

Interreligious Dialogue to Promote Environmental Flourishing: An Ongoing Imperative

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Abstract

In today's world, as the global community grapples with escalating environmental crises and other issues plaguing humanity, there is need for collective action that transcends national, cultural, and religious boundaries. This paper explores the significance of interreligious dialogue in addressing environmental challenges and promoting ecological flourishing. It highlights the moral responsibility emphasized by diverse religious traditions to protect and nurture the environment. Through interfaith collaboration, individuals and communities can collectively engage in environmental stewardship based on shared values and teachings. The paper discusses the imperative of interreligious dialogue, its role in addressing environmental concerns, and its potential to foster environmental flourishing through various forms of dialogue – dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchange. It argues that interreligious dialogue (re)contextualized to environmental concerns is an urgent and ongoing imperative and an opportunity for solidarity among people of diverse faiths and worldviews, fostering a harmonious relationship with the Earth as humanity's common home.

Keywords: *interreligious dialogue, environmental crisis, ecology, interfaith collaboration, environmental flourishing*

1. Introduction

In our modern era, as the global community faces escalating environmental challenges, the need for collective action to address ecological crises becomes increasingly pressing. In this context, interreligious dialogue emerges as a potent and vital tool to promote environmental flourishing. Recognizing the interdependence between human beings and the natural world, numerous religious traditions have emphasized the moral imperative to safeguard and nurture the environment. By engaging in interreligious dialogue, individuals and communities from diverse religious backgrounds can join forces, drawing upon shared values and teachings, to forge a collaborative approach towards environmental stewardship. This paper explores the ongoing imperative of interreligious dialogue as a means to foster environmental flourishing in our time. By examining the potential of interfaith collaboration, we can uncover insights and strategies that inspire sustainable practices and nurture a harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world.

This paper delves into the imperative by discussing the following: 1) the need for interreligious dialogue in the contemporary world; 2) the need for interreligious dialogue to address environmental concerns; and 3) the ways to promote environmental flourishing through

the four forms of dialogue—dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchange. The thesis of this paper is that interreligious dialogue to respond to the concerns regarding the environment is an imperative because it is not only a matter of urgency but also an opportunity for people of diverse faiths and worldviews to stand in solidarity with one another and with the Earth—our common home.

2. Interreligious Dialogue in the Contemporary World

Friedrich Max Müller, who was a Sanskrit scholar and philologist, declared, “To know one [religion] is to know none.”¹ As a scholar of comparative religion and mythology, Muller well understood that religious self-understanding was integrally connected to learning and appreciating about the beliefs of other people from other religious traditions. Understanding other religions sheds light on one’s grasp of one’s own religious adherence. Vietnamese American theologian Peter C. Phan observed that in the contemporary world, one cannot be religious without being interreligious. Phan asserted that this is the “imperative of our time” because the widespread phenomena of globalization, religious pluralism, and transnational migration have caused people of various cultures to end up living right next door to one another.² According to Phan, the objective of interreligious dialogue is not to merge all world religions into a singular global religion, but rather to address the potential for violence and animosity that may arise from religious differences. Its primary goals include dispelling mutual misunderstandings and prejudices, fostering a deeper understanding and respect for diverse religious traditions. The ideal outcome is to cultivate religious harmony, which does not seek to eliminate differences and diversity but instead aims to enhance one’s own religious heritage through engagement with others. The fundamental purpose of interreligious dialogue is to foster global justice and peace.³

Global religious leaders agree that interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the contemporary world. This was certainly the sentiment of all those who gathered in Kazakhstan in mid-September 2022 for the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. This event was originally initiated by Nursultan Nazarbayev, the first president of Kazakhstan, in 2003.⁴ The idea was to create a platform for dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders of different faiths. The first gathering was held in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) on September 23-24, 2003 with the theme “Religion, Society and International Security.”

¹ F.M. Muller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution with Two Essays of False Analogies, and the Philosophy of Mythology* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1873).

² Rumi Forum, “Peter C. Phan: Being Religious as Being Interreligious,” YouTube, July 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrSCMZu47HM>

³ Peter C. Phan, “Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue at Vatican II Some Rethinking Required,” *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* 42, Article 5 (2012). <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol42/iss1/5>

⁴ Qazadstan Tarihy, “Congress of World Leaders and Traditional Religions,” August 8, 2013, <https://e-history.kz/en/e-resources/show/13450/>

The theme of the 2022 gathering appropriately focused on the role of global and traditional religious leaders in the spiritual and social advancement of humanity during the period following the pandemic. In his welcome speech, President Tokayev set the agenda for discussions and reflections by remarking that “as we face an increasingly turbulent geopolitical post-pandemic world, it becomes more crucial to develop new approaches to strengthening inter-civilizational dialogue and trust at the global level.”⁵ The declaration released at the conclusion of the two-day event affirms the essential role of religions in helping to address contemporary global dilemmas. One of the major concerns which the leaders paid attention to was caring for our common home. In his speech in the first plenary session, Pope Francis mentioned this as one of four important tasks that needed to be carried out post-pandemic. The others were becoming artisans of communion, addressing the challenge of peace, and promoting fraternal acceptance.⁶

In the statement issued at the conclusion of the two-day event, the Congress declared “that in the conditions of post-pandemic world development and the globalization of processes and security threats, the Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions plays an important role in the implementation of joint efforts to strengthen dialogue in the name of peace and cooperation, as well as the promotion of spiritual and moral values.”⁷ In the document, the religious leaders also “appeal to all people of faith and goodwill to unite in this difficult time and contribute to ensuring security and harmony in our common home—planet Earth.”

The event in Kazakhstan is by no means exceptional and there have been countless interreligious initiatives at various levels throughout the world over the years. This is significant because through both theoretical analysis and practical application, dialogue has demonstrated its effectiveness as a powerful tool for driving the necessary positive transformations within our global community. Various religious traditions have recognized the significance of dialogue, utilizing it to de-escalate conflicts and contribute to peacebuilding, policymaking, organizational and societal development, as well as the pursuit of inclusive and peaceful societies.⁸

Moreover, it is not only religions that see interreligious dialogue as essential to building a harmonious and sustainable society but also secular institutions like the United Nations. In 2010, in a meeting at the United Nations, King Abdullah II of Jordan introduced the idea of organizing a World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) with the aim of fostering a culture of peace and nonviolence. The UN General Assembly swiftly embraced the concept, passing resolution A/RES/65/5, which designated the first week of February annually as World Interfaith Harmony

⁵ Remarks by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Religions-Congress.org, <https://religions-congress.org/en/news/novosti/1679> (accessed June 10, 2023).

⁶ Pope Francis, “Opening and Plenary Session of the 'VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions' 2022,” Vatican.va, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220914-kazakhstan-congresso.html>.

⁷ Declaration. Religions-Congress.org, <https://religions-congress.org/en/page/deklaraciya-uchastnikov-VII> (accessed June 10, 2023).

⁸ The International Dialogue Centre, *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging Differences and Building Sustainable Societies* (Vienna: KAICIID, 2021), 9.

Week. This resolution urges governments, institutions, and civil society to observe the week through diverse programs and initiatives that advance the objectives of WIHW.⁹ When religious leaders are able to converge in these contexts, they demonstrate that they are “united in their conviction that spiritual faith is not a cause for violence and oppression, but for reconciliation, justice and peace. This message rings true and powerful against those preachers of hate that still try to use religion as a false justification for oppression and violence.”¹⁰

3. Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental Flourishing

Interreligious dialogue is a dynamic and transformative approach to tackling the pressing issue of the ecological crisis. It brings together individuals from diverse faith backgrounds, recognizing that environmental challenges like climate change, pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity affect people of all faiths. To address these issues, collective action and cooperation are essential. The Dalai Lama has emphasized the need for a global ethic that incorporates both spiritual and secular values in order to address environmental challenges. The Buddhist leader remarked, “I believe it is very important that we try to make this twenty-first century a century of dialogue. In addition to non-violence in our relations with each other, we also need to employ a much greater sense of non-violence in relation to the environment, because a healthy natural environment is essential to the survival of life on our planet.”¹¹ Unfortunately, the Dalai Lama observed that oftentimes, instead of meaningful dialogue, there are numerous confrontations that prevent peacebuilding and environmental safeguarding. However, he emphasized that this is a pivotal generation, and “we have the capability and the responsibility. We must act before it is too late.”¹²

Why is interreligious dialogue and collaboration an imperative in addressing the ecological crisis? I propose the following reasons.

3.1. Shared Responsibility

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environmental crisis demonstrate that religions recognize the shared responsibility of all people to care for the planet. In Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*, he specifically identified the Earth as our “common home” in which all people have the responsibility to care for. Pope Francis has repeatedly called for interfaith cooperation to address environmental challenges, stating that “the urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a

⁹ United Nations, “World Interfaith Harmony Week,” <https://www.un.org/en/observances/interfaith-harmony-week> (accessed June 10, 2023).

¹⁰ Alvaro Iranzo Gutiérrez, Ambassador of Spain in Saudi Arabia, quoted in The International Dialogue Centre, *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging Differences and Building Sustainable Societies* (Vienna: KAICIID, 2021), 18.

¹¹ Dalai Lama, *Dalai Lama on the Environment: Collected Statements, 1987-2007*, India: Environment and Development Desk, TPI, 2017, 147-48.

¹² Dalai Lama, *My Tibet*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1990, 80.

sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change.”¹³ For Pope Francis, dialogue with other religions to address the ecological crisis is part of a multi-faceted dialogue involving the international community, in national and local policies, in decision-making, in politics and economy, and between religion and science.¹⁴ In other words, there is a need to “enter into dialogue with all people about our common home.”¹⁵

The concept of a “common home” holds profound significance as it underscores the collective responsibility of all individuals in nurturing the well-being of the Earth. By employing the analogy of a home, Pope Francis emphasized the Earth’s cohesive nature, where every element is interconnected and interdependent. While humans maintain their distinctiveness from the Earth, they exist as integral parts of its interconnected web. In recognizing the Earth as a shared dwelling, people of diverse religions and cultures can be regarded as members of a global family, entrusted with the duty to preserve their common abode and foster harmonious relationships within it. A Vietnamese proverb aptly captures this sentiment, stating, “When the house is clean, it feels cool; when the bowl is clean, food tastes good.” Consequently, the flourishing of the Earth directly benefits humanity.

The language of caring for our “common home” as shared responsibility has resonated with other religious leaders as well. On the occasion of the “Day for the Protection of Creation” in 2017, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued a message calling upon “all people of good will to undertake the good struggle for the protection of the natural environment and the establishment of solidarity.” In the same message, Bartholomew called on businesses to stop “trading” in the environment. The Patriarch asserted, “The short-term benefits dictated by the rise of living standards in some parts of the world simply camouflage the irrationality of abuse and conquest of creation. Corporate business that does not respect the planet as our common home cannot be sanctioned as business at all.”¹⁶

The theological foundations presented by Pope Francis in support of his plea for shared responsibility have also found resonance among Muslim scholars and leaders. In a commentary on *Laudato Si’*, A. Rashied Omar remarked, “I concur with Muslim scholars such as Joseph Lumbard, Anas Malik and Ibrahim Ozdemir, who have each engaged with *Laudato Si’*, that the important themes in Pope Francis’s encyclical on the environment resonate well with the teachings of Islam.”¹⁷ Omar emphasized the necessity for Muslims to actively participate in the

¹³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 2015, no. 13, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

¹⁴ *Laudato Si’*, no. 163-201.

¹⁵ *Laudato Si’*, no. 3.

¹⁶ World Council of Churches, “Ecumenical Patriarch Calls for Solidarity in the Protection of Creation,” August 31, 2017,

<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/ecumenical-patriarch-calls-for-solidarity-in-the-protection-of-creation>

¹⁷ A. Rashied Omar, “A Muslim Response to Pope Francis’ Environmental Encyclical *Laudato Si’*,” *Contending Modernities*, December 17, 2015, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/field-notes/a-muslim-response-to-pope-franciss-environmental-encyclical-laudato-si/>

dialogue with *Laudato Si'* and contribute significantly to fostering a robust global solidarity centered on responsible environmental stewardship. By assuming the role of conscientious caretakers, Muslims have the potential to play a pivotal role in advancing meaningful global commitments that prioritize the well-being of all individuals and the planet as a whole.¹⁸

3.2. Counter the Image of Interreligious Conflict

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on environmental concerns serves as a powerful means to transcend the stigma associated with interreligious conflicts. The prevalence of religious strife, prominently highlighted in daily news, has contributed to the perception of religions being perpetually engaged in adversarial encounters. Despite the messages of love and forgiveness espoused by religious leaders, instances of animosity and ill-treatment towards other groups and faiths have cast doubt on the sincerity of their teachings. Consequently, a significant number of individuals have cited interreligious conflict as a catalyst for their disillusionment with organized religion, leading them to identify themselves as “nones”¹⁹ – those who do not affiliate with any particular religious group. It is disheartening that the positive contributions made by religious institutions worldwide often remain overshadowed by the negative events unfolding within interreligious relationships.

The destructive impact of extremist religious organizations such as the Islamic State (IS), as well as fundamentalist factions within Hinduism and Christianity, has reinforced the notion in society and academia that religion is inherently prone to violence.²⁰ Charles Kimball, an ordained Baptist minister and expert in Comparative Religion comments, “It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.”²¹ While interreligious conflicts are often described as multifaceted by experts, acknowledging the involvement of factors such as politics, economics, and cultural identity,²² it is undeniable that the religious dimension receives significant attention and is frequently cited as a key factor contributing to discord by both the parties directly involved and external observers. The association between religion and conflict emerges as a recurring theme, capturing considerable focus and prompting extensive discussions.

In order to overcome this stigma and disillusionment, interreligious collaboration on environmental issues emerges as a transformative avenue. By shifting the focus from divisive religious disputes to shared concerns for the well-being of the planet, religious communities can forge meaningful partnerships and demonstrate their capacity for collective action and unity. Such collaborations exemplify the potential for religions to rise above their differences and work

¹⁸ Omar, “A Muslim Response to Pope Francis’ Environmental Encyclical *Laudato Si'*.”

¹⁹ Pew Research Center, “Why America’s Nones Left Religion Behind,” August 24, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>

²⁰ W.T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

²¹ Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002), 1.

²² William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*.

together in addressing global challenges. By promoting dialogue, cooperation, and responsible stewardship of the Earth, religious groups can showcase the positive and constructive role that faith can play in fostering harmony and sustainability.

It is imperative to recognize that interreligious conflicts do not encapsulate the entirety of religious experiences or the teachings of all religious traditions. Many individuals and communities within religious contexts actively advocate for peace, interfaith understanding, and social justice. By emphasizing the positive contributions and diverse expressions of religious beliefs, we can reframe the narrative surrounding religion and move beyond the notion of inherent conflict. Through dialogue, empathy, and collaborative efforts, religions can reshape their public image and inspire hope for a future where shared values and a collective sense of responsibility guide their actions.

3.3. Counter Negative Impact of Religious Climate Change Skeptics

A religious united front is necessary to counter the impact of religious groups who either do not see the value of religious collaboration when it comes to addressing common concerns or do not perceive environmental issues in the same way. For example, on April 27, 2015, prior to the release of *Laudato Si'*, the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation addressed an open letter to Pope Francis, which raised concerns about the accurateness of some of the climate science. It claimed that empirical evidence suggests that there is “no rational basis to forecast dangerous human-induced global warming, and therefore no rational basis for efforts to reduce warming by restricting the use of fossil fuels or any other means.”²³ For this group, fossil fuel use actually demonstrates the glory of God. “By using fossil fuels to generate energy to lift billions of God’s precious children out of poverty, we liberate from the tomb of the earth the carbon dioxide on which plants and therefore all the rest of life depend. This beautifully reveals the Creator’s wisdom and care for all of His creation—people, animals, plants, and the earth itself.”

The Cornwall Alliance, founded by Calvin Beisner, is one of the most prominent evangelical voices challenging the consensus on anthropogenic climate change. It takes a different stance on the ecological crisis compared to many mainstream environmental organizations. In the executive summary of a document titled “A Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor,” it states, “The world is in the grip of an idea: that burning fossil fuels to provide affordable, abundant energy is causing global warming that will be so dangerous that we must stop it by reducing our use of fossil fuels, no matter the cost. Is that idea true? We believe not. We believe that idea – we’ll call it ‘global warming alarmism’ – fails the tests of theology, science, and economics.”²⁴

²³ Cornwall Alliance, “An Open Letter to Pope Francis on Climate Change,” April 27, 2015, <https://cornwallalliance.org/anopenlettertopopefrancisonclimatechange/>.

²⁴ Cornwall Alliance, “A Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor,” May 1, 2009, <https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/a-renewed-call-to-truth-prudence-and-protection-of-the-poor/>

The organization argues that many proposed solutions to environmental problems, such as heavy government regulation and restrictions on economic growth, are not effective and can have unintended negative consequences for human flourishing, particularly for the world's poor. They believe that economic growth, technological advancements, and free markets can help alleviate poverty and lead to a healthier environment. The Cornwall Alliance also questions the extent and impact of human-caused climate change. They contend that the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change is overstated, and that natural factors play a significant role in shaping global climate patterns.²⁵ They advocate for further scientific research and critique policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions as potentially harmful to economies without providing significant environmental benefits.

3.4. Religions' Interest in Temporal Issues

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environment demonstrate that religions are not only concerned with matters regarding the afterlife removed from the temporal world. World religious traditions exhibit a profound concern for temporal issues because they are deeply invested in the well-being of humanity. This concern extends beyond spiritual matters, encompassing the physical, emotional, and social aspects of human life. Religions acknowledge that temporal concerns have the potential to impact the overall health and flourishing of individuals, and ultimately, their spiritual well-being. As Christine Schliesser pointed out, many faith actors “view human flourishing as a holistic process as they aim at providing sustenance for the body and the soul.”²⁶ This notion of integral well-being holds that physical, emotional, and spiritual health are interconnected, influencing and nourishing one another.

For instance, poverty and illness are recognized as pressing temporal concerns that can profoundly affect an individual's spiritual journey. Religions understand that when individuals grapple with basic needs, such as access to food, shelter, and healthcare, their capacity to engage in spiritual pursuits can be compromised. Such temporal hardships can engender emotional distress, erode one's sense of hope, and impede the ability to focus on matters of the spirit. As a Vietnamese saying states, “You can't do well in religion without food.” Recognizing this interplay, religions may direct their efforts towards alleviating poverty, providing aid to the sick, and promoting environmental sustainability, all in service of helping their followers maintain spiritual health.

Moreover, religions emphasize the interconnectedness of all aspects of human life. They recognize that temporal concerns have ripple effects, not only on individuals but also on families, communities, and society at large. By addressing temporal issues, religions seek to create an environment conducive to the practice of virtue, compassion, and justice, all of which are

²⁵ Cornwall Alliance, “Protect the Poor: Ten Reasons to Oppose Harmful Climate Change Policies, 2014,” <https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/protect-the-poor-ten-reasons-to-oppose-harmful-climate-change-policies/>

²⁶ Christine Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 39.

integral to spiritual growth. Confucianism holds that one cannot develop one's virtues without the proper environment where one's potential is nourished and actualized. Religions also view the pursuit of temporal well-being as an expression of their core values and teachings. They advocate for ethical living and social responsibility, calling on their followers to actively engage with the world and work towards the betterment of society.

Religions often provide moral frameworks that guide individuals in navigating temporal concerns, encouraging service, compassion, and the promotion of justice as manifestations of faith. Christine Schliesser noted, "Whoever tries to separate 'spiritual' issues of worship and prayer from 'worldly' concerns for justice and development has not grasped that both are intrinsically interwoven in the DNA of Christian faith."²⁷ It was undoubtedly the conviction that "Just as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly"²⁸ that compelled Dietrich Bonhoeffer to participate in the plot to overthrow the Nazi regime—an action that led him to be caught and hung on April 9, 1945.

What is true for Christianity is also true for Buddhism, which despite its soteriological goal of emancipation from mundane existence, is far from being escapist. This ultimate goal does not prevent a Buddhist from caring for others in this world. On the contrary, compassion, loving kindness, and a host of other Buddhist virtues that demonstrate care for others are precisely the means that help us to achieve this ultimate goal.²⁹ Thus, human actions on earth hold implications for where we find ourselves in the afterlife. Buddhism presents us with an ultimate vision of no more suffering and permanent happiness in *nibbāna*. Buddhism also teaches us to not be attached to things in this world, indeed not attached to even ourselves. But Buddhism does not advise us to be uncaring towards the things that belong to mundane existence. To be detached and to be uncaring should not be understood to be the same thing. Buddhist detachment does not in any way derail us from exercising relationally positive actions towards other people and things. This is precisely the reason why the late Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh founded the movement of Engaged Buddhism in the 1960s. This movement called on Buddhist practitioners who utilize their practice, wisdom, and insights gained from meditation and dharma teachings to directly confront real-world obstacles related to social, political, environmental, and economic suffering and injustice.³⁰

The advice for religions to keep their attention on spiritual matters instead of what's going on in the world is inherently contrary to the nature of religion, no matter what tradition we are referring to. Thus, when religions dialogue and collaborate in order to address environmental

²⁷ Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs*, 31.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 59.

²⁹ Anthony Le Duc, "A Framework for Buddhist Environmentalism: The Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions." *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* 28, no. 1 (2018): 177–203.

³⁰ Oxford Reference, "Engaged Buddhism,"

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095751887;jsessionid=62F8D1C0C163FB26CB1342C9414A7C8C> (accessed June 10, 2023).

issues, they are in fact doing something intrinsic to their very existence. They affirm that they have a legitimate stake in the well-being of the world because the flourishing of the environment also affects the well-being of humanity.

3.5. Witnessing Value of Finding Common Ground

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on environmental concerns present a compelling case for the importance of finding common ground and fostering relationships across diverse religious traditions. Despite the significant differences in worldviews, beliefs, and practices that exist among various religions, the shared commitment to addressing environmental issues highlights the potential for constructive cooperation and mutual understanding. Such collaboration not only serves to protect the planet but also offers a model for other groups and institutions to envision their place in a diverse world and build meaningful relationships with others.

One of the significant strengths of interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environment is the recognition that caring for the Earth is a shared responsibility that transcends individual religious boundaries. Air pollutants do not choose to hover over people of one religious group over the other. By engaging in dialogue and collaborative efforts, religious traditions can contribute their unique perspectives, knowledge, and resources to tackle these global issues collectively. In doing so, they exemplify the possibility of setting aside differences to address a common concern, fostering a sense of unity and purpose.

Furthermore, interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environment have a broader societal impact. By showcasing cooperation among different religious traditions, they inspire other groups and institutions to reconsider their own relationships with diverse communities. In a world marked by polarization, division, prejudice, and intolerance, religious dialogue and collaboration hold enormous witnessing value. It exhibits the possibility of working together towards a common goal and demonstrates the potential for mutual exchange and respect across differences. It encourages and models the way for individuals and organizations outside the religious sphere to embrace dialogue, empathy, and collaboration as essential tools for addressing complex global issues.

The collaborative efforts of religious traditions in addressing environmental concerns can also mobilize significant social and political change. Religions often possess extensive networks and resources that can be harnessed to raise awareness, promote sustainable practices, and influence policymakers. By coming together, religious communities can amplify their collective voice and advocate for policies that prioritize environmental protection and sustainability. Through joint initiatives, they can educate their respective followers and wider communities, fostering a sense of environmental responsibility grounded in shared values and teachings.

4. Four Forms of Dialogue in the Environmental Context

Interreligious dialogue encompasses a range of forms that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The four widely recognized forms include the dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchange. These forms are not isolated but intertwine to promote understanding and cooperation. For instance, the dialogue of action should be guided by solid theological principles rooted in each respective religious tradition. Likewise, the dialogue of theological exchange should foster direct experiences of different faiths. Within the context of environmental care, we delve into these forms of interreligious dialogue to explore their significance.

4.1. Dialogue of life

The term “dialogue of life” is often used to describe the everyday interactions and relationships that occur between individuals from different religious backgrounds. The Catholic Church’s document “Dialogue and Proclamation” defines dialogue of life as “where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.”³¹ Life is the word that we use to describe all that take place as we go about our days, whether it is working in the yard, taking a morning run at the neighborhood park, grabbing some groceries from the local supermarket, or participating in some community activities organized by our church, mosque, or some other social organizations.

Because life is the broadest common denominator in the human experience, the dialogue of life can take many different forms, including shared community activities, social events, and personal relationships. As societies continue to become more culturally and religiously diverse due to migration, dialogue of life can take place between neighbors, co-workers, and college roommates. Because people nowadays often marry outside of the religion, families are also becoming more religiously diverse. Nearly 40 percent of Americans report being married to someone of a different faith.³² In predominantly Buddhist Thailand where I am living, as much as 80 percent of Catholics marry non-Catholics. Thus, the dialogue of life can take place even in our own livingroom and dining table day after day. The key to this dialogue is the recognition of shared human values, such as compassion, respect for life, and the importance of family and community.

The dialogue of life can play an important role in promoting environmental flourishing by fostering cooperation and collaboration between individuals and communities of different faiths. It is an opportunity for people to come together to share their knowledge, experiences, and values, and to work together towards a shared goal of protecting and preserving the natural world. The Dalai Lama advocates for dialogue to begin with the people in our household. He wrote, “So the concept of dialogue must begin at the family level. As individuals we must look

³¹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation,” 1991, no. 42, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

³² Stephanie C. Toelle and Victor W. Harris, "Are You Marrying Someone from a Different Culture or Religion?" UF, September 27, 2018, <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FY1337>

within, investigate, analyze and then try to overcome contradictory ideas. We must not lose hope or despair of the irritating conflict we find inside ourselves. So these are some of the ways in which we can ultimately solve environmental problems.”³³

The “dialogue of life” can also promote environmental flourishing by encouraging people to develop a deeper appreciation for the natural world and its sacredness. In Thailand, people often tie ribbons around certain trees, especially older ones. This practice, commonly known as “spirit tree,” is rooted in a traditional belief system that combines elements of animism, Buddhism, and local folklore. It is believed that spirits or deities reside in these ancient trees and have the power to protect the surrounding environment and bring good fortune to those who pay respect to them. Tying ribbons around old trees is considered an act of reverence and a way to seek blessings. The ribbons, usually brightly colored, are tied around the trunk or branches of the tree in the hope of attracting the attention of the spirits or deities that reside within. It is believed that when the wind blows, the ribbons flutter, creating a spiritual connection between the people and the tree’s divine inhabitants.

This practice is not limited to specific locations but can be observed throughout Thailand, including in temples, forests, and even urban areas where old trees still stand. The act of tying ribbons is often accompanied by prayers, incense offerings, and other rituals to express gratitude, make wishes, or seek protection and good fortune. People may also leave small offerings such as flowers, fruits, or coins at the base of the tree as a sign of respect and gratitude. The belief in the spiritual significance of old trees and the act of tying ribbons around them reflects the deep-rooted connection between nature and spirituality in Thai culture and spirituality. Trees are considered sacred symbols of longevity, strength, and wisdom. They are seen as guardians of the land, linking the human and spiritual realms. By demonstrating respect for these trees, people aim to maintain harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm.

Additionally, the practice of tying ribbons around old trees serves as a way to raise awareness about environmental conservation. By emphasizing the sacredness and importance of these trees, it encourages people to appreciate and protect the natural world around them. It promotes a sense of environmental stewardship and reminds individuals of their responsibility to safeguard the Earth’s resources. While Christians and Muslims in Thailand may not hold the same beliefs regarding the tree spirits, as they immerse themselves in this Thai cultural milieu, they can learn to appreciate the spiritual as well as environmental significance of this practice. By reflecting on the environmental implications of this practice, Christians and Muslims may discover ways within their own tradition that demonstrate the sacredness of nature and promote environmental well-being. As it has been observed, one of the causes of the modern-day ecological crisis is the desacralization of nature brought about by modern scientism that attempts to displace the presence of the divine in the world.³⁴

³³ Dalai Lama, *Dalai Lama on the Environment: Collected Statements, 1987-2007*, India: Environment and Development Desk, TPI, 2017, 79-80.

³⁴ Anthony Le Duc, “Responsibility as a Primary Environmental Virtue in Islam,” *Asian Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 2, no. 1 (2023): 187-206.

4.2. Dialogue of action

The concept of “dialogue of action” in interreligious dialogue refers to the process of engaging in collaborative efforts between people of different faiths “for the integral development and liberation of people.”³⁵ It is concerned with humanitarian issues and involves working together to identify and address the root causes of social problems and to develop practical solutions that can benefit communities.

The dialogue of action is grounded in the notion that people of different faiths believe that universal ethical principles have the potential to serve as a constructive influence in building a fair and compassionate society. These common values include upholding the sanctity and worth of every individual, fostering a sense of belonging and active participation in communities, honoring the rights and duties of each person, assisting marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society, acknowledging the value of labor and workers’ rights, promoting solidarity, and nurturing a responsible approach towards the environment.³⁶

Environmental care is ideal for the dialogue of action due to its intrinsic connection to the very essence of our shared existence. It serves as a unifying force that transcends religious boundaries, reminding us that the protection and preservation of our planet is a responsibility we all bear. By engaging in the dialogue of action on environmental care, we embark on a journey of exploration and discovery of how to turn spiritual teachings and profound religious insights into praxis of faith that concerns the well-being of all. According to the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), faith-based organizations (FBOs) have gained recognition as significant contributors in the fight against poverty, enhancing public health, preserving the environment, and advancing sustainable development. Particularly at the local level and in collaboration with faith actors, their adaptability plays a pivotal role. FBOs serve as sustainable institutions, and policymakers have increasingly involved them in initiatives related to environmental preservation and the responsible management of natural resources.³⁷

It is because of this understanding that the international body has been actively engaging with religions, setting itself up as a platform for interfaith collaboration on environmental action. The Faith for Earth Initiative was launched by the UNEP in 2017. The initiative aims to engage with faith-based organizations and faith leaders to promote environmental awareness and action. Its main goal is to leverage the influence and networks of faith-based organizations and leaders to help address environmental challenges and promote sustainable development. The initiative focuses on issues such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and sustainable consumption and production.

³⁵ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, no. 42.

³⁶ Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz, “Religions in Action: The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Public Health (Oxf)* 43, no. 2 (June 7, 2021):1-2.

³⁷ UNEP, “Why Faith and Environment Matters,” <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment-programme/faith-earth-initiative/why-faith-and-environment-matters> (accessed June 10, 2023).

Other notable interfaith efforts on behalf of the environment have also been launched over the years. For example, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) was started in June of 2017 at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, Norway in a first-of-its-kind summit of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist religious leaders. In attendance were also climate scientists, rainforest experts, and indigenous peoples' representatives from various countries. According to its website, the organization aims to “provide a platform for religious leaders to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, civil society organizations and businesses on actions that protect rainforests and safeguard the indigenous peoples that serve as their guardians.”³⁸ The initiative has organized several interfaith events including a meeting of religious leaders in Brazil in 2018 to discuss rainforest protection and a series of interfaith workshops in Indonesia in 2019 to address the deforestation crisis in the country.

Religions for Peace is an international coalition of representatives from different religions, founded in 1970, with the aim of promoting multi-religious cooperation for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.³⁹ Its mission is to work with religious leaders, communities, and institutions to promote peace, end poverty, and protect the environment. The organization is involved in various initiatives, including interfaith dialogue, peace education, humanitarian aid, and advocacy for peace and justice. It has a presence in over 90 countries and operates through a network of national and regional interfaith councils. Religions for Peace is headquartered in New York City, and its work is supported by various governments, foundations, and individuals.

While these examples represent dialogue of action at the international level, there is no reason why the same dialogue cannot take place at the neighborhood or local level, where members of the same community come together on the issue of environmental care. At the community level, people of different faiths can collaborate on environmental care through various actions such as organizing clean-up days, community gardens, and tree planting initiatives. During community clean-up days, individuals from diverse faith communities can engage in not only picking up litter but also conducting recycling drives to ensure proper waste management. They can educate their communities about the importance of recycling, segregating waste, and minimizing plastic consumption to reduce pollution and landfill waste.

Another local effort that can be initiated at the local level is community gardens that can become spaces not just for growing organic fruits and vegetables but also for promoting biodiversity and wildlife conservation. Participants can establish native plant gardens that attract pollinators and create habitats for local fauna. They can also incorporate composting techniques to minimize waste and enrich the soil naturally. The gardens can serve as educational resources, offering workshops on organic farming methods, permaculture, and the benefits of growing food locally. The garden with its variety of fruits and vegetables that come in different shapes and

³⁸ Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/about-us-2/> (accessed June 10, 2023).

³⁹ Wikipedia, “Religions for Peace,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religions_for_Peace (accessed June 10, 2023).

colors can become a symbol of harmony and richness amidst diversity in the community. Besides having aesthetic and spiritual value, the surplus produce from the garden can be shared with community members in need, promoting food security and fostering a sense of solidarity. The idea of community garden is not new, and there are many examples of successful community gardens in various countries that people can study in order to start their own local project.

A third initiative that local communities can implement to collaborate on environmental care is tree planting, which can have numerous positive impacts. Faith groups can play a significant role in this effort by focusing on selecting native tree species that are well-suited to the local ecosystem. By involving local schools and youth organizations, they can educate the younger generation about the vital role of trees in mitigating climate change, providing oxygen, and preventing soil erosion. This educational aspect can encompass lessons on the interconnectedness between trees and the environment, including their ability to support biodiversity and act as carbon sinks. To maximize the impact of tree planting efforts, faith communities can organize events in areas prone to deforestation or those in need of ecological restoration, such as degraded parks or urban spaces. By targeting these locations, they can transform barren landscapes into vibrant green areas. This not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the community but also improves air quality by absorbing pollutants and releasing oxygen. Furthermore, the planted trees provide shade, creating cooler microclimates and offering respite from the heat for community members during the hot summer months.

The collaborative nature of the above-mentioned initiatives strengthens the sense of unity and shared purpose among different faith communities. It fosters a collective commitment to environmental stewardship and empowers individuals to take tangible action to improve the local ecosystem. By working together, faith groups can leave a lasting legacy for future generations, creating a greener, healthier, and more sustainable community that benefits both humans and the natural world.

4.3. Dialogue of Religious Experience

The “dialogue of religious experience” is “where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.”⁴⁰ This recognition of the presence of the Holy in one another can deepen one’s own faith and foster empathy, respect, and appreciation for the diversity of religious traditions.

In the dialogue of religious experience, participants go beyond merely discussing their personal experiences and beliefs and actively participate in the religious practices of others. By experiencing the rituals of other faiths, they gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual practices and beliefs of other religions. For instance, Catholics and Buddhists can appreciate each other’s

⁴⁰ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, no. 42.

practices of meditation and contemplation when they attend and participate in the rituals afforded by each tradition. Catholics may find it extremely enriching to participate in a Buddhist meditation session on compassion while Buddhists may resonate with the Catholic's contemplative gaze in a Eucharistic Adoration liturgy.

In the context of environmental care, the dialogue of religious experience finds expression through prayer events that specifically address environmental concerns. One notable series of gatherings that exemplify this intersection is the Assisi gatherings. The Assisi gathering is an interfaith peace gathering that originated in 1986 under the leadership of Pope John Paul II. The event brought together religious leaders from diverse faith traditions worldwide to engage in prayer and dialogue for peace, as well as to discuss pressing global issues.

Among the various topics addressed in the Assisi gatherings, the environment has emerged as a significant focus. In particular, the most recent gathering in 2016, led by Pope Francis, placed a special emphasis on the environment and its conservation. During this gathering, religious leaders from different traditions united to offer prayers and reflections on the urgent need to address climate change and environmental degradation.

The significance of the Assisi gatherings lies not only in the collective power of prayer but also in the resulting declarations and calls to action. In the 2016 gathering, the religious leaders who participated signed a declaration that urged immediate and concerted efforts to combat climate change and protect the environment. By doing so, they sought to amplify the moral imperative for environmental care, emphasizing the responsibility shared by people of faith in safeguarding the Earth for future generations.

The Assisi gatherings serve as notable examples of how prayer events can facilitate dialogue and collaboration among religious leaders on global environmental concerns. By coming together, they not only express a unified commitment to environmental stewardship but also generate awareness and inspire action within their respective communities. These gatherings provide a platform for religious leaders to advocate for the protection of the environment and to engage in meaningful interfaith dialogue aimed at finding common ground and sustainable solutions to ecological challenges.

At the local level, communities can come together to organize eco-religious rituals that integrate environmental themes into cultural-religious observances. These rituals aim to strengthen the spiritual bond between humans and the natural world, nurturing a deep sense of reverence, gratitude, and responsibility towards the Earth. They incorporate ecological elements and symbolism, emphasizing the importance of environmental care and sustainability within religious traditions. One example of eco-religious ritual is the inclusion of blessings or prayers specifically dedicated to the Earth during religious ceremonies. These blessings express gratitude for the Earth's abundance, seek forgiveness for human actions that harm the environment, and invoke divine guidance for the preservation and healing of the natural world.

Seasonal celebrations provide another avenue for eco-religious rituals. By adapting existing festivals to include ecological themes, communities can highlight the importance of nurturing the Earth and promoting sustainable practices. The Lunar New Year or the Spring Festival celebrated in many Asian countries is a great occasion for promoting environmental awareness. The Lunar New Year is not only a cultural holiday but also a religious one for Asians because no matter what faith they belong to, Asians use this occasion to go to temples and churches in order to give thanks for the blessings of the previous year and to pray for the new year.

The occasion of Lunar New Year teaches us about the importance of environmental flourishing through its symbolism of renewal, connection to nature, and seasonal awareness. As Lunar New Year marks the beginning of a new lunar cycle, it emphasizes the need to nurture and revitalize our natural world alongside personal growth. Incorporating elements of nature in celebrations fosters a deeper appreciation for the environment, highlighting our interdependence with the natural world. Additionally, the timing of Lunar New Year during the spring season, with its vibrant blooms and budding trees, prompts us to observe and value the cycles of nature, reinforcing the significance of maintaining ecological balance and preserving biodiversity for the flourishing of our environment. The Lunar New Year, therefore, can be a wonderful occasion for people of different faiths to come together for not only cultural celebrations, but also to pray for environmental flourishing and to promote environmental awareness.

Each religious tradition can easily find within its calendar of celebrations those events that hold environmental significance and can turn them into interfaith occasions that involve members of other faiths, may it be Thanksgiving (US and Canada), Kumbh Mela (India), Songkran/Water Festival (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar), Yom Kippur (Israel) and so on. All these occasions can become opportunities to organize eco-religious rituals that serve as a response to environmental concerns. They become a means of healing and restoration, with communal prayers, offerings, or acts of service aimed at repairing environmental damage and fostering renewal.

The specific practices and expressions of eco-religious rituals may vary among different faith traditions. However, they all share a common goal of deepening the spiritual connection between humans and the environment. By integrating eco-religious rituals into their worship and observances, and inviting people of other faiths to join in these celebrations, communities nurture a profound commitment to environmental care and foster a sense of reverence and stewardship for the natural world.

4.4. Dialogue of Theological Exchange

The “dialogue of theological exchange” is “where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other’s spiritual values.”⁴¹ This is a

⁴¹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, no. 42.

commonly encountered form of dialogue, encompassing bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral exchanges involving individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, each offering unique perspectives. The nature of these meetings can vary, accommodating different numbers of participants, from large congresses to intimate gatherings in private residences. This form of dialogue is based on the recognition that religions have their own unique metaphysical principles and theological perspectives, but that there are also many shared theological questions and concerns that can be explored and discussed.

Through the dialogue of theological exchange, participants can explore the similarities and differences in their theological beliefs, engage in critical and constructive discussion, and learn from one another's perspectives. This can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the diversity of religious traditions and the ways in which they contribute to human understanding and flourishing. The dialogue of theological exchange can also help to clarify misunderstandings and address misconceptions that may exist between different religious traditions. By engaging in respectful and open-minded dialogue, participants can build relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

The exchange of theological ideas can take place through written communication, such as the publication of books and articles in scholarly journals, where authors may receive feedback from other scholars in the form of correspondences or a response article or essay. In the age of social media, the platform for this dialogue can be a YouTube video or a podcast.⁴² However, it is equally, if not more, fruitful when theological discussions occur in formal or informal settings, where participants face each other to engage in real-time conversation. The location of such a happening can be on the "home ground" of one of the participants or in a neutral location. While the dialogue of theological exchange often takes place in conference settings or roundtable discussions, such an activity can just as well be carried out among colleagues over shared meals and drinks. The informal setting may facilitate the building of friendships and lead to greater openness in accepting fresh insights and perspectives.

The dialogue of theological exchange in interreligious dialogue can promote environmental flourishing by fostering a deeper understanding of the theological underpinnings of environmental stewardship and conservation within different religious traditions. By engaging in theological exchange, individuals can share and learn about the environmental teachings, values, and ethics within their own and other religions. For example, Jews and Christians may discuss their understanding of the Biblical concept of the "*imago dei*" and how it emphasizes the responsibility of humans to care for the earth as stewards of God's creation. Muslims may share their concept of "*khalifa*" or vicegerency, which emphasizes the responsibility of humans to care for the earth as Allah's trustees. Jains and Hindus may highlight their concept of "*ahimsa*" or non-violence, which emphasizes the importance of avoiding harm to all living beings. Scholars

⁴² Anthony Le Duc, "The Church's Mission of Dialogue in the Digital Age," *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 4, no. 2 (2022): 31-56.

of Confucianism may present the concept of the Mandate of Heaven and its relevance to environmental conservation.

Through the dialogue of theological exchange, individuals can also explore how their religious teachings can inform environmental action and advocacy. For example, they can discuss how the concept of social justice within their religions relates to environmental justice, and how their religious teachings can inspire sustainable practices in areas such as agriculture, energy use, and waste reduction.

Significant interreligious declarations have emerged from dialogues among religious leaders and experts, exemplified by the signing of the “Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics” on June 10, 2002, by Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I.⁴³ This declaration emphasizes the imperative for collective cooperation to reinstate the original harmony of creation, acknowledging humanity’s historical transgressions. It underscores the paramount importance of ecological awareness, stimulating practical initiatives to protect natural resources and preserve the environment. The declaration highlights repentance, humility, and a transformative change of heart as indispensable elements for aligning with the divine blueprint for creation. Furthermore, it accentuates the inherent responsibility arising from the relationship between God and humanity, encompassing obligations towards oneself, others, and the natural world. Ethical objectives, such as the valuing of children, responsible utilization of science and technology, adopting a humble perspective regarding ownership, acknowledging diverse responsibilities, and seeking divine guidance in safeguarding creation, are also encouraged for contemplation within this statement.

The Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto, signed in October 2008 during the Interfaith Summit on Climate Change in Uppsala, Sweden, represents another significant document in this context.⁴⁴ Religious leaders acknowledged the influential role of faith in empowering individuals to modify their lifestyles and consumption patterns. They asserted that substantial transformations in human life, economy, trade, and technology are imperative to address the climate change crisis. The leaders called upon governments and international organizations to formulate and adopt a comprehensive climate strategy aimed at limiting global warming to below 2°Celsius. They advocated for swift and substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, binding cuts for developed nations, measurable and verifiable mitigation actions by developing countries, substantial technology transfers and sharing, as well as economic incentives to facilitate cleaner development on a national level in developing countries. Furthermore, the religious leaders acknowledged the significance of adaptation to climate change and committed themselves to assume and share the responsibility of providing moral leadership within their respective faith traditions.

⁴³ Vatican, “Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics,” June 10, 2002, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration.html

⁴⁴ Martin Robra, “Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto 2008,” *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 2 (2010): 242.

The subsequent year saw the signing of the Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change by religious leaders.⁴⁵ The declaration places emphasis on the central value of care and respect for life, which holds significance across all faith traditions. It recognizes the escalating levels of greenhouse gas emissions as a direct threat to life on Earth. The document underscores the acknowledgment of climate change science and urges global leaders to adopt robust, scientifically-grounded targets that are binding in nature, aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, the religious leaders acknowledged the moral, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of climate change, committing themselves to personal transformation and to guiding their followers towards lifestyles that adhere to the shared limits of the planet. They called upon leaders, individuals of faith, and the wider populace to collectively acknowledge the reality of the imminent danger we collectively face, take prompt and resolute action, and perceive this moment as an opportunity for transformative change.

In 2015, the Parliament of the World's Religions released the document titled "Embracing Our Common Future: An Interfaith Call to Action on Climate Change." This statement addresses the significant global warming of the Earth's atmosphere and oceans, attributing it primarily to human activities such as fossil fuel consumption and deforestation. The document highlights the irreversible and detrimental consequences of climate change, with the understanding that without a change in human behavior, these impacts will intensify, posing grave threats to humanity and biodiversity. The most affected by these consequences are the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable populations, highlighting the presence of grave injustice. However, the document asserts that this crisis can be mitigated through the reduction and eventual elimination of greenhouse gas emissions, transitioning towards renewable energy sources, and ensuring the fulfillment of basic needs and poverty eradication for all individuals across nations. The urgency for action is emphasized at all levels, prompting the signatories to pledge their commitment to individual and communal efforts, while also calling upon governments and institutions to swiftly implement measures aligned with these objectives.

In 2021, nearly 40 faith leaders, representing diverse religious traditions including various Christian denominations, Sunni and Shi'a Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and Jainism, gathered at the Vatican to sign a Joint Appeal. This gathering coincided with their collaboration with scientists and aimed to urge the international community to heighten their ambition and intensify climate action in anticipation of the COP26 conference.⁴⁶ The Joint Appeal, presented by Pope Francis to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, reflects the collective effort of faith leaders and scientists to address the unparalleled challenges confronting the environment and humanity. The document underscores the responsibility to safeguard the environment and the well-being of future generations, emphasizing the necessity of a comprehensive and enduring response that integrates both scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom. The signatories advocated for achieving net-zero

⁴⁵ "Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change," 2009, <https://interfaithdeclaration.org/index.html>

⁴⁶ "World Religious Leaders and Scientists Make pre-COP26 Appeal," UN Climate Change, October 5, 2021, <https://unfccc.int/news/world-religious-leaders-and-scientists-make-pre-cop26-appeal>

carbon emissions, embracing sustainable practices, and fostering sustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns. They implored governments, financial institutions, and civil society to assume responsibility and collaborate in safeguarding the most vulnerable communities. Furthermore, the faith leaders stressed the significance of encouraging their respective communities to adopt sustainable lifestyles, align financial investments with environmentally and socially responsible standards, and evaluate consumer choices and services through an ethical lens. A warning was issued that failure to take immediate action to protect our shared habitat will leave a lasting legacy of unforgivable consequences for future generations.

5. Towards a More Effective Interreligious Dialogue

In the contemporary world, interreligious dialogue to address issues confronting humanity has become an imperative. It is necessary in order to build a world free of fear of other religions and to aim for common aspirations that benefit all. According to research, dialogue has a significant impact on fostering positive social change and peacebuilding; however, assessing the outcomes of smaller dialogue initiatives can be difficult because the results are often abstract and take time to materialize, involve various stakeholders with shared responsibilities, and require monitoring of transformation at different levels.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, mechanisms for evaluation of the work of interreligious dialogue should be installed and there are also ways to make interfaith dialogue more effective. I would like to suggest a few ways towards this end.

First, interfaith dialogue can be made more effective by using a common language and framework that respects the diversity of religious views and values. The fundamental human values of respect, freedom, justice, community, love, and compassion form the common foundation of many global religions, which also emphasize principles such as acknowledgement, remorse, tolerance, and forgiveness that are closely associated with nonviolent conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and reconciliation processes.⁴⁸ For example, the concept of “flourishing” can be employed to understand environmental ethics in a holistic and relational way. Flourishing refers to the idea that all beings, including humans, have inherent value and a right to live and thrive. It is often associated with a holistic approach to environmental ethics that considers the interconnectedness of all life and recognizes the intrinsic value of nature beyond its instrumental value for human use. By using a common language and framework like flourishing, participants in interfaith dialogue can approach environmental issues from a shared understanding and work towards common goals. It also allows for the recognition and appreciation of diverse religious views and values while still providing a common ground for collaboration and action.

Second, interreligious dialogue should be practical and action-oriented by engaging in environmental projects, campaigns, education, advocacy, and policy-making. This can involve

⁴⁷ The International Dialogue Centre, *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging Differences and Building Sustainable Societies* (Vienna: KAICIID, 2021), 63.

⁴⁸ The International Dialogue Centre, 49.

joint efforts such as planting trees, cleaning up polluted areas, reducing carbon footprints, and promoting sustainable practices. By engaging in practical and action-oriented efforts, interfaith initiatives can demonstrate the shared commitment of different religious traditions to environmental protection and sustainability. This can also provide concrete solutions and strategies to address specific environmental challenges, while promoting interfaith collaboration and understanding. Although the building of bridges just by coming together contributes to positive change, the act of traversing those bridges through cooperative endeavors carries even greater importance.⁴⁹ Moreover, such efforts can also lead to greater engagement and participation from the wider community, including those who may not be traditionally involved in interfaith dialogue. By focusing on practical outcomes, interfaith initiatives can help to raise awareness of environmental issues, promote sustainable behaviors, and inspire more people to act on behalf of the environment.

Finally, diverse and representative participants from different religious traditions, backgrounds, genders, ages, and roles should be involved. The reason for this is to ensure that multiple perspectives are included and considered in the dialogue process. Including a diverse range of participants also means that the dialogue is not dominated by one particular group. This can lead to a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the issues and can help to build bridges between different communities. It is also important to ensure that the participants are representative of the wider community and not just a small group of individuals. This increases the chance that the outcomes of the dialogue are relevant and meaningful for a wider range of people. Finally, including participants from different ages and roles affirms that the dialogue process is inclusive and that everyone has a voice. This can be particularly important when engaging with marginalized or underrepresented communities, as it can help to empower those who may not otherwise have a platform to speak.

Diversity of voices in interreligious dialogue affirms that a plurality of perspectives is not a threat to unity but an important resource. As Lubna Qassim articulates, “Bringing together followers of religions and diverse cultures through a constructive dialogue aims to serve humanity and peace purposes and spread good all over the world so differences are no longer a reason for conflict but a factor towards social harmony.”⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ The International Dialogue Centre, 52.

⁵⁰ The International Dialogue Centre, 17. Lubna Qassim is Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations in Geneva.