



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

Introduction

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Published online 20 September 2023

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.¹ For Christianity, we focus on the Catholic tradition given it is the largest Christian denomination,² 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 summon 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.³ 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

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).⁴ 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.⁵ 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”.⁶ “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

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 incorrect⁷ – 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

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

10 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.¹¹

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

This article is part of the special issue “Care for the Poor, Care for the Earth: Catholic-Muslim Dialogues on Development”, edited by Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano.

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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