

## OX|BER workshop

### Christian-Muslim Dialogue on Ecology and Socio-Environmental Justice

Campion Hall, 23–24 June 2022

#### Summary notes<sup>1</sup>

From 23<sup>rd</sup>–24<sup>th</sup> June 2022, the Laudato Si' Research Institute in conjunction with Humboldt University of Berlin held a workshop at which speakers from both Christian and Muslim traditions presented on various ecological and socio-environmental justice topics such as: the ecological turn in religions and development; the role of the Catholic Church in promoting socio-environmental justice in the Amazon region; the re-configuration of the relationship of al-Azhar University and the state in post-coup Egypt; eco-theologies in South African Initiated Churches; Qatar's proposed Qur'anic Botanic Garden as an example of Islamic environmentalism; Qur'anic eco-theology; and faith-based ecological conversion. These talks were arranged in two parts, the first focused on Christian and Muslim communities as civil society actors and agents of socio-environmental justice, the second on how social injustices and environmental degradation shape religious communities, their teachings and practices.

#### **23<sup>rd</sup> June 2022**

##### ***Religion and Environment: Exploring the Ecological Turn in Religions and Development – Ignatius Swart and Philipp Öhlmann<sup>2</sup>***

The workshop began with a presentation by Ignatius Swart and Philipp Öhlmann, which set the scene with a literature survey of how the religion and development literature has taken on a more ecological turn. They observed that religious actors have been recognised as important factors in sustainability, for e.g., [UNEP's Faith for Earth initiative](#). Religions can play a fundamental role in societal and cultural transformation and contribute to the radical transformation which the spiritual and moral roots of the ecological crisis require. The speakers considered 1) how religious communities act as an ideological backbone for socio-ecological transformation, and 2) how much theological contributions and discussions propel environmental action.

Hinduism and Buddhism have long had a positive view of nature. Christianity has seen a dualist view of nature and humankind which has facilitated human exploitation of nature (White). Islamic engagement with ecology is evident in literature since 1960. Swart and Öhlmann referred to Gottlieb on the 'greening of religion' and how ecology has become a 'lay religion'. Concerns about climate change, technology, space and place are resulting in retrieval, re-evaluation and reconstruction.

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<sup>1</sup> This summary was written by Farhana Mayer based on her handwritten notes taken during the workshop and on the presentations' recordings. They were edited by Séverine Deneulin.

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius Swart is Professor at the Department of Religion & Theology at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Philipp Öhlmann is Feodor Lynen Research Fellow at the Department of Religious Studies and Theology of the University of Botswana and Head of the Research Programme in Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt University. The presentation was based on the chapter 'Religions and the Environment' for the *State of the Evidence in Religions and Development Report*, published in 2022 by the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith and Local Communities at <https://jiliflc.com/2022-state-of-the-evidence>. A revised version has subsequently been published in *Religion & Theology*: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10044>.

In the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey cited by the speakers, religious leaders globally were asked how important it will be to strengthen environmental protection after the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic: 47% considered it extremely important and 21% held it to be very important. The religious leaders were also asked if they agree that environmental destruction is more important than the coronavirus pandemic globally: 21% strongly agreed while 31.4% agreed. This data according to Swart and Öhlmann indicates an ecological turn within religious communities.

Regarding the religion-environment nexus, the speakers also noted that from 2016 to 2021 there has been noticeable evidence of ongoing and intensifying scholarly interest in this issue. They noted two strands of debates, the first within the field of religion and development (R&D), the second, wider inter/multi-disciplinary debates beyond R&D. They noted that the UN launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, provided much momentum. However, while global warming is the main concern of the SDG agenda, religions have more of an ecological concern, looking at social issues such as gender, violence, poverty alleviation, and how faith actors can implement the SDG agenda, while environmental issues have been a secondary focus. That being said, a number of publications have given increasing attention to environmental matters and religion, such as two World Bank surveys studying the positive correlation between religion, religiosity and environmental concerns; another ethical reflection on stewardship in animal husbandry and sustainability as pertinent religious concerns; the practical contribution of religious organisations to 'integral sustainability'; religion as a potential driver of sustainable consumption; and Christian theological reflections on environmental justice and wholeness in the African context.

Looking at the growing body of literature around Catholic social teaching, the speakers highlighted Pope Francis's papal encyclical, *Laudato Si'* (LS, also issued in 2015), which has promoted integral ecology and post-development thinking. Going beyond the SDGs, which remain within the paradigm of global economic development, the speakers pointed out that some authors have noted that LS has a far-reaching conceptual paradigm shift from 'integral human development' to 'integral ecology' and that it points towards a post-capitalist era of 'eco-solidarity' with its recognition of the cry of the earth and the cry of the human poor. This approach looks for an ecological conversion. Swart and Öhlmann note that previous religious scholarship had no explicit discussion of development. *Laudato Si'* is a meaningful bridge and is inspiring religious environmentalism on the ground as well as the development of eco-theologies and eco-justice ethics within the multi-disciplinary academic fields of religion and ecology. 'Ecologies' has become the preferred term in religious environmental discourse.

The speakers noted that new constructs and syntheses are emerging such as the methodological distinctions of retrieval, re-evaluation and reconstruction. Or the three phenomena driving the discourses now: climate change, technology and space/place. The speakers also highlighted that the concept of 'spiritual ecology' is gaining ground and may be used as an umbrella term comprising a large, complex, diverse and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces of religions, spiritualities and nature, ecologies and environmentalism. Recent literature in the fields of religion and theology indicate new engagements with the issues of climate change, sustainability and religious environmental activism. In conclusion, the speakers felt that the idea of a wholesale 'greening of religions' may be premature with the exception of some pioneering works, and that it is more fitting to speak of an ecological turn in religious communities. Recent reviews indicate that more research is needed especially regarding the effects of religious ecology on religious communities and on their members' attitudes, values and environmental action.

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***Researching Religion in Development: An Analysis of the Role of the Catholic Church in Promoting Socio-Environmental Justice in the Amazon Region – Séverine Deneulin<sup>3</sup>***

The speaker started with addressing the current state of ‘religion and development’ (R&D) in development studies. She then proposed a framework for R&D based on the works of Amartya Sen, and argued for moving beyond a R&D research agenda towards a social and environmental justice research agenda which includes religion but also pays attention to agency, inequality and human and environmental rights. Deneulin defined religion as ‘an as an institution which has emerged from social living, a “structure of living together”, which is characterised by discourses, social norms and practices, which is heterogenous and in constant evolution’; it is not static. In this regard, her focus in the presentation was on, firstly, religious teaching and discourses on right relationships with other living beings (human and non-human); and secondly on the civil society organisations which embody or advance these religious teachings.

Deneulin noted that the 1990s witnessed the interest of international development donors in the work of religious institutions in health and education among poor communities worldwide, and how the reality on the ground showed the need to better understand the role of religious beliefs in developmental processes (organisations and practices). She highlighted Tomalin’s four-phases of R&D:<sup>4</sup> 1) arguing for the field; 2) establishing the field; 3) deconstructing the field through critique; 4) reconstructing the field. She observed that much R&D work has focussed on the leadership of faith communities to the exclusion of women, youth, and lived religion, and that there is no conceptual framework for R&D research. Deneulin drew attention to Tomalin’s call (2021: 106) for ‘a new conceptual perspective’ which goes beyond ‘prioritizing the agenda of secular global development institutions and includes local faith communities and their objectives’.

Deneulin pointed out that based on case studies, local faith communities are frequently concerned with matters to do with human flourishing, agency/voice, and protection of life. Using Sen’s capability approach (with its value-based account of development and focus on agency and public reasoning), Deneulin proposes that an evaluative framework for assessing ‘development’ could include: ‘being able to relate to one’s ancestors, land and animals; or ‘how well ecosystems are doing’ as part of evaluating spaces of development; and would center public values such as how a religious tradition has come to value endangered species. She pointed out that public reasoning processes include enabling the conditions through which people can do and be what they have reason to value, and that religious teachings and organisations play a role in this through: helping the marginalised self-organise and helping their voices to be heard; forming or modifying what people value; and building networks of solidarity. In other words, religions inform what people value and mobilise people.

The speaker proposed that a reconstructed R&D conceptual framework would analyse what religions teach about relationships (ecological and social) and about how people should

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<sup>3</sup> Séverine Deneulin is Director of International Development at the Laudato Si’ Research Institute, Campion Hall. The presentation is based on work in progress with Mariz Tadros (Coalition on Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Institute of Development Studies at Sussex) on a comparative analysis of the ‘Religion and Development’ and ‘Freedom of Religion or Belief’ frameworks in development studies.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Tomalin. 2021. “Religions and Development: A Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual?”, *Religion*, 51:1, 105-124, DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2020.1792055

live (good socio-environmental and ecological living), and how religious practices and organisations actually embody these teachings. In other words, she proposed a framework that looks beyond religion and development to examine questions of inequality, flourishing and power and politics, without neglecting faith-based actors.

Before turning to her case study of the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM), Deneulin first provided some background points regarding the Amazon: 1) its well-known place in global climate regulation, fresh water supplies, biodiversity etc.; 2) its grave deforestation; 3) the criminalization of those who resist deforestation and them being accused of being 'anti-development', noting that 25% of Indigenous groups have suffered violations of their human rights.

REPAM is a de-centralised social network of over 1000 organisations.<sup>5</sup> It is not a faith-based organisation. It transcends the institutional structures of the Catholic Church and national states. It emphasises the role of the Church as 'sister and listener' and not 'mother-teacher'. REPAM has a bottom-up dynamic with local actors driving the action in their territories. Deneulin described this as 'the peripheries becoming the cornerstone'. REPAM provides numerous connections between civil society actors and local governments, and it pools resources for certain projects. However, there is no centralised record of members or action nor evaluation of impact.

The aim of REPAM is to promote cooperation among Church organizations, civil society actors, and communities in protecting the cultural and biological diversity of the Amazon and in defending the right to life of vulnerable populations. It takes its mandate from the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM in its Spanish acronyms) in 2007 at Aparecida, to 'raise awareness in the Americas about the importance of the Amazon for all humanity; [...] [t]o establish ... in the Amazon basin, a joint pastoral ministry with differentiated priorities to create a model of development that favours the poor and serves the common good' (§ 475).<sup>6</sup> REPAM works locally and globally on both territorial and systemic levels. It seeks to halt, or mitigate, the intensification and expansion of extractive industries and infrastructure projects, and to transform the unsustainable global culture and economic development that drives extractivism at the territorial level. REPAM operates by researching and mapping what is happening in the Amazon. It communicates social transformation, seeking to provide new narratives and alternatives to development. It builds global networks, with links to the Holy See, diplomatic agents and others, seeking how to impact 'the other jungles ... because if you don't change; nothing will change in our territory'.

REPAM's achievements so far include the Amazon Synod which took place in October 2019 promoting integral ecology as an alternative to development. The Synod followed the values of the Amazonian peoples and their understanding of life which is 'characterized by the interconnection and harmony of relationships between water, territory and nature, community life and culture, God and various spiritual forces', or 'good living'. Another achievement is the establishment of the School of Human Rights, together with the Inter-American System for the Defense of Human Rights, which seeks to empower local actors by equipping them with legal knowledge and the tools to speak up and denounce human rights violations. A third significant achievement is the Information System on the Ecclesial Reality

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<sup>5</sup> The case study on REPAM is based on a consultancy report on REPAM by Adrian Beling (Canada Research Chair in Transition to Sustainability, King's University) for the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex.

<sup>6</sup> The document can be found in Spanish at <https://celam.org/aparecida/Espanol.pdf>

of Pan-Amazonia. This played a crucial role in monitoring COVID-19 and is now a permanent health observatory.

Deneulin also noted some of REPAM's weaknesses, namely, that they denounce 'development' but do not propose or embody alternatives to development; they have not done any work on addressing the unsustainable culture of consumerism and accumulation which drives extractivism in the Amazon; there seems to be a reluctance to build network coalitions beyond ecclesial actors who share similar goals; and there is a conflict within the Catholic Church about what an ecclesial body should be and do.

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### ***The Cap v. the Turban: The Reconfiguration of al-Azhar-State Relationship in Post-Uprising Egypt – Mohamed S. Mohamed*<sup>7</sup>**

Mohamed's presentation, statedly not directly linked to environmental topics, addressed the political aspects of the prestigious Sunni religious institution, Al-Azhar, (first established during the era of the Shī'ī Fatimid dynasty (909–1171 C. E.), and its changing socio-political role and impact under different regimes in Egypt – a relation which is not without its consequences for global environmental politics given Egypt's hosting of the COP 27 in November 2022. Mohamed focussed on the recent conflict between Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayyeb's and President Sisi, exploring how the Egyptian uprising of 2011 reconfigured the relationship between the religious institution and the state and liberated al-Azhar relatively from a long-standing tradition of state appropriation. Mohamed also touched on how external factors and actors/parties impacted al-Azhar, e.g., the Emirates support Tayyeb as an alternative to Sisi.

The speaker noted that the changeable relationship between religious scholars ('*ulemā*') and the state is a long-standing one. Academic scholars have conducted extensive research on the link between these two parties and on what role the former have on the latter in Muslim countries, with special attention being paid to the Azharite religious scholars. Mohamed stated Al-Azhar has never been isolated from political institutions. In Egypt the clerics and the state have long struggled with each other.

Prior to the rule of Muḥammad Ali (started in 1805), Al-Azhar was the link between the Egyptian people and foreign rulers. Viewing the religious scholars ('*ulemā*') as an indigenous threat, M. Ali attacked them and undermined their authority and minimised their control over education and law, reduced their economic support from endowments and essentially reduced their power. In more recent history, however, President Nasser (r. 1953–70), Anwar Sadat (r. 1970–1981) and Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981–2011) instrumentalised Al-Azhar for state political propoganda. Nasser turned Al-Azhar from an independent entity into a state institution impregnated with notions of socialism and Arab nationalism. Subsequently, under Sadat and Mubarak, Al-Azhar enjoyed unprecedented privileges including absolute authority over religious matters. However, the state also instrumentalised al-Azhar to confront its Islamist rivals.

Mohamed's paper looked at how al-Azhar negotiated its role and rights as if it was a political party during the Egyptian uprising (as a result of which President Mubarak was ousted in 2011) and onwards, and how its engagement in global politics impacted its relationship

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<sup>7</sup> Mohamed S. Mohamed is a PhD Candidate at George Mason University. He specializes in the Sociology of Religion, Politics of the Middle East, Religious Education and Religious Institutions. He was a Visiting Student at the Oxford Department of International Development. The presentation is based on his doctoral research.

with the state. Mohamed noted that Grand Imam al-Tayyeb was personally close to Mubarak and in the protests (in which some religious scholars participated even leading some of the Tahrir Square protests), and how he proclaimed the protests to be rebellion and contrary to the shariah, and the protestors as ‘hell-bound’. Al-Tayyeb also attacked non-Egyptian religious scholars who criticised Mubarak’s regime, describing them as ‘betraying religion’. Al-Tayyeb and the scholars who followed him, were publicly criticised especially when he refused to resign in protest at the regime’s violence against the protestors. In short, Mubarak had al-Tayyeb’s full support until the end. Mohamed observed that this was understandable given that al-Tayyeb was a loyal public servant, a member of Mubarak’s National Democratic Party’s Policy Committee, and because Al-Azhar and the NDP were in a close and mutually beneficial relationship.

But after Mubarak’s defeat, al-Tayyeb did a 180° turn and praised the protestors for “igniting the flames of freedom and democracy.” After Mubarak was ousted, and while Egypt was under the interim rule of the Security Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), Al-Azhar’s main aim was to be independent from state control, as it was clear that Islamists were gaining popularity and would most likely gain political power (which they did in the elections of 2012). Therefore, al-Azhar uniquely managed to negotiate its legal and constitutional rights in a way that guaranteed it unprecedented independence from the state.

Despite these new variables (i.e., Egyptian Uprising, legal and constitutional privileges, etc.), Mohamed argued, recent works on al-Azhar and its intersection with politics are still anchored in a parochial “instrumentalization” thesis. These instrumentalization-based arguments intensified in the aftermath of the 2013 military coup, claiming that the coup regime has reappropriated al-Azhar in the course of its relentless efforts to regain control over the religious discourse. Mohamed asserted that these works tend to ignore these new privileges that al-Azhar gained after the uprising when exploring the al-Azhar-state relationship. The legal and constitutional privileges, al-Tayyeb’s public popularity as well as his relations with the United Arab Emirates — which has been instrumentalizing the religious institution’s religious capital over the last few years — granted the religious institution the power to challenge the seemingly unchallengeable coup regime and unprecedentedly defy the highest political authority. These new dynamics between the religious institution and the state, could be seen in the ongoing conflicts between al-Sisi and al-Tayyeb over renewing the religious discourse and their strife over the extent to which the state should interfere in the religious sphere.

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### ***What Makes an Eco-Theology? Complex Empirical Findings on Eco-Theologies in African Initiated Churches in South Africa – Juliane Stork<sup>8</sup>***

Observing that the environmental crisis presents an opportunity to re-explore our vision for the future, Stork’s presentation focussed on conceptions of eco-theology and what constitutes recognition of an eco-theology, as a recognised eco-theology is given better dissemination and generates further discourse. Classical academic recognition of a theology requires that it be defined by theologians at higher education institutions; is presented in writing; and is accepted by theologians. Smaller churches are not even recognised as having a theology. Stork offered the following definition of eco-theology, namely that it is ‘a

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<sup>8</sup> Juliane Stork is John S. Mbiti Research Fellow at the Research Programme for Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, Humboldt University. The presentation is based on her doctoral research.

reflection on the relationship between God and the human environment from the viewpoint of a believer in God’.

African Initiated Churches (AIC) are founded by Africans and are located in Africa. Most AICs do not have an eco-theology in the classical sense of theologies. However, AICs have experienced the consequences of climate change directly. Stork provided on-the-ground insights into South African AICs and how they related their conception of what is happening in nature to human activity. She noted how their responses may amount to a lived eco-theology even if not in the classical sense of theology whose normal markers include written theologies devised by theologians at institutions of higher education and accepted by theologians. She highlighted the South African AIC’s Ubuntu-inspired eco-theology whereby everything is related to everything, and everything impacts everything. Their thinking includes ideas like ‘I am because you are’; ‘I exist because you do’; ‘we are because everything is’. And we are all connected and affect each other.

Some AICs are involved in social alleviation of the consequences of climate change; for instance, provision of necessities for those in need, and communal prayers after floods. There are also communal prayers for rain during times of drought. Communal prayers are an example of communal religious activity in response to effects of climate change and also display an overlap between Christianity and traditional African beliefs and customs.

In individual interviews conducted by Stork, the following connections were provided as possible explanations for the effects of climate change: infertile land was deemed to be the result of human blood-letting on that land which then needs to be purified and redeemed; unwanted behaviours (e.g., sexual misbehaviour) and generational conflict were seen as causes of undesirable natural phenomenon that needed some explanation, (e.g., failed harvests). These individual explanations for changes in the climate/environment are not necessarily shared by others nor arrived at in consultation with others.

Stork described AICs as involving the personal oral religious reflections on the relationship between God and people’s experiences with the human environment. They are expressions of ‘lived religion’. Noting [Vahakangas \(2018\)](#) empirical approach, ‘theological meaning-making is not exclusively cerebral’, Stork points to how eco-theology is religious meaning-making of ecological happenings. Eco-theologies are created in AICs by the following means: using the Bible and prayer as inspiration and going to them to understand what is happening around one (e.g., climate changes); pastoral networking; church members bringing topics for discussion and prayer into the church; coincidental outsiders also bringing in topics; and bodily experiences – i.e., physical experiences of climate change.

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### ***The Qur’anic Botanic Garden: An Example of Islamic Environmentalism in Qatar – Naiyerah Kolkailah<sup>9</sup>***

Kolkailah noted that religiously and culturally rooted indigenous expressions of environmentalism are on the rise in the Muslim world. These expressions are rooted in an Islamic worldview, inspired by Islamic beliefs and teachings from the Qur’an and Hadīth,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Naiyerah Kolkailah is a DPhil Candidate in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford. Her presentation is based on her doctoral research, and forthcoming in the special issue of Religion and Development on ‘Christian-Muslim Dialogue on Development’ edited by Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano.

<sup>10</sup> The *Hadīth* genre of literature presents narrations ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ and his companions. The narrations comprise the words of the Prophet on a variety of topics and / or accounts of what he did in specific circumstances.

and aim to actualise socio-ethical ideals and achieve higher religious aims. However, Kolkailah noted that there is still a dearth of scholarship on how to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of Islamic environmentalism. She observed that the situation of the Arab Gulf region is still understudied. In general, while there are shared climate and environmental challenges, there is a diversity in environmental thought, policy and practice.

Kolkailah's specific 'case-study' was about the Qur'anic Botanic Garden (QBG) which is an institution established by the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development. Although the QBG maintains a plant nursery and seed bank, the physical garden remains a theoretical idea at present. The QBG aims to combine environmental aspirations of modern botanic gardens with explicitly religious and cultural aims, making explicit reference to Islamic scriptural texts and teachings. The QBG aims to identify, collect and research plants that are mentioned in the Qur'an and in Ḥadīth, as well as the local flora not mentioned in scriptural texts. The QBG has held international forums on plants and the environment. The QBG seeks to apply modern scientific approaches to conservation of biodiversity and have conservation programs. It also aims to advance the Islamic concept of humanity's role as stewards of the earth through community engagements and educational books for both adults and children. Its leaders stress protection and respect of God's creation as an Islamic religious obligation. The central role of moderation and biodiversity conservation in Qur'anic and prophetic teachings are underlined. Parallels are drawn between plants, trees and spiritual rootedness. QBG thus has a 'hybridized garden vision' bringing together Islamic botanic teachings/materials/attitudes with modern scientific environmental approaches.

Kolkailah pointed out that some young Qatari environmentalists see the QBG as an irrelevant attempt to create a green image for Qatar, since the QBG does not actually address the real climate challenges such as desertification and dependence on non-renewable hydrocarbon energy. These young Qataris therefore see a disconnect between the idea of such a garden and the reality on the ground and question the need for QBG. They feel there is a disparity between such pursuits and the top environmental needs of the country.

In addition to questions about relevance, there are social and equity concerns. Grassroots environmental initiatives do not always receive funding from the state in Qatar, whereas the QBG does. While the QBG has the potential to address the imbalances and negative impacts of social marginalisation, the reality might be very different. For instance, it is highly unlikely that migrant workers – who are economically and socially marginalised and whose physical and mental health is not supported, and who are overworked – will be given equal access to the main garden if and when it comes into existence.

In summary, Kolkailah highlighted the proposed Qatari Qur'anic Botanic Garden as an overtly Islamic environmental institution, which uses clearly religious concepts and language, and presents potential theological and ecological value, for example, growing all the plants mentioned in the Qur'an, and using recycled water. At the same time, she noted the shortfall between theory and practice in the idea of this botanic garden. She also shared how younger Qatari environmentalists question the ecological value of such a venture which does not actually address the environmental challenges which Qatar faces. Kolkailah also drew attention to the discordance between this proposed endeavour and the situation of migrant workers who are highly marginalised both economically and socially and whose human dignity and human rights are not respected.

**24<sup>th</sup> June 2022**

***Art and Ecology– Stanislav Shmelev<sup>11</sup>***

[Environment Europe](#), which the speaker founded, engages in the science of sustainability and has thematic areas of research covering, for example: macro-sustainability and economics of sustainability; ecosystems; sustainable cities; renewables and climate change; green and circular economy; complex system and multicriteria decision aid; investment in sustainable business models; and cultural initiatives. The last, cultural initiatives, involves using visual images to explore and express how humanity makes an impact on the planet – something others have also done.

Shmelev presented a sequence of beautiful and evocative photographs of the natural world from a photography project he undertook. The purpose of the project was to highlight that ‘nature and eco-systems matter and should be cared for’. Introducing the book, the speaker spoke about biodiversity and economics and how eco-systems are measured and evaluated. Shmelev pointed out that ecological economics has been discussed for decades. The key themes and issues in ecological economics include: the way progress is measured, how GDP is insufficient as a measuring tool and the need to get beyond GDP and use other alternative measures; decision making processes and the need to move towards more multi-dimensional tools which allow all the different aspects (economic, environmental, social) of decisions to be taken into account.

The roots of the book project ‘[Ecosystems: Complexity, Diversity and Nature’s Contribution to Humanity](#)’ (published in 2018 by Environment Europe Press) go back to 2007/8 when the speaker was involved with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in developing a way of assessing and measuring the value of eco-systems. The project was funded by the government of France. In the course of the project, it became very apparent that money cannot be used to express the value of nature, and could also risk create opportunity for the exchange value of money to kick in. For instance, if a monetary value is set on a forest, it sets up the potential scenario of a company purchasing it and then using the land and trees for whatever purpose they wish. Shmelev pointed out that money, which leads to exchange and purchase, cannot be used to value nature and he came to the conclusion that multicriteria decision making, involving for example, economic and social and environmental criteria – would be needed for such assessments.

A year later the speaker was invited by UNEP to be involved in an international project on ‘the economics of eco-systems and biodiversity’ (TEEB), in which a monetised view of nature was prevalent. Recently, the International Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, in its ‘Methodological assessment regarding the diverse conceptualization of multiple values of nature and its benefits’, published in July 2022, concluded that monetizing and marketing the eco-system are damaging and detrimental and not the best framework for evaluating ecosystems and nature.<sup>12</sup>

The speaker then presented slides of photographs, such as about glacial melting, water and oil and mining sites, Brazilian farming in deforested areas and the impact on indigenous people; oil spillage in the Gulf of Mexico; the toxicity of a dried out Californian lake that had been polluted. Shmelev spoke of how the photographs combine aesthetic beauty with evidence of human impact on the planet and the power of juxtaposing these things in a

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<sup>11</sup> Stanislav Shmelev is Oxford-based photographer and Director of Environment Europe. His photography can be viewed at <http://stanislav.photography/portfolio>.

<sup>12</sup> A summary for policy-makers can be downloaded at <https://ipbes.net/the-values-assessment>

single photograph. Such images are powerful means of introducing people to the issues at hand.

The [Eco-Systems album project](#) was designed to present complex ecosystems in a simple and visual way. It was staged as an exhibition in 2018 at the Mathematical Institute at the University of Oxford. The Eco-Systems slides presented in the talk were taken by the speaker and linked to various album chapter topics: water – a German photo of an alpine lake; food – a Ghanaian image of a woman and fruit basket and mobile phone; using biomass for heating – an image of a British oak forest, most of Britain used to be forested once, forests which were cleared away and used by successive human generations; biodiversity per se – image of a Colombian kingfisher and a Malaysian palm forest; use of wave energy - an image of the wave patterns on a British beach; soil – an image of a Nepalese rice field; oxygen production – an image of a Colombian leafy plant used to shade coffee plants; image of the national Malaysian butterfly - one of the consequences of deforestation in Malaysia is that the national butterfly is now found only in dedicated enclosures; the image of an Indian monk in saffron robes – as an example of how nature informs and shape cultures; the importance of natural sacred spaces– such as Mt Kailas – which underscores how a monetary price cannot be set on nature. The speaker ended with a display of further books on the topics he raised in his presentation, with sample photographs available on his website at <http://stanislav.photography/portfolio>.

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### ***Qur'anic Eco-Theology - Tareq Moqbel<sup>13</sup>***

The speaker started by stating that while there are no direct solutions in the Qur'an to the current environmental crisis, nevertheless the Qur'an like the Bible can contribute and already has contributed to ways of thinking about the environment. Moqbel noted that the Qur'an is an open text and susceptible of a plurality of interpretations. His own reading is grounded in the perspective of the Andalusian and Yemenite mystic Ibn 'Arabī who spoke of the cosmos as Divine Expansion expressing the Divine Plenitude. Moqbel uses this wide interpretive framework which at the same time remains loyal to the letter of the Scripture. Moqbel also acknowledged Norman Habil's approach to ecological hermeneutics which also informs Moqbel's approach: namely, suspicion, identification and retrieval. Moqbel applied the first element to the exegetical tradition, suspecting that the historical exegetes read the Scripture through an Anthropocentric lens. Moqbel applied the element of identifications to how the reader identifies with actors in the Qur'an, be those actors in narratives or otherwise.

Applying the aspect of retrieval to nature – retrieving the voice of nature in the Qur'an, Moqbel highlighted the following principles of eco-theology in the Qur'an:

1. Nature as an active agent: God addresses nature including the earth, instructing it; and nature is articulate, it has a voice. For example, Q. 17:44 states 'The seven heavens and the earth and everyone in them glorify Him (God).' Moqbel compared this to Psalm 50:6, 'The heavens declare his righteousness.' He also cited other verses, both Qur'anic and Biblical, which indicate that the heavens and the earth weep for the righteous.

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<sup>13</sup> Tareq Moqbel is Research Fellow in the Study of Love in Religion at Regent's Park College, University of Oxford. The presentation was prepared specially for the workshop and is not linked to a publication.

2. Nature as a work of God and intrinsically beautiful: For example, Q. 32:7 states that God 'gave everything its perfect form'. Moqbel sees in this verse a call for humankind to make things beautiful too. Moqbel compared Q. 32:7 to Ecclesiastes 3:11, 'He has made everything beautiful in its time'. But Moqbel also noted that beauty in the Qur'an is not like Greek symmetrical beauty. Human beauty is not an aesthetic quality but relates fundamentally to virtue.
3. Humans and nature as interconnected: Moqbel cited Q. 20:55, 'From (the earth) We created you' and Genesis 2:7 'then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground'. With regard to this interconnectedness, Moqbel brought in Ibn 'Arabī's notion of the unity of being which can be utilised in Islamic environmentalism for re-thinking the relationship between humanity and the cosmos. Moqbel cited William Chittick on how, according to Islamic philosophical notions, a wedge cannot be driven between people and nature. Moqbel compared this to Isaiah 28-35, citing Hilary Marlow who noted that each of these Isaiah texts demonstrates a fundamental interconnectedness within the created order: abundant regrowth of the physical world is accompanied by physical and moral healing among humans.
4. Promotion of moderation and critique of consumerism: Moqbel cited Q. 8:63, 'And [He] brought their hearts together. Even if you had given away everything in the earth you could not have done this, but God brought them together.' Moqbel pointed out that this verse indicates that Love and many other things cannot be purchased, and should not be thought of in terms of money. Moqbel compared the Qur'anic verse to the Song of Songs 8:7, 'If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.'

Moqbel also noted some scriptural verses which challenge environmentally friendly readings of the Qur'an. For instance, there are Qur'anic eschatological verses which speak in violent terms of the destruction of the natural world at the end of time. As an example, Moqbel discussed Q. 18 (*Sūrat al-Kahf*, 'The Cave'), which speaks of how God will, at the end of the earth's time, make the surface of the earth as barren dust (Q. 18:8); and verse 18:87, which describes how God will remove the mountains and flatten the earth on the day when all people are gathered at the end of time. Moqbel said that such verses need not be read as environmentally unfriendly verses, but rather may be seen as showing how the fates of humanity and the natural world are interlinked and will be broken only on Doomsday. They may also be read as a reminder of the intrinsic worth of nature and therefore the ethical responsibility of preserving nature.

There are also some scriptural verses which speak of the earth being created for human being and of the cosmos being subservient to the human race, and this may be read as implying human dominance and hierarchy which has the potential for exploitative interpretations. Moqbel cited Seyyed Hossein Nasr's explanation that even the verses which speak of nature being subjected to humanity are to be interpreted in a circumscribed manner, such that humans may use them but only in keeping with God's laws and only because the human is God's vicegerent on earth.

In the final part of his presentation, Moqbel discussed the Moses-Green Man narrative in Q. 18. Moqbel drew attention to how divine mercy precedes knowledge, according to Q. 18:65. This verse speaks of the Prophet Moses and his travelling companion meeting someone whom the Qur'an does not name but describes as a servant of God on whom God had mercy and on whom God bestowed knowledge directly from God's own presence – in that order. This mercied man, recipient of direct Divine knowledge, was not named in the Qur'an but

later Muslim tradition calls him *al-Khidr*, 'the Green Man'. The Khidr-Moses narrative presents three enigmatic episodes. Commenting only on the third, Moqbel noted the following.

The Khidr-Moses relationship is not easy. Khidr takes some convincing to allow Moses to accompany him, because as Khidr put it, 'you will not be able to be patient with me because how can you be patient about things concerning which you have no knowledge' (Q. 18:67–68). Moses promises not to question Khidr about what he does – but thrice breaks his promise. The third breaking of his silence occurs when Khidr scuttles a boat, seemingly for no reason (18:71–79). When Moses questions him about this, breaking his promise yet again, Khidr explains that the boat belonged to poor people who made their living from the sea, and he damaged it because there was a king coming seizing every serviceable boat by force. Moqbel relates Q. 18:71–79 to liberation theology.

Moqbel pointed out the eco-theological significance of this narrative. Firstly, Moses and Khidr encounter each other at a point which was identified to Moses by God as being where a fish in his possession escapes and swims away. It is thus the fish that indicates the meeting place to Moses. Moreover, this point of the meeting is where two seas meet. Here non-human creation enables a human prophet of God to find knowledge [through the teaching of the Green Man] and to find God. Secondly, in this narrative Khidr represents spiritual substance and Moses represents form. So Moqbel interprets this story as teaching a prioritisation of substance over form, showing how the Khidr-Moses narrative teaches the importance of the inner meaning (*bāṭin*) over the literal (*ẓāhir*) meaning, of inner over outer, of spiritual over materialist meanings. Thirdly, there is the symbolism. Moqbel cites Seyyed Hossein Nasr that symbolism sacralises the cosmos and enables humans to find meaning in the cosmos that surrounds us. Nature is thus imbued with spiritual significance and meaning.

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### ***Radical Ecological Conversion in Light of Losing Biological Diversity – Oliver Putz<sup>14</sup>***

As a biologist and theologian, Putz presented a Roman Catholic perspective on the implications of the biodiversity crisis. He noted that after reaching tipping points, the earth system reorganises relatively quickly: this can be positive or not (an explosion can be a manifestation of a reorganisation). The Earth system can bounce back from certain impacts – until it reaches a certain point. Planetary boundaries set the limit for what degree of human impacts the Earth system can withstand. So far, ten such quantitative boundaries have been proposed. Restraining human impacts to within a safe operating space allows the Earth system to retain its stability and resilience. However, crossing these boundaries increases the risk of irreversible ecological changes. Where exactly these tipping points lie is a matter of debate, which is why scientists have assigned a 'zone of uncertainty' in which the risk of permanent damage is elevated but might still be reversible if immediate actions were taken. Currently, studies suggest that we have already passed tipping points with regards to our impact on (1) the integrity of the biosphere (biodiversity loss), (2) biogeochemical flows, and (3) novel entities (e.g., plastic pollution). Stratospheric ozone-depletion apparently is still within a high-risk action space, though given the concerted efforts of the world nations this might be recoverable. Land system changes and climate change are, surprisingly still in the zone of uncertainty with an increasing risk of far-reaching impacts but they are on the rise

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and in a few more hundred years, if nothing changes, the consequences will be catastrophic. Ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion and freshwater use are in the safe operating level.

Focussing on biodiversity, Putz referred to recent studies which show that the resilience of the Amazon Forest is down by three quarters, that is, three quarters of the rainforest is not able to compensate for its losses. The current rate of biodiversity loss is approximately 100–1000 times higher than the natural rate of loss without the impact of humanity. This rate was reached in just over 200 years. If it continues, this would mean the loss of 5000 species every year. Biologists now deduce that we may already be in the period of the sixth mass extinction on earth. Most of the previous mass extinctions took place over long periods of time. This sixth one will be much more dramatic in terms of time.

Putz observed that we are at an ecological *Kairos*, that is, an opportune time that requires an existential decision. Humanity needs to make an existential decision involving not only practical measures but also a re-evaluation and re-defining of the meaning of our life and the role of faith. For Christians, the most important *Kairos* was the time of the incarnation of the Christ. Citing theologian Paul Tillich, for whom all other *Kairos* need to be situated in the light of the central *Kairos* of the incarnation, Putz highlighted that the role of faith has to be negotiated for the socio-ecological crisis. He asked the question ‘What can the role of the Roman Catholic tradition be in instigating, supporting and bringing about a global transformation?’ What does negotiating the meaning of faith and of our existence in this ecological *Kairos* involve? What needs to be done? The answer, Putz argued, is a *Radical Ecological Conversion*.

The term ‘ecological conversion’ was introduced by Pope John Paul II in 2001, and caught the attention of Roman Catholic theologians. It is also used in Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si’*. The term refers to transformation by means of ecological conversion. Putz drew attention to the Pope’s points in *Laudato Si’* that the intrinsic value of all things is not quantifiable – it is God-given, and that the technocratic paradigm – which quantifies and places a value on things making them ownable – has resulted in the current crisis. To what *Laudato Si’* calls the technocratic paradigm, Pope Francis proposes the paradigm of integral ecology as alternative. Transforming the technocratic paradigm requires an ecological conversion that goes to the roots of individuals and societies – hence the term ‘radical ecological conversion’ coined by the speaker and eco-theologian Celia Deane-Drummond to highlight that the ecological conversion requires going to the roots.

A Radical Ecological Conversion involves individual inner transformation. It needs a fundamental re-orientation of existential concern for integral ecology; it requires us to ‘turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering’ (LS 19). This involves seeing oneself as interconnected to a whole, which leads to developing a new habit of concern and action, which in turn feeds into societal transformation. Putz gives the example of transitioning from ubiquitous plastic use to a plastic-free society. Societal transformation requires a new economic system and new approaches of governance, which should be achieved through a participatory and multi-disciplinary engagement, and have global checks and balances based on social and ecological justice. How this can be achieved needs to be negotiated.

A necessary first step would be a personal spiritual conversion, or *metanoia*, that is, turning to God and not turning away from Him anymore. [This is relatable to the Islamic concept of *tawbah*, which denotes repenting of sins and misdeeds and turning back to God.] This transformative change of heart and spiritual conversion is an existential re-orientation

and would have the corollary of turning to the integral view of understanding ourselves as part of the whole of creation. Putz drew attention to practical wisdom (phronesis) and virtue ethics and how the protection of creation must be viewed as a virtue in light of the signs of the time. For Christians, this means relating to the central *Kairos* of Christianity. In sum: 1) The socio-ecological crisis as an ecological *Kairos* demands an existential transformation; 2) Such a change of paradigm can only be achieved by means of a radical ecological conversion (metanoia); 3) The Church needs to be part of this personal and societal metanoia through practical wisdom.

Putz spoke of moving from spiritual practice to new governance and observed that the Church can contribute in the following ways: a) Educating itself and others on how to be a Christian in this ecological *Kairos* against the background of the central *Kairos*; b) Presenting information that others can use; c) Supporting individuals to undergo this conversion; d) Acting – both internally within the Church and externally. Internal action would involve theological reflection, developing a science of faith and looking at how to negotiate questions of meaning. On the matter of meaning, Putz proffered that the crisis we are in is an old crisis in a new instantiation: the crisis of meaning, with the difference that this time the crisis of meaning is unfolding in such a way that it could lead to the destruction of humanity and the planet as a whole. Further internal action would involve re-thinking concepts of spiritual practice, e.g., applying old spiritual practices in a new context or developing new spiritual practices. Internal action involves the Church undergoing internal institutional conversion and inner transformation. Externally the Church could: a) be a better moral exemplar; b) participate in societal dialogue on governance and in political discourse; c) exert social and societal influence – but not in a fear-driven way rather in an open-minded way, like that in which *Laudato Si'* was written, together with members of other faiths regarded as brothers and sisters; and d) bring Prophetic witness to this *Kairos* moment.

Putz summed the above up in three points. The Church can support individual transformation and must undergo an institutional conversion. The Church can, should and must act *ad intra* and *ad extra*. It needs to lead by example and offer prophetic witness.