Sustainability and Religion: Past Trends and Future Perspectives

Walter Leal Filho, Lena Maria Dahms and Adriana Consorte-McCrea

Abstract This introductory paper offers some perspectives on sustainability and religion, and outlines some areas where further attention is needed.

Keywords Sustainability · Ecology · Faith · Religious values · Religious communities

1 Introduction

> "We may believe in different heavens, but we all live on this same Earth"
> —unattributed

Academic research on sustainability and climate change mainly focus on economic, political, and technological solutions and innovations. In this way, they usually forget one potentially important factor—religion. Inarguably, religious communities are amongst the largest organized worldwide networks and institutions (Altmann et al. 2012, p. V; Casanova 1994; Habermas 2006). Their leaders generally enjoy a high level of trust from their communities. This raises the question if and how these networks can act as a powerful force to change the behaviour of their adherents towards more sustainable lifestyles. How does religious belief contribute to moving society towards sustainability? So far, there is a lack of research examining the potential roles and resources of religion. Until today, the study of the public involvement of religious actors has been mostly limited to the US, (Dewitt 2006; Djupe and Gwiasda

W. Leal Filho (✉) · L. M. Dahms
Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Life Sciences,
Research and Transfer Centre "Sustainable Development and Climate Change Management",
Ulmenliet 20, 21033 Hamburg, Germany
e-mail: walter.leal2@haw-hamburg.de

A. Consorte-McCrea
Sustainability Development Office, Canterbury Christ Church University,
North Holmes Road, Canterbury CT1 1QU, UK
e-mail: adriana.consorte-mccrea@canterbury.ac.uk

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2010; McCammack 2007; Nagle 2008; Wardekker et al. 2009). The following article gives a short overview of the researches about the influence of religion and faith on sustainable behaviours. Furthermore, religious communities and initiatives dedicated to sustainability will be presented. The main aim of the authors of this article is to develop an understanding of the relation between religion and sustainability.

2 The Meaning of Religions in the Contemporary World

Religions not only had a strong powerful influence in history, till today, but also are said to play a key role in fostering a change of behaviour and a transformation of societies (Palmer and Finlay 2003). Still, in the contemporary world, different beliefs help to explain human existence. In all cultures, there are those who have a set of beliefs in God's creation or an openness to a sense of transcendence and find support and answers relating to their inner questions from religions.

Besides their problematic dimensions such as intolerance, dogmatism, and fundamentalism, religions have always been a source of wisdom, moral inspiration and a preserver of rituals. And even in a more secular era, for many people around the world, religious beliefs are still central to their culture, providing moral guidance in life and a specific set of values in everyday lives. And especially, these values could render religions helpful in changing people's attitude and behaviour towards the environment and as a result helping to shape a sustainable future.

3 … Towards a More Sustainable Future

The issue of sustainability concerns human values. The ecological crisis shows up in the ecological systems of the world, but it is not a crisis of these ecological systems as such. It is a crisis caused by caused by human choices, by what we choose to value (c.f. Moltmann 1989, p. 53). Religion, then, has a contribution to make because it can inform and challenge our choice of values; at the very least, religion creates room for thought by providing alternative visions of life's meaning and purpose.

Many studies show values as a main motivation for specific behaviours, such as Sheth's shopping preference theory. Thus, it appears that a sustainable behaviour and life depends upon personal values. If we assume that religions influence value development, it suggests that a religious belief has the potential to lead to sustainable behaviour. Several studies have investigated if and to which degree religions significantly influence sustainable behaviours through their religious values. In their paper 'Religious Values as a Predictor of Sustainable Consumption Behaviours: A Cross-Cultural Comparison' Kahle et al. (2015) showed the important influence of religion in understanding determinants to sustainable consumption. Their study revealed that 'consumers adhering to any religious affiliation, as opposed to those that are Atheist,

are more likely to participate in sustainable consumption behaviours.' (Kahle et al. 2015, p. 275)

Altmann et al. (2012) interviewed a number of religious leaders and surveyed the corresponding religious community. Indeed, their research proved that religious concepts such as stewardship and the Golden Rule (do to others as you would have them do to you) are principal motivations that can guide towards sustainability. However, both religious leaders and adherents, it seems, lack a broad understanding of sustainability (Altmann et al. 2012).

Further, Koehrsen discovered that the given socio-geographic context and religions' general predisposition to adapt to its social environment have an impact on the extent to which a given religious group tends to enable a 'Sustainable Transition'. A sustainable transition is defined as 'long-term, multidimensional, and fundamental transformation processes through which established sociotechnical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption' (Markard et al. 2012, p. 956). In some geographical spaces and social spheres, religions are marginalized to a degree where they are not involved in societal issues anymore, whereas in other social contexts religions are much more supported.

It is often argued that people adhering to Eastern religion's beliefs (Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Taoism) participate significantly more in sustainable behaviours due to their more eco-friendly worldviews in contrast to adherents of Western religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam). According to the Western religions' perspective, God created nature and bestowed upon humanity a superior position to nature. In his famous essay 'The historical roots of our ecological crisis', Lynn White claimed 50 years ago that this Western religion's belief caused an exploitation of the natural world and an ensuing destruction of its resources by giving room for a utilitarian attitude to the natural world. On the other side, Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Taoism), perhaps, enable a more pantheistic perspective where God, or the ultimate, is in and through everything, including nature. This short introduction about the relation between religion and sustainability does not seek to solve this debate. What is certain, however, is that the environmental crisis presents a serious challenge to all the world's religions. Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-founder of the 'Forum on Religion and Ecology' at Yale University, sees in the religions a key ally: 'The environmental crisis calls the religions of the world to respond by finding their voice within the global community' (Altmann et al. 2012, p. 8). Following Tucker and other various appeals from environmental groups and from scientists and parliamentarians, religious leaders such as the Ecumenical Patriarch, the Pope and the Dalai Lama (including leaders of indigenous traditions) have released statements encouraging the world's religions to participate in worldwide commitments towards a more sustainable planetary future. In his recent Encyclical on the environment 'Laudato Si', Pope Francis calls 'everyone living on the planet' to care for nature and protect the planet (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015). In the same year, world Islamic leaders alerted people of all faiths to engage with the global climate crisis: 'What will future generations say of us, who leave them a degraded planet as our legacy?' (Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change 2015, p. 1).

4 Religious Communities and Initiatives Dedicated to Sustainability

An increasing number of religious organizations and initiatives dedicate themselves to environmental issues. This 'ecological awakening' of religious communities can be seen by the emergence of coalitions and national religious organizations such as the 'National Religious Partnership for the Environment', the 'Evangelical Climate Initiative' in the US, and 'Operation Noah' in Great Britain that understands itself as the 'Alliance of Religion and Conservation' (NRPE 2017; ECI 2017; Operation Noah 2017; ARC 2017). These all rethink their theologies and promote campaigns that seek ecological awareness within and outside their churches and religious communities.

Critics accuse the religious communities of being too late in addressing environmental issues. They ask for more 'religious commitment, moral imagination, and ethical engagement to transform the environmental crisis from an issue on paper to one of effective policy, from rhetoric in print to realism in action'.

The potential for religions contributing to moving society towards more sustainability is increasingly recognized by secular and even scientific organizations. In 2007 the 'Society for Conservation Biology' established a conservation and religion working group (SCB 2017). For a long time, this juxtaposition was seen as a contradiction; it is now understood that science and religion together can help to integrate humans and ecology. It is becoming more and more evident that the environmental crisis is also a social issue as Pope Francis stated in his 'Laudate Si':

> 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.

This complex crisis cannot be solved by science, technology, law, politics or economics alone; it requires the contribution of and cooperation with various community groups—including religious groups. Attempting to 'heal' the climate and environment only through technical innovations or legislation will prove insufficient. In the end, what is required, is the creation of communities where humans do not dominate nature, but rather recognize and accept their dependence on nature and on the larger community of life. In this respect, religious insight has the ability to act as a powerful corrective to the notion of abstract autonomy that colours contemporary western individualism. Rather, within a religious purview, mind can be reconnected to body, self to community, human community to the wider community of creation, and finally creation to the Creator.

5 The World Series of Conferences on Religion and Ecology [1996–1998]

In this spirit, a series of ten conferences on Religion and Ecology was initiated by the University Center for the Study of World Religions coordinated by Yale University professors Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. The culminating conferences were held at Harvard University from 1996 to 1998. More than 800 international scholars, religious leaders, environmentalists and graduate students participated. The subordinated objective of the conferences was to establish a ground to facilitate partnerships between religion and other disciplines working on implementing sustainable policies and practices to enable long-term solutions to environmental problems. Papers from the conferences were published in a series of ten books between 1997 and 2004 (The Religions of the World and Ecology Book Series), one for each of the world's major religious and indigenous Traditions. The series started with 'Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds' published in 1997. A foreword to each of the volumes written by conference organizers Tucker and Grim entitled, 'The Challenge of the Environmental Crisis', provides an introduction to the topic of religion and ecology. The series shows how the diverse world religions with their attitudes, beliefs and rituals can contribute to a wide interdisciplinary dialogue on the environmental challenges affecting public policy and environmental ethics. The Conferences, as well as the remarkable successful 'Religions of the World and Ecology' publications series, emphasized the crucial role of religions in helping to solve the environmental problems. Moreover, it generated a new field of study in religion and in other disciplinary fields such as contemporary environmental ethics and public policy. Among others, the Conferences led the way to the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, also founded by Tucker and Grim. It turned out to be the largest international multireligious project of its kind. Its research, education, publications and more than hundred engaged projects are presented at its major international website http://fore.yale.edu/. Besides a growing number of universities in North America and around the world now offer courses on environment and religion.

The identified values from the Harvard conference series on World Religions and Ecology can be seen as convergent with the ethical principles of the Earth Charter: reverence; respect; restraint; redistribution; responsibility; and renewal. The Earth Charter is a result of a worldwide, cross-cultural dialogue on the transition to sustainable ways of living and sustainable human development. Once started as a United Nations initiative it was completed by a global civil society and launched as a people's charter on 29 June 2000 by the Earth Charter Commission. With ecological integrity as its main theme, it is a global ethical framework that seeks to guide the transition to a sustainable future.

6 Some Future Perspectives

Charting 'possible paths towards mutually enhancing human–earth relations', as proposed by Tucker and Grim (1997) is a pressing challenge to faith communities. Although research shows a wide affinity between faith and sustainability values, barriers such as a lack of a shared understanding of sustainability, may be curtailing a sense of urgency or limiting the potential of communities of faith to act (Altmann et al. 2012). There are also concerns about using a methodological approach tailored to 'traditional philosophical and religious ideas for contemporary concerns'. These include: gaps between ideals and practice; concerns about the impact of religious beliefs in shaping socio-economic and environmental injustice in the past; the vast diversity and complexity of the many religious traditions, to cite a few (Tucker and Grim 1997). However, there are compelling reasons for overcoming these and other obstacles. Interfaith cooperation for the sake of finding common solutions for shared concerns has been addressed by ARC using the slogan 'Come, proud of what you bring of your own, but humble enough to listen' (Palmer and Finlay 2003:47).

As pointed out by DeWitt in his comment of Pope Francis' '*Laudate Si'*, the time is 'not for mere dialogue, but dialogue that results in appropriate action that is at once swift and deliberative' (2016:276). To this affect, *Laudate Si* refers to the need for an integrated ecology of humans and nature, reflected by cross-disciplinary research, supported by academic institutions that 'ensure broad academic freedom'. The Pope recognizes that a change in culture is needed to face the sustainability crisis and achieve 'a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm'.

In their thesis about the contribution of Christian belief to addressing the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) Altmann et al. (2012) suggests that many actions are currently centred around sustainable use, or 'reduce, reuse, recycle' (2012:vii), but that further and wider reaching actions towards social change are required. They suggest that a move towards an explicit sustainable development strategy would be greatly beneficial to help religious communities achieve further behaviour change.

How best to develop learning for sustainability within faith communities is another question. Altmann et al. believe that the development of 'a trusted ambassador of sustainability from within a religious community' may help develop the necessary understanding about sustainability within the community while also creating faith representation within 'the secular world of science' (2012:48). Koehrsen (2017:16) believes that 'religion can have a triggering, facilitating, or blocking effect' on the sustainability debate, and suggests that 'religious actors' can engage in the sustainability debate through campaigning, adopting sustainable practices, and disseminate sustainability-related values and worldviews.

DeWitt holds that 'action-forcing' mechanisms are essential to integrate science and ethics with praxis, only so can 'environmental stewardship and human well-being' are incorporated into government decision-making (2016:279). He considers the CBD (Convention of Biological Diversity) is one such mechanism that centralizes

information and creates the means for implementing pro-environmental actions. The derived Millennium Development Goals (UN 2000) recognize the important role of a diversity of beliefs for sustainable development. The importance of working across governments, organizations and funding bodies, as solutions for the present crisis cannot be found in isolation, is a common theme (Palmer and Finlay 2003; DeWitt 2016).

Perhaps one of the greatest ways for faith communities to take the sustainability message forwards already lies at the heart of every religion: storytelling is a powerful tool to convey a message (Palmer and Finlay 2003; Altmann et al. 2012).

> For it is by telling and remembering traditional stories that the religions are often most persuasive and positive in protecting the environment, both by reminding people of the right way of doing things and by promoting a greater sense of responsibility for natural resources. (Palmer and Finlay 2003:51)

On the matter of 'wisdom' the Rev. Jeremy Law (Dean of Chapel at Canterbury Christ Church University, personal note) comments: 'Thus, for example, the Hebrew Bible speaks of a God who creates the world through wisdom. In Proverbs 8:22–31, wisdom is an aspect or activity of God metaphorically personified as God's master worker who gives shape to the world. Thus, the world is not random, but ordered—it has structures and limits and so is meaningful. And what is wisdom's goal in creation? It is that of a habitable world, the formation of a flourishing community of creation'.

Faith may also have a role to play in 'fostering a more expansive appreciation for the complexity and beauty of the natural world' (Tucker and Grim 1997). As the current environmental crises are not merely limited to social, economic and political aspects, it is perhaps generated and nurtured by a disconnect between ourselves and the natural world. Religious discourse and leadership may be a means to heal and restore connection and care. As remarked by De Witt:

> Beyond our stewardship of biology and the biosphere, and of law and culture, it is vital in our current krisis juncture that we maintain our awe and wonder for the world in which we live and work. (DeWitt 2016:280)

7 Conclusions

This article emphasizes that neither an approach focusing only on the economy, politics or regulations, nor a separated religious, ethical or moral approach can solve the environmental challenges of today and tomorrow alone. All organizations and communities, included religious communities, have a role to play in moving society towards sustainability. Several researches have demonstrated that a religious belief can offer guidance for a more sustainable and respectful life. As presented in this article the world's faiths are concerned and aware of their responsibility; in several official statements they highlight the importance and necessity of sustainability and combating climate change. Still, there is much research required to test how best to

bring sustainability to the world's religious communities. How do the world religions perceive a sustainable life and how could that be achieved according to them?

For many people, like Munjed Murad from the Center for the Study of World Religions, it is not only an environmental crisis but also a moral and spiritual one that requires us to understand ourselves as creatures of nature, who are embedded in life cycles and dependent on ecosystems. Munjed Murad favours a broad philosophical and religious understanding:

> "A tree no longer symbolizes transcendence, the absoluteness in his trunk and the infinite in his branches, no longer being that but rather a source of paper […] it becomes a commodity. […] the problem is rooted in a denial […] of sacredness. A solution must involve an integration of the sacred into our world view, into our understanding what nature is.

In the end, it does not matter if you live a sustainable life, respecting the life of a tree out of a faith in God's creation or out of a 'secular' ethical conviction that we have to preserve the earth for future generations. What matters is to reconnect with nature and lead a sustainable life.

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