scandinavia for the first time. One of the key events of this visit was the signing of a Declaration of Intent for cooperation between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and Caritas Internationalis.¹⁵ A few years earlier, the LWF had signed a similar declaration with the Islamic Relief World Wide. Characteristically, when Pope Francis visited the World Council of Churches office in Geneva in 2018, he underlined the motto *Walking, Praying and Working Together* in his talk to the WCC General Secretary Olav Fykse Tveit.¹⁶ This indicated the same tendency: a stronger emphasis on joint action, charity, and advocacy. However, does a stronger diapraxis contribute to a better dialogue as well?

In a Northern-European context where religion often is thought of as politically irrelevant or even dangerous, the green journey of interreligious diapraxis demonstrates the

opposite. Diapraxis makes an impact and it has the potential to be a journey of cohesion and peace in a time of global polarisation.

Furthermore, the learning process in which churches and religions broaden the scope, mirrors the global contextual differences and the multifaceted and complex environmental challenges we are facing these days. Our contributions, i.e. what faith traditions and indigenous peoples' knowledge can offer, are definitely needed in the years to come. The green transformation and journey ahead of us have to be local, international, intersectional, intergenerational, and not at least interreligious.

We are currently entering a new decade, heading towards 2030, which marks the time frame of implementing the Paris Agreement as well as the SDGs. It will be a demanding decade that calls for radical mitigation of greenhouse gases, requires solid climate justice finance, shifts from fossil to renewable energy, not to mention avoiding further loss of forests and biodiversity. It has to be the decade of action.

Even if the last decade was important, in the sense of an awakening among people and religions, it left us with a critical urge to do more. Not only governments, politicians, corporations, scientists, academics, NGOs, and so on, but also people of faith have to walk the talk. Being people of faith, we are potentially the largest people's movement on the planet Earth. This decade we have to maximise this potential.

In light of this, it is therefore encouraging that Green Faith International, of which the Norwegian Interfaith Climate Network will be part, will be launched in 2020. This is precisely an expression of the global concern and urge for mobilisation. In addition, UNEP will organize an interfaith launch of the [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021–2030](#) in partnership with the Vatican later on this year.¹⁷ However, even more important than these two examples are the various faith-based grassroots movements. Many of them are still small and few. Religious leaders should be stronger in their emphasis here. People of faiths are many and have a potential to radically strengthen local "green congregations", "green mosques", and green diapraxis groups, by learning, sharing, and planning together for spirituality, advocacy, and love for all creatures. Part of this is concrete steps in fields such as recycling, divestments, travel, energy, and diet.¹⁸

A decade of green diapraxis is also a journey of bridge building and peace. Hence, I will end with the quote of Pope Francis, who I started with, having in mind the interconnectedness between all religions, sectors, and creatures:

"We need to enter together as one family into an ark, which can sail the stormy seas of the world: the ark of fraternity...There is no alternative: we will either build the future together or there will not be a future."¹⁹

Notes

¹ The article is based on my presentation at the conference, Sustainability and Climate in Religion, Bergen 12th February 2020 <https://www.hvl.no/en/research/conference/sustainability-and-climate/>. I am drawing upon and developing on my article *Grønn tro gir håp – Religioner sammen for klodens framtid*, Nytt Norsk Kirkeblad 2/19

² Ibid

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Wide_Fund_for_Nature

⁴ My translation. Oddbjørn Leirvik og Øyvind Solum(red), «En levende jord i krise» Oslo 1994.

⁵ <https://www.silene.org/en/documentation-centre/declarations/the-uppsala-interfaith-climate-manifesto-2008-faith-traditions-addressing-global-warming>

⁶ http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf

⁷ Different faith declarations and joint statements can be found here: <http://fore.yale.edu/climate-change/statements-from-world-religions/interfaith/>

⁸ <https://klimabrolet.no/gjenopplev/>

⁹ See i.e. <http://gammel.gronnkirke.no/doc//SoB/Teologisk%20grunnlag%20SoB%20endelig.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/dictionary-article11.html>

¹¹ <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/>

¹² <http://www.hopecathedral.no>

¹³ <http://www.sdgbok.com>

¹⁴ The Lutheran World Federation has build on this term, used first by the Danish theologian Lissi Rasmussen in 1988, see <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWI-200504-EN-low.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/new-beginning-lutheran-and-catholic-aid-agencies>

¹⁶ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180621_pellegrinaggio-ginevra.html

¹⁷ <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/faith-earth-shifting-needle-environmental-action>

¹⁸ See <https://livingthechange.net/> and the Church of Norway manual on green congregations <https://kirken.no/nb-NO/gronnkirke/gronn-menighet/bli-gronn-menighet---fremgangsmate/>

¹⁹ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_emiratiarabi-incontrointerreligioso.html