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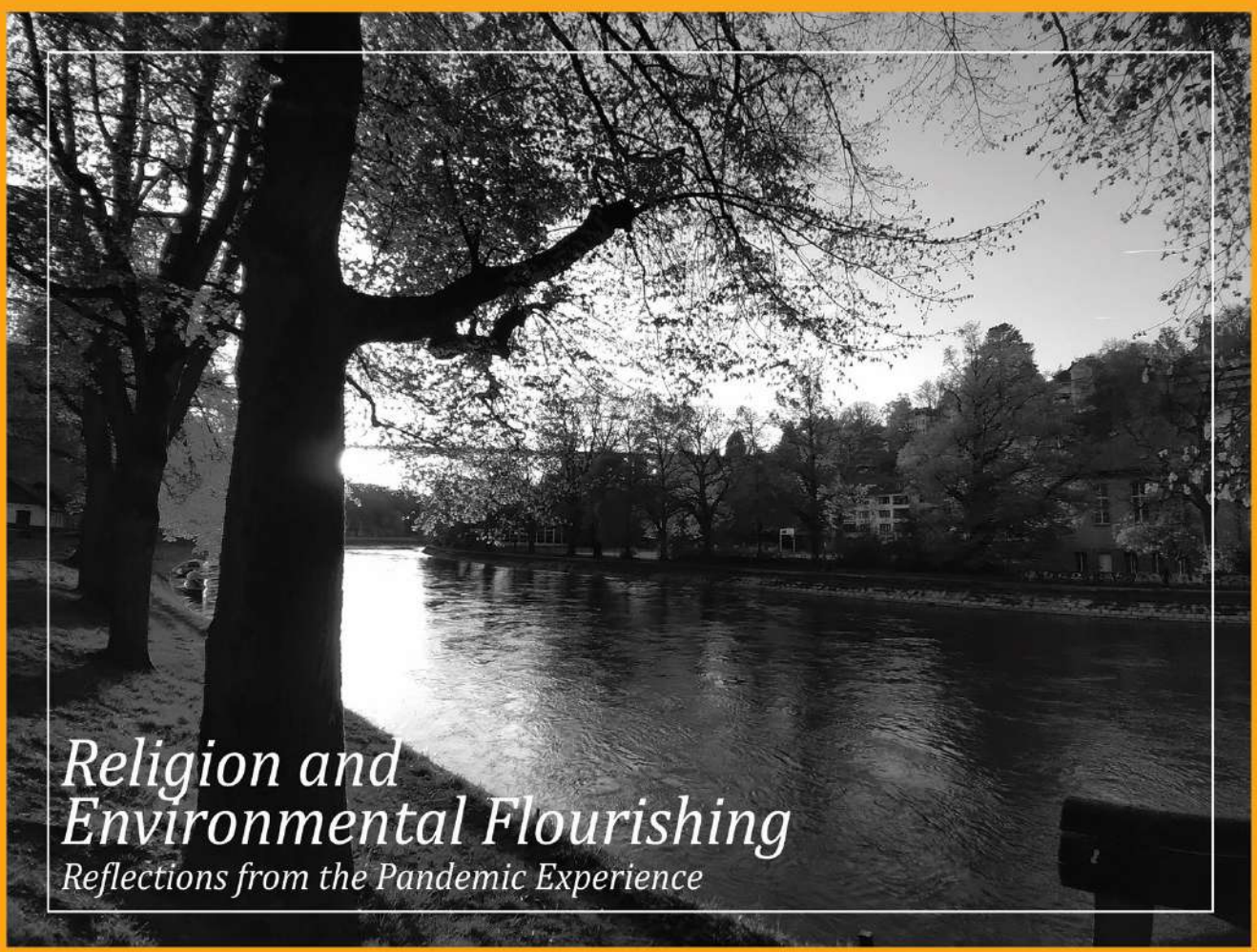


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# RELIGION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

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# EDITOR'S COLUMN

## Need for an Environmental Spirituality Going Forward

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

As the world was trying to pull itself out of the coronavirus pandemic and while Russia and Ukraine were engaging in a war that holds enormous ramifications for global peace, on 14-15 September 2022, dozens of religious leaders gathered in Kazakhstan for the Seventh Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. The theme of the gathering appropriately focused on "the role of leaders of world and traditional religions in the spiritual and social development of mankind in the post-pandemic period." In his welcome speech, President Kassym-Jomart 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."[1]

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, which in his speech in the first plenary session, Pope Francis mentioned 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. This multi-pronged agenda is reflected in the final declaration which states, "We 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."[2] Indeed, human and environmental flourishing comprises multiple intertwining facets – social, political, economic, environmental, and spiritual – all

[1] Remarks by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Retrieved from https://religions-congress.org/en/news/novosti/1679

[2] Declaration of the VII Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Retrieved from https://religions-congress.org/en/page/deklaraciya-uchastnikov-VII

serving to impact each other either negatively or positively. Thus, the participants 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."

The Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication shares the sentiments stated above and has allocated most of the pages of this issue of *Religion and Social Communication* to the theme of "Religion and Environmental Flourishing: Reflections from the Pandemic Experience." The contributions in the form of research articles and essays come from a variety of religious perspectives – Buddhist, Catholic, Muslim, Jain, Hindu, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox. Despite coming from different religious worldviews, the underlying message fundamentally affirms that promoting ecological flourishing requires an approach that centers on both praxis and spirituality in order to prevent the task of caring for our common home to become simply a series of dry mechanical calculations, purely theoretical propositions, or clever policy enactments. Religions at their best inspire and infuse external acts that are consistent with authentic interior virtues ordered to the wellbeing of both humanity and the natural environment. In this respect, religions must undergo its own self-examination in order to adequately speak to the present context. As the Buddhist scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi (1994) asserts:

> If any great religion is to acquire a new relevance it must negotiate some very delicate, very difficult balances. It must strike a happy balance between remaining faithful to the seminal insights of its Founder and ancient masters and acquiring the skill and flexibility to formulate these insights in ways that directly link up with the pressing existential demands of old-age. It is only too easy to veer towards one of these extremes at the expense of the other: either to adhere tenaciously to ancient formulas at the expense of present relevance, or to bend fundamental principles so freely that one drains them of their deep spiritual vitality. Above all, I think any religion today must bear in mind an important

> lesson impressed on us so painfully by past history: the task of religion is to liberate, not to enslave. Its purpose should be to enable its adherents to move towards the realization of the Ultimate Good and to bring the power of this realization to bear upon life in the world.

This sentiment adequately encapsulates the task that religious traditions must undertake to contribute to addressing contemporary issues plaguing society, especially that of the environmental crisis. Although there have been countless books, academic articles, and conferences on the topic of religion and the environment, there is still a need for ongoing voices for multiple reasons. First, as long as the environmental crisis continues to threaten human and ecological flourishing, there can never be silence even if what is now said has already been said before. The environmental crisis did not develop overnight, and it would not be resolved in a short time. Persistence on the part of those who recognize the problem and tirelessly address it is essential to its mitigation and, hopefully, eventual remedy. In addition, old voices can be renewed, reinvigorated, and re-presented in new social contexts where both the speaker and the listener approach the issue with different understanding and sensibilities. Thus, even if the content of the message is not new, how and in what circumstances it is presented may help it to gain new import. As religion and the environment can impact each other, at the same time be impacted by technological and social developments, ongoing engagement in the discourse in an interdisciplinary and interreligious manner promises to be beneficial to the ultimate goal of achieving flourishing and wellbeing for both nature and humanity. Therefore, ongoing work in environmental spirituality must explore the following questions:

- How can an adherent of a religion develop a spirituality that is conducive to promoting environmental wellbeing?
- What elements of one's religious tradition are able to inform such an environmental spirituality?
- How can particular religious traditions motivate and sustain an environmental spirituality that does not derail from its tradition, yet at the same time, is able to respond to the present situation?
- How does a religious environmental spirituality manifest itself

in ethical actions and activities relating to the environment?
- How can religious systems make a unique contribution to the overall global discourse on environmentalism itself?
- How can a religious environmental spirituality enrich and inform purely secular environmental ethics?

Scientific surveys and empirical experience confirm that religion continues to play a prominent role in the life of people around the world, which makes it wise to encourage an environmental spirituality founded upon scientific facts and positively informed and motivated by their faith. In this context, the term 'spirituality' is applied to all religious systems, including nontheistic traditions like Buddhism and Confucianism. One might find the term 'spirituality' applied to a religion like Buddhism to be an oxymoron because Buddhism denies the existence of a 'spirit' or a 'self.' However, 'spirituality' in its modern academic usage does not necessarily connote the presence of a 'spirit' or a 'soul' as understood in Western Christianity but can also refer to a more general state or experience of inner wellbeing and transformation. Because of this, spirituality as a discipline can be applied to a variety of religious systems as well as non-religious contexts. The Dalai Lama (1999) says that spirituality goes beyond religion, which is "concerned with faith in the claims to salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or *nirvana*." On the other hand, spirituality is "concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which brings happiness to both self and others." Therefore, the Dalai Lama asserts that what is needed is not a 'religious revolution,' but a 'spiritual revolution' where there is a "radical reorientation away from our habitual preoccupation with self" and a turning "toward the wider community of beings with whom we are connected, and for conduct which recognizes other's interests alongside our own." Having said that, the Dalai Lama does not deny that spiritual "qualities, or virtues, are fruits of genuine religious endeavour and that religion therefore has everything to do with developing them and with what may be called spiritual practice."

What religions continually emphasize is that the dilemmas plaguing humanity today are not just social issues. As His Eminence

Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and Chairman of the Muslim Council of Elders remarked in his speech at the Congress in Kazakhstan, the issues of concern to global religious leaders "is the topic of the hour at the spiritual and social levels." Therefore, when it comes to such complex dilemmas as the environmental crisis, changes must start from within the human spirit. Otherwise, remedies are only superficial, temporary, and inadequate. The COVID-19 pandemic experience has revealed this lack of and need for deeper spiritual transformation from humanity. During the first year of the pandemic, in which the virus was wreaking havoc on nations and peoples, causing lockdowns on a massive scale, there was hope that the pandemic would somehow serve as a reset for the environment. Skies were clearer, more wild animals appeared in public places, and certain natural places, bereft of human footprints revitalized. But all this was not much more than a temporary respite because environmentally positive actions were carried out due to force, not from an awakening of conscience. In fact, there were many signs that humans were just as willing to disregard the wellbeing of nature to protect their own health (at least in the short term). All plans for reusable cups at cafes and restaurants were put on hold. Discarded masks and COVID-19 test kits became one of the most common forms of garbage. As people did not leave the house, most opted for ordering things online that were delivered in layers of wrappings that would be discarded as trash. When restaurants were opened, utensils came individually wrapped in plastic bags to ensure proper sanitation. And once travel restrictions were removed, demand for airline tickets surged to pre-pandemic levels. Since 2021, the term 'revenge travel' has become a buzzword to describe the pent-up demand for travel to make up for lost trips during pandemic restrictions. Thus, even when petrol prices doubled and airline ticket prices sky-rocketed due to higher demands, people still organized big trips by air and by land with little hesitance.

All the signs indicate that as people put the pandemic behind them (at least mentally), things will return to the way it always was with not much change in their way of traveling, of consuming, and of carrying out their daily activities. The dangers that climate scientists warned pre-pandemic remain no less serious after nearly three years of the health crisis. Thus, the need for interreligious and interdisciplinary collaboration in order to address the environmental crisis is still an

urgency that cannot be ignored as we dig ourselves out of one of the most terrible calamities in modern history.

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***ARTICLE***

# (Re)Discovering the Sacredness of Mount Pulag: A Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Eco-Spiritual Grounding

*Rico C. Jacoba*[1]
*Brigido Dubao*[2]

**Abstract**

*This paper explores the spiritual dimension of human ecology at Mount Pulag. To achieve this, the researchers gleaned themes on the sacredness of Mount Pulag from available literature and field interviews with members of the indigenous groups living around the sacred mountain at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The elements in the sacred mountains of the Judeo-Christian tradition are made to dialogue and interplay with the themes relative to Mount Pulag. The dialogue among the elements leads to the realization that the sacred Mount Pulag of Kabayan is physically distant from but very akin to the sacred mountains of theophany in biblical Israel. In similar ways, both mountains are sacred mountains of God's presence. Sustained by His (and spirits') presence, Mount Pulag contributes to the well-being of human beings and creation. Thus, God's sustaining presence makes sacred Mount Pulag a source of spirituality at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. If recognized and made to influence practice, this rediscovered eco-spiritual bond between humankind and Mount Pulag could lead to a transformed way of being in the world, with humanity interrelating with all creation as subjects,*

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*not objects, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.*

**Keywords**: *sacred mountains, human ecology, eco-spirituality, post-COVID-19, indigenous people.*

## 1. Introduction

In our current health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has led many religious adherents to display their devotion to God through prayer and love for their brethren through service. Many religious congregations, churches, and Christian members provided religious interventions and assistance to people in dire need. Some provided online spiritual guidance, initiated feeding programs, and offered protective gear for healthcare workers (Del Castillo 2022). Some tried to find ways to save their lucidity and spiritual uplifting through nature appreciation. Some tried to reconnect to Mother Nature, like mountain hiking. For this reason, this paper wants to explore and understand how a mountain like Mount Pulag of Kabayan Benguet in the Philippines became significant to many during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 1.1 The popularity of Mount Pulag

Mount Pulag is popular with foreign and local tourists and mountain trekkers who usually post their impressions of this sacred mountain on social media blogs, newspapers, and magazines. The popular view of Mount Pulag seems rooted in visitors' impressions. Though visitors are oriented briefly at the DENR Office at Ambangeg, Bokod, about Mount Pulag and how to behave at the sacred ground before the start of the climb, the 30-minute orientation, however, does not fully present what Mount Pulag is all about, especially about the understanding of the Indigenous people around the sacred mountain.

Since the researchers are not strangers to the municipality where Mount Pulag rises, they prefer to use an unstructured interview guided by the theme of sacredness. For a grounded and wider range of perspectives on how the indigenous people of Kabayan view Mount Pulag, the researcher reached out to informants from different communities around the sacred

mountain, including Ibaloi and Kalanguya ethnolinguistic groups,[3] young people, tour guides/porters, and some tourists/visitors. The stratification of informants is meant to get a broader range of views about Mount Pulag as a sacred space based on the informants' knowledge and experiences. All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees were withheld by mutual oral agreement. Each informant/interviewee is herein labeled as Respondents "A," "B," "C," and so on.

To focus more on this space's sacredness, the researchers treated the subject thematically. The themes are chosen from the salient and significant points brought out by the informants in their narratives, personal experiences, and stories shared with them by older folks. As the themes intertwine, some information/data in one theme is necessarily included in another. Every theme is anchored in Mount Pulag.

### 1.2 The name "Pulag"

The name "Pulag" originated from the *Kalanguya* term *na**pul-ag**an* (bare, or bald), also called *epu-dagan* in the Ibaloi language. This term refers mainly to the grassland zone of the Mount Pulag summit, where only dwarf bamboos thrive. The peak looks bald and bare, devoid of trees from a distance. In the past, wild deer used to play and roll around like kids in this area. Somewhere at the side below the peak was a body of water where the deer used to gather to drink. From *napul-agan* came the name *Pulag*.[4] According to early hunters, it was in this *napul-agan* area, the grassland zone where wild deer used to congregate at early sunrise. For this reason, the early sunrise at around 5:00 A.M. was described by the hunters as "*hegit ni makawas"* or *"sekit ni makebas*" (sunrise of the wild deer).[5]

When the tri-boundary of Benguet, Ifugao, and Nueva Vizcaya provinces were not yet delineated around Mount Pulag, the initial name

[3] Ibaloi and Kalanguya Ethno linguistic groups are two Indigenous groups in Kabayan (residing on the western and eastern part, respectively) aside from the Kankanaey group on the northern part of the municipality. The term for their language is also the term for their group.

[4] Informant "G" (70 yrs. old), Interview by Researcher, Ballay, Kabayan, Benguet, February 09, 2021.

[5] Informant "K" (56 yrs. Old – IP Representative of Lusod, Kabayan), Interview by Researcher, Babadak, Bashoy, Kabayan, April 11, 2021.

of the highest peak in Luzon was "Mount Pulog," a name registered in Lagawe, Ifugao**,** by a particular educator from Kiangan or Lagawe. The American regime then picked up the name Mount Pulog in the early turn of the twentieth century. However, to the Kalanguya and Ibaloi indigenous communities around the sacred place, it has always been known as Mount Pulag**.** Since the 1980s, until it became a National Park in 1987, the highest peak in Luzon is better known as Mount Pulag (Informant "K").

Mount Pulag, after all, is not that bare or bald. Aside from the conspicuous wild deer and ducks that used to roam the area, there are unseen spirits whose presence was experienced by people around the sacred mountain now and then.

## 2. Mount Pulag as Home of the Spirits

Sacred natural sites worldwide are believed to be "the abode of deities and natural spirits and ancestors" and "can be important places of reference for cultural identity" (R.Wild et al. 2009). If Mount Olympus in Greek mythology is the home of the God Zeus; in Babylonian mythology, great gods are born on the mountains; in Hindu, Buddhist, and Tibetan mythologies, Mount Peru is the palace of the supreme God, Sakra Devanorn Indra (Bassler 1989), for the Ibalois and Kalanguyas of Benguet, Mount Pulag is the home of the Spirits. The Supreme Spirit, *Biyaw*, is in charge of this holy mountain. From the informants' stories, one of the overriding themes that come to the fore is the presence of spirits (*biyaw/bfiaw, kaapuan, amapasit*) in Mount Pulag. Mount Pulag is the home of the *biyaw/bfiaw* as distinguished from the *Kaapuan* (the spirits of the dead) and the *ampasit* (spirits living in trees/timbers) (C.R. Moss 1920). Severino Oblas' (2013) paper about W. Sacla (1987) speaks of the hierarchy of spirits: the highest and most powerful Spirit is *Mengos-oschong* followed by *Kabunyan,* then the *Kaapuan,* and other lesser spirits. However, never was the Spirit *Biyaw/Bfiyaw* mentioned.

The generic term for these spirits is the *egmaun-an* (unseen spirits). However, the term *egmaun-an* more appropriately refers to *biyaw/bfiaw*. The *biyaw* of Mount Pulag is the highest *biyaw* as each

mountain, by the way, has its *biyaw.* With its presence at Mount Pulag, the sacred space has to remain clean, in order, peaceful, and calm.[6] The sacredness of this mountain is highlighted even more by the stories of some trekkers who had experiences of the power of these spirits. The atmosphere of peace in the whole mountain area, according to informant "J," was usually noticed by trekkers. However, after informant "N" and his group inappropriately played gongs at the peak, they experienced a sudden downpour amidst a sunny sky. They might have disturbed the serenity of that sacred space. Otherwise, his broad experience at the summit was so relieving, accompanied by a feeling of being free just being there. Overall, informant "N's" experience of God's presence in nature at the summit seemed to sum up his trek.

Every creature living at the sacred mountain is taken care of by this *Biyaw*. It is forbidden (*pi-jew*) to get anything (plants and animals) at the Mount Pulag area without asking permission from the spirits or performing a ritual for them to participate in. This kind of spirituality of reverential fear *(inayan*) will guide a person's behavior once he/she sets foot in any sacred space. At times, according to informant "A," it is unwise even to mention the names of people when visiting the peak because it is easier for the spirits to hide people whose names are mentioned in case they misbehave within the area. In acknowledgment of the supremacy of *biyaw*, the *emambunong* (indigenous priest) always invokes their presence whenever and wherever he performs a ritual.[7]

The Buddhists in the Himalayas have associated the mountains with the dead; mountains facilitate the rise of the spirit of the dead to the other world (Bassler 1989). Similarly, Mount Pulag is where all the spirits of the dead (*kaapuan*) go. At the top, these spirits count the *opo*, the offering for the dead during the wake. This belief in the spirit of the dead going up Mount Pulag was also affirmed by Respondent "D" saying that the mountain is where the spirit of the dead ascends after death so much that in the prayer over the remains of the dead the

[6] Merino, 14; Informant "A" (79 yrs. old), Interview by Researcher, Adereg, Gusaran, Kabayan, December 02, 2021; Respondent "M" (73 yrs. old – Former Tour Guide, Tour Guide Adviser), Interview by Researcher, Babadak, Bashoy, Kabayan, August 11, 2022.

[7] Informant "A", Interview; Respondent "K", Interview.

*emambunong* at times says, "*Niman man dinmaw ka la, panchiwes ka ngo da'd Pulag, kara ka ngo da masibat*" (Now that you are gone, go straight to Pulag, avoid wandering around).

According to Respondent "K," however, there is a popular belief among the Kalanguya group that Mount Pulag is not the destination or the home of the spirit of the dead *(kaapuan)*. Instead, it is the home of the *Biyaw,* the Supreme Unseen Spirit, who takes care of the whole mountain and everything in it. The *biyaw* is in charge of Mount Pulag and other lesser spirits like the *ampasit* (informant K*).* With this belief, elder folks who visit the mountain usually invite the spirits to join them during meals by performing a simple symbolic gesture called *peltic*.[8] Going by this belief, Respondent "M" usually reminds the trekkers that Mount Pulag is sacred for the indigenous people of Kabayan and that spirits are ever-present in the mountain, so much so that some trekkers, while going up the forested and grassy pathways, utter words like "*tabi-tabi po*" (a Tagalog polite expression asking permission from the spirits to let them pass through).

Several incidents of *simeng* (losing one's way), *singew* (always going back to where one came from), and *na'ebit* (being hidden by spirits) were experienced by trekkers as a result of not living or behaving according to the moral standards at the Home of the Spirits. Informant "I" mentioned that the *ampasit* (as distinguished from the spirit of the dead *kaapuan*) was responsible for hiding the engineer down Akiki Trail in December 1999 for suspected misbehavior.[9] Additionally, informant "J" related an incident involving some group members who could not make it to the top as they only reached Camp 2, which is only over an hour to the top. Since the group had only one guide who accompanied those who pursued the journey up to the peak, the two decided to go back by themselves instead. Reaching just past Camp 1, they caught up with a tall guy they thought was also going down in the same direction. They asked if they could join him downhill. All of a sudden, however,

[8] "Peltic" is a gesture of spilling a small amount of liquid (wine, water, coffee, juice) to the ground with accompanying prayer of permission and invitation.

[9] Informant "I" (60 yrs. old-Park Ranger), Interview by Researcher, Abucot, Bashoy, Kabayan, February 10, 2022; Informant "F" (68 yrs. old), Interview by Researcher, Lusod, Kabayan, February 08, 2022; Respondent "D", Interview; Informant "M", Interview.

their surroundings darkened and turned unfamiliar. They could no longer trace their way down. In the meantime, the man disappeared from the area. They cried in confusion, not knowing what to do since they had no guide. After composing themselves, they acted according to what they learned from old folks back home: to reverse their clothes and hang them only cooked eggs they got at that time on the branch of a tree. Only then did their surroundings begin to clear up.[10]

Informant "I," moreover, related the experience of his grandfather, Sumakey Bangonan (deceased), who went hunting with two companions around Mount Pulag. After lunch, one of them defecated somewhere allegedly without informing or asking permission from the spirits. While going down for home, they always ended up in a place where one of them defecated. So, Sumakey reprimanded his companion for defecating without permission from the unseen spirits (*egmaun-an*). Realizing that they could not proceed further, one or some decided to smoke his/their pipe(s). Only then were they able to move forward (informant I). Similar punishments for offending spirits in the forested mountains in northern Thailand are also discussed by David and Jaruan Engel (2010) in their book, *Tort, Custom, and Karma: Globalization and Legal Consciousness in Thailand.*

The same incident happened to two tourists, as related by informant "K," who got lost while descending Mount Pulag. Although the pathway from the peak to Camp 1 was clear, they could not trace their way back. After several attempts to trace their way back, they descended the path to Lusod (eastern side) instead of going down to the Ranger Station at Babadak, Bashoy (southwestern side). It took them two days to come out from Lusod via Ballay, Kabayan (northern side). This respondent interpreted the event as a consequence of their misbehavior while on the sacred mountain. Additionally, the case of an American tourist who opted to be a sweeper while going down from the top en route to the Babadak Ranger Station and got lost along the way was interpreted to have been the work of the spirits. At one point, he urinated without prior permission from the spirits. His companions waited for him at the Ranger Station, but he failed to arrive. Some of their members decided to go back to find him. According to this American, he

[10] Informant "J", Interview.

could see them but could not talk and could not even be seen by those who came back for him (informants "K" and "G").

Informant "A" related another story that he heard from his father-in-law involving a hunter who was hidden by the spirits (*na'ebit*) after he shot a duck near a pool below the peak of Mount Pulag. Parallel to this incident is the experience of hunters at Mount Pulag, who prepared a trap with concealed guns aimed at the deer that usually took the route within the forested side of the mountain. After having caught nothing on the spot, they went elsewhere to hunt the large bats (*paniki*) that used to hang on the branches of trees. However, all of the bats were spared from the series of bullets fired to the consternation of the hunters. Not long after, dark clouds hovered over them, followed by a heavy rain pouring down, catching them flat-footed and sending them to seek shelter. They all had to suffer in the cold, particularly the person who fired the gun. They had to find a place to rest. During the night, the spirit of the mountain spoke to one of the hunters in a dream. Informant "G" relates "that they had to suffer in the cold due to their attempts to kill the animals in the mountain. These animals were being taken care of by the spirits."

As a side note, while Mount Pulag is popularly known among trekkers and on social media as the "playground of the gods," as it is usually mentioned during the orientation given by the DENR to trekkers, Respondent "N" noted, however, that the description does not originate from the indigenous people of Kabayan. A *Mambunong* (traditional medicine man) explains:

> It must have been coined by English-speaking foreign tourists who were told that the mountain is the abode of the spirits and who have experienced the beauty and wonder of Mount Pulag. It could have been an English version of their understanding of the sacred mountain as the home of the spirits. Eventually, the title or the description was borrowed by the tourism people of Kabayan and called Mount Pulag the "playground of the gods," meaning home of the spirits.

From the characteristic of Mount Pulag as an abode of the spirits flows the standards of conduct expected of visitors within the sacred

space. If Mount Pulag is the home of the spirits (*Biyaw/bfiyaw, Kaapuan, Ampasit*), then a respectful attitude and behavior are expected from everyone. Any disrespectful conduct at Mount Pulag has corresponding immediate consequences per trekkers' experiences.

## 3. Mount Pulag as Refuge for Life

Mountains are a hiding place and refuge of the besieged community. Mountain heights with springs of water were the usual refuge of people during WWII. As narrated by the leaders of the Ibaloi tribe, most of the residents of Kabayan fled to the mountains to escape the pursuit of Japanese soldiers. Similarly, Mount Pulag had been a point of refuge and continued to sustain life. There is much life, then, at the sacred mountain. One informant in Lusod shared a myth relating to Mount Pulag and the survival of the tribes surrounding the mountain peak. In the early times, a terrible flood came to the *Kalahan* (mossy forest) or the Kalanguya area where Mount Pulag is situated. A couple named Wa-a (husband) and Gomiya (wife) tried to escape the flood by taking refuge at the mountain's peak. The more the couple scaled the top, the more the flood level followed them until they reached a certain point where the flood level stopped rising. As they had brought nothing with them, they survived below the peak only with fish that the flood left after it receded because the deluge wiped out all the plants. Wa-a and Gomiya, however, were not the only survivors. Aside from the couple, six other people survived because they were saved by an improvised wooden boat. Eventually, the couple and the six others increased to become descendants of the Ibaloi, the Kankanaey, and the Kalanguya around Mount Pulag (informant "F").

Mount Pulag, let it be recalled, is the home of the *biyaw* (Supreme Spirit), the *ampasit* (lesser spirits), and also the *kaapuan* (spirits of the dead). *Biyaw* is the one in charge overall of this sacred space. There is life, therefore, even after death in this sacred place. Informant "A" shares "the ducks around a pool of water just below the peak of this mountain," and for informant "G" "the deer (*makawas/makebas*), and large bats (*paniki*), which were often the targets of hunters, were protected by the spirits." Hunters are punished for teaching them lessons whenever they

touch the creatures under the spirits' watch. Disrespect, rowdy behavior, and disorder did not promote life at the sacred mountain and were dealt with accordingly.

## 4. Mountains in Biblical Lenses

Similarly, the mountains in the Bible symbolize God's power and authority. This was evident, particularly in the case of Mount Sinai, where the presence of Yahweh through clouds, fire, and lightning caused fear and trembling among the Israelites at the base of the mountain. Furthermore, Yahweh, through Moses, delineated the parameter within which people were allowed to stay within the mountain. Only selected people were permitted to ascend the sacred mountain because it was a holy ground touched by God. In this sense, Mount Pulag is a reminder of the Sinai event. Physically, only those fit to climb are allowed to scale the mountain.

The theme of power identified with the mountain in the Old Testament found its way to the New Testament. Jesus, on many occasions, went up a mountain to commune with His Father, especially at crucial moments in His ministry. His union with His Father gave Him the strength to be humble as a servant, the strength to carry the cross for humanity until the top of Mount of Olives. Mount Pulag is the holy ground for a serene encounter with the unseen God who reveals Godself in the wonder and beauty of nature as the Word came upon Mary in silence during the annunciation (Lk 1:26ff). Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 is a reminiscence of Yahweh at Mount Sinai giving the Law to Moses for His people down the mountain. As the people listened to God and Moses, so the people listened to Jesus from that hill.

Visitors scaling Mount Pulag cannot hide their realization after encountering the wonders of nature that unfolded before them. The feedback on Facebook blogs posted on travel agency websites is ubiquitous, encouraging, and spirit-renewing positive comments. However, more of that kind are still unspoken on screens. They usually contrast the humdrum of city life and the workplace to the serene and refreshing natural environment of Mount Pulag. Coming from an environment saturated with noise inside and out, once at the top, they

become still by the deafening power of silence that something "Divine" is present and expressed only in their "Wow" with an attitude of gratitude for being there (Informant "O").

This kind of powerful silence at the summit of Mount Pulag recalls Elijah's experience at the cave of Mount Sinai, where Elijah renewed his allegiance to Yahweh and where he encountered God's presence not in the furious wind, not in the fire, not in the earthquake, but a whisper of a voice (1Kings 19). Mount Pulag invites everyone to imbibe the docile Spirit of Elijah to be able to recognize God's presence in its calm environs.

Having experienced the privilege of reaching the summit, having experienced the wonder and beauty of nature, and having encountered something of the "Divine" at the highest peak in Luzon give power and a sense of identity to reflective trekkers. They become proud to sport a T-shirt printed with "I Survive Mount Pulag." Behind these printed words is a renewed and broadened perspective on life. With their life-refreshing experience, most visitors expressed their interest in coming back time and time again.

This kind of dynamism of every Mount Pulag encounter recalls the experience of the Israelites after the Sinai event. The theophany and the Law gave them a renewed sense of being privileged to be God's people. It was a momentous event that Scripture writers, especially the prophets, always reminded the Israelites about, highlighting the covenant relationship. The individual's encounter with God's presence at Mount Pulag could also lead to a change of heart and a renewal of a personal covenant with God.

Nevertheless, suppose there were/are people who understood more, entered fully and communicated better the presence of God and spirits in sacred mountains. In that case, they are the priests and prophets of old and the *emambunong* (indigenous priests) of Kabayan, Benguet, and other mountains everywhere who act as the intermediaries between humans and God and the spirits.

## 5. Mount Pulag Communicates the Presence of the Sacred

Like Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1), those who resides in the vicinity of Mount Pulag asserts that Mount Pulag is a sacred space where God communicates with God's people. From the previous discourse, the *emambunong* (indigenous priest/priestess) and priests and prophets, like in the Judaeo-Christian traditions, play certain parallel vital functions in the community. They communicate the message of *Kabunyan* (God). In the traditional culture of Benguet, particularly in Kabayan, the indigenous priest, the *emambunong*, is the person sought after because he/she has a central role in every sacrificial rite in community celebrations. The *emambuong* is held in high esteem because only he/she enters the world of the spirits and communicates their message to the people (Merino 1989). Whatever he/she says is heard and heeded because the spirits are viewed to be an integral part of the human community on the same ground, on the same mountain as Mount Pulag. This role of the *emambunong* is evident when ritual sacrifices are offered to spirits to release visitors who are hidden by the spirits of Mount Pulag for having infringed on specific standards of behavior at the sacred mountain.

Likewise, in the Judaeo-Christian traditions, the priests and prophets of Yahweh had an intimate relationship with God. They brought God the concerns of their people as they, too, came from their people and brought back to the people the message from God. Such was the case with Moses at Mount Sinai (Ex 19-34), Elijah at Mount Carmel (1Kings 18), other prophets like Isaiah, etc., and finally, Jesus (life, death, and resurrection).

Both traditions involved a sacrificial animal whose blood is laden with a redemptive dimension which ultimately points to the sacrifice of Jesus at Mount of Olives. Concerning Mount Pulag, while the *emambunong* performed the rite in a particular place prepared for the purpose almost within the periphery of the sacred mountain invoking the name of the Supreme Spirit (*bfiyao*), and other spirits of Mount Pulag (as Elijah invoked the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the biblical priests/prophets, too, performed the sacrifice on altars in sacred mountains. The sacrifice and the presence of priests made the ground sacred.

In the Old Testament priests and prophets were to serve and guard the temple/sanctuary against anything unclean, as Adam was initially charged to guard the sanctuary of the Garden of Eden. Similarly, the *emambunong* of Kabayan, after performing the *baknew* (ritual to locate a missing person or thing), gets the message across to all those visiting Mount Pulag that the ground they are about to step on is a sacred home of the spirits as much as the Sanctuary/Temple in the biblical tradition is filled with God's presence.

## 6. God's Communication through Mount Pulag's Lights and Clouds

A man and woman trekker of faith scaling Mount Pulag could not but go beyond just the sight of clouds and sunrise. One can only recall the presence of clouds, fire, dazzling light, and radiance on the mountains in the Old and New Testament signifying God's faithful presence among God's people in faithfulness to the covenant. The radiant light, in Judaeo-Christian tradition, also signifies God's glory and power, as in the Sinai event (Ex 19-34), the fire on the sacrifice of Elijah at Mount Carmel (1Kings 18), the event at Mount of Transfiguration as the pre-view of Christ's resurrection, where Jesus' face shone like the sun (Mt 17:2). The early rising sun at Mount Pulag that gradually dispels the darkness over the earth re-echoes the Christological and eschatological overtone of Isaiah 42:6, 60:1-3 – light to the nations, a passage affirmed by John 1:4-5, "The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out" (also Jn 8:12; Acts 13:47).

The sea of clouds at Mount Pulag lighted up by the rising sun can only mirror the clouds from where God spoke to His people from Mount Sinai and Mount of Transfiguration. From Mount Carmel, the small cloud seen from the sea signified the end of the three-year drought in the Kingdom of Ahab. God is, once again, speaking through the sea of clouds. Every visitor confronted by the clouds should listen and take to heart that there is a God-given interplay in the natural order of evaporation and condensation in the air behind the sea of clouds at Mount Pulag. Suppose visitors who were inwardly touched by the "divine" in the natural beauty unfolded by the sacred mountain desire to

come back again and again, is this not an indication of spiritually thirsty individuals living in parched metropolia ever longing for the "cloud" of God's presence? Aside from amidst lights and clouds, humankind finds itself in the Sanctuary Garden of well-being in the mountains.

## 7. Rediscovering the Sacredness of the Mountain

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people wondered and tried to understand what this pandemic would bring. Experiences of worries and anxiety can no longer be denied, including mental and spiritual stress. The COVID-19 pandemic became a point of prayer and reflection. Various kinds of coping mechanisms were sought. People realized the importance of the mountains as the safest places during the COVID-19 pandemic; it is where people are far from the crowd and have social distancing. At this time, people tried to commune with nature in the mountains. Mount Pulag, which was taken for granted for a long time, became important again as a place of refuge. The COVID-19 pandemic stretched the general populace beyond one's comfort zone, leading to a lesson on spirituality. This is how the sacredness of Mount Pulag was rediscovered. The fantastic view of nature that unfolds before the eyes of trekkers could lead to the appreciation of creation and the widening of one's horizon to the "Unknown."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was shot down, including the world of the indigenous peoples of Kabayan. They realized that their produce sustaining their well-being and sustained by the water tributaries originating from Mount Pulag can go nowhere for commercial exchanges. As people with an ingrained sense of natural religiosity, they groaned for their families and young ones' survival. Thus, they turned to "someone" beyond their control, "someone" who watched over them for their day-to-day living. For these people, one of that "someone" is "dwelling" at Mount Pulag, a Spirit who has always been there for them but frequently forgotten due to the economic pressures of modern living. Re-visiting the sacred mountain is rediscovering the sacredness of that mountain and, perhaps, every mountain, for that matter, rediscovering the spiritual dimension of one's personal and communal, commercial, and economic life.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped people to expand and rediscover their inner life and reconnect once again with their fundamental sense of

creatureliness with Mount Pulag. This sacred mountain unfolds in and before us a sense of the Sacred, a sense of transcendence that we are more than just victims of earthly exigencies like COVID-19. We are interrelated with "Someone" spiritual. The experiences of visitors who were hidden at *Akiki* trail and between the grassland and the Ranger Station at Bashoy; of those who got lost and confused; of those who tried to steal; of those who were soaked with the sudden rain; of those who kept on going back to where they defecated, and of those who were rowdy at the sacred mountain, might have taught these people the hard way a lesson on humility at the home of the spirits. Indeed, they might have returned home with a transformed view of Mount Pulag and themselves. This inner transformation was manifested by the engineer who got lost and was found returned the following year with his wife and scaled once again Mount Pulag. He then visited the informant who once pleaded for his release, and they embraced each other in gratitude (informant "I").

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, some signs of personal transformation were noticeable in the various feedbacks of trekkers. The following is an attempt to summarize their discoveries and realizations during their journey to the sacred mountain. One informant narrated how she was tricked into joining the trek because the one who initially signed up backed out because of an emergency. All she knew was that they were just bound to Baguio City. When the group told her they "kidnapped" her for a trek to Mount Pulag, her initial reaction was panic because climbing mountains was not her cup of tea. In short, with the help of her friends, who provided her with the needed paraphernalia for the climb, she made it to the top. For her, it was the coldest part of the Philippines. She did not recall any moment when she ever perspired throughout the journey. Mount Pulag was breathtaking; she did not expect it to be that nice and fulfilling. Another tourist-interlocutor said that hiking to the "Playground of the gods" contributed a lot to the change in his perception of life. Before, he thought he must travel abroad because the most beautiful places could be found outside the country (informant "O").

Behind the sense of power for conquering the summit of Mount Pulag and experiencing the wonders of the vastness of nature is the feeling of being "small" at the top, a feeling that could lead to a change in attitude. Along this line, Bassler (1989) quotes Leslie Stephen thus,

"[T]he mountains represent the indomitable force of nature to which we are forced to adapt ourselves; they speak to the man of his littleness and his ephemeral existence." As sacred mountains like Mount Pulag are peaks of spiritual renewal and transformation, Taoist hermits seek to transform themselves into immortals at the ridge of Hua Shan, the sacred peaks of China. Additionally, "John Muir, a major figure in the genesis of the environmental movement, founded the Sierra Club primarily to preserve the Sierra Nevada as a place where people could go for spiritual and physical renewal" (Bernbaum 2006).

From the onset to the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, various lessons can be drawn from the trekkers' experiences and those living just around the sacred mountain. They experienced the vast open space opening a world more than themselves. There is power beyond their control that impresses on them a sense of being limited. A limitation is comprehending nature's mystery and the spirit that the sacred mountain reveals in so many instances. Thus, the rediscovery of the story of the sacredness of the mountain is a story worth handing down. It is "Good News" to tell the next generation in the post-COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon of sacred encounters in the area elicits among the indigenous peoples a call from within to renew their sense of awe and wonder, a call to acknowledge the power of the spirit in the area, a call to obedience, respect, and proper moral behavior in the sacred mountain. The spiritual renewal of trekkers and the disposition to be docile to something beyond physical nature could lead to the realization that Mount Pulag unfolds more than just the beauty of nature but something of the "Divine."

## 8. Re-grounding Spirituality in Mount Pulag

COVID-19 is making many of us reconsider how we spend our time. Previously, various activities took a large portion of our time. We are naturally gregarious, busy people, so having time alone seems like a fresh start. One wonders if social isolation will become the new normal and if arranging a time for spiritual life-building will be part of the process of filling the gap of loneliness. Rather than undertaking things to occupy the time, focus on actions and objects that bring fulfillment and create joy and tranquility, particularly those that improve one's spiritual life.

Due to strict health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic, residents living near Mount Pulag opted to go trekking in the mountains. Most of them went for trekking mountains to watch the sunrise, even spending time on cold, rainy nights in a tent on top of the mountain. Some of them spent the night a few hundred meters below a shed with some tourists. The locals and tourists wanted to experience nature's beauty at the mountain's peak. They hoped to see the mountains in all their glory in the morning sun.

Most of the experiences of those who trekked Mount Pulag share one common experience. The claim that Mount Pulag radiates the glory and majesty of the Creator who pronounced everything in creation as good in the Garden of Eden. This beauty and wonder of creation can be seen in Mount Pulag, the center of ecosystems and home to high biodiversity in the country (Inocencio 2010), with pine forests, mossy forests, and dwarf bamboo at the grassland summit, birds, and animals (fauna) – all interdependent with each other. The symbiotic relationship of living creatures at the mountain with the stewardship of the spirits reflects the harmony of creation at the original Garden of Eden. As God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:7-25) to take charge of all living creatures (Gen 1:28), so did God place the indigenous peoples and even the spirits around Mount Pulag to take charge of this Sanctuary Garden.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is a massive burden that adds stress and loneliness, the existential aspect of transformation is an equal stressor among all specific stressors. Remember the proverb, "Do not waste a good crisis." This is the glass half-full versus glass-half-empty of shifting one's perspective. Another proverb goes, "A person's perception determines his/her reality." Sometimes change can be skewed to show that there is a silver lining and that things are not as awful as they appear. Seeing the opportunities among the challenges is one approach to preparing for the best or worst-case scenarios. Now is the time to stay focused on the spiritual disciplines in our lives. This is a time for prayer and meditation because these disciplines apply to many faiths. Prayer is the way to connect with God, and going to the mountain like Mount Pulag is a time of distancing oneself from people and events, allowing one to focus more on the spiritual life that may be an essential aspect of one's life.

## 9. Concluding Remarks

From the previous interlocutions of the authors with the tour guides, they heard many experiences wherein many trekkers appreciated how the indigenous people around the area regard the mountain as sacred. These trekkers even recommended that the area should be preserved from too much commercialization. On the part of the indigenous peoples, they realize that their culture and the sacred mountain are not only for them to behold but for everyone. This has been the experience of the people of Kabayan because the trekkers/visitors are encouraged to visit the sacred summit and invited by the Local Government Unit (LGU) to the center of the municipality and to visit other cultural sites in the area. In this aspect, the natives of the Ibadois and the Kalanguyas of the municipality are interconnected with the international community through Mount Pulag.

Looking back on the articulations and praxis of faith of select Indigenous peoples residing in the vicinity of Mount Pulag during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is noteworthy that many of their religious lived experiences were Christian, and they discovered God in the sacredness of Mount Pulag. Most of them communicated to God through appreciation of the wonders and beauty of Mount Pulag. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who lived in the vicinity of Mount Pulag found consolation in the beautiful ecosystem of the mountain. Inspired by the beautifully created reality and their Christian faith, some re-committed themselves to protecting the environment. Also, some indigenous Christians around Mount Pulag turned to God to find meaning amidst the global health crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. A few others considered their interconnectedness to nature as an essential resource in facing the challenges brought by COVID-19.

The rediscovery of the sacredness of Mount Pulag has significant implications for human ecology post-COVID-19 pandemic. The care of mountains, nature, and all creation is a task to be taken seriously in the new normal. It is fundamentally a profound affirmation that all creation is permeated and sustained by the Creator's presence, affirmed by Jesus Christ's continued presence on verdant mountains.

In the post-pandemic world, the greatness of Mount Pulag "communicates" and reminds us of the majesty and wonder of our Lord. The trekkers/tourists/guides informant receive this communication and react to this communication with awe & wonder. Mountains are almost universally viewed with admiration and affection. As we enter the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, rediscovering the "sacredness of the mountain" leads to deep bonding with God, creation, and even the unseen spirits. This is a kind of Trinitarian eco-spirituality. A spirituality characterized by interdependence and the interconnectedness among humans, social institutions, government, society, and all of creation (living and non-living). It is an eco-spirituality that all of creation with humanity leads to its perfection as sustained and ordered by the Creator. It is an eco-spiritual consciousness that humankind is a co-creator, a partner, and an active steward in transforming nature or creation into the original Eden-like Garden where humanity knows its boundary and where humanity encounters God "face to face" as Mary Magdalene personally encountered the Lord in the Garden at the Mount of Olives.

In the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, trekkers and dwellers of Mount Pulag will have a new perspective of trekking and dwelling in the mountain. With this eco-spirituality, every proud visitor of Mount Pulag would have to change what is printed on his souvenir T-shirt from "I Survived Mount Pulag" to "Mount Pulag Survived Me." Behind this line is a creature transformed by the rediscovered sacredness of Mount Pulag. The implication of these words ripples from sacred Mount Pulag to every nook of this typical home. Sacred Mount Pulag will be present for and among the people signifying God's ever-faithful presence to His people.

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***ARTICLE***

# Reviving the Islamic Narratives about the Sacredness of Nature: A Case for Nasr's Ecosophy as Political Ecology after the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Mohd. Shazani Bin Masri* [1]

**Abstract**

*This paper analyses the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of metaphysical crisis in addition to its well-known status as a global health crisis. I argue that the general absence of a comprehensive metaphysical outlook of nature has further alienated humankind from a Divine-based cosmology of nature. COVID-19 is certainly part of nature and man too. However, our outlook at 'tackling' the disease is filled with overconfidence that man could overcome nature, thus 'defeating' the disease. This should not be the mental and spiritual state of human beings at present natural crisis. Drawing from Seyyed Hossein Nasr's* Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis as Modern Man*, I argue that a certain arrogance had developed in modern mentality that COVID-19 was just another viral disease – until it engulfed the entire planet. Realizing that man's modern knowledge had been sorely inadequate to contain the disease as they expected, due to general disconnect with the sacred side of nature, they turned to fear, even despair. Present Islamic perspectives should revive the inclusivity between man and nature to reconnect humankind to the sacred aspects of nature. A narrative borne of Islam must serve as communique for those who seek re-connection with nature considering the evolving ecosophy by accounting Michel Serre's Natural Contract to develop a new political ecology.*

**Keywords:** *Nature and the Sacred, ecosophy, political ecology, metaphysical crisis, COVID-19*

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is well known for affecting us for close to three years now. It has impacted us in innumerable ways including those fundamental aspects of life we took for granted before the pandemic began. Now, the pandemic situation is almost normal for us – a new and alien normal viewed from since 2019. The physical and psychological impacts of the pandemic are now fast documented in various forms – formal and informal. However, there is not much deliberation on how our metaphysical outlook has changed ever since. The change, however, is not very encouraging. Already daunted by various forces of modernity and natural catastrophes – such as climate change – then, we are now forced to face a pandemic that does not seem to subside. Like multiple tsunamis – giant waves – the COVID-19 hit our outward shores of being that are well known to literally kill us. And although we know our inner being was hugely disturbed, we did not know how to respond because of our outlook's detachment from a wholesome and Divine-based cosmology of nature.

We responded at first with a sort of arrogance – very confident with our present knowledge about the empirical world – especially of science – that we thought we could 'defeat' the COVID-19 disease by overcoming nature in no time. However, the world knows that it has now engulfed the entire planet. Realizing that man's modern knowledge is sorely inadequate to contain the disease as expected, due to the general disconnect with the sacred side of nature, the result is fear, even despair. This is where and when a present Islamic perspective needs to be brought forward to revive a notion of inclusivity between man and nature so that man can be reconnected with the sacred aspects of nature – his deeper and meaningful sense of being. This could be achieved by certain narratives about nature present in Islam that could serve as communique for those who seek reconnection with nature by considering the evolving ecosophy and political ecology.

## 2. Brief Explanation on *Scientia Sacra*

To explain the concept of *scientia sacra*, I contrast it with Hugo O. Engelmann's understanding about fundamental concepts of modern science (1962, 8). Engelmann maintains the universe in modern

science is metaphysically viewed as "…a self-contained process [and] is scientifically transliterated into the concepts of particle and field. The universe as a dynamic system appears composed of irreducible, indivisible, elementary particles of organization" (Ibid). Thus, we could say that modern science is, in principle, the science of particles. The mode and levels of organization can be indefinite, but according to Engelmann, we can assume only three, namely, "…the physical, the biological, and the behavioural, to account for all empirical phenomena" (Ibid).

The system made no mention about something beyond the closed universe that could explain the workings of the universe itself. It also made no attempt to view the subsystems to arrive at a certain Unity that encompasses the meaning of the closed system itself and beyond. The only admissible evidence to solidify the claims it made are empirical phenomena – those that can be materially observed, qualified and quantified. Thus, we can say the focus of modern science, where it differs with *scientia sacra*, is that the latter points on arriving at the fact of Unity – vis-à-vis God. There is a clear objective to the science: its end and means point to the fact of Unity, vis-à-vis God in Islam. Where both the sciences meet is exhaustive employment of human reason to observe the empirical phenomena as much as possible. However, *scientia sacra* goes further than just human reason and empirical phenomena. It admits revelation and its Source as credible form of knowledge to explain the phenomena, including the empirical ones, without necessarily abandoning the fruitful products of human thought.

*Scientia sacra*, while respecting the veracity of human thought, does not presume as fundamental the inevitable Ultimate Reality – the Unity. At best human thoughts are mirror to something beyond, although not exclusive from, empirical phenomena, but are not *It* regarding the fact of Its being and existence. Thus, while we can rely on modern science to explain all the empirical aspects of COVID-19, we need *scientia sacra* to explain COVID-19, both as part and parcel of the universe and of human life with the essential underpinning that points to an Ultimate Reality of Unity – God.

## 3. COVID-19 as a Form of Metaphysical Crisis

Seyyed Hossein Nasr spelled it brilliantly in his acclaimed work, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* when he examines "the domination of nature" by humankind (1990, 18). What underlies this domination is that nature in the eyes of modern man is desacralized and exploited to the fullest for utility and enjoyment purposes (Ibid). This is owing to the underpinning concept of 'progress' defined essentially with 'economic development' with almost utter indifference to nature. This disregard is motivated by the lack of meaning to nature. As a result, humankind develops little relationship to his environment. Other than an expectation that he could fully subjugate it to his rapacious whim, this has resulted in environmental problems unique to modern civilizations such as overconsumption, climate change, physical destruction of natural reserves, etc. So much was this assumption of domination over nature – underpinned by fundamentally materialistic assumption – that it has reduced nature to 'mere material.'

Under this assumption, all things in nature could be explained by their material functions and dysfunctions with a bias that they always must serve the *material* human wants and needs, with ever stronger emphasis on the former. Thus, the human idea of achievement regarding nature is increasingly focused on his 'self.' Nasr again pointed out the idea of 'mystique' that is a residue from spiritual relationship with nature (Ibid, 19). From the act of perceiving nature as a reflection of the divine and contemplative sign, this time the act is about conquering nature to demonstrate man's ability to control and dominate nature (Ibid).

With this attitude, there is little wonder that COVID-19 is viewed as just another natural problem to conquer. Many would equate it with the 'evil' or 'destructive' side of nature – taking away human lives in troves and disrupting their used-to-be 'normal' human activities. Suddenly this merely material nature has a characteristic – that it is 'evil' or 'destructive' just because it takes away human lives and livelihood. COVID-19 seems to be at the helm of such titles but without the traditional and religious language as 'evil' or 'destructive.' COVID-19 is not as 'tame' unlike other infectious diseases that had long been infecting and affecting the livelihood of human society.

Dengue and influenza for instance, have been affecting parts of human society annually but have never been treated as novel and dangerous, unlike the 'wild' COVID-19. The lack of historical knowledge related to earlier pandemics such as the Spanish Flu and Pestilence that resulted in millions of deaths put one's understanding of crisis as unilinear. Science, as viewed from a detached engagement with nature, is assumed to describe and prescribe remedies for human maladies.

There will never be a full understanding about nature if we confine our perspectives without accounting for a more comprehensive view of nature. This is because when we deal with nature, we also directly deal with the human aspects of and about it, namely our own human deeds and misdeeds. It is very important to scrutinise and reflect on the motives of human deeds and misdeeds. Such scrutiny must encompass the different domains of the psychological and intellectual. More emphasis must also be centered on the spiritual as we are cognisant of its significant role in our everyday understanding of nature.

To analyse the spiritual aspect, we cannot simply hope to use the 'tools' mean to analyse other aspects of human *being*. While we must not deny what the empirical data and scientific methods have shown us, we must also go beyond them, i.e., to regard COVID-19 in the realm of the metaphysical.

## 4. COVID-19 and Cognizance of the Centre

In this paper, I draw on Nasr's views on the medieval Islamic philosophers, namely Suhrawardi and Avicenna to get a sense that God is above nature. Firstly, according to Nasr, the conception of God according to Avicenna is as follows:

> Everything in the Universe, by the very fact that it exists, is plunged in Being; yet, God, or Pure Being, who is the Origin and Creator of all things, is not the first term in a continuous chain and therefore does not have a "substantial" and "horizontal" continuity with the beings of the world. Rather, God is anterior to the Universe and transcended with respect to it. It is God as conceived in the religions of the Abrahamic

> Tradition; it is God not only as envisaged by the Muslim Avicenna but also by Jewish and Christian philosophers who shared a common conception of the Supreme Deity and who, like Avicenna, reformulated the tenets of Greek philosophy in monotheistic terms. (1997, 25)

Meanwhile, by Nasr's account, Suhrawardi hails from the Illuminationist (Ishraqi) school, who sees the Universe comprising "…degrees of light and of darkness, which is the absence of light. And bodies, so far as their material aspect is concerned, are no more than this darkness, or obstruction, which does not permit the light to penetrate through it" (Ibid, 67-68). Regarding the soul, Suhrawardi is fundamentally interested in its celestial origin and its current worldly affliction. The soul constantly seeks to free itself from this worldly prison vis-à-vis "Occidental exile" to return to its native home (i.e., the celestial above) where it can truly be happy and at peace (Ibid). Thus, God in Suhrawardi's conception is "… the Pure Light, the Light of lights (*nur al-anwar*), is the Divine Essence whose light is blinding because of its luminosity and intensity. [This] Supreme Light is the source of all existence, since the Universe in all its planes of reality consists in nothing more than degrees of light and darkness" (Ibid, 69). According to Nasr,

> Suhrawardi also considers the division of beings according to their degree of comprehension and awareness… the ultimate criterion for a hierarchic existence is the degree of light each being possesses, which is also identified with knowledge and awareness. The Universe therefore issues from the Supreme Light – without there being a "substantial" and "material" continuity between the two. Moreover, the Light of Lights has its vice-regent and direct symbol in every domain i.e. the Sun in the sky, fire among the elements etc. so that everywhere His signs are manifested, and all things attest to His Presence. (Ibid)

In the thought of both Avicenna and Suhrawardi, we can see therefore that nature is always below God but is never detached from Him in terms of His Reflection and Presence. While Avicenna thinks that God is not part of the continuous lesser being because he is Pure Being,

nature as lesser being nonetheless could be reflected as a Sign (*Ayat*) of God that could be contemplated by human to reach Him. Suhrawardi takes a different mode by attributing gradations of existence being God as Light of Lights (*Nur al-Anwar*). Nature is seen as this imperfect place – a prison – for the human soul who seeks the ultimate freedom transcending from an inferior state of light to the superior one until the soul returns home in the Pure Light, the Divine Essence. Thus, we can see COVID-19 as part of this Signs of God and light posts – instead of dark corners – towards God because of its part in nature. Its silver lining (of Light) is in the beholders' part to see (us) that we could contemplate the place of COVID-19 in nature to learn its lessons to reach the Sacred.

COVID-19 can be viewed from the Tawhidic perspective of Islam as advanced by Nasr and other scholars of *scientia sacra*, of the perennial philosophy. Viewed from this perspective, COVID-19 is yet another opportunity to return inwards – a mode for reorientation of sorts toward the Center from the turbulent circumferential Periphery. The Center is none other than the Sacred Himself – a testimony to viewing the Unity, to the One God that has been the central message of revealed religions and in this essay's particular context, of Islam. The Unity as understood here is that COVID-19 is yet another reminder and lesson for the human being to be cognizant of his or her Centre – God. Whilst the basic idea is to realise the return to God, all efforts must be done from the physical to the metaphysical. Hence, the work to return to the Centre presents the potential to cast COVID-19 not as fatalist calamity, but as a lesson to the betterment of humanity – starting from the self – and his general connection that leads to the One (*Ahad*).

With this, humanity again realizes that its confidence in science, or whatever periphery of its doings, must be all returned to the basics of human living. Recall that during the earliest phase of the pandemic, countries of the world imposed movement restrictions throughout the cities that virtually took away one of the human basic freedoms, that is, the right to free movement. However, the animal kingdom cherished the situation because the limitation imposed as such casts their return to some of the riverside, seaside, even city roads where they were thought to be 'extinct' or impossible to be at such place during 'normal' times. While COVID-19 is catastrophic to human beings as it deprives, alters their

everyday practices and lifestyle, it however provides both the physical space and 'spirit' space for the lower forms in the animal kingdom to 're-take' what was once their natural habitat. During the period of human immobility, though the other spheres of 'scientific endeavours' were suddenly put to a standstill, animals and plants were able to recoup, relax, and regenerate without too much human interference.

Thus mark the equilibrium of COVID-19 to the dynamics of life in general – especially if one lives in the city where a semblance of human touch on nature is scarce. The disease reminds us in the form of silver lining of a cloud to reconnect ourselves with nature. The nature being articulated here is not just about walking in the park or any form of tourism. Rather, it calls for the deeper reflection of our environment and the direct effect around us. The effects are so significant if understood beyond the statistical numbers of everyday new cases, R-value, and so on and so forth. Of paramount importance is the contemplation on the exceptional circumstance especially about man's deeper psyche and spiritual self that has brought humanity to this point when the onslaught of COVID-19 seems to be unstoppable.

At the psychic level, COVID-19 can be interpreted as a symbol of cognizance – that no matter how busy we may be with our life to the point that we are careless about our responsibility with our surroundings, and more importantly, with ourselves, we will be faced with the disturbance of insecurity. COVID-19 came when we were literally unaware of the magnitude of its impact when we faced it. It came as a shock to our state of being – that we needed to adjust to a 'new normal' in such a short period of time because of the severity of the disease at the time – there was no cure nor vaccine. But we were presented with a visual graphic of a microscopic creature that literally changed our 'normal' lives forever.

This move to a 'new normal' assumes a fundamental change in our lives. But we must ask ourselves whether it will change us for the better. Also, what does it mean to be 'better' in the context of a 'new normal'? Although in reflection, there is nothing new as far as the principle of human nature is concerned. Suddenly, we are ruptured in the sense that there is not much prior 'guidance,' a manual of sorts, to guide society into the sudden storm of pandemic. We were quite

literally walking in the dark hoping that science could guide us. Science has performed its role to the extent that it posits the materiality of the disease, i.e., by describing the virus, how it infects people, how it evolves, and so forth. But even as we have found ways to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, we are left with a host of unresolved uncertainties about the future.

For instance, by turning inwards and growing the spiritual wings to fly are how we can relate the sacredness to nature. By turning inwards, we essentially introspect the essential qualities of the self that relate to nature 'outside.' The realisation on the aspect is that we are part of the natural world from the 'inside,' that the external nature is all but reflections of our inner world. We will realize the natural relationship to the sacred when we view that our life situation between the interior and the exterior world cannot be fully appreciated if we ignore the inevitable connection. This connection cannot be explained by our material consciousness with the physical and material nature alone, even if they manifest the impacts of human thoughts and the endeavours in the outwardly empirical manner. The devastating impact of COVID-19 on human life is not the result of direct mal-intention of little viruses to harm humans. They are merely manifesting themselves and unleashing their deadly potential from none other than careless human thought and acts reflective of an egoistic drive to conquer nature. By turning inwards, we attempt to envisage a world beyond the external vision to train our internal vision to see the world as it is. The realization can be ugly at first, but the discovery of such a vision would at least enable us to contemplate the possibility to transcend the current lowly state of life that we are living into the spiritual realm.

## 5. Nasr's Brief Spiritual Reflection on the Current Pandemic

Nasr wrote a short essay in the Sacred Web (2020) where he made a spiritual reflection on the current pandemic. In it, he reminds us that human life on Earth is temporary and is inevitably coupled with various degrees of dangers, disasters, and tragedies. He also draws our attention to the scriptural reminders of various religious traditions to be taken as valuable lessons. The idea is strong that we ought to regain

our consciousness of the cosmos all around us and embrace it as part and parcel of our lives, especially in moral and spiritual principles. Nasr emphasizes the importance of collective prayers in public spaces and houses of worship which were common during an aftermath of natural disasters (This was also observed in the West). Now, the cosmos is viewed secularly as if it is a dead machine, lacking life and spiritual significance, a mere 'it'. Thus, it denotes the modern man's forgetfulness about the underlying principles of the significance of such practices (vis-à-vis collective and public prayers after an occurrence of a natural disaster).

Nature has its own rhythm and harmony and a life of its own both visible and invisible. Therefore, like any life form, it will in some way and someday react to what humanity has done upon it so the latter can learn a lesson, as informed by the multiple verses of the Quran. We can draw spiritual lessons from nature, in which nature itself serves as teacher. The modern man fails to see such lessons, in good part because he suffers from the sin of hubris – of pride. Thus, the momentous pandemic and other worldwide crises currently facing us could make us more humble and more compassionate towards every creature, and among ourselves. Thus, the present crisis should be an opportunity for a spiritual awakening. Instead of viewing it as all gloom and doom, it should be viewed as God's gift to spiritual realities that many had been oblivious to. In particular, the present crisis could make us turn more inward, more introspective, and be more familiar with our own inner self. By doing so, we can hope to view nature as our true spiritual friend and that humans are governed by a Divine Will and not by blind forces and laws.

Nasr beautifully closes his passage when he mentions that we have only two choices when the earth suddenly cracks below us: we can either sink into the abyss or grow wings to fly to the illimitable sky. He invites us "to grow wings and fly," and cites the Quranic verse: *Kullu man 'alayha fan wa yabqa wajhu rabbika dhul-jalali wa'l-ikram*, which he renders as, "All other than Him perish, and there remains the Face of thy Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generosity." The Face in a way is the face we turn to God. Nasr then prays that the present tragedy aids us to face ourselves to God, not turn away from him.

## 6. Theophany in Ecosophy as New Political Ecology: Expanding Nasr's *Scientia Sacra* and Michel Serre's Natural Contract

I contend that the basic work in political ecology, if it were to appreciate any discourse about the Sacred, must begin by addressing the problem of desacralized knowledge that currently dominates both mainstream political philosophy and ecological philosophy. We need to also rebuild our relationship with nature in a fundamental way. In this section, I investigate reviving God-consciousness in politics by relating to Michel Serre's Natural Contract with respect to his idea of harmonizing natural rhythm with human activities by means of closing the gap between 'natural time' and 'human time' to restore some sense of connection and balance with nature.

Serre is looking into a possibility of human dialogue with nature – how we can speak the natural language again by being sensitive to *temps* – time and weather – vis-à-vis our physical-experiential surroundings just like sailors and peasants during premodern era. In this sense, a political community (vis-à-vis a state, an international body, etc.) can be likened to a ship whilst everyone on board the ship is fragile, subject to the mercy of the high seas and which demands collective cooperation and conscience of everyone not only between people, but also with the surrounding seafaring elements (i.e., weather and time). Being collectively fragile, we recognize that there is a need for a pact – a contract – that is the product of our mutual needs and attune to ourselves and with nature. This pact is beyond individualistic need to survive – no sailor can survive alone in the high seas – it is a recognition that everyone is in the high seas together with the mentality that we are not about to conquer the high seas, but with the intent that we are able to journey together while appreciating nature all along. The binding relationship is love, care and vigilance. It goes beyond individualistic short-term political or economic consideration to more long-term, even inter-generational considerations (i.e., climate change is a result of a generation's work that could not be wholly resolved here and now; and same goes to any pandemic with whatever life and material damages it has done) by returning our sensitivity to nature's 'slow time.'

Thus, there is a need for a two-way exchange in thought about our relationship with nature, not just a one-way exploitative attitude. The

preliminary to this is by asking: what if we put nature at the centre and not our narrow modern human existence of means and materiality? What if we also empower nature by giving it rights in our legal institutions, hence our politics? This is significant because nature is existentially independent from our human reasoning, and our historicist tendencies tend to favour our narrow current needs. As long as we exist, we always experience nature by applying our thoughts and attitudes towards it. Unfortunately, it is modern humans who have applied our thoughts and attitudes in such a detached and careless manner that we put ourselves on the pedestal and nature is literally put below our feet and far away from the transcendent. At this point, the Tawhidic science, the science of Unity and God consciousness, applies. This is where Nasr's ecosophy could inform a new political ecology envisaged as a lesson from this pandemic.

Following Nasr's (1989) outline about the state of modern man and his reduced mode of understanding that falls far short of wholesome understanding due to a discourse of knowledge that is disconnected from the Sacred, there is little hope to frame any mode of knowledge that could resonate God and His Wisdom as reflected in nature. In politics, there are many questions to be raised in related problems such as that of the hierarchy of existence and the standing of the humans within it. This would open the question of rulership, rights, and obligations of and about nature, interrelationship between species, responsible usage of natural resources, climate order and so on. Following Nasr, there needs to be a revamp of the mechanized and obsolete idea about the natural world. This is to realise that the natural world is in fact alive and having its own conscience that we can at least move from the conquest of nature mentality to a vision of nature that considers humankind as responsible rulers because they answer to a real and higher authority above themselves and above nature.

This can be applied when reflecting on the possible contingency of political will, potential ability and hope from something beyond (vis-à-vis a miracle or recalling/reconnection with the Higher Order) as reflected during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unique because it is the first pandemic in the digital era where everyone seems to relate to everyone but at the same time removed as far as they could psychologically get in the spatial sense. Within this context, the lightning

fast spread of the disease – ironically due to our own material efficiency (i.e., cheap and fast air and land transportation) and other social and political mechanisms used to mediate societies had somehow increased its rate of infection that it forced governments to take drastic measures.

There were pandemics in the past such as the Bubonic Plague, the Spanish flu, etc. Each time a pandemic came, human society responded according to the knowledge about being of their time. While scientifically and practically they can act very differently, they all have the same objective: to end the pandemic as soon as possible, and to minimize all harm caused to human society. Thus, when we discuss harm, we look at the loss of many lives and various degrees of health issues related to COVID-19. We also look at major economic losses framed in terms of lost businesses and individual livelihood which result directly and indirectly from COVID-19. We also touch on aspects of psychological harm such as suicide due to various social pressures that result from COVID-19 and various public and government responses to tackle it. What is unerring about the disease is that, at present, none could predict its trajectory, and that has been a cause for uncertainty. Governments and health authorities are now keen to conclude that we now must accept that COVID-19 is already endemic, and we must accept the fact and fate that we are going to live with the disease for good.

The mitigating factor is that society now has some medical means to reduce the effects of COVID-19 both to individuals and human collectives. Thus vaccines, COVID-19 test kits, pills, and other forms of medical interventions are formulated to tackle the disease. With aid of various public health and intervention measures done by the government, we are now entering into a 'new normal.' This new normal is a description of our daily lives with a causality due to COVID-19. Without COVID-19, there is no 'new normal.'

What it politically entails is that public life is never going to be the same again from 2019 onwards. Previously, that public life was taken for granted. Philosophically, it had something to do with liberal notion of freedom in public and private lives. Somehow, that freedom was suddenly taken away, suspended, or limited by various COVID-19 intervention measures. This 'freedom' is a notion of a public life

about what it 'used to be,' which is everything about life before 2019. Somehow, after 2019, whatever idea of freedom we invoke, we relate it to the pre-2019 notion of freedom. Freedom now has a time marker, a sort of historicist outlook about its nearest known golden age now lost due to a sudden pandemic.

It means the loss of potential of many planned and realized activities viewed from economic and social achievements. No longer can we simply dive into the 'old' ways of doing things; such activities as face-to-face meetings, daily commute to work, and eating in a restaurant have become sources of longing, even sources of fear and abhorrence for some. At the back of our mind, there is now a thought – depending on our degrees of attachment – of the possibility that we will be infected with COVID-19. It is not that we fear COVID-19 like we fear dangerous creatures of the jungle, but we fear it more as something that snatches away our potentials to realize our life achievements, by literal infection and sickness, even death from the disease itself, or by various social limitations to curb it.

Somehow, out of this fear from COVID-19, rationalized by our knowledge of modern science and statistics, we have turned more inwards. However, this inwardness shrinks us. This inwardness is not the kind of freeing journey into the self towards the Center and Origin as Sufi and other spiritual masters have in mind. Rather, it is a form of belittling the self. The irony before is that being modern, hence positively rational, should free us. Now, that same rationality has been the source of self-limitation. It is as if our own sharp intellect has turned against us.

## 7. COVID-19 as Communicative Mode of Return to God

COVID-19 can be seen as a communicative mode of return to God. It can be seen as God's calling – a reminder – for modern humanity to return to Him. When modern humanity is busy with endless and most often mundane activities of worldly progress, COVID-19 sets to upset such routine like a very sudden pull of a break. Some see it as a rude awakening – but an awakening, nonetheless. Like it or not, the world

has forever changed because of the pandemic. There is virtually no chance for the world to return to an 'old normal,' a carefree and careless world in which we lived before 2019. We must be honest to ourselves in this, and we must be able to accept the fact that we must adapt to the new world that we are living in, a notably more uncertain world whilst its trajectory is hard to predict – other than that of more natural calamity if we continue with our present carefree and careless state. A major break from routine can be seen as a breakaway and forced retreat from the disquiet yet numbing everyday life. Suddenly, a time-space is open again with major restrictions – we are forced to be and remain with ourselves at a certain place.

Consider the various situations that people are in – some with privileges may be able to be more private in their mansions and condominiums, but not so those who are less economically fortunate, who may not be able to have a private space, but are forced to stay in one small place with many others – usually family members for those who stay in a small flat and such, or with co-workers for those who stay in dormitories and similar quarters. Also consider those who are forced – by their own will, or by law and circumstance, to work during the peak of COVID-19. Consider the medical officers and others who needed to keep going during those times when things were difficult due to the novelty of the situation.

We need a comprehensive metaphysical outlook of nature to clarify the silver lining of COVID-19 to us. So far, COVID-19, at least in the public and popular discussions has largely been about medical, public health measures and policy effectiveness on how to control the spread of the disease and minimize its impact on everyday routine. While not denying the importance and value of such discussions, we need also turn our attention to ways we have been perceiving nature so far. Many scientific and social scientific methods have been employed to understand the impacts and solutions of COVID-19. However, none seems to integrate them so we could understand the COVID-19 problem from a broader angle. Those studies assume objectivity, hence a certain kind of distance from COVID-19 as an object of study to the human being that studies it.

While we uphold the benefit of social scientific studies, we seldom see the significance of religions and their aspects in presentations about COVID-19. It seems that COVID-19 has proven a 'victory' for modern mathematical and scientific worldviews. Religion and spirituality at best seem to have taken the backseat among the larger worldview of public discourse. Religion and spirituality are usually taken as domains of solace in 'modern' sense of its study. Now it seems that solace is running short – fear seems to take over for a period during the pandemic. While the world is trying to move towards the endemic phase, it is also burdened by the scar it experienced during the various peaks of pandemic. The narrative of trust then shifted towards trusting the vaccines – a symbol of man's capability to control nature. While vaccines may be able to control the physically severe or lethal threat of the disease, vaccines are nowhere close in alleviating the deep sense of widespread uncertainty. Suddenly, there is a vacuum that modern science and medicine cannot fill, namely, the uncertainty of the heart.

Nature, viewed from the positive and medical sciences, is mechanical, complex, and soulless. It may contain life, but the only life concerned is the biological and the psychological; not much beyond. The spiritual aspect of nature is missing in this worldview, thus, preventing a perspective of healing from the spiritual angle and at most a more complete metaphysics of nature. Thus, it can be said that the self-limiting view of nature that we are currently engaging in prevents a more wholesome view of nature. With the limit, we are blind to problems that lie outside of the currently understood matrix of the world, such as our spiritual ineptitude to confront the current state of nature. We are now living in our make-believe system that the world only exists on a certain limited plane – a plane limited by our imagination that fails to transcend due to lack of relation to the Divine. In other words, due to our self-limiting thought – thinking that our sheer rationality is sufficient to comprehend nature – we cut ties with the essential source of nature, which is the Divine.

COVID-19 is certainly part of nature and man too. This is because on the one hand, it exists in nature. The coronavirus is nothing new. But what is new this time is that it has managed to wreak havoc to human lives and upset our usual activities; thus began the relationship

between humans and the disease. What was external and alien to humans is now part and parcel of their lives. This is not something new in the longer arc of human history. Because of COVID-19, we now learn a hard lesson that diseases are not always 'routine' in their nature of occurrences – just like our attitude to influenza virus, for instance. They will occur routinely, but we are very sure to be able to contain it. Hence our mindset tends towards overconfidence at 'tackling' the disease by overcoming nature, thus 'defeating' the disease. This arrogant attitude – hubris – the sin of modern man as Nasr describes it, blinds us from the possibility that a tiny creature could 'defeat' us instead. No, it does not have to eradicate us in one fell swoop – it just needs to create a prolonged disturbance and disequilibrium for humanity to feel the pangs of its presence. But its presence is not due to the virus' own conscious making. The presence of the virus is felt only because human beings think it is now 'the enemy,' just like the any 'other' to satisfy their need to be victorious and overcome 'the challenge – in this case his long-term health and possibly, his life.' This mindset that man will always be victorious – to be able to conquer all including the deepest aspect of Nature is, arguably, our great blind spot in this pandemic.

## 8. Revelation, Nature, and the Pandemic

Revelation, the Quran in particular, speaks volumes about the role of human beings as vicegerent (khalifah) of God on Earth. For instance, in Quran 2:30:

لُعَجْتَأَ أَوَلُاقَ ۖةَفَيلِخَ ضِرْأَلْاِ يفِ لٌعِاجَ يِنّإِ ةِكَئِلَمَلْلِ كَبُّرَ لَاقَ ذْإِوَ
سُدِّقَنُوَ كَدِمْحَبِ حُبِّسَنُ نُحْنَوَ ءَآمَدِّلْاِ كُفِسْيَوَ اهَيفِ دُسِفْيُ نمَ اهَيفِ
٣٠ نَومُلَعْتَ الَ امَ مُلَعْأَ يِنّإِ لَاقَ ۖكَلَ

*[Prophet], when your Lord told the angels, 'I am putting a successor on earth,' they said, 'How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?' but He said, 'I know things you do not.'* (Abdul Haleem trans.)

Here, human beings are given a noble but heavy task that even the angels raised concerns about human beings' potentiality to cause

damage and bloodshed. Viewed within this context, the fact of human rulership over nature encompasses the knowledge of even the noble angels. God mentions that He knows what the angels do not regarding the human vicegerency on Earth, signaling a form of stewardship that must always be taken with knowledge and remembrance of God. God is the true King because even the angels who constantly celebrate and proclaim God's holiness are not even chosen for the task because their lack of knowledge to rule the Earth despite their unwavering submission. Osman Bakar explains the role of Islamic revelation in his latest book, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth: The Islamic Heritage* (2022) to further expound Nasr's conception about Man and Nature to deal with modern challenges of human vicegerency of planet Earth. Osman Bakar further asserts the principle of Unity of God, *al-tawhid*, to be the central teaching of Islam which is repeatedly asserted in the Quran, the five pillars of Islam, and the six pillars of faith (Ibid, 22-27). Osman Bakar also details about Islamic Ecology and Environmental Science that could be derived from the first part of the Shahadah: there is no god but God in the metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological sense (Ibid, 27-39).

Viewed from the context of human vicegerency and their commitment to Shahadah, we could say that the COVID-19 pandemic teaches us a lesson to rule the Earth right again by reasserting his commitment to Shahadah: there is no god but God. In a way, COVID-19 serves as an expensive lesson and warning from God, the true King Himself – as did other pandemics that came before COVID-19 and potentially deadlier pandemics that may come after. Human beings must return to their role as khalifah, as God's vicegerent, not as egoistic plunderers whose aim is to make nature subject to their whims and desires. The turning away from God in this context is really the forgetting, or worse, the abandoning of the Shahadah. Thus, viewed as notice of return to Unity, to God, COVID-19 despite all the physical pain and economic calamity it wrought to human lives and livelihood, can also be viewed as God's Wisdom (*Hikmah*) for those who are willing to look at the silver lining, just as we saw the animals that came out in the open in cities, riverside, and lake during the first total lockdown during the pandemic.

The outcome of realizing the wisdom of nature from one of God's sacred names, *al-Hakim*, The Wisest should return to us the basic sense of custody of planet Earth as our only home in this world to be accounted for both in this world and the next. We must move away from accounting nature as a marketplace with gross profiteering and see her considering the sacred *manifestation*, an Ayat, of God.

## 9. Re-Sacralizing Nature: An Islamic Perspective

Following Nasr, nature in Islamic perspective possesses a sacred aspect (1990, 21). All the phenomena that it contains, including itself, contain meaning. Therefore, whatever occurs as phenomenon, big or small, observable or unseen, ultimately serves to tell something about the Sacred. Nature in this sense is a Sign (*Ayat*) that points to the ultimate existence of Unity, of Tawhid, which concludes that God is the Ultimate Reality. While nature itself is not God, it serves as an essential vehicle for contemplation about existence of God.

In contemplative Islamic tradition, nature is part of the "ontological Quran," the *Quran al-takwini* that is an essential co-reference to the revealed Quran, the *Quran al-tadwini.*

> *"Have they not contemplated the realm of the heavens and earth and all that God created, and that the end of their time might be near? What [other revelation] will they believe in if they do not believe in this?"* (Quran 7:185)

This verse of the Quran, and many other similar verses, emphasizes the entire aspect of nature – the wholeness of it, vis-à-vis the various realm of heavens, earth, and God's creation, in relation to the end of our time. The Quran further asserts that one of the essential foundations of belief is this reflection about nature and all its aspects. This reflection thus forms a bridge between revealed knowledge on the one hand, and empirical and experiential knowledge on the other. Thus, we can say that contemplation is key to the Sacred because of its connecting function.

Regarding COVID-19, the wisdom of its whole picture can be

projected from our contemplation of both. On the one hand, COVID-19 lies indeed in the empirical knowledge – its origin, viral strain, vectors, etc. On the other hand, it is in the realm of experience – whether we get infected and sick because of it and all other direct and indirect experience that results from it such as working, mandated mask wearing, and movement limitation, etc. Both are conceptualized as a Book, which presumes that they are to be read and explored in chapters and sections resembling that of a book. Within that 'book,' COVID-19 can be thought of as a major chapter of our time. As noted earlier, it has changed many practical aspects of our lives that we took for granted before. It has also changed our notion of freedom and security in ways that are limiting to our physical movements and social interactions. It has even moved our world into more virtual and digital connections, which is unprecedented in known history of humanity. We are now told daily in the news that there are ongoing and upcoming military conflicts in different parts of the world. We are also facing severe droughts, forest firestorms, thunderstorms, floods, and landslides which are record breaking in modern history. Viewed exclusively from just one angle, these are immense problems that even to tackle one of them takes tremendous task with gloomy prospects with all the unfolding uncertainties around them.

Hence, enter the Sacred in nature considering these confusing signals. A view of the Sacred gives hope and rest to a notion of existence that is ever pressurised due to tremendous challenges well beyond the ken of any single individual to contain. It opens a door to remembrance (*zikr*) to reflect the state of inward self for the betterment of personal and collective life of which spirituality and its related activities will be at the communicative centre – a messenger of sorts – to the conscientious network of hope that will guide further activities.

## 10. Conclusion

To conclude, we need to seriously reassess Islamic narratives about nature. To this end, we can view nature from a perennial wisdom with its principles that is 'fresh in its time' to be able to rejuvenate its discourse within the context of modern human beings who are struggling with reckless subjugation and mechanization of their environment and has

tainted their vision of nature as enabler to contemplate the Divine. The key is contemplation of nature – a deep contemplation that requires participation of the whole of human self, and not just the contingency of human hands and minds disconnected from the rest of his being that has clouded his vision about power, rulership, rights and obligations and relationship with nature and its order. In this, the contemplative tradition of Islam as outlined by Nasr, if expanded further into the realm of political ecology, may well provide a contemporary answer.

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*ARTICLE*

# Ecological Conversion: What Can We Learn from the African Traditional Religions?

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**Abstract**

*In the face of the ecological crisis, many prominent voices including Pope Francis have called for immediate collective actions to curb the problem. In the spirit of interreligious dialogue and collaboration, this article discusses what the African Traditional Religions have to offer when it comes to the theme of ecological conversion and the protection of the environment. The article clarifies that due to the vastness of Africa and the distinctiveness of each tribe and culture, it is more accurate to talk about African Traditional Religions rather than the African Traditional Religion as a monolith. This work focuses particularly on a tribe in Ghana called the Akans and discusses their worldview which tends to be spiritual, religious, and unlike some religions and philosophies, benignly anthropocentric. This paper examines the various ways traditional Akans protected their ecology and this article looks at them as well. The paper argues that the Akan traditions which recognize the divine in nature differ from the desacralization and the demythologization of nature in some Abrahamic religions, which have contributed to environmental exploitation and degradation. In addition to calling for re-sacralization and remythologization of nature, this paper argues that if God took on flesh in both the "first" and the "second" incarnations, the entire creation can be perceived as the body of God. This perspective affords a way of looking at nature, not as merely trees, mountains, rivers, rocks, etc. – and facilitates the possibility of an ecological conversion.*

**Keywords:** *interreligious dialogue, African Traditional Religions, Akan Traditional Religions, ecology, ecological conversion.*

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## 1. Introduction

Africa is a big continent with around fifty-four countries and about three times the size of the United States of America. As many as there are countries and cultures in Africa, so there are many religions in Africa. These religions tend to be tribal, ethnic, or village specific, and as result could vary from one village to the other in terms of belief and practice. It is believed that there are about three thousand tribes in Africa, each having its own religious system.[2] It will be a misnomer then to talk about the African Traditional Religion since there are multiplicities of them. However, according to E.B. Idowu, the real cohesive factor of religion in Africa is the living God, and based on this identical factor, we can speak of the religion of Africa in the singular.[3] The same uniting factor, i.e., the living God, is the same between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Thus, inferring from Idowu's argument, could one then argue that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are one religion since they share a common identity? I agree more with John Pobee who asserts that "in view of the pluralism of Africanness, the religion tends to be ethnocentric. Consequently, it is more accurate to speak of African religions."[4] I would therefore prefer to talk about the African Traditional Religions (ATRs hereafter) due to their huge numbers and varieties. Even though I have been born and bred in Ghana, it would still be impossible to talk about the Ghanaian Traditional Religion. Instead, I can talk specifically about some African Traditional Religions, especially those that I have experienced in the Akan land where I belong.

Noticing the co-existence present between Church and Traditional African Religions, Pope Benedict XVI in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* said, "It is worth singling out knowledgeable individual converts, who could provide the Church with guidance in gaining a deeper and more accurate knowledge of the traditions, the culture, and the traditional religions."[5] Even though Pope Benedict calls on converts from

[2] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Botswana, Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990), 1.

[3] E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 104.

[4] John Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 1 (Spring, 1976): 1

[5] Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (2011), no. 93.

the ATRs to provide the Church with guidance as regards the ATRs, most African academics who have written about the African Traditional Religions are either not converts or adherents of the ATRs. Against this backdrop, Godfrey Onah, a former vice rector of the Pontifical Urbaniana University and an African writer observes that most of the spokespersons of the ATRs are not adherents themselves and speak as outsiders. Although I am not an adherent and also not a convert from the ATRs, I still think having grown up with adherents of the ATRs, I possess some degree of knowledge to be able to write about them. This paper, therefore, is a response to Pope Francis' call on all religions to dialogue in order to protect creation,[6] in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council which declares:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men,…that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.[7]

In this paper, therefore, I would like to focus on the theme of ecological conversion and what we the people of other religions, through dialogue and collaboration could learn from the ATRs and their perspectives on the ecology.

## 2. African Traditional Religions

Unlike most religions that have scriptures (Holy Bible, Holy Quran,

[6] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter (2015), no. 201.

[7] Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions (18 November 1965), no. 2, in Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, ed. A. Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980).

Bhagavad Gita, etc) and written traditions (Catechisms, Hadiths), most African religions do not have scriptures or written traditions. At the same time, it is worth revealing that the teachings and beliefs of most of the African Traditional Religions are handed down through nature (the ecology), through oral traditions such as sacred stories, folklores, and proverbs. The memories of the people become receptacles and means of transmitting their commandments, parables, cosmology, ecology, etc. Defining what an African Traditional Religion is, John Pobee says,

> We understand the phrase African Traditional Religion to include the beliefs and practices of Native African peoples with regard to the supernatural, those which were handed down by the ancestors and which people hold on to as their link with both the past and eternity.[8]

Anyone who has witnessed the practices and beliefs of the Traditional African Religious person would understand that it is basically a way of life. Every aspect of the traditional African person's life is permeated by a sense of the sacred and spirits and as a result, there is no clear distinction between the sacred and secular, spirituality and religion, holy and profane. This then would explain why the ATRs, unlike some other religions, do not have elaborate temples and religious artifacts. For traditional Africans, day-to-day life is in itself spiritual and religious. From rising in the morning until going to bed at night, all the activities of a traditional African are religious in nature. The African therefore by nature is incurably and notoriously religious.[9] Because spirituality is intertwined with every aspect of the adherents' lives, scholars such as Douglas Thomas think that the ATRs are as ancient as the first African people and hence older than the Abrahamic Religions.[10] Unfortunately, there is little scholarship on the ATRs, and among the studies in existence, most were done through the lens of Christianity. Descriptions of the ATR by Christian authors tended to be unkind, making use of derogatory terms such as fetish, heathen, pagan, primitive, savage, and so on. Negative depictions of ATRs by Christian and Muslim writers and missionaries who do not take time to explore

[8] Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 1.

[9] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1.

[10] Douglas E. Thomas, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), 5.

the people's beliefs and spiritualities have, in fact, caused some natives to even hate the spirituality of their ancestors.

Among the diverse collection of Traditional African Religions exists the tribe of the Akans in Ghana. From the outset, it must be noted that even though the Akans are a homogenous group with the same fundamental beliefs about God, variations do exist with regard to how traditional religion is practiced from one Akan village or shrine to the next. What is taboo, totem, and forbidden in one village or shrine might be a delicacy in the next. What is hostile in one Akan society or traditional shrine might be friendly in another. For instance, some deities like Kune and Tigare (both executioner gods) who are believed to be helpful by their adherents in my village, Kranka, are believed to be harmful, hostile, and even not deities in some Akan communities.[11] It is a result of these differences in beliefs and practices that it would make sense to refer to this religious reality as 'Akan Traditional Religions' instead of 'Akan Traditional Religion.' Who are the Akans?

> "Akan" is an ethnographic and linguistic term used to refer to a cluster of culturally homogenous groups living in central and southern Ghana and parts of the adjoining eastern Cote D'Ivoire. The Akan constitute two broad subcategories: the inland Asante, Bono, Akyem, Akwapem, and Kwawu, who speak the Twi, and the coastal Fante, who speak a dialect of the same name….Most of these ethnic groups constituted autonomous political systems in the pre-colonial period.[12]

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[11] Gillian Mary Bediako, Benhardt Y. Quarshie, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, eds., *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond: Christianity as a Universal Faith: Essays in Honour of Kwame Bediako* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014), 263.

[12] Joseph K. Adjaye, ed., *Time in the Black Experience* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 57. See also "Who Are the Akan People?" accessed 20 March 2022, https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/who-are-the-akan-people.html

"The Akan is a unique group of people found in **Ghana** and **Ivory Coast**. Historically, the Ghanaian population migrated to the Ivory Coast and became the most populous group of people in the country. The Akan language is known as Fante or Twi; it is a group of dialects within the Niger-Congo family of languages. The dialects of the Akan language include the Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Bono, Agona, Wassa, Fante, Kwahu, and Asante. Some prominent people from the Akan community include Kofi Annan, John Atta Mills, and Kwame Nkrumah."

## 3. The Akan Worldview

Generally, the Akans believe in three main groups of otherworldly beings consisting of the Supreme Being, the Lesser/Minor gods, and lastly the Ancestors.[13] Although considered to be suprahuman and otherworldly, these beings are very much part of the everyday activities of the Traditional Akan people. The very language of the people is filled with phrases and sayings that refer to God (*Onyankopon/Nyame*), the gods (*abosom*), and the ancestral world (*nsamanfo/asamando*). One is likely to hear of God's tree (*nyamedua*) and God's axe, a stone-like substance that comes with a thunder strike. The people refer to rain as God's water (*nyankonsuo*). The Venerable Archbishop Emeritus of the Kumasi Archdiocese, Peter Sarpong, explains that the concept of God among the Akans is native rather than imported. In other words, the Akan people had their own notion of the Supreme Being before their first contact with other religions.[14]

Next to God in the Akan cosmology are the lesser gods. Whereas Sarpong prefers to call the divinities "gods," Onah prefers to employ the term "deities" because "it would be improper to call the divinities 'gods,' thus giving the false impression of polytheism."[15] Although Onah's clarification is noteworthy, for the purpose of this paper, these two terms will be used interchangeably. Describing the lesser gods, Sarpong says,

> Inferior to Onyankupong are the minor deities or spirits, called Busum or Obosum – of these, there are two classes, those which are friendly to man – Busum papa, and those which are mischievous and hostile – Busum bon. These beings are themselves invisible, but are commonly associated with visible objects, especially objects of remarkable character, such as mountains, rivers, large trees or rocks or stones of peculiar appearance.[16]

Generally, the lesser gods are seen as playing similar roles like

[13] Peter Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," *Anthropos*, Bd. 62, H. 1./2. (1967): 2-22.

[14] Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 6-7.

[15] Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, "The Somali Dir Clan's History: Codka Beesha Direed," accessed 7 April 2022 https://beeshadireed.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-meaning-of-peace-in-african.html

[16] Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 8.

the linguists in the Akan court. At the Akan court or chief's palace, the linguists are the go-betweens of the kings/chiefs and their people. Some of the gods are therefore believed to be intermediaries between the Supreme Being and humans. Ernestina Afriyie, like Sarpong, puts the gods into two main categories – the executioner gods (*abosom brafoɔ*) and the tutelary gods (*tete abosom*). Whereas the *abosom brafoɔ* could be sometimes hostile to humans, the *tete abosom* are mostly helpful. It must be noted that despite the goodness of the tutelary gods, there have been instances where they have been invoked against dishonest people and the deities have acted. According to Afriyie, between the executioner and the tutelary deities, it is the latter who are intermediaries but not the former.[17] For instance, the tutelary water gods Tano, Bea, Bosomtwe, and Bosompo are considered by the Asantes as intermediaries between God and the people. Nonetheless, Kwesi A. Dickson explains that whereas this mediatory role of the gods is true in theory, caution must be exercised because, in practice, the belief that the gods are mediators is not always ritually and experientially exemplified in the Akan Religion.[18]

In the Akan cosmology, the lesser gods are subordinates of the Supreme Being and there is no way one could compare them to God. Against this backdrop, Idowu contends that the ATRs and by extension the Akan Traditional Religions are not polytheistic but are accurately described as monotheistic – with a modification.[19] Responding to Idowu's argument, Dickson maintains that the ATRs are neither polytheistic nor modified monotheism. Instead of hastily labeling the ATRs as either polytheistic or monotheistic, Dickson thinks scholars should ask the adherents of the ATRs themselves how they perceive the relationship between their deities and God.[20]

The gods' associations with mountains, rivers, large trees, or even entire forests, rocks, and creation as a whole give the environment or nature a sacred character. The Akan Traditional people, therefore, tend to venerate some objects of nature because of their perceived

[17] Gillian, Benhardt and J., *Seeing New Facets of the Diamond*, 265.

[18] Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 56.

[19] E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 165-168.

[20] Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 54-55.

sacredness. This belief has been termed *animism*, a term first coined by E.B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture*.[21] The trees, rivers, animals, seas, mountains, groves are not the deities themselves; rather they are the abodes possessing or the sacred vessels/media holding the deities or spirits. For the Akan therefore, any attempt to conquer or abuse nature (trees, rivers, mountains, etc.) can have huge supernatural and even natural consequences on the culprit and by extension the whole society. In summary, according to the Akan worldview, the natural and the supernatural worlds are integrally connected and any disturbances to the natural world would incur reactions from the transcendent.

## 4. The Impact of Judeo-Christian Religions on the Akan Worldview

The attitudes of Christians towards the ATR and their adherents have not been praiseworthy. Christianity in its early days in Africa condemned almost everything indigenous and the remnants of these still remain today. The Roman Catholic Church in Ghana recently initiated a five-year *Laudato Si* Action Programme. At the launching ceremony, the Archbishop of Cape Coast, the Most Rev. Charles Palmer-Buckle averred that "colonialism and the manner of evangelization received, did not understand this reverence that our ancestors had toward nature, and through that, [the reverence] they also had toward their fellow man and woman."[22]

The late Ghanaian SVD Brother, Pius Agyemang related a story of how he and his colleagues were pelted with rocks the first time they played traditional drums in a Mass. Because traditional drums were generally played at 'fetish' shrines, some Catholics attending Mass thought that Br. Pius was promoting syncretism in the church. Writing in the *American Journal of Sociology* in the early 1940s, the great Ghanaian statesman and politician Ako Adjei said:

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[21] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Languages, Art and Custom*, Vol. 1, (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1889), 417.

[22] "Church in Ghana launches 5-year Laudato sí Action Programme," accessed 7 April 2022 https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-11/ghana-laudato-si-bishops-action-program-five.html?msclkid=fea8cc1aaa5111ec882fb2715bc1480e

> The Christian church in Africa has never respected or tolerated the traditional institutions of African society. In the past, Christian missionaries refused to acknowledge the truth, the faith, and the philosophy of African religion….The theory which supported the action of the early Christian missionaries in Africa was that everything African or indigenous was bad and contrary to the Will of God but that everything European or foreign was good and acceptable to the Will of God. The effect of this theory on the indigenous African social institutions was great. Application of the theory brought about a great disruption in African social life.[23]

Disparagement of traditional African beliefs and knowledge is not simply a problem of the past. Today African knowledge continues to be undervalued and judged as illogical, superstitious, anti-development, and unscientific.[24] Africans had to reject names with strong spiritual meanings and instead adopt European or Christian names when baptized in a Christian church. The negative perception could have resulted from some misguided biblical hermeneutics and unfounded Christian anthropology. As we saw earlier, the ATRs and in particular the traditional Akans believe in one Supreme God, multiple minor gods (subordinate to God), the Ancestors and the physical world comprising human beings and the natural environment. The belief that the gods inhabited the natural world, especially rivers, trees, animals, mountains gave the natural world a sacred view. Like a sacrament, the natural world becomes a means of leading one to the sacred. The traditional Akan dared not conquer or take dominion over nature since in doing so, one would be entering into a fight with the spirits that were present in nature. For the Akan therefore, the suprahuman, humans, and the environment are interrelated and interdependent.[25] They all form a community, which would become handicapped if one member, especially the environment, is exploited. Samuel Nyamekye claims the following about various animals and plants:

[23] Ako Adjei, "Imperialism and Spiritual Freedom," *American Journal of Sociology* 50, no.3 (Nov., 1944): 193-194.

[24] Munyaradzi Mawere and Awuah-Nyamekye, ed., *Harnessing Cultural Capital for Sustainability: A Pan Africanist Perspective* (Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa Research & Publishing CIG, 2015), 221.

[25] Kevin Behrens, "Exploring African Holism with Respect to the Environment," *Environmental Values* 19, no. 4 (November 2010): 469-470.

Odum (Chlorophora excelsa), Esa (Ceitis mild-braedii), Abeko (Tieghemella heckelii), Tweneboa (Entant drophragma), Onyina (Ceiba pentandra), Homakyem (Dalbergia saxatalis), Odii (Okuobaka aubrevillei), etc. The animals include: Tromo (Tragelaphus euryceros isaacii), Oyuo (cephalophus niget), Kuntun or Pataku (Canis adustus), Okoo (Syncerus caffer),"[26] are generally considered to be possessed.

One important way that the ATRs conserved the environment was through their belief in totems.[27] According to Roger Keesing, totemism is a belief that "a mystical relationship connects human groups with animal species or natural phenomenon."[28] The Akans of Ghana are divided into eight main clans (families), each having its own totem consisting of: *Aduana* (dog), *Agona* (parrot), *Asakyiri* (vulture), *Asenee* (bat), *ɔyoko* (hawk), *Asona* (crow), *Bretuo* (leopard), and *Ekoɔna* (buffalo). Usually, great historical legends describe the relationship between the totems and the clans, and as a result, the humans are to honour and take care of these animals. As a member of the *'Asenee'* clan, it behooves me to treat the bat with respect and it is my duty to bury a bat fittingly anytime I chance on a dead one. As each of the eight Akan clans protects their totems for religious and spiritual reasons, they contribute to the conservation of the fauna even if that is not their primary aim. In addition to the above-mentioned species, there are a few monkey sanctuaries in Ghana whereby the natives of these areas have strong spiritual connection to these primates. For instance, the residents of the Boabeng-Fiema townships have legends that explain the mystical relationship between them and the monkeys that are now found in the famous Boabeng-Fiema monkey sanctuary. With these stories and spiritual connections, these monkeys are unharmed and are buried like humans when they die.[29]

In order to prove that the deities of the ATRs had no power,

[26] Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, "Belief in Sasa: Its Implications for Flora and Fauna Conservation in Ghana," *Nature and Culture* 7, no.1 (Spring 2012): 4.

[27] Munyaradzi Mawere and Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, *Between Rhetoric and Reality: The State and Use of Indigenous Knowledge in Post-Colonial Africa* (Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa Research and Publishing CIG, 2015), 133-134.

[28] Roger M. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective* (Sydney: CBS Publishing, 1981), 330.

[29] "Boabeng Fiema Monkey Sanctuary," accessed 22 March 2022, https://www.boabengfms.org/who-we-are/history

some Christians deliberately went about destroying sites and symbols considered as sacred by adherents of ATRs including cutting down forests, killing certain animals, and even intentionally poisoning some fishes, etc. This strategy, labeled as 'power encounter' in Pentecostalism, is described by Sobhi Malek as "an open, public confrontation between opposing forces….[it] includes tangible demonstrations that prove the superiority of Christ over old lords."[30] Malek cites St Boniface's felling of the Oak of Jupiter as an example of 'power encounter' wherein the power of Jesus overcomes that of the devil.[31] Employing this strategy, a popular Ghanaian Radio Evangelist named Akwasi Awuah boasts of having poisoned sacred fishes in Techiman. In trying to undermine African religious beliefs, Christians have inadvertently destroyed the natural environment which ATRs adherents hold as sacred. Because Akan indigenous religious traditions contributed to protecting the environment, the act of delegitimizing these traditions along with the adopting of Christian views and various laws have done great damage to the Akan ecology. For example, in the village of Kranka in the Bono East Region of Ghana, there is a sacred grove/forest dedicated to a god called Kune. Kune is a powerful god whose name and exploits send shivers down the spines of both his adherents and people of other religions in the village. Because of this belief, while almost all other trees in the village have been felled despite government regulations against illegal logging, the giant trees in the Kune sacred grove have not been touched

[30] Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus and Douglas Petersen, eds., *Called and Empowered: Global Mission in Pentecostal perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1991), 180.

[31] Murray, Byron and Douglas, *Called and Empowered*,193. See also, C.H. Talbot, trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1954), 45-46."With the counsel and advice of the latter persons, Boniface in their presence attempted to cut down, at a place called Gaesmere, a certain oak of extraordinary size called by the pagans of olden times the Oak of Jupiter. Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch. But when he had made a superficial cut, suddenly the oak's vast bulk, shaken by a mighty blast of wind from above, crashed to the ground shivering its topmost branches into fragments in its fall. As if by the express will of God (for the brethren present had done nothing to cause it) the oak burst asunder into four parts, each having a trunk of equal length. At the sight of this extraordinary spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased to revile and began on the contrary, to believe and bless the Lord."

for fear of retribution from the god.[32] For the village of Kranka, religious belief has so far contributed positively to environmental conservation.

Traditional Akan Religions also contribute to environmental protection through their understanding of the earth. Similar to the Judeo-Christian Religions' personification of the earth (Is. 24:4-5, Rm. 8:22-23), the Earth is personified and called 'Mother Earth' in the ATRs. Among the Akans, the Earth is popularly called '*Asaase Yaa*,' a name that indicates that the earth is a female born on Thursday. In the Akan cosmology, the Earth is revered as a goddess and is offered drinks during libations. The Akan people must seek her permission before even a grave could be dug for burial. There are even '*shabbat*' days for the earth called '*dabɔne*' (which literally means 'bad days'), in which no one is to visit the farm or till the soil since the Earth rests on those days. The traditional Akans believe that any desecration of the Earth will yield consequences such as poor growth, dying of livestock, or even drought. This deification of the Earth by the Akans underscores the belief that humans need to live in harmony with rather than exploit the Earth.

The Akan belief that rivers are either gods or possessed by deities had also helped many rivers in Ghana, such as Birim, Ankobra, Afram, and Tano to be protected. However, the undermining of indigenous beliefs by the Abrahamic religions in Ghana upon their arrival led many people to abuse the rivers. Illegal mining known as *galamsey* has made unusable what used to be the sources of livelihood and potable water for small communities. River courses have been diverted, excavated, and even poisoned by cyanide. The Ghanaian President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo in a 2017 speech said he would put his presidency on the line to curb this menace plaguing Ghana's water bodies, agricultural lands, fauna, and flora.[33] Despite the military-led task force, burning of excavators, and other heavy-handed approaches, the government seems to be still losing the fight against *galamsey*.

[32] Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, "Salvaging Nature: Akan Religio-Cultural Perspective," *Worldviews* 13 (2009): 259.

[33] "I will put my Presidency on line to stop galamsey," accessed 30 March 2022 https://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2017/07/11/i-will-put-my-presidency-on-line-to-stop-galamsey-akufo-addo/

While elements of the ATR anthropology emphasize the sacredness of and human interconnectedness with nature consistent with a non-anthropocentric worldview, some scholars have convincingly argued that the African, and by extension the Akan, worldview is anthropocentric. Mbiti explains,

> In African myths of creation, man puts himself at the centre of the universe . . . [thus] he consequently sees the universe from that perspective. It is as if the whole world exists for man's sake. Therefore, the African peoples look for the usefulness (or otherwise) of the universe to man. This means both what the world can do for man, and how man can use the world for his own good. This attitude toward the universe is deeply ingrained in African peoples. For that reason many people, for example, have divided animals into those which man can eat and those which he cannot eat. Others look at plants in terms of what can be eaten by people, what can be used for curative or medical purposes, what can be used for building, fire, and so on.[34]

Discussing the African traditional worldview, Onah says:

> It is anthropocentric because the actions of God and the other spiritual beings are generally directed towards humans for their sustenance and well-being; and infra-human realities are thought to be ordered towards the promotion of human life.[35]

Similarly, Callicott observes, "One may be stunned to discover that, generally speaking, indigenous African religions tend to be both monotheistic and anthropocentric...Even Africans who regularly hunt for a living take an anthropocentric stance toward the environment."[36] There are, however, also scholars who assert that the African traditional worldview is primarily non-anthropocentric. For instance, Kevin Behrens argues,

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[34] John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1991), 43.

[35] Godfrey Igwebuike Onah, "The Somali Dir Clan's History."

[36] J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Los Angeles, LA: University of California Press, 1994), 157.

> Whilst a strong strand of anthropocentrism in African thought cannot be denied, this does not fully represent African moral worldviews. I point out that many African theorists, even those who place significant emphasis on human interests, also often claim that everything in nature is interrelated.[37]

Considering the thoughts of Mbiti, Callicott, and Onah, I believe that despite the interconnectedness that exists between the Traditional Akan and their environment, the Akan worldview tends to be anthropocentric. The Akans generally see themselves at the centre of the created order, a mindset not so unlike that found in some Christian circles. It must, however, be clarified that even though the Akan cosmology tends to be anthropocentric, because of the traditional Akan belief that sacralizes aspects of nature such as rivers, trees, and mountains, etc., the Akan anthropocentrism is benign, controlled, and not as destructive to the environment like the strong anthropocentrism found among religions and philosophies that do not see the sacred or divine in nature.

## 5. The Points of Convergence between the ATRs and the Judeo-Christian Religions

Like Tertullian, one might be asking: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" To wit, what have the ATRs to do with the Abrahamic religions? Archbishop Buckle, expressing the need to revisit the heritage left by their ancestors, told Catholics in Ghana that "there is no disconnect between our Christian belief and our traditional attitude or religiosity."[38] Among religions, there are some commonalities that can be observed and can serve to pave the way for greater collaboration and dialogue. The first point of convergence between the ATRs, specifically the Akan Traditional Religions, and the Abrahamic religions is their conception of creation. The Quran, the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the

[37] Behrens, "Exploring African Holism with Respect to the Environment," 466.

[38] "Church in Ghana launches 5-year Laudato sí Action Programme," accessed 23/03/2022 https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-11/ghana-laudato-si-bishops-action-program-five.html?msclkid=aaa0dae2aa4e11ec9cae874ca6b856c8

Christian Scriptures all assign anthropomorphic qualities to creation. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find the image of the earth opening its mouth sometimes and swallowing people (Nm. 16:32), and the whole creation is asked to praise the Lord (Dan. 3ff). In the New Testament, creation is depicted as in labour pains and groaning to be delivered (Rm. 8:22). Similarly, in the Quran, it is mentioned that neither the heaven nor the earth weeps for Egypt (Surah Ad-Dukhan 44:29). For the Akan Traditional Religions, the Earth is described as feminine and even named 'Asaase Yaa.' She is a mother endowed with fecundity and needs to be treated with utmost respect and care. Thus, both the ATRs and the Abrahamic religions share a common view of creation not as a lifeless entity but rather life-containing being capable of giving life and responding to God and humans.

Secondly, the ATRs and the Judeo-Christian traditions generally see creation (or nature) as sacramental. These religions understand creation to be pointing to something beyond itself. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops proclaims, "From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine."[39] This affirms the sentiment of Psalm 19 that "The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands." Likewise, Paul writes, "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rm. 1:20). The examples cited clearly demonstrate that the Judeo-Christian religions hold a symbolic/sacramental view of creation since it points to and reveals God and God's power. With regard to the Akans, Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle averred, "Our ancestors have always revered the waters as habitats of the divine. They had always looked at forests not in terms of trees but as the habitat of the Spirit of God. They have always looked at mountains, rocks, the sea in terms of the divine."[40]

[39] Canadian Bishops' Conference, *A Pastoral Letter on the Christian Ecological Imperative from the Social Affairs Commission, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops* (2003): 1, accessed 30 March 2022 http://www.inee.mu.edu/documents/32Canadianpastoralletter_000.pdf

[40] "Church in Ghana launches 5-year Laudato sí Action Programme," accessed 23/03/2022 https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-11/ghana-laudato-si-bishops-action-program-five.html?msclkid=aaa0dae2aa4e11ec9cae874ca6b856c8

It must be noted that adherents of Akan Traditional Religions did not necessarily see creation as pointing to God directly but rather to the deities who inhabited certain features of the environment, e.g., the rivers, rocks, trees, etc. To elucidate, it is uncertain how many traditional Akans upon seeing the Tano or Antoa River[41] would think immediately of the Creator. What is certain is that many of them would immediately think of the Tano or Antoa deity/god. In other words, whereas the Judeo-Christian traditions perceive creation as a sacrament of God, the Akan Traditional Religions perceive specific features of creation as a sacrament of particular deities. Despite this difference, as stated previously, the gods are intermediaries and delegates of God and ultimately point to God. It must be reiterated that the Akan Religions believe God as the Creator just that some created elements like the trees, rivers, and mountains become possessed by the gods (also created). In the end, the trees, rivers, and mountains become symbolic/sacramental of the gods/deities. Having said this, the Akan description of God is neither '*deus remotus*' (a remote God) nor '*deus ostiosus*' (a lazy God who is uninterested in His creatures).[42]

Moreover, the Akan Traditional Religions, as well as Christianity, believe that there is interdependence between human beings and the environment. Despite some of the adherents of both religions occasionally falling into the canker of anthropocentrism, thinking everything revolves around humans, their essential belief about the relationship between human beings and the environment is interdependence. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches,

> God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.[43]

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[41] "Tano River," accessed 30 March 2022 https://www.britannica.com/place/Tano-River.

Both River Tano and Antoa are deities in Ghana and are feared among the people.

[42] Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 6.

[43] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* English translation, 2nd ed. (1997), n. 340.

> Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment.[44]

Similarly, as seen in their belief in totems, the ATRs have a firm conviction that everything in the physical environment is interconnected. Thus, any abuse of the environment brings about negative consequences from the gods and spirits who possess the environment. Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye states, "The Akan have a firm belief that their physical life depends on the physical environment for which reason they have devised ways to ensure the sustainable use of the natural resources."[45] Therefore, by recognizing this common outlook on the interdependent relationship between humans and the environment of both traditions, ATRs and Christianity can find basis for dialogue and collaboration towards environmental conservation.

## 6. What Do the African Traditional Religions Have to Offer?

Having discussed some similarities between ATRs and the Judeo-Christian traditions, it can be seen that the ATRs have much to contribute to interreligious dialogue. The most notable contribution is the sacredness that the ATRs attribute to the environment. As stated at the beginning, the ATRs do not necessarily distinguish between the sacred and the profane, the religious and unreligious, spiritual and unspiritual. Even the seemingly ordinary activity of sharing food and drink for traditional Akans is an act of communion (*koinonia*) between them and the spirit world. Therefore, the first drop of a drink or the first morsel of their food is offered to the ancestors and the spirit world. This consciousness that all of life and all within the world are sacred determines how they treat the natural environment. To reiterate Archbishop Buckle's assertion, the indigenous Akans saw and continue to see the forests not in terms of trees and rivers, not just water but the habitats of the divine. -

[44] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* n. 339.

[45] Samuel Awuah-Nyamekye, "Totemism, *Akyeneboa* and Plant Ethics," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no.9 (2012), 5.

Another thing that we can learn from the ATRs is their spirituality of ecology. This spirituality is one that perceives nature as divine but not God, sacred but not to be worshipped. The historian Lynn White in his seminal essay asserts that the root cause of the contemporary ecological crisis is religion, particularly the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has desacralized nature. White proposes that "since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."[46] Therefore, in order to rectify the crisis, there needs to be a process of remythologizing nature to recognize the sacredness present in nature. According to Kevin Vanhoozer:

> "Remythologizing" theology is not a call to fall back into mythology. [It] does not require that one turn one's back on contemporary science; neither does it seek to project our best thoughts onto a superhuman being or re-populate the world with red devils and shopping demons. It has rather to do with going back to the scene of the hermeneutical crime.[47]

In other words, remythologizing is not a reversal to ancient myths and superstition but a move into metaphysics. It involves explaining nature with metaphors, true and broadly embracing incarnational theology, poetic languages, and stories that are capable of drawing people to seeing nature anew. To remythologize is to appreciate the fact that nature is not only physical but is permeated by the supernatural. This remythologization does not imply turning rivers, the sun, earth, rocks, mountains, and groves into deities or gods. Rather it is about taking a new look at the environment in a similar manner as the adherents of ATRs have since time immemorial. It means referring to nature not merely as sun, moon, wind, water, or earth but in the metaphorical language of St. Francis of Assisi as Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, and Mother Earth. If these elements of nature are seen as subjects but not objects, having their own being and understood as brothers, sisters, and mother, humans would be less likely to harm these 'relatives' of ours. In sum, what the ATRs can teach us is a new and fresh mindset about nature, calling for a change in our perceptions

[46] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1205

[47] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 23.

about nature that facilitates the process of ecological conversion. The ATR worldview finds concordance with what theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin, Richard Rohr, Ursula King, and many others have held that God is immanent in creation as well as transcendent. Teilhard de Chardin in his '*Mass on the World*' says:

> By virtue of his immersion in the world's womb, the great waters of the kingdom of matter have, without even a ripple, been endued with life. No visible tremor marks this inexpressible transformation; and yet, mysteriously and in very truth, at the touch of the supersubstantial Word the immense host which is the universe is made flesh. Through your own incarnation, my God, all matter is henceforth incarnate.[48]

Likewise, Rohr advocates the concept of the Cosmic Christ who has been in existence for eternity. He explains that God took on materiality/flesh since the Big Bang and so, God became incarnate not just at the birth of Jesus around two millennia ago but billions of years before this historical event. The Cosmic Christ, therefore, is all of creation that has been in existence since what Rohr calls the 'first incarnation,' the Big Bang.[49] If God at the 'first incarnation' took on materiality, how can anyone then deny nature as God's incarnate? These two events of the incarnation, one from the very beginning of the universe and one in more recent human history, there is basis for embarking on the process of remythologizing nature and rethinking the sacredness of nature. The worldview of the ATRs provides some inspiration for Christians to re-examine our view of nature and to go beyond mere idolization of nature, but to see nature, in Sallie McFague's thought, as God's body.[50] This understanding of nature as God's body, i.e., an embodiment of God's immanence and transcendence, will facilitate better decorum and reverence of nature, and thus, promote environmental well-being and flourishing.

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[48] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 24.

[49] Richard Rohr, "The Cosmic Christ," accessed 30th March, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLMcZNuJpBc

[50] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Britain: SCM Press, 1993), 20.

## 7. Conclusion

The great reverence that ATRs exhibit towards nature has primarily been due to their perception of nature as sacred though not God. Contemporary Christian thinkers propose that at both the first incarnation (the Big Bang) and the second incarnation (the birth of Jesus), God assumed materiality and hence became incarnate in both creation and the person of Jesus. Even though God is transcendent and above nature, through the incarnation, nature has become the 'Body of God.' The aim then is to see beyond nature merely as a physical reality but to see it also in its supernatural aspects, a perspective that would contribute to the process of ecological conversion. Christians, through interreligious dialogue, can engage with the ATRs in order to help us become more informed in our own perception and treatment of nature in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* which calls on us to recognize and accept all that is true and holy in other religions. The spirit of dialogue and fraternity will not only lead to greater harmonious interreligious relation but also contribute immensely to the protection of our Common Home.

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*ARTICLE*

# An Exploration of Cordilleran Students' Christian Environmentalism (CE) and Environmental Awareness (EA): Towards a Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Response to *Laudato Si'*

*Jeramie N. Molino*[1]

**Abstract**

*In response to the youth's emerging role in care for our "common home," this study examines the Christian environmentalism and environmental awareness of the selected Cordilleran students. The data sets were taken from two measures: Christian Environmental Scale (CES) and Environmental Awareness Scale (EAS). Being empirical, the data set is analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Both levels of analysis provided this study with some depth in understanding the characteristics of the Cordilleran students' attitudes and experiences on environmental concerns. By employing the Christian Environmental Scale (CES) and the Environmental Awareness Scale (EAS) to select Cordilleran students, this study endeavors to determine the level of Cordilleran students' consciousness of the importance of the environment, especially during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper aims to give attention to the Cordilleran students' views, for they belong to indigenous groups that give so much importance to the natural environment. The results show a high Christian Environmentalism (CE) and a high Environmental Awareness (CE) among Cordilleran informants. Moreover, the informants' responses analysis revealed how the students' mindset expressed a theocentric view of the environment. Such a mindset can be a fertile ground for sustainable actions*

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*toward care for the common home, especially post-COVID-19 pandemic. In the same manner, the CEs and EAs of the Cordilleran informants are a potential source for understanding how Cordilleran youth can contribute to responses to the challenges of* Laudato Si *in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.*

**Keywords:** *Post-COVID-19 pandemic, Christian environmentalism, environmental awareness, Laudato Si, indigenous knowledge.*

## 1. Introduction

The Cordillera region is home to the largest vegetable industry in the Philippines. It is composed of six provinces namely: Benguet, Mt. Province, Ifugao, Abra, Kalinga, and Apayao. The region supplies 70 percent of temperate vegetables in the Philippine market, chiefly potato, cabbage, beans, and carrots (Ngidlo 2013). In terms of education context, many young Cordillerans have their education in the different universities in Baguio City, a city within the Cordillera. Interestingly, while many of the young Cordillerans continue to practice their autochthonous rituals, many simultaneously profess the Christian faith. Young Cordillerans who live in the uplands identify with various forms of Protestant Christianity while many who have settled in the city, like Baguio and the Hispanicized lowlands, adhere to Roman Catholicism (Howell 2009).

In Cordillera, extractive mining industries and corporate exploitation are the gravest threats facing Cordillerans and their communities. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has asked for the repeal of the Philippine Mining Act, citing "the devastating effects and adverse social impacts of mining that will destroy both environment and people" (PIA 2012). The Mining Act, it says, "destroys life." The Philippine churches' anti-mining campaigns are anchored in the belief that resistance to mining is a "defense of creation" (Simbulan 2016).

The selected Cordilleran students who became informants for this research are considered indigenous people. The indigenous peoples of the Cordillera face various environmental challenges and threats. They are

also considered among the most marginalized and disenfranchised people in their society (First People Worldwide n.d.). Some face discrimination, exploitation, exclusion, abuse, and injustice in their lands. Pope Francis (2017) recognized these prevailing struggles of the indigenous people and believed that the central issue is determining how to reconcile their right to development with the protection of the particular characteristics of indigenous peoples and their communities.

Most of the Cordilleran people are farmers (Hilhorst 2001), and they know the importance of the land. An essential practice during the agricultural cycle is the *tengaw* (days of rest) for the Cordilleran people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Igorots, or Cordillerans, a small indigenous tribe living in the Cordillera, embraced the quarantine measures. Jones explains that "before the planting season and after a harvest, the council of elders usually declares *tengaw*, and villagers are prohibited from passing through the rice terraces because they might upset the spirits" (2002,380).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Cordilleran villages also declared *tengaw* to cleanse, protect, and heal the community and the land they toiled for several decades. There are rituals that they perform like *manengtey* (a ritual that divines omen from a chicken's internal organs). This shows that the Cordilleran people are very concerned about nature and the environment. Similarly, there has been a long record of deeds and documents in the Roman Catholic Church of its initiatives for environmental care. However, it is in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* that one will find a more serious and aggressive approach to the care of what Pope Francis calls "Our Common Home." The Pope explains:

> A correct relationship with the created world demands that we do not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the "Thou" of God. Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and God (*Laudato Si' - LS,* §119).

Furthermore, it is striking that *LS* mentions the future thirty-two times in the text. Pope Francis is concerned about humanity's future (*LS,* §38). More particularly, in *LS* paragraph 13, he is concerned about

the demand of young people for change. He argues that young people are wondering how anyone can claim to plan for a better future without considering the pressing environmental crisis. I consider this an essential gap in this paper.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people realized the importance of a healthy environment. According to experts, COVID-19 transmission is decreased by isolation measures and disinfection products (San Juan-Reyes et al. 2021). Confinement policies favor a reduction of air pollution. In the study by San Juan-Reyes et al. there is a positive association between air pollution and COVID-19 infection. The authors argue that biocidal products are responsible for toxicity and impact the environment.

It has been a popular observation that the COVID-19 pandemic has successfully contributed to the recovery of the environment to a large extent, which should positively impact global climate change. It changes the daily behavior of humans and the surrounding ecological system (Verma 2020). So much has been discussed about the environment, ecological concerns, and *Laudato Si',* and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, none of these studies specifically elevated the discourse of Cordilleran students' experiences. Hence, the main problem of this paper is to address the question: How can one develop a Cordilleran youth-oriented post-COVID-19 pandemic "care for our common home" from the Cordilleran students' Christian Environmentalism (CE) and Environmental Awareness (EA)? Drawing from a culturally appropriate latent dimension of Cordilleran students' CEs and EAs, what environmental or ecological theologies or theologizing can address the challenges of *Laudato Si'* post-COVID-19 pandemic?

## 2. **Participants and Procedures**

To conduct the survey, a Google form containing the data collection tool "Christian Environmental Scale" (CES) and "Environmental Awareness Scale" (EAS) was created. This tool was originally constructed and validated in a study by Rito Baring, Jeramie Molino, and Stephen Reysen (2021). The Google form was the most convenient way

to collect the data because during the time of collection, lockdown and online classes were strictly imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. CES and EAS were administered to select Cordilleran Christian students in Baguio City as part of this study. The participants were made aware of the aims of the research. After filling out the informed consent and the required demographics, the respondents answered the following items in CES and EAS:

**Items on Christian Environmentalism Scale (CES)**

1. God creates the world.
2. God is the center of life.
3. God invites me to respect life.
4. Humanity and nature are related to God.
5. God calls me to care for the earth like my home.
6. I see creation as God's symbol of grace and delight.
7. God loves all His creation.
8. I admire the beauty of God's creation.
9. God wants and expects me to protect nature.
10. The world is good because God is good.
11. The world will prosper if we believe in God.
12. Worship to God requires that I protect the earth.
13. We are responsible to God for abusing the environment.
14. God did not cause evil things to happen to us.
15. God made the world for humanity.

**Items on the Environmental Awareness Scale (EAS)**

1. We need to act now to reverse environmental damage.
2. Global warming is due to high levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.
3. We can address environmental problems by avoiding the use of single-use plastics.
4. We need to preserve the earth's resources for future generations.
5. Humans can improve and preserve the earth's resources.
6. Human disregard for the earth is a serious error.

7. Human activities should first consider the limits of the earth's resources.
8. Students like me can help save the earth from further destruction.
9. Planting more trees can help reduce global warming.

The Cordilleran student informants completed the G-form of CES and EAS. Responses were made using a simple Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree (cf. Table 1; for a discussion of attitude measurement with Likert-type scales, see Joshi et al. 2015). The scale is reliable and demonstrates convergent validity with the scales on religion and pro-environmental attitudes (Molino, Baring, and Reysen 2021).

**Table 1:** 5 Option responses for CE and EA

| | CES and EAS |
|---|---|
| 1. | Strongly Agree |
| 2. | Agree |
| 3. | Disagree |
| 4. | Uncertain |
| 5. | Strongly disagree |

This descriptive survey research was carried out through purposive sampling, where subjects are selected using sound judgment (Black 2010) in the most cost and time-effective way (Dudovsky 2019). Data analysis includes two levels of analysis—quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative component constitutes a simple data analysis from CES and EAS. CES and EAS are uncharted in empirical theological discourse here and abroad. Molino, Baring, and Reysen introduced CES and EAS as an assessment model inspired by the notion of ethnocentrism offered by Hoffman and Sandelands (2005). It is also inspired by environmental theology in general since most literature uses the concept of environmental theology (Doughty 1981). CES and EAS can generally represent environmental insights inspired by Christian principles and ideas. Especially, CES and EAS, as it is used here, describe an empirical construct operationalized by a single dimension representing views about the divine creative power, the sanctity of nature, and human responsibility towards nature. It contrasts with environmental

theology in that the latter concerns discourses not precisely anchored on a single religious, traditional view. Hence CES and EAS accommodate the Christian perspective in articulating views about nature.

While Baring, Molino, and Reysen see the struggle to understand environmental theology (Jacubus 2004), they find an opportunity to build upon a new concept from empirical foundations. They introduce Christian environmentalism as an empirical concept that underwent validation within environmental theology, which traditionally incorporates anthropocentric and geocentric components. This paper's contribution to the evolving environmental studies in youth theology is the employment of CES and EAS in analyzing the Cordilleran youth's Christian environmentalism and environmental awareness. This paper offers new possibilities for theologizing about the youth attitudes toward the environment by proposing the notion of Christian environmentalism and environmental awareness as an essential response to *Laudato Si'* in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

## 3. **Profile of Cordilleran Student Informants**

The sample ($n$=176) represented the Cordilleran youth from the different colleges and universities in Baguio City. Following Republic Act 8044 of the Philippine government defining 15–30 years old as "youth," they can also be referred to as young people, but for purposes of this research, I consider my participants in terms of their educational level. All respondents are college students and were classified according to their year level. Most of them belonged to the first and second-year levels with a 96.59 cumulative percentage.

Table 2 below shows the informants' gender distribution and educational attainment. They were classified as male and female. Notice that there are more male informants (54.5%) than females (45.5%). This is important to emphasize because in the Cordillera, gender statistics are vital inputs for planners, decision-makers, and implementors in formulating and implementing programs and projects for the benefit of women and in monitoring their status. They indicate women's involvement in all socio-economic endeavors as beneficiaries or decision-makers (PSA 2019).

**Table 2: Informants' Gender and Educational Attainment**

| Gender | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 96 | 54.5 | 54.5 | 54.5 |
| Female | 80 | 45.5 | 45.5 | 100 |
| Grand Total | 176 | 100 | 100 | |
| **Respondents' Educational Attainment** | | | | |
| Year Level | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| First Year | 83 | 47.16 | 47.16 | 47.16 |
| Second Year | 87 | 49.43 | 49.43 | 96.59 |
| Third Year | 5 | 2.84 | 2.84 | 98.93 |
| Fourth Year | 1 | 0.58 | 0.58 | 100 |
| Grand Total | 176 | 100 | 100 | |

## 4. **Results and Analysis**

CES initial query is on the question, "Is there an environmental crisis in our time now?" The majority of the informants answered YES. There are 161 out of 176 or 91.47 percent of informants who positively affirmed that an environmental crisis is indeed evident in contemporary times. This is an affirmation of what the different kinds of literature are telling us. It is also an affirmation of the claims of *LS.* Only 12 out of 176, or 6.8 percent of the informants answered MAYBE, and 3 out of 176, or 1.7 percent said NO. Combined, 15 out of 176, or 8.5 percent of informants are not entirely convinced that there is an environmental crisis. A critical look at this suggests a need to further discuss the issue until everyone is convinced about the environmental crisis. However, we can conclude that the informants with 91.4 percent answering YES affirmed that the environmental crisis is inevitable and fundamental.

### 4.1. CES AND EAS (Results)

Table 3 below presents the overall Christian Environmental Scale (CES) results from the Cordilleran youth informants.

**Table 3:** OVERALL RESULTS: CES (N=176)

| ITEM NO. | STRONGLY DISAGREE (SD-1) | | DISAGREE (D-2) | | UNCERTAIN (U-3) | | AGREE (A-4) | | STRONGLY AGREE (SA-5) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **F | **P | **F | **P | **F | **P | **F | **P | **F | **P |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2.3 | 5 | 2.8 | 29 | 16.5 | 138 | 78.41 |
| **2** | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1.7 | 6 | 3.4 | 28 | 15.9 | 139 | 78.98 |
| **3** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 35 | 19.9 | 141 | 80.11 |
| **4** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.6 | 5 | 2.8 | 34 | 19.3 | 136 | 77.27 |
| **5** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.6 | 1 | 0.6 | 30 | 17 | 144 | 81.82 |
| 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1.7 | 36 | 20.5 | 137 | 77.84 |
| **7** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1.7 | 20 | 11.4 | 153 | 86.93 |
| 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1.1 | 16 | 9.09 | 158* | 89.77 |
| **9** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1.7 | 33 | 18.8 | 140 | 79.55 |
| **10** | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2.3 | 20 | 11 | 47 | 26.7 | 105 | 59.66 |
| **11** | 0 | 0 | 5 | 2.8 | 16 | 9.1 | 28 | 15.9 | 127 | 72.16 |
| **12** | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1.1 | 12 | 6.8 | 52* | 29.5 | 110 | 62.5 |
| **13** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.6 | 15 | 8.5 | 44 | 25 | 115 | 65.34 |
| **14** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.6 | 24* | 14 | 49 | 27.8 | 102 | 57.95 |
| **15** | 0 | 0 | 7* | 4 | 13 | 7.4 | 32 | 18.2 | 124 | 70.45 |

Legend: *with the highest number of Likert Scale
**F- Frequency
**P- Percentage

## 4.2 CES Result Analyses and Discussion

Following are presentations and discussions on the informants' responses to different items of CES.

### 4.2.1 Item no. 1: "God creates the world."

CES item 1 is a statement on the basic Christian belief that God is the world's creator. With 16.5 percent AGREE and 76.41 percent STRONGLY AGREE, the informants agree with the fundamental Christian conviction that God is the Creator of the world. This is an affirmation that many respondents are informed about the fundamental Christian belief about the world's creation. This is not surprising because even in their traditional religious belief, they believe that the source of

all that is living and non-living things is *Kabunyan*, or God. Because of this belief, the rice terraces, rivers, and forests, among others, are sacred and created by God. It is evident also that some find very little tension between their autochthonous religion and Christianity. They feel more or less confident that God is the creator of everything. Thus, "the gospel is understood with the resources of the culture, and the culture is interpreted through the gospel" (De Mesa 2007, 59).

### 4.2.2 Item no. 2: "God is the center of life."

CES item number 2 is a fundamental Christian conviction that implies an attitude and acceptance that God is the center of life. The response of the informants to this statement is positive, with 15.9 percent AGREE, and 78.98 percent STRONGLY AGREE. This affirms that God plays an essential role in the lives of the students. Looking back at the religious practices of Cordilleran Christian youth, one can notice that many religious rituals are important to them as a manifestation of the centrality of God in their life. Because of this belief, they demonstrate that Christianity can thrive alongside traditional spiritual practices. Most indigenous rituals are learned in the family and believed to have efficacy.

### 4.2.3 Item no. 3: "God invites me to respect life."

CES item number 3 is a statement that implies God's invitation to respect life. The informants' response is impressively high, with 19.9 percent AGREE, and 80.11 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The Cordilleran youth understand more fully the value of life and how to defend and protect human life. Such belief is rooted in the conviction that God creates human beings in God's image and likeness, which means human beings are made to be in a loving relationship with God. It is clear for the Cordilleran youth that the essence of human identity and worth, the source of human dignity, is that God loves us: "We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son" (John Paul II 2002).

It is an affirmation of what St. Paul says in his letter: "[F]or in

Him have created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible; all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in Him, all things hold together" (Col. 1:16-17). The Cordilleran Christian students corroborate the social teachings of the United States Conference of the Catholic Bishpos (USCCB) Catholic that "something essential is missed whenever a human person's dignity is overlooked."[2] It is a belief with far-reaching consequences. It is a belief that becomes visible through our actions. It influences how we live and act; it shapes how we relate to other people, other cultural groups, and other nations.

### 4.2.4 Item no. 4: "Humanity and nature are related to God."

CES item number 4 is a statement that implies the interrelatedness of the human person, nature, and God. With 19.3 percent AGREE and 77.27 percent STRONGLY AGREE, the informants positively affirmed that humanity and nature are related to God. The informants are convinced that we live with God in a fantastic world, in an expansive universe, with the wonders of life here on earth, and then beyond us our moon, the sun, the stars, galaxies, and nebulae. With this relationship with God, the Cordilleran youth have the inspiration to explore and continue to explore space as well as atoms, quarks, and the latest, the Higgs Boson particle – the so-called god particle.

### 4.2.5 Item no. 5: "God calls me to care for the earth like my home."

CES item number 5 is a statement about the responsibility of every human person to care and protect the earth. Again for the Cordilleran youth informants, this is positively affirmed. With 17 percent AGREE and 81.82 percent STRONGLY AGREE, this item manifests the positive attitude of the Cordilleran youth informants on their vocation as caretaker of the earth. For them, God calls them to care for the earth like our home. It is a belief that we are God's stewards, entrusted by God with time and opportunities, abilities and possessions, and the blessings of the earth and its resources. We are

[2] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Recognizing Every Person' God-given Dignity," *Revisiting Paul's Writing,* https://www.usccb.org/resources/recognizing-every-persons-god-given-dignity.

responsible to God for their proper use. Stewardship is a privilege given to us by God for nurture in love and victory over selfishness and covetousness. The steward rejoices in the blessings that come to others due to his/her faithfulness.

### 4.2.6 Item no. 6: "I see creation as God's symbol of grace and delight."

CES item 6 is a statement on "perception" or worldview towards created reality. It is a worldview that implies the sacredness and sanctity of the created reality. The informants positively affirmed this, with 20.2 percent AGREE, and 77.84 percent STRONGLY AGREE. It is unsurprising because the Cordilleran people view nature as God's abode (*Kabunian*). For instance, mountains are held by cultural communities and primal traditions worldwide as sacred with special significance to the people. Traditionally, the sense of sacredness and spiritual values in mountain cultures is manifested in the stewardship of forests, waters, and other mountain resources, as these indigenous peoples have deep connections to nature that sustains them (Korner et al. 2005).

### 4.2.7 Item no. 7: "God loves all His creation."

CES item number 7 is a statement that shows the nature of God as a loving God. The informants welcomed this positively, with 11.4 percent AGREE and 86.93 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The Cordilleran students have heard much about God's love. However, do they sufficiently comprehend the extent of that love? Probably not. They need to realize that God's love is not just for human beings. Perhaps Christianity has been the most anthropocentric of all of the world's religions through the centuries. There are many references to God's concern for nature in the Hebrew Bible that Christians call the Old Testament, and Christian environmentalists have increasingly called attention to those passages. For example, Psalm 145:9 declares, "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made." In the Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II's message for New Year's Day 1990 was titled "Peace with God the Creator, Peace With All of Creation," which elaborates on this love. It is also good to reflect

on the thought of Elisabeth A. Johnson, a noted Catholic theologian who wrote in 2001 about "God's Beloved Creation."

### 4.2.8 Item no. 8: "I admire the beauty of God's creation."

CES item 8 is a statement on human admiration of the beauty of God's creation. It is no doubt that the Cordilleran student informants have it. This is evident in their response of 9.09 percent AGREE, and 89.77 percent STRONGLY AGREE. However, there is an observation that the Cordilleran people's interrelations with nature and sacred mountains, particularly *Mount Pulag*, tend to be characterized by objectification, leading to the commodification of ecotourism and abuse of land use. Thus, a need for a more profound and long-lasting bond between humankind and the environment is necessary.

### 4.2.9 Item no. 9: "God wants and expects me to protect nature."

CES item number 9 is a statement implying a divine-given responsibility. This responsibility is expected to be carried out by all Christian believers. The Cordilleran informants, with 18.8 percent AGREE and 79.55 percent STRONGLY AGREE, positively welcome the idea that they are expected to protect nature. Care and respect for the environment are the fruits of something with far deeper roots. These deeper roots are what humankind may have neglected, which is why the fruits are now very much wanted. To find these roots, one must go back to the heart of how humans understand themselves as they relate to nature. These deeper roots involve ecology's cultural and spiritual dimension and care for nature and the ecosystems.

### 4.2.10 Item no. 10: "The world is good because God is good."

CES item 10 is a categorical statement on the goodness of God's creation. Again, in no doubt, the Cordilleran student informants, with 26.7 percent AGREE and 59.6 percent STRONGLY AGREE, positively accept the idea that the world is good because God who created it is good. The Bible often describes God as "good" and "God saw all He had made," which was very good (Genesis 1:31, NIV). For the informants, there is no doubt that this is a Christian belief, and they will hold to it as a fundamental Christian tenet.

### 4.2.11 Item no. 11: "The world will prosper if we believe in God."

CES item number 11 is a statement of conviction that only God is the source of prosperity, and apart from Him, everything is begrimed. The informants welcomed this positively, with 15.9 percent AGREE and 72.16 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The informants are highly aware of the biblical teachings about God's creative activity. They know the story that God placed humankind in the Garden of Eden to "cultivate it and guard it" (Gen 2:15). God made humankind a responsible steward; rightly understood, not dominator, of the ground, the earth, and nature, which He saw as very good (Gen 1:31). Humans have to till the soil to remedy their original nakedness but to do it in a manner so as not to damage creation's original beauty and goodness (Polanco 2005). For the informants, the world's prosperity is only possible through genuine faith in God. The calling of God for everyone is to be responsible stewards so that prosperous life in the world is ensured. Stewardship and prosperity would mean "to serve the good of human beings and all of creation (Action Institute n.d.). While some environmentalists think that nature is better off without humans' exercise of dominion, God calls us to be co-creators with Him through our intelligent and responsible cultivation and care of nature. No other creature has "the power, intelligence, and responsibility to help order the world in accord with divine providence" (Polanco 2005,12). In short, according to Polanco, "the good of nature is the good of man, and vice versa" (Ibid, 11).

### 4.2.12 Item no. 12: "Worship to God requires that I protect the earth."

CES item 12 is a statement that compels every worshiper of God to turn their praise into action, e.g., to protect the earth. Once again, the Cordilleran student informants positively accept this, with 29.5 percent AGREE, and 62.5 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The informants are convinced that everything created, living and non-living, is meant to be respected, cared for (guarded), and shared for everyone's well-being and integral human development as intended by the creator, especially the poor (option for the poor) and even the next generations of humans together with all living beings in the cosmos (solidarity) (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, #106-108).

For the Church, whatever God has created "very good" is meant to be a "common good," as Pope Francis has stressed. There is such a thing as worthless worship. It is worship that has words but no action. It is worship that has sound but no heart. Jesus defines it in Mark 7:6-7, when he quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, "[T]hese people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'"

### 4.2.13 Item no. 13: "We are responsible to God for abusing the environment."

CES item 13 speaks about accountability towards God concerning our actions towards the environment. The idea was positively accepted by the informants, with 25 percent AGREE, and 65.34 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The informants must have been aware that God has placed humans in a position of responsibility over the creation in the book of Genesis. Genesis 2:15 says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." The informants recognize that all created things belong to God and that we are accountable to Him as stewards of the creation. God commissions us to rule over the creation in a way that sustains, protects, and enhances his works so that all creation may fulfill the purposes God intended for it. We must manage the environment for our benefit and God's glory (Geneva College 2022).

### 4.2.14 Item no. 14: "God did not cause evil things to happen to us."

CES item 14 is a Christian conviction that God wills only good things for the human person and the created reality. With 27.8 percent AGREE and 57.95 percent STRONGLY AGREE, the informants positively believe in it. The International Theological Commission (2000-2002) explains:

> As the witness of Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium makes clear, the truth that human beings are created in the image of God is at the heart of Christian revelation. This truth was recognized, and its broad implications were expounded by the Fathers of the Church and the great scholastic theologians.

This explanation implies that since God created the human person in His image, God necessarily cannot cause evil things to happen to every person who is His image. The most basic principle of the Christian moral life is the awareness that every person bears the dignity of being made in the image of God.

### 4.2.15 Item no. 15: "God made the world for humanity."

CES item 15 manifests God's loving action for the human person. It implies that everything that God has made is for humanity. The informants approve of such a view, with 18.2 percent AGREE, and 70.45 percent TRONGLY AGREE. One of the informants said: "God is perfect, fully loving, wonderful, and true, and these characteristics continually flow out of him. His very nature is to share his goodness, grace, and love. He created people out of love for sharing love." Another informant said, "[P]eople were created to love God and each other. Additionally, when God created people, he gave them good work to do so that they might experience God's goodness and reflect his image in how they care for the world and each other. They were created without flaw or sin, and God intended to live this way eternally."

## 5. **Result Analyses of EAS**

The Environmental Awareness Scale (EAS) is a pro-environment attitude. The scale covers human stewardship, respect and preservation of nature, and just relations between the living and non-living things. This scale contains ecocentric items. Table 3 shows the summary of the responses to EAS.

**Table 4**: Summary Table for EAS

| ITEM NO. | STRONGLY DISAGREE (SD-1) | | DISAGREE (D-2) | | UNCERTAIN (U-3) | | AGREE (A-4) | | STRONGLY AGREE (SA-5) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *F | *P | *F | *P | *F | *P | *F | *P | *F | *P |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 2.84 | 19 | 10.8 | 152 | 86.36 |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1.14 | 33 | 18.8 | 141 | 80.11 |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2.27 | 30 | 17 | 142 | 80.68 |
| 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.57 | 16 | 9.09 | 159 | 90.34 |
| 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2.27 | 26 | 14.8 | 146 | 82.95 |
| 6 | 1 | 0.57 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 5.11 | 34 | 19.3 | 132 | 75 |
| 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.57 | 4 | 2.27 | 36 | 20.5 | 135 | 76.7 |
| 8 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.57 | 7 | 3.98 | 16 | 9.09 | 152 | 86.36 |
| 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.57 | 16 | 9.09 | 159 | 90.34 |

Legend: *F= Frequency
*P= Percentage

### 5.1. Item no. 1: "We need to act now to reverse environmental damage."

The result of EAS shows that 10.8 percent AGREE and 86.36 percent STRONGLY AGREE that the informants have a high conviction that there is an urgent need to reverse environmental damage. It is not enough to act. We must act now. Delayed efforts to mitigate either carbon dioxide or short-lived climate pollutant emissions will have negative and potentially irreversible consequences for global warming, rising sea levels, food security, and public health. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) urges human communities to have the duty, responsibility, and moral imperative to act together decisively to save the environment (CBCP 1998). One can reiterate the point made in the 1998 CBCP Pastoral Letter, where the bishops underline the point under the heading "We can and must do something about it." The Pastoral Letter acknowledges that damage has been done, and nobody can identify now when and how "the damage has become so irreversible that our living world will collapse" (Ibid). The sad reality is that the world is heading towards environmental collapse. However, the CBCP pastoral letter's optimistic outlook suggests that as Filipinos, we can do something to prevent the environmental collapse if and only if we act now.

### 5.2 Item no. 2: "Global warming is due to high levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere."

EAS item 2 concerns the severe effect of high levels of

greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and causes global warming. The informants, with 18.8 percent AGREE and 80.11 percent STRONGLY AGREE, manifest a very high awareness and approval of the item. Global warming affects so much the livelihood of those dependent primarily on the natural environment as their primary source of sustenance. Pope Francis argues that "our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded" (*LS*, §7).

### 5.3 Item no. 3: "We can address environmental problems by avoiding the use of single-use plastics."

EAS item 3 is a statement that suggests a solution to environmental problems. A necessary part of the solution is to avoid using single-use plastics. With 17 percent AGREE and 80.68 percent STRONGLY AGREE, the informants are convinced that there is a need to avoid using single-use plastic. In the Philippines, especially in Baguio City, there is a nationwide campaign to ban single-use plastics. A Sustainable Consumption and Production Action Plan is now being formulated to provide a coherent framework for climate action (Philippine Daily Inquirer, Sept. 2021).

### 5.4 Item no. 4: "We need to preserve the earth's resources for future generations."

EAS item 4 calls for preserving the earth's resources for future generations. This statement is positively welcome by the informants, with 9.01 percent AGREE, and 90.34 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The informants, recognizing the importance of the future, hope to preserve the earth's resources for future generations. This hope is not a passive waiting but rather an active doing, as seen in most of their habits and practices.[3] Furthermore, some other indications of hope among informants' activities towards creation are suggested in their recognition of the earth's limited resources and need for conservation. The Cordilleran informants' voice indicated in EAS can help save the earth from further destruction. Initially indicated in the responses of the Cordilleran youth, sources of hope

[3] Example recycling and avoiding the use of single use plastics (PEA,73).

are supported in acts like planting more trees, which will undoubtedly reduce global warming.

### 5.5 Item no. 5: "Humans can improve and preserve the earth's resources."

EAS item 5 is a categorical statement that humans play a vital role in improving and preserving the earth's resources. It is no doubt that the informants understood this. Their 14.8 percent AGREE, and 82.95 percent STRONGLY AGREE manifest the informants' approval. They know that global warming is due to high levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. They manifested that they could address environmental problems by avoiding single-use plastics.

Furthermore, the informants affirm EAS item 4, indicating that they must preserve the earth's resources for future generations. It further implies that a future-oriented attitude is not another-worldly but a realistic, practical view of the present. The sense of preservation in the EAS is action oriented as distinguished from CES preservation intents. Regarding conservation, EAS contains items showing how informants think negligence or human disregard for the earth is a severe error. The informants believe that human activities should first consider the limits of the earth's resources. This is an attitude that a lot of JPIC[4] promoters have advocated.

### 5.6 Item no. 6: "Human disregard for the earth is a serious error."

EAS item 4 pertains to human activities that directly or indirectly disregard the importance of the earth. With 19.3 percent AGREE and 75 percent STRONGLY AGREE, the informants recognized the serious implications of the irresponsible human relation to the earth. Many human actions affect what people value. One way the actions that cause global change are different from most of these is that the effects take decades to centuries to be realized. This fact causes many concerned people to consider taking action now to protect the values of those who might be affected by

[4] JPIC- Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation: The Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Commission has its roots in the Pastoral Constitution, Gaudium et Spes: "The council...regards it as most opportune that an organism of the universal Church be set up in order that both the justice and love of Christ toward the poor might be developed everywhere," (1965, n. 90).

global environmental change in years to come. Nevertheless, because of uncertainty about how global environmental systems work and because the people affected will probably live in very different circumstances from those of today and may have different values, it is hard to know how present-day actions will affect them (Stern et.al. 1992).

### 5.7 Item no. 7: "Human activities should first consider the limits of the earth's resources."

EAS item 7 gained positive approval, with 20.5 percent AGREE, and 76.7 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The informants believe that human activities should first consider the limits of the earth's resources. Anthropogenic climate changes stress the importance of understanding why people harm the environment despite their attempts to behave in climate-friendly ways. One reason people do this is that people apply heuristics, shaped initially to handle the social exchange, to environmental impact issues.

### 5.8 Item no. 8: "Students like me can help save the earth from further destruction."

EAS item 8 evokes the responsibility of students to do their part in saving the earth. There is no doubt that the informants are ready to help. It is shown in their response that 9.09 percent AGREE and 86.36 percent STRONGLY AGREE. The informants' response indicates that the growing awareness about environmental issues is no longer confined to the adults involved in the scientific, political, economic, social, and environmental debates. The concern is now also an issue among the youth. "Young people with a stake in the distant future are especially well-placed to promote environmental awareness. Their participation in environmental protection can be sought at levels ranging from grass-roots activism to policy-making bodies and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)" (Ghosh 2011, para. 2). Recall that in August 2019, Greta Thunberg began to sit outside the Swedish parliament for three weeks instead of going to school. This led other young people to skip or walk out of school to protest climate inaction, which they called "Fridays for future protests," calling for "system change, not climate change" (Curnow 2019, para. 2).

### 5.9 Item no. 9: "Planting more trees can help reduce global warming."

EAS item 9 suggests what the students can do to reduce global warming. Planting more trees is a sustainable solution to help reduce global warming. The youth informants greatly welcomed this, with 9.09 percent AGREE, and 90.34 percent STRONGLY AGREE. In a conversation with the informants, one said, "I live in it, so I do my best to protect my environment in ways like planting trees for cleaner air, helping clean-up drives to prevent floods and health problems. The environment gives me so much that I can live a good life." Another informant said, "I am involved in the environment every second of my life, from breathing the air, watering the plants, disposing of our garbage correctly, planting saplings, participating in programs and various activities for the environment."

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Looking back on the articulations of the Cordilleran students on CES and EAS, it is noteworthy that their responses are already concrete responses to the challenges of *Laudato Si'*. The overall result of CES and EAS show that the informants are very high in their Christian environmentalism and environmental awareness. They believe that God is the Creator and the center of life. They also believe that God invites them to respect life. The Cordilleran students strongly agree with the notion that humanity, nature, and God are interrelated.

With this, the Cordilleran students take responsibility for caring for the earth as their home. It is also admirable that most Cordilleran students recognize the created reality as God's symbol of grace and glory. They firmly believe that God loves all His creation, and in return, they admire its beauty. A sense of responsibility to protect nature and natural resources is evident among the informants. This responsibility is a necessary implication of their faith that God is good and that everything God created is necessarily good. For them, the world will prosper if and only if we believe in God. It is also striking to note that for the informants, worship should always be translated to action that

will respect and protect nature. The students indicate the willingness to take responsibility for whatever damage the human person inflicts against nature. They know very well that God never wishes evil for God's creation, for God loves the world and created everything good for the good of humanity.

Items on the Environmental Awareness Scale (EAS) reveal how the informants are very aware of environmental issues. They believe there is a need to act now to reverse environmental damage. The informants are convinced that global warming is due to high levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. They also believe that we can address environmental problems by avoiding the use of single-use plastics. They know we need to preserve the earth's resources for future generations. They believe that humans can improve and preserve the earth's resources. It is their conviction that human disregard for the earth is a serious error. The informants believe that human activities should first consider the limits of the earth's resources. They are convinced that students like them can help save the earth from further destruction. They know that such actions like planting more trees can help reduce global warming.

Nature provides us with many wonderful and valuable things for the informants, from beautiful sights to food and shelter, to maintain the delicate balance necessary to sustain life on this planet. Mother nature works very hard to ensure that life can exist (and coexist) in the driest deserts and the lushest rainforests. As industry advances and the human footprint spreads, the elegance of this balance increases more and more. As a result, the Cordilleran students must do their due diligence in helping nature thrive. Cordilleran students are fully involved in this environment, which they are bound to care for and protect. The Cordilleran students know how to play an essential role in a community. They know that our environment is a natural gift to sustain our living. Therefore, as a gift, caring for and treating it as a precious gift is their just role. As students, their mission is to participate in the mission of God through every activity of life that expresses God's creativity, sustains God's creation, and cooperates with God's redemption – through discipleship and stewardship.

## 7. **Recommendations**

Post-COVID-19 pandemic is a time to plan for long-term sustainable solutions for environmental degradation. Solutions must be responsive to the challenges of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) and *Laudato Si'*. The results of this simple research employing CES and EAS are helpful for environmental planners. They have to consider that the Cordilleran students are highly aware and readily available to contribute to long-term and sustainable solutions for the care of our "common home." These Cordilleran students, who are at the same time educated with both traditional/indigenous knowledge and Christian beliefs, are potential collaborators to the promotion of both the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) and the challenges of *Laudato Si'*. Therefore, Cordilleran students or youth must be considered in planning and implementing environmental programs, for they are knowledgeable in indigenous and Christian knowledge to care for the "common home."

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***ARTICLE***

# Buddhist Environmental Humanism: A Humanistic Spirituality to Promote Ecological Flourishing

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*[1]

**Abstract**

*Religious environmentalisms are often inaccurately described as 'anthropocentric,' a label that can lead to a devaluation of the potential contribution that religiously inspired environmentalisms can have towards addressing the ecological crisis. This paper argues for reframing religious environmentalism, particularly Buddhist environmentalism, as an environmental humanism. The paper argues that seeing Buddhist environmentalism from the lens of humanism will help to eliminate the negative connotations attached to anthropocentrism, especially strong anthropocentrism, which is detrimental to environmental wellbeing and flourishing. On the other hand, environmental humanism argues that when human beings undergo the self-cultivation process to transform their lives, they are in fact achieving the best version of themselves—becoming truly and authentically human—a reality that in fact contributes to promoting both human and environmental wellbeing and flourishing. Thus, acting on behalf of the environment is part and parcel of the self-cultivation process encouraged by Buddhism. In the paper, the author presents fundamental Buddhist teachings that are essential to integral human development and are relevant to environmental humanism. The paper also discusses the various Buddhist virtues that define authentic personhood as well as promote environmental protection. Finally, the paper argues that Buddhist environmental humanism is not simply an environmental ethic but an environmental spirituality.*

**Keywords:** *Buddhist environmentalism, environmental*

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*humanism, ecological crisis, environmental wellbeing, environmental spirituality*

## 1. Introduction

Some years ago, I participated in an academic conference on religion and the ecology at a university in the United States. As a contribution to the event, I delivered a paper from the Buddhist perspective while other participants presented theirs from that of other religious traditions. As part of the format, each session consisted of about three papers followed by reaction from a person designated by the conference organizer. In the session that I was scheduled, our reactor, after listening to the papers from different religious perspectives, observed that while the papers provided very profound religious and spiritual insights to address the ecological crisis, these perspectives were nonetheless very '*anthropocentric*.' The comment was meant to not only highlight a common thread running throughout the various religious environmentalisms but also to draw attention to what might be perceived as a shortcoming in environmentalisms rooted in religious traditions.

In the field of environmental ethics, the term 'anthropocentric' or 'anthropocentrism' is often associated with ideologies and ways of thinking and behaving that prioritize human status, rights and desires at the detriment of non-human beings such as animals, plants and other biotic and abiotic entities. Anthropocentrism comes in various degrees from weak (benign) to strong (tyrannical), but when push comes to shove, this worldview entails that human interests ultimately come out on top and moral consideration is reserved first and foremost for human beings. This paper, however, argues that environmentalism inspired by Buddhist teachings is not anthropocentric but should be properly characterized as 'humanistic.' There is a distinct difference, in fact, almost opposite, between these two outlooks, which the paper will demonstrate. Moreover, this paper argues that Buddhist environmental humanism is an environmentalism that is both viable and beneficial to promoting environmental sustainability and flourishing to address the contemporary ecological crisis.

## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Humanism

Due to the fact that religiously inspired environmentalisms are perceived as being anthropocentric to some degree, not everyone has embraced them. Some opt for building ecosophies that move away from being human-centered towards those that are 'eco/bio-centered' as to avoid the perceived difficulties present in systems of thought that focus on the human person as the locus of value and agency. While non-religious ecosophies are able to pursue this approach, religious environmentalisms, unless undergoing a radical reframing, cannot simply ignore human agency in the matter being considered. After all, religious systems are created in order to address directly the human spiritual condition with the intent to improve the human lot, both in this life and in the next. Thus, any environmentalism that emanates from religion needs to confront and embrace the role and responsibility of human beings not only as the source of environmental problems but also the instrument of resolution.

Notwithstanding that there is an ongoing debate among environmental philosophers about whether anthropocentrism is as terrible as it is made out to be, the details of this debate will not be delved into in this paper for the sake of brevity. It suffices to say that environmental philosophers such as Paul W. Taylor (biocentrism), Lawrence E. Johnson (ecocentrism), and Arne Naess (Deep Ecology) represent the various approaches to the non-anthropocentric worldview. Whereas biocentrism is concerned with the 'inherent worth' of biological individuals, ecocentrism provides moral considerability to entire systems comprising of both biotic and abiotic entities such as air, water, land, and ecosystems. Deep ecology, on the other hand, is not so much an environmental ethics as a philosophical orientation or an ideology that advocates Self-Realization to the extent that one fully identifies oneself with the world and that one's behavior and thinking naturally are in harmony with nature.

On the other side of the debate are scholars such as Tim Hayward who says that "it would also appear to be unavoidable that we should be interested in ourselves and our own kind" (1997, 51). However, anthropocentrism is only truly objectionable "when humans give

preference to interests of members of their own species over the interests of members of other species for morally arbitrary reasons" (Ibid, 52). In such a case, Hayward says what we have is actually "human chauvinism" and "speciesism," which is bad and cannot be condoned. Bryan G. Norton (1994) calls for categorizing anthropocentrism into 'weak' and 'strong.' Norton adopts the former position which provides the basis for critiquing human preference to see whether they are exploitative of nature or contrary to human ideals. For Norton, environmental protection can be achieved without having to confer intrinsic value to nature. Instead, human preferences must be carefully considered for environmental outcomes that 'converge' with the vision of those advocating nonanthropocentric ethics. In general, scholars on this side of the debate do not feel that anthropocentrism can be eliminated from any ethical system based on human perspectives because the values espoused ultimately reflect human values.

Despite this rather extensive debate, it seems that at least in terms of the public consciousness, the word 'anthropocentrism' is still largely seen as a 'dirty' word when speaking about human behavior and attitudes toward the environment. Thus, when religious environmentalisms are characterized as 'anthropocentric,' as was done by the commentator mentioned in the introduction of this paper, one cannot help but feel that this characterization is meant to be a critique. I believe that when it comes to religious environmentalism, it is not helpful to frame the discussion within this 'anthropocentrism' vs. 'nonanthropocentrism' debate because it would always be the case that religious ethical ideals, even those concerning the environment, would be 'anthropocentric' in some way. After all, religions in every instance were created by humans and for humans as the first priority. While some religious soteriologies involve non-human beings, the focus and the central concern is always human happiness and spiritual liberation. Religious environmentalism cannot depart from this fundamental worldview because the concern for the environment has to be integrally connected to the concern for human beings. The question that religious environmentalism attempts to address is essentially how promoting environmental wellbeing and flourishing can be seen as part and parcel of the human soteriological aspirations, and that one cannot successfully achieve full humanhood unless one takes into consideration the wellbeing of others—humans and nonhumans alike.

It is because of this that I believe it is misleading and unhelpful to refer to religious environmentalisms as 'anthropocentric' since this term carries too much baggage that can cause religious environmentalisms to not be understood within its own context and epistemology. It reduces environmental thinking inspired by religious thought to be merely axioms to be evaluated like other secular environmental ethics in the field. Religious environmentalisms, however, can be characterized as 'humanistic'—a notion which has found acceptance across many religious traditions and of course, in the secular sphere as well. Indeed, the term 'humanism' has been employed by numerous groups and individuals across history, religions, philosophies, cultures and worldviews. Despite the many usages of the term by various groups to suit their own metaphysical assumptions and needs, the common thread that runs through every thought system that claims to be humanistic is the emphasis on human value, integrity and agency. Both religious and secular humanisms advocate for human beings to achieve full self-realization, to become their best self, to be *truly human*. Only in being fully and truly human, can human beings achieve what is best for themselves as individuals but also what is good for others. Unsurprisingly, each thought system will have its own version of and approach towards paradigmatic personhood. While Christians look to Jesus as the model of perfect humanity, Buddhists may imitate the Gautama Buddha in their quest for perfection. Atheist humanists strive to achieve human perfection without reference to any spiritual or transcendental beings. However different their starting points may be, humanistic thought systems tend to have a positive outlook on the human potential and the individual and collective good that can be achieved when that potential is fully realized.

Religious environmental humanism, particularly, Buddhist environmental humanism, adopts this outlook on the human person. It believes that positive contribution to environmental protection can be achieved when the human person undergoes self-cultivation in order to achieve self-transformation, spiritual progress, and ultimately, emancipation from the cycle of suffering. Buddhist environmental humanism sees the role and flourishing of the environment as integrally connected to the effort of achieving human spiritual growth necessary to the quest for lasting happiness. Thus, there is a causal relationship

between the quality of the human person and the flourishing of the natural environment in the Buddhist environmental approach. The rest of the paper will demonstrate this proposition in further detail.

## 3. Integral Human Development in Buddhism

The term humanism has often been used to describe Buddhism. The secular humanist Paul Chiariello, for example, sees profound commonality between Buddhism and secular humanism. According to Chiariello (2014), "Buddhism and Humanism are two geographical sides of the same philosophical coin. They're twins with the same DNA, separated at birth, and brought up by different parents…. Buddhism is Eastern Humanism and Humanism is Western Buddhism." Many people have pointed out the atheistic worldview of Buddhism to draw close affinity between Buddhist humanism and secular humanism. David J. Kalupahana, for example, writes:

> The philosophy of . . . Buddhism. . . undoubtedly represents one of the most comprehensive and systematic forms of humanism. It is based on naturalistic metaphysics, with causal dependence as its central theme. Rejecting any form of transcendentalism, determinism, or fatalism, it emphasizes its ultimate faith in man and recognizes his power or potentiality in solving his problems through reliance primarily upon empirical knowledge, reason and scientific method applied with courage and vision. It believes in the freedom of man, not in a transcendental sphere, but here and now. The highest goal it offers is not other-worldly but this-worldly. (1977, 12)

While there are striking similarities between Buddhist humanism and secular humanism, there are features in Buddhism that would make secular humanists uncomfortable such as the belief in transmigration, the existence of the realms of ghosts, spirits and heavenly beings. Buddhist monks, like the historical Buddha, also believe that they can develop through meditation the ability for retrocognition—the ability to see their own past lives as well as the past lives of other people. Buddhist monks also claim that they have the capacity for clairvoyance and telepathy which enhances their ability to apprehend the Law of

Dependent Origination, or the principle of causal dependence. Moreover, in actual practice, the various offshoots of Buddhism have essentially turned the Buddha into a deity and bodhisattvas into saints, especially in the Mahayana tradition. In Southeast Asia, particularly, Thailand, Theravada Buddhism as practiced by the people is a combination of Early Buddhism, Brahmanism, and local animistic beliefs in spirits inhabiting trees, mountains, rivers, and even one's own garden.

The more convincing basis for Buddhist humanism lies not in Buddhist metaphysical assumptions—matters which the historical Buddha was not always enthusiastic about addressing—but about its outlook on the human person and on the world. The Nan Tien Institute which belongs to the Mahayana tradition points to the very existence and events in the Buddha's life as basis for what it calls "Humanistic Buddhism." It says,

> We know that the founder of Buddhism, Sakyamuni Buddha was born into this world; he cultivated his spiritual development, attained enlightenment, and shared with others in this world the profound truth he had realised. The human world was emphasised in everything he did. Why did the Buddha not achieve Buddhahood in one of the other five realms? Why did he not attain enlightenment in one of the other ten dharma worlds? Why did he, instead, attain complete enlightenment as a human? There can only be one reason; the Buddha wanted the teachings of Buddhism to be relevant to the human world. The Buddha's very life as a human being has give us all an inspiration and a model for the spiritual path and for making our own lives a spiritual practice.[2]

Humanistic Buddhism as advocated by the Nan Tien Institute tries to overcome the perception that Buddhism is removed from humanity and the world, preoccupies itself with isolation, retreat to forests, and individual happiness. Instead, "Humanistic Buddhism encompasses all of the Buddhist teachings from the time of the Buddha to the present—whether they are derived from the three traditions. The goal of Humanistic Buddhism is the bodhisattva way; to be an energetic,

[2] Nan Tien Institute, "What is Humanistic Buddhism?" https://www.nantien.org.au/en/buddhism/knowledge-buddhism/what-humanistic-buddhism.

enlightened and endearing person who strives to help all sentient beings liberate themselves...[as] well as transforming our planet into a pureland of peace and bliss."[3] In other words, Buddhist humanism holds the conviction which is well stated by Daisaku Ikeda, "The Buddha is an ordinary human being; ordinary human beings are the Buddha" (1999, 384). This is the conviction that any individual can become a buddha – a fully-realized, enlightened person imbued with the noblest qualities of humanhood.

Indeed, humanistic Buddhism does not deny that the goal is to achieve personal emancipation by becoming a 'buddha' with the small 'b.' However, this goal does not have to conflict with the interest and wellbeing of others. On the contrary, they are integrally tied to the good of others. Thus, one cannot hope to be reborn with a better human status in the next life, or being reborn in one of the various heavenly realms, or even entering *nibbāna*, escaping completely from *saṃsāra*—the cycle of birth, death and rebirth—without leading a life that demonstrates concern for others as well. The Buddhist cosmogony comprises six realms ranging in various degrees of suffering. While beings can progress from one realm to another over numerous lifetimes, it is only in the human form that individuals can achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Buddha himself never claimed to be anything more than a human being who managed to achieve enlightenment purely by human intelligence without any assistance from the divine or transcendent. He was confident through his own experience that humans had the potentiality to attain buddhahood if they worked hard enough.

For any individual striving for spiritual progress necessarily involves the work of eliminating the spiritual poisons or unwholesome roots that cause them to experience suffering and become trapped in *saṃsāra*. As opposed to the wholesome roots (*mula*)—the fundamental conditions in the mind that determine the moral quality—the unwholesome roots include greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). These poisons exist within each person in various degrees and manifest themselves in thoughts and actions in various expressions. Greed is the mental state in which one is unceasingly plagued by an insatiable feeling of need and want in his/her life. Even after the desire

[3] Ibid.

has been fulfilled, the feeling of satisfaction does not last and the feeling of lack inevitably returns. Greed can come in many forms including the desire to hoard material things while others go without or the need to achieve a high social status through material possessions. Hatred comprises a whole range of negative emotions such as disappointment, aversion, anxiety and dejection, and feelings of dissatisfaction towards oneself and others. They can manifest themselves in subtle words to belittle another person or outright violence against individuals and groups. Hate can also be seen in one's aversion to certain persons or things. The third poison is delusion, which is integrally tied to ignorance (*avijjā*). A person afflicted with this poison suffers confusion and lack of direction in life. This condition can easily lead to adopting false views on simple matters that concern one's everyday life to more serious positions of ideological dogmatism and fanaticism. Nyanatiloka Mahathera, one of the earliest westerners in modern times to become a Bhikkhu, remarked, "For all evil things, and all evil destiny, are really rooted in greed, hate and ignorance; and of these three things ignorance or delusion *(moha, avijja)* is the chief root and the primary cause of all evil and misery in the world. If there is no more ignorance, there will be no more greed and hatred, no more rebirth, no more suffering" (Quoted by O'Brien 2018).

In order to eliminate the unwholesome roots from one's life and to replace them with the wholesome roots of wisdom (*paññā*), generosity (*dāna*), and loving kindness (*mettā*), the Buddha proposed practicing the Noble Eightfold Path. This path combines moral virtues (*sīla*) with development of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom or insight (*paññ*ā). According to the Buddha, all the Buddhas of the past traveled this path towards enlightenment and liberation from the cycle of birth, aging and death (S.II.12). The eight elements are often listed as follows:

1. Right view (*Sammā diṭṭhi*)
2. Right thought (*Sammā sankappa*)
3. Right speech (*Sammā vācā*)
4. Right action (*Sammā kammanta*)
5. Right living (*Sammā ājīva*)
6. Right effort (*Sammā vāyāma*)

7. Right mindfulness (*Sammā sati*)
8. Right concentration (*Sammā samādhi*)

The three factors of right speech, right action, and right living make up the *Sīla* group while the *Samadhi* group includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The *Paññña* group consists of right view and right thought. The diligent training and practice of these three stages results in higher moral discipline, higher consciousness, and higher wisdom, which is the condition that directly opposes the ignorance causing human suffering. To achieve the ultimate goal of wisdom, one must go through the training of the moral discipline, which serves as the foundation for training of concentration, which in turn serves as the foundation for training of higher wisdom. While the elements are listed in a sequential order, the process of training is not linear like a ladder; rather the three aspects of training are always present along the path, with each continuing to reinforce the other and in turn becomes further developed until perfection is achieved (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1998, 13). Therefore, this path is only linear in the metaphorical sense. If the training proves to be successful, the individual is imbued with all the factors in full measure. The successful completion of this path also results in the attainment of *nibbāna*, a state where all suffering associated with mundane existence has effectively ceased. While the presentation here is simple, the effort towards this spiritual summit is extremely strenuous, painstaking and gradual. One should not hope to make a quantum leap from one state to another by any means (Keown 2001, 102). According to the Buddha, intellectual as well as moral progress as prescribed by the Noble Eightfold Path is compulsory for the attainment of enlightenment or emancipation from the cycle of rebirth. He was extremely critical of any teachings that suggested full enlightenment could be achieved through an alternative route (D.II.151).

## 4. Buddhist Humanistic Environmental Virtues

The fundamental assumption of Buddhist environmental humanism is that the wellbeing and flourishing of humanity is integrally tied to the wellbeing and sustainability of nature. What is seemingly an individual effort at self-cultivation is not merely to achieve selfish

aims but involves transforming all the dimensions and all of the relationships in one's life – including the relationship with the natural environment. In the face of the ecological crisis, the present context demands awareness of the human-nature relationship as constituting a part of the totality of relationships. Therefore, the virtues and wisdom gained from the process of self-cultivation prescribed by the Noble Eightfold Path must also be applied to the relationship with nature as well as with other human beings. In other words, it is not enough for Buddhist self-cultivation to only impact one's relationship with family, friends, and fellow human beings but also need to be extended to all sentient beings, and in fact, the entire cosmos itself. Fortunately, while in ancient times, the ecological crisis was not in the mind of the Buddha or his followers, the fundamental Buddhist intuition that the boundaries of human relationships were much wider than what was in one's realm of being allows for re-examining Buddhist scriptural texts and re-contextualizing them for the present circumstances.

According to the Buddhist outlook, any problem in human life whether experienced on an individual or communal basis, can be traced to the unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion. Therefore, what we categorize as a personal, social, economic, or political problem are essentially ethical and spiritual in nature. Interpersonal conflicts can often easily be traced to one person being envious of the other (hatred). Economic inequality plaguing societies is often rooted in the desire to accumulate wealth while others go hungry (greed). Interreligious conflict can often be traced to people's ignorance of the faith and teachings of another religion and even of one's own religion leading to false beliefs and assumptions (delusion). While an unwholesome root may play a more prominent role in a particular problem, in fact, all three are usually present in an intertwining manner and often fuel one another. The poison of greed can fuel hatred, which in turn fuels delusion, which in turn motivates greed in a vicious unending cycle of negativity.

The environmental crisis, therefore, must be seen within this Buddhist framework of human moral degeneration where greed leads to such actions as deforestation and the exploitation of other natural resources for economic production. The delusion of human might and grandeur inspires the belief that infinite economic growth can be

achieved without negative consequences to the wellbeing of the earth and of humanity itself. The poisons of greed and delusion lead to actions of violence such as destroying habitats of animals, polluting life supporting water sources, poaching and hunting for economic gains and pleasure, etc. Therefore, the process of addressing the environmental crisis requires human beings to rectify their relationship with nature by internally rooting out the poisons that cause harm to the environment and the entities within that environment. The environmental crisis can be likened to a mirror in which one holds up to examine one's own reflection and discovers that one's hair is all in tangles. The logical and effective action that ought to be taken upon discovering this condition is not to change the mirror in the hope that the next one shows a different and more satisfactory reflection, or to try in vain to fix the image behind the mirror. Rather, one must untangle one's own hair so that the image reflected in the mirror no longer displays a mess. Fundamental Buddhist teachings can help to conceive possibilities of human-nature relationship that are both conducive to the wellbeing of nature as well as to the spiritual goals of the human person. The vision of harmonious human-nature relationship must be built upon wholesome and positive dynamics directly opposed to greed, hatred and delusion.

Buddhist self-cultivation enables the individual to possess virtues that promote, among other things, environmental flourishing. The environmental crisis characterized by exploitative and destructive human-nature relationship can be rectified when human virtues are intentionally ordered towards improving it. This section explores a number of environmentally relevant virtues in Buddhist environmental humanism.

### Loving kindness *(mettā)* and compassion *(karunā)*

Human solidarity with nature in the common experience of suffering can be demonstrated by the virtues of loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*). Loving kindness and compassion are two of the four sublime abodes (*brahma-vihāra*) along with sympathetic joy and equanimity. Loving kindness is the wish that all sentient beings, without exception, be happy while compassion is the genuine desire to alleviate the sufferings of others which one is able to feel. The text that one often encounters when discussing about loving kindness is from the Suttras

which states: "I dwell pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second quarter, the third quarter, and the fourth quarter. Thus above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all as to myself, I dwell pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, vast, exalted, measureless, without enmity, without ill will" (A.I.183). Similarly, in the Karaniya Mettā Sutta of the Suttanipata (S.I.8), the Buddha exhorts the practitioner to exercise *mettā* to others no matter whether they are weak or strong, big or small, seen or unseen, near or far away, etc. Monks are enjoined also to have loving kindness even in the face of challenges and difficulties (M.I.123).

Along with loving kindness, the person who exhibits compassion towards others and has their wellbeing in mind ultimately makes progress in his/her own spiritual state. The stereotypical verse cited above about loving kindness also has its equivalent for compassion in the suttas. If a person practices compassion, "relishes it, desires it, and finds satisfaction in it. If he is firm in it, focused on it, often dwells in it, and has not lost it when he dies, he is reborn in companionship with the devas of streaming radiance" (A.II.129). Compassion is exemplified by the Buddha himself who is said to be the "one person who arises in the world…out of compassion for the world" (A.I.23) and is "practicing simply out of sympathy and compassion for living beings" (A.II.177). Compassion is exhibited in multiple forms, for example by giving material goods or by teaching the Dhamma (A.I.93). Indeed, the latter form of exhibiting compassion characterizes the Buddha who desired to show the people the path to liberation.

As one can see, loving kindness and compassion when practiced diligently by the Buddhist person has direct impact on the environment. For each of these as well as the other sublime virtues, the Buddha exhorted the monks to assiduously train themselves so that they are able to carry out these virtues beyond their immediate neighbors, extending to the entire world (Sahni 2007, 120). Simon P. James points out that someone who is truly compassionate extends his/her compassion to human as well as non-human beings. If one is only compassionate towards human beings, then one would not be considered a truly compassionate person. Thus, a person's dealings with non-human sentient beings, i.e., animals would reflect on his/her level of virtuousness (2007, 457).

One may ask the question, if loving kindness and compassion are only extended to human beings and non-human sentient beings, then what good is that when it comes to plants and other non-sentient entities? Certainly, a person would hardly be considered compassionate if he/she goes about destroying rainforests which serve as the habitat for countless animal creatures big and small. In the same manner, a person would hardly be considered to be suffusing the world with loving kindness if he/she chooses to fill the air and rivers with dangerous chemicals that harm living things. Thus, the implication for loving kindness and compassion in the context of the environment is that it must respond to all dimensions of life that ultimately holds ramifications for different aspects of the ecology. Buddhism indeed encourages people to be kind and compassionate in a thoroughgoing manner and not just on a selective basis.

**Gentleness (*maddava*)**

Closely related to loving kindness and compassion is the virtue of gentleness. Gentleness can be seen as the positive derivative of the non-violence (*ahimsā*) precept in Buddhism. With respect to this First Precept in Buddhism, all actions which intentionally harm other sentient beings are considered morally wrong. In the Dhammapada one is reminded that just as a person recoils at the thought of pain and treasures his own life, so do other sentient beings. Thus, suffering should not be inflicted on others (Dp.129-130). Buddhism not only urges people to be gentle in their daily dealings with other people and animals, but it also encourages people to avoid means of livelihood that brings about intentional harm to others. Thus, making a living by trading weapons, trading human beings, trading flesh, trading spirits and trading poison ought to be avoided, according to the Buddha (A.V.177). In addition, earning a living as pig and sheep butchers, hunters, thieves and murderers resulted in terrible consequences to the individual that no water ablution can eliminate (The.242-3). While the non-violence virtue directly speaks about how one treats fellow human beings and animals, it would be peculiar if a person acted with great respect towards all sentient beings, but made a complete turn-about when it came to plants which in Buddhism is considered to be non-sentient or at best, border-line sentient beings. One would expect that those who display gentleness

towards people and animals would also extend this demeanor towards plants and even non-living things like a historic boulder or a cave. When gentleness permeates a person's veins, it is displayed in his/her actions which affect all the things around him/her. Environmental wellbeing then greatly depends on a human community that knows how to refrain from doing violence to its members and to others. By acting with gentleness towards others, environmentally negative events such as the extinction of animal species due to excessive hunting or the loss of plant species due to destruction of forests can be prevented.

**Moderation and contentment**

Moderation and contentment (*saṅtuṭṭhī*) serve as the antidote for the greed that is detrimental to one's quest for liberation. There is a plethora of texts in the Buddhist canon that exhorts the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. The Aggañña Suttra of the Dīgha Nikāya (D.III.80-98) tells a fanciful tale of the beginning of the world where as (pre)human beings went through moral degeneration, filling their hearts with greed, hatred, and envy, human lives became less and less joyful. In the beginning, the beings were luminous and weightless creatures floating about space in pure delight. However, as time passed, on earth, there appeared a sweet and savory substance that piqued the curiosity and interest of the beings. They not only ate the substance, but due to greed seeping in, they ate it voraciously which led to its eventual depletion. In the meanwhile, due to endlessly feeding on the earth substance, the weightless beings eventually would not only become coarse individuals with a particular shape, but also lose their radiance. The story then goes on to tell how the natural world and human society continue to evolve in unwholesome manners as a result of the depraved actions of humanity.

This tale claims that there is a causal connection between human virtuousness and the state of the natural world. The lack of moderation, thus, can be seen as a cause of great detrimental effects not only to the surrounding environment, but also to one's own wellbeing. While Buddhism does not advocate abject poverty, the Buddha indeed taught that over dependence on material things was a hindrance towards spiritual progress. Monks were asked to have as their possessions not more than

a robe and a bowl, enough food for a day, simple lodgings and medicine. On the other hand, such things as gold and silver, high beds, garlands and other luxury items were to be avoided. For the Buddha, a life that led to true happiness was not one controlled by sense desires, but rather a life of simplicity guided by wisdom and moral virtues.

Moderation is a virtue when it goes hand in hand with contentment (*Saṅtuṭṭhī*), which Buddhism greatly advocates. In the Suttas, time and time again the Buddha reminds the monks to be content with simple things and avoid desire of many things. In the Aṅguttara, the Buddha says: "Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as contentment. For one who is content, unarisen wholesome qualities arise and arisen unwholesome qualities decline" (A.I.13). In the same collection of discourses, the Buddha extolled the monk who is content with whatever robe, alms food, and lodging he receives as "diligent, clearly comprehending and ever mindful, is said to be standing in an ancient, primal noble lineage" (A.II.27-29). As new robes are received, the old ones are not tossed away but made use of as coverlets. Likewise, the old coversheets are turned into floor-sheets, the old floor-sheets become foot-towels, the old foot towels are used as dusters, and old dusters become floor-spreads (V.II.291). Thus, moderation is not only seen in how one obtains new things, but also demonstrated in how old things continue to be put to good use.

Contentment is opposed to non-contentment and craving (*tanhā*). G. P. Malalasekera interprets the Buddhist notion of *tanhā* in the following manner: "Tanhā is, rather what might be called thirst, the craving of the limited, individual living creature seeking to gratify itself in its separateness and to use the external world as a means to satisfy its self-centred needs. The evil in man's life is man-made and, therefore, eradicable by man, without outside interference" (1964, 152). Craving leads to suffering, or unsatisfactoriness because one is never fulfilled by the thing that one has and continues to look for fulfillment in impermanent things, an endeavor that is ultimately done in vain. While human craving leads us to think that more material possessions and greater material wealth is desirous, Buddhism teaches us that contentment is the "greatest riches" (Dp.204) whereas destruction of all cravings means overcoming

all suffering (Dp.21).

One can immediately see how moderation and contentment advocated by Buddhism would have profound effect on human-nature relationship and environmental wellbeing. By setting limits on one's lifestyle, focusing on what one truly needs rather than what one likes or what one wants, consumerism, and subsequently commodity production, is reduced. This leads to less strain on natural resources and results in improved ecological equilibrium. Possessing moderation and contentment also means true appreciation of the thing that one already possesses and intends to use it in the most meaningful way possible. Oftentimes, people discard a perfectly good mobile phone or tablet that they have been using simply because there is a new model out on the market that supposedly will bring about more satisfaction to the consumer. This behavior reflects a notion of trying to achieve happiness through possessing things rather than the kind of happiness achieved through non-acquisition. According to Apichai Puntasen, true happiness (*sukha*) in Buddhist thinking is not based on hedonistic acquisition, but is achieved "from giving, from meditation, or from helping others to be relieved from pain" (2007, 185). It is also derived from being able to rid the mind of various defilements that prevents its liberation. Puntasen asserts that true happiness ought not to be equated with "pleasure, prosperity, gratification or even enjoyment," but must be considered in terms of "wellness, peace and tranquility" (Ibid, 186).

Buddhism affirms that the feeling of discontentment with the thing that one already possesses is a sign that one will most likely feel the same towards other things that one desires but has yet to possess. Exercising moderation and having contentment with respect to the environment is ultimately a reflection of a person's sense of responsibility towards nature. It reflects one's awareness of the limited natural resources available for human use. It also reflects one's understanding that wanting more and owning more means placing unnecessary strains on nature. And it reflects one's understanding that one's behavior becomes the condition that gives rise to certain phenomena that take place in the world in accordance with the teaching of Dependent Origination. Thus, any spirituality that advocates simple living and contentment rather than constant striving for material possessions clearly reflects a sense of responsibility and

is naturally beneficial towards environmental wellbeing. With the state of the natural environment as it is, there is a great need at this time for simplicity and contentment on the part of human beings. As Donald Swearer remarks, "One chooses less so that all may flourish more" (1998, 93).

### Generosity *(cāga)* and giving *(dāna)*

Generosity is the antidote for greed and attachment and is considered to be an essential quality of a superior person (*sappurisa*), alongside other important qualities of faith, morality, learning and wisdom (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995). According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, generosity as a spiritual quality is important because "the goal of the path is the destruction of greed, hate and delusion, and the cultivation of generosity directly debilitates greed and hate, while facilitating that pliancy of mind that allows for the eradication of delusion" (Ibid). True generosity is the underlying impetus for the practice of *dāna parami*, the perfection of giving that brings about wholesome kamma essential to the path of enlightenment (Jootla 1995). Indeed, giving is an admirable act and Buddhism focuses a great deal on giving. However, the kind of giving that Buddhism is interested in is not just any act of giving, but those acts of giving that are motivated by the genuine internal disposition of generosity. Giving is so fundamental to Buddhism that the Buddha usually preached to newcomers by beginning with the topic of giving (V.I.15,18). Giving is also listed as the first of the ten perfections (*pāramitā*), which are necessary for anyone who aspires to travel the path towards arahantship. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha specified eight motivations for giving: to insult the recipient, from fear, to reciprocate, expecting a future gift in return, because giving is good, because of the sense of justice, because of gaining a good reputation, and to ornament and equip the mind (A.IV.236). Among these, the Buddha taught that the most superior reason for giving is with the intention that it will benefit the effort to attain *nibbāna.*

The object of giving may be both material and non-material things. Material things include food, clothes, and money, while non-material things would be words of encouragement, and most important of all, the Dhamma itself. The gift of the Dhamma was given first by the Buddha, then subsequently by the monks. Lay people participate in giving the gift

of Dhamma by supporting the Sangha which has the direct mission of imparting this gift to the general public with essential material things. Besides giving to the recluses and brahmins, people are also expected to give to the destitute, wayfarers, wanderers and beggars. Moreover, the gift of a good person is given out of faith, given respectfully, given in a timely manner, given unreservedly, and given without injuring himself or others (A.III.173). In all these acts of giving, the Buddha said that the giver "is joyful before giving;" "has a placid, confident mind in the act of giving;" and "is elated after giving" (A.III.336). This demeanor is to be maintained even when the act of giving involves great self-sacrifice on the part of the giver. An illustration of this perfection in giving is cited by I.B. Horner when he selected the story of the hare from the Jātaka collection (J.308). In this story, a Sakka disguised as a famished brahmin (in reality, a Bodhisattva) approached the hare asking for food. Because the hare had nothing in his house to offer the religious man, he decided to offer himself, inviting the religious to eat him, then jumping into the fire. At the moment of self-sacrifice, the story recounts, "Then offering his whole body as a free gift he sprang up, and like a royal swan, alighting on a cluster of lotuses, in an ecstasy of joy he fell on the heap of live coals" (Francis and Neil 1897, 37). Fortunately, it was only Sakka's test of the hare's virtue, and the coal was made cool so as not to do any harm to the creature. In fact, instead of feeling the burning heat from the coal, the hare felt that it was icy cold.

How does the virtue of generosity reflected in the perfection of giving promote ecological wellbeing and flourishing? As can be observed, nature is of service to human beings, not only providing physical sustenance but also facilitating spiritual growth. There is no question that without nature, human beings cannot survive. Without the oxygen produced by plants, human beings would not be able to breathe. The processes taking place in nature are also extremely conducive to the spiritual progress of human beings when they meditate and reflect on them. The service that nature offers to human beings is constant and unceasing. The relationship of mutual service, by the very phrase, implies a reciprocal relationship and human beings must also put themselves at the service of nature. True service requires giving, and giving not just in a haphazard manner, but giving with a joyous and peaceful heart, giving out of true generosity.

The virtue of generosity responds to nature's generosity towards human beings with their own mode of generosity. Human generosity reflects their appreciation of the Buddhist doctrine of *kataññukatavedi* in which one is conscious of the favor that one receives and has the mind to reciprocate such favor. This is the teaching of gratitude that we apply not only to other human beings but to any entity that acts on their behalf. The Phra Dharmakosajarn points to the Buddha as the embodiment of gratitude. After the Buddha achieved Enlightenment, he traveled to his homeland to pay gratitude to his father as well as to the surrounding environment. In addition, the Buddha was very grateful to the Bodhi tree under which he sat to meditate seven days before achieving his ultimate goal of Enlightenment (2011, 16). The virtue of generosity also strengthens human-nature relationship because it is the opposite of the defilements of selfishness and attachment that are so detrimental not only to human wellbeing but also to the wellbeing of nature. It would not be too difficult to realize that much of the environmental devastation taking place is due to human attachment to material possessions and selfishly accumulating them, causing great strains on natural resources and upsetting the ecological equilibrium. The generosity that human beings display towards nature has to be in a way that is appropriate to the human status in the world, reflecting the degree of ethical and spiritual development that they have undergone. Human generosity may be displayed through reforestation projects in order to maintain suitable habitats for animals and insects. Human generosity may be demonstrated in reducing the use of chemicals that are harmful to the natural environment and the atmosphere. It may take place through financial donations to projects that promote environmental sustainability, and organizations that publicize accurate information about environmental destruction and climate change. Generosity can also take place through supporting the Sangha and particular religious leaders to give spiritual guidance on environmental issues.

## 5. Conclusion: Buddhist Environmental Humanism as a Spirituality

As expressed in the previous sections, Buddhist humanism is based on the conviction that humanity has the capacity to achieve personal transformation through self-cultivation. This is done primarily

through the use of human reasoning combined with hard work and discipline. The outcome of this painstaking process is not only spiritual advancement for oneself but also improved human-human and human-nature relationships. Thus, when human beings become better versions of themselves, personal, communal and environmental problems plaguing humanity get resolved. Buddhist environmental humanism therefore is simply a specific aspect of the overall Buddhist humanistic project of cultivating virtues on behalf of self and others.

What I would like to stress regarding Buddhist environmental humanism, indeed, Buddhist humanism as a whole, is that it is not simply an 'ethic' but a 'spirituality.' The late Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1997) speaks of the human moral degeneration as a 'spiritual disease' that must be cured by the Dhamma. Indeed, he remarked that climate change and other imbalances in nature being experienced at this time is a result of an internal human moral degeneration that affects the external dimension of the world.[4] Thus, the environmental crisis is not just a social crisis but at its root a spiritual crisis. Rectifying this situation cannot be just about coming up with scientific solutions or instituting legal measures that safeguard against environmental destruction. Rather it involves self-cultivation and spiritual transformation that translate into ethical actions on behalf of the natural environment. Our inner spirituality is also manifested in our relational life—our interactions and dealings with others around us. This paper affirms that the natural environment can appropriately constitute one of the kinds of relationships in our life that we can either nourish or harm by the kind of actions that we choose to take. Unfortunately, in our life, we give great priority to our human relationships, especially with members of our immediate family, kinship or ethnic group, but completely ignore or are unaware of our relationship with nature. Thus, we do not invest any effort into improving this relationship for the better. This paper suggests that we must expand our circle of relationship beyond the limit of humanity to include other entities, especially nature.

[4] Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's ideas come from a number of works that have been compiled and translated by Grant A. Olson. Olson gives the title of his translation "A Notion of Buddhist Ecology." In addition to the negative effect on nature, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu asserts that internal degeneration hinders spiritual progress.

The spirituality embedded in Buddhist environmental humanism also suggests that Buddhism is far from an 'escapist' spirituality. The aim for emancipation from mundane existence does not prevent us from caring for others in this world. On the contrary, compassion, loving kindness, generosity, responsibility, moderation, and a host of other Buddhist virtues that demonstrate care for others are precisely the means that help us to achieve this ultimate goal. In this manner, Buddhist aspirations are not much different from other religions, say Catholicism. Catholic theology asserts that caring for the things and people in this very world, especially the poor and the marginalized, is indeed the way to achieve eternal life in heaven (Mathew 25). 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 prevent us from being truly human and exercising relationally positive actions towards other people and things. Thus, there is no reason to charge Buddhists who are engaged in social issues related to the environment or to the poor as being inauthentic in their Buddhist belief. Some cynical people may take issue with the notion of a "world-loving" or "world-affirming" Buddhist. However, if Buddhist humanism is understood correctly, there is nothing inherently wrong with this disposition. In fact, Buddhist humanism affirms that one cannot be authentically Buddhist without striving to be fully human, that is, being human in the noblest sense of the word, and totally imbued with the virtues that demonstrate love and compassion to a suffering world. The quote attributed to St Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd cent.), "Man fully alive is the glory of God" is often used to illustrate the essence of Christian humanism. For Buddhist humanism and its implications for environmental flourishing, we can assert that *'Human beings fully realized is the glory of the cosmos.'*

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***ARTICLE***

# A Response to the Ecological Crisis in the Post-Pandemic World from the Eastern Christian Perspective

*Joseph Cao Viet Tuan, CM*[1]

**Abstract**

*Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has made humans more aware of the alarming situation of nature with environmental and ecological crises that have become more urgent to have concrete actions. In working to protect our common home, among the religions, Eastern Christianity is involved very actively in making awareness, initiating dialogues, co-operation with other institutions, organizations, and governments, and contributing many insights and solutions to environmental issues. However, amid a secularized world, due to her nature and mission, Eastern Christian Church always emphasizes a deeper dimension of human life: salvation, rather than simply the world's concerns. In reality, with a long history of the theological tradition of creation since the Church Fathers, Eastern Christianity has viewed creation as inherently related to Revelation, Incarnation, and salvation; it has provided an all-sided theological vision for environmental problems. And radically, Eastern Christianity identified the ecological crisis as a human failure to care for nature. Thus, the solutions it offers have spiritual root by calling for the radical shift of mentality and lifestyle as genuine repentance by living a life of asceticism. And as soon as humans convert and enter a deeper union with God, they can look after God's creation and bring all creation back to the proper order God created at its beginning. In contrast, without a radical conversion, new mentality, and lifestyle, there is no real solution to environmental problems. From Eastern Christianity's perspective, hopefully, the light may shine on the darkness of ecological crisis in the*

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*post-pandemic world; that is what this paper aims for.*

**Keywords:** *Eastern Christianity, creation theology, environment, ecological crisis, COVID-19 pandemic.*

## 1. Introduction

In December 2019, coronavirus disease (COVID-19), caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, initially appeared as an infectious disease. Then quickly, it spread out as a global health emergency and finally became a global pandemic. Moreover, it has revealed itself as a phenomenon of many facets with profound structural, ecological, and social challenges. It indicates our broken relationship with the natural world of which we should be a part.[2] Today, when facing the severe ecological crisis and environmental problems in the post-COVID-19 pandemic world, humans have recognized that they are living in the interrelation and interaction with nature.[3] Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop Justin of Canterbury have reminded the faithful regarding the interdependence in our efforts to stay safe, that "no one is safe until everyone is safe, and that our actions do affect one another. These are not new lessons, but we have had to face them anew."[4]

In recent years, there have been many global summits on the environment at various levels, scientific conferences and meetings, and numerous projects addressing the ecological problem. Humans already possess the scientific and technical knowledge to correct our broken

[2] Alexander J.B. Hampton and Annalea Rose Thiessen, "Theology and Ecology in a Time of Pandemic," in *Pandemic, Ecology, and Theology: Perspectives on Covid-19*, edited by Alexander J.B. Hampton and Annalea Rose Thiessen (London and New York: Routledge: 2021), 1.

[3] Joshua L.I. Gentzke, "Viral Vision and dark dreams: Ecological darkness and enmeshment in the time of Covid-19," in *Pandemic, Ecology, and Theology: Perspectives on Covid-19*, edited by Alexander J.B. Hampton and Annalea Rose Thiessen, (London and New York: Routledge: 2021), 4.

[4] Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew, and Archbishop Justin, A Joint Message for the Protection of Creation, *Vatican,* September 1, 2021, assessed July 14, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/20210901-messaggio-protezionedelcreato.html

relationship with nature and address the century-old environmental crisis. However, the first and most crucial point is not to find a scientific, technological or technocratic innovation but to implement these solutions. COVID-19 pandemic caused us collectively to reflect upon our inherited social imaginary with new eyes and begin to envision alternative possibilities for the flourishing of both human and non-human life.[5]

From a Christian perspective, the crisis of the environment connects with the crisis of faith that the Christian teaching and tradition are capable of answering. Saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662) showed the connection between theology and ecology.[6] Besides, more recently, many leaders and theologians from Eastern Christianity have urgently raised their concerns about the ecological crisis as well as raised awareness among them of how their rich tradition of worship and theology, sacramental life and ascetic discipline, and even traditional customs encapsulate an entire view of creation as a whole and its relation to God.[7] Especially, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians, became an outstanding figure in raising awareness of ecological crises. He is well known for the title "Green Patriarch."[8] Pope Francis in *Laudato*

[5] Alexander J.B. Hampton and Annalea Rose Thiessen, "Theology and Ecology in a Time of Pandemic," 2.

[6] Cf. Radu Bordeianu, Maximus and Ecology: The relevance of Maximus the Confessor's Theology of Creation for the Present Ecological Crisis,' *Downside Review* 127, 2009, 103–26; Andrew Louth, "The Cosmic Vision of Saint Maximus the Confessor," in *Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, edited by Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 195.

[7] Cf. John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz eds., *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009).

[8] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics: Reclaiming the Deep Ecology of Christian Tradition," *Religions* 2017, *8 (7)*, 116 (June 2017), assessed July 12, 2022, *https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8070116*. Cf. John Chryssavgis, "The Green Patriarch: Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew As a Pioneer of Ecological Change," *Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology*, assessed July 11, https://fore.yale.edu/sites/default/files/Green_Patriarch_Chryssavgis.pdf; John Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch*

*Si'* singles out and highlighted the example of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "who has spoken in particular of the need for each of us to repent of the ways we harmed the planet."[9]

In the current thought of Eastern Christian Tradition, this paper summarizes some brief keys in the theology of creation as the work of God out of nothingness (*ex nihilo*), divine Revelation, and presence that makes the unity of creation. Then, the Mystery of Incarnation and the works of Christ called all creatures again into the union with God in the process of deification that happens in the Church as the Body of Christ and new creation by the Holy Spirit. With some core theological perspectives, Eastern Christianity provides an integrated solution to the ecological crisis in the post-pandemic world, beginning with a shifted view of the universe as a creation of God that participates in cosmos liturgy. As the most crucial step to implicate other solutions, humans are called for a critical conversion from ecological sin into the life of asceticism. So, Eastern Christianity does not only advocate some environmental movements such as using the recyclable cup, reducing gas emissions and consumption, or planting more trees but rather contributes to an integrated vision of all creation from the point of view of teleology. It calls all humans to enter a deeper union with God with all creation through the process of deification as its divine design at the beginning of creation.

## 2. Some Brief Keys in Theology of Creation in Eastern Christianity

### Brief introduction to Eastern Christianity[10]

Christianity started in the city of Jerusalem. Then, the Apostles and the early Christians established the first Christian communities in major

*Bartholomew* (Grand Rapid, Michigan, and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

[9] Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015), no. 8.

[10] Cf. New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Eastern Christianity," *New World Encyclopedia*, v.b. 'Eastern Christianity', April 23, 2022, 20:12 UTC, assessed July 12, 2022, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Eastern_Christianity&oldid=1068149). To read more about Eastern Christianity, cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974); Michael Angold ed., *Eastern Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

cities of the southeastern Roman Empire in Syria, Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, and North Africa. The Christian communities also developed in Persia, Armenia, Ethiopia, and India. Even under the savage persecution of Roman emperors, the influence and prominence of Christians within the Roman world gradually increased, especially in the more Eastern areas of Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece.

Because of various developments and characteristics in the church beginning in the first four centuries, it is common to speak generally of Eastern and Western Christianity. The early distinction between Eastern and Western Christianity reflects the differences in languages (Greek East and Latin West) in cultural and intellectual contexts in the early church. So, the theological and historical development of Eastern Christianity is distinctive from the forms of Western Christianity in theology, organization, tradition, and liturgy. By the early fourth century, there were important centers of Christian learning and thought in the Eastern cities of Alexandria, Antioch, Edessa, and in the region of Cappadocia with outstanding and notable Church Fathers such as Athanasius (296-373), Ephraem (306-393), Basil the Great (330-379), Gregory the Theologian (329-389), Gregory of Nyssa (330-395), John Chrysostom (347-407), Olympia the Deacon (368-408). In history, so much of Christian liturgy and most of the Christian dogma had arisen in the East.

Sadly, the division started after the Council of Ephesus (431), which reflected the differences between the theological schools of Alexandria and Antioch, particularly in Christology. Twenty years later, the bishops gathered together in the Council of Chalcedon (451) to reconcile the division in the church. However, after Chalcedon Council, the church division continued not only because of differences in Christology but also in history, politics, and culture between the Eastern and Western Christians. The following councils in Constantinople in 553 and 661 attempted to heal the growing division but were unsuccessful.

Today, the term "Eastern Christianity" refers collectively to the Christian traditions and churches that developed in Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East, Northeastern Africa, and southern India over several centuries of religious antiquity. In general terms,

Eastern Christianity can be described as comprising four families of churches: The Assyrian Church of the East, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Oriental Orthodoxy, and the Eastern Catholic Churches.

**Creation *ex nihilo***

For a long time in the history of human civilization, in philosophy schools and religions, there have been many stories and theories to explain how the universe came into existence like it is today. However, according to Vladimir Lossky, in Christian theology, the world's creation is not a truth of philosophical order but rather an article of faith.[11] The book of Genesis narrates that God created heaven and earth without form or shape (cf. Gn 1:1-2 - NAB). Later, the notion of creation from nothingness (*ex nihilo*) is again found in the Bible (cf. 2 Macc 7:28). Saint John of Damascus (675-749) writes, "The earliest formation (of human) is called *creation* and not *generation*, for *creation is the original formation at God's hands*, while generation is the succession from each other."[12]

In Eastern Christian theology, the nothingness of creatures, the absolute void, is so mysterious, inaccessible, and unimaginable to human understanding because the void does not exist. But in some way, creation *ex nihilo* is understood as an act producing something "outside of God" – the production of an entirely new subject, with no origin of any kind either in the divine nature or in any matter of potential of being external to God.[13] Or, according to Saint John of Damascus, in creation *ex nihilo*, God makes something wholly outside of Himself, which is entirely "other," infinitely removed from Him.[14]

The Eastern Christian Tradition clarifies that creation is a work

[11] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press*,* 1976*),* 91; Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland Publishing, 1976), 43.

[12] John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2:30, 43 quoted in Seraphim Rose, *Genesis, Creation and Early Man*: *The Orthodox Christian Vision* (California: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000), 391.

[13] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 92.

[14] John of Damascus, *De fide orthodox,* I, 13', PG., XCIV, 835 C, quoted in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 93; Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 46.

of will and not of nature that is not co-eternal with God and has its beginning. And since it is not a work of nature, there is nothing in the divine nature that could be the necessary cause of the creation of creatures. This point keeps Eastern Christian theology not falling into pantheism. God created the universe in His perfect freedom.[15] Creation is a free act of Divine will that God could equally well not have created. However, by the power of the Almighty, in Divine Wisdom and creative energy, God desires something, which becomes a fact and is realized. Creation is the realization of God's will.[16]

And because creation is the realization of God's will that is unchangeable, it will never cease when it begins to exist.[17] Methodius of Olympus, an early martyr (died ca. 311), in the Homilies on Romans 14:5, said: "God has not established the world to see it destroyed. He has created it to continue in existence."[18] Everything, even death, and destruction, will not involve a return to non-being, for "the word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Pet 1:25), and "*For He has established the world so that it shall not be moved*" (Ps. 93:1). Hence, the universe was created not for nothing that it never comes back to nothingness.

**Divine presence, the unity of creation, and revelation**

As previously mentioned, in creation *ex nihilo*, God made something wholly outside Him, which is entirely "other," infinitely removed from Him.[19] However, God is not far from the world but is Himself part of the world He creates, shaping it from within.[20] In creation, the relationship between God and His creatures, between the infinite and the finite, is created with the contact point being its *logoi*

[15] Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 52.

[16] Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *De imaginibus,* I, 20', P.G, XLIV, 69A, quoted in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 94.

[17] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 94; Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 44-45.

[18] Methodius of Olympus, *Homily on Rome 14.5,* quoted in Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation,* 37.

[19] John of Damascus, *De fide orthodox,* I, 13', PG., XCIV, 835 C, quoted in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 93; Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 46.

[20] Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation,* 35; David Bradshaw, "The *Logoi* of Beings in Greek Patristic thought," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration,* edited by John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, 10.

(inner essences), which means rationales or essential principles of everything that exists.[21] And God as the Logos is present in all things, as the source and the end of the particular *logoi* in every creature.[22]

Because of the presence of Logos in all creatures (*logoi*), the Eastern Church tradition sees all creatures as a single body. Saint Paul stated, "*All things are gathered together in Christ*" (Ep 1:10). Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) makes clearer when he says, "All things exist in each other and all things mutually support each other."[23] And recently, Patriarch Bartholomew used the symbol of a seamless garment to describe the relationship between human beings and the environment, which is "a multi-colored cloth which we believe to be woven in its entirety by God."[24]

As God's spoken word, the Logos is the Revelation of the Mystery of God. Due to the presence of Logos in all creatures, God reveals Himself in the idea and active power to build creation. So in creation, the creatures reveal God's mystery, enabling us to "read" something of the Creator in His creation.[25] Saint Maximus the Confessor says, "Creation is a bible whose letters and syllables are the particular aspects of all creatures and whose words are the more universal aspects of creation. Conversely, the Holy Bible is like a cosmos constituted of heaven and earth and things between the ethical, the natural, and the theological dimensions."[26] Saint John of Damascus summarizes the meaning of the universe as follows: "The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God." This statement became a classic and famous quotation.[27]

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[21] David Bradshaw, "The *Logoi* of Beings," 9.

[22] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[23] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 105.

[24] John Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer,* 289.

[25] Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 64; Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[26] Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 10, PG 91. 1128-1129a, quoted in Linda Gibler, "Preaching from the Heart of Earth," *Oblate School of Theology,* 2018, assessed July 9, 2022, https://ost.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Sr.-Gibler-OP-Presentation.pdf

[27] It is hard to find out the source of this quotation, but it became famous and classical. There is a movie named "The Face of God" about God and nature, faith and climate change, and the experience of Orthodox communities around

## Creation: deification *(theosis)* and incarnation

According to Dionysius, the Areopagite, containing in itself the Logos of God, the idea of creation is so close to deification that it is hard to distinguish between the first state of creatures (creation) and their final *telos* (the union with God). In other words, the creation and everything in the created world, created to be deified, is dynamic in a perpetual state of becoming towards their final purpose – full union with God or deification.[28]

In Eastern Christianity, the concept of *theosis* (deification) is the central idea of theology as the "bedrock" of the ancient Christian faith that the Greek Father had formulated. Salvation, defined as deification, was the theme of the Christian faith and the biblical message (cf. Ps 82:6; Jn 10:34; 2Pt 1:4).[29] In Christian East, deification does not mean becoming gods by nature or essence; that is impossible. Instead, deification is understood as the process of acquiring godly characteristics, gaining immortality and incorruptibility, and experiencing communion with God.[30] Being united with Christ was the means of deification.[31] In creation, the human being was made uniquely to become an outstanding creature far from other creatures. Humans carry a glorious mission to bring into harmony in their own person the divisions within creation, ultimately uniting all creation with the Creator. As a focus of unity, humans have to be focused on God; when they are inclined towards their senses from the moment of creation. However, with the Fall, humans became a force for division instead.[32]

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the world facing and experiencing changes in their lives. It is a film about beauty, ecology, theology, sanctity, our relationship to the natural world, love, asceticism, and the radiant living icon of the face of God in creation. Cf. https://www.ncca.org.au/ncca-newsletter/march-2021-1/item/2385-the-orthodox-church-on-climate-change-2021031

[28] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 97; cf. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, 47, 73-75.

[29] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, 10; Paul Michael Gamar, *Theosis: Patristic Remedy for Evangelical Yearning at the Close of the Modern Age* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 99.

[30] Donald Fairbairn, "Salvation as Theosis: The Teaching of Eastern Orthodoxy," *Themelios* 23 - 4, assessed July 7, 2022, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/salvation-as-theosis-the-teaching-of-eastern-orthodoxy/

[31] Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom,* 10.

[32] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

Christ redeems this failure when he comes in the flesh to fulfill the great purpose of God the Father and recapitulate all things in himself (cf. Eph 1:10).[33] Therefore, "*The Word became flesh*" (Jn 1:14) is excellent news and a historic turn of the whole creation. The Incarnation brought the fullness of Revelation and the beginning of redemption. The Word of God, perfect God and perfect man, came down from heaven to redeem the world and unite humans with God forever. In the Incarnate Word, God reveals Himself in the most fullness as an absolute manifestation of God and restores all creatures in the perfect union with Him through His Word. In this divine union, all creatures participate in Divine Life.[34] So, in the Mystery of Incarnation, the Word of God in person enters into his creation to fulfill a pattern laid down at the moment of creation. That means He accomplished the task of deification of humans and the whole created universe according to its design.[35]

Vladimir Lossky summarizes the relationship between Incarnation and deification as follows: "The Son has become like us by the incarnation, we become like Him in deification by partaking of the divinity in the Holy Spirit."[36] So, just as in creation, God created the universe in the Holy Spirit by His Word, and so in deification, God brings it back to God by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. *Theosis* is offered by Christ but realized only with the Holy Spirit: Only in the Holy Spirit will we reach the point of becoming gods, the likeness of God.[37] Saint Basil the Great (330-379) writes, "From the Holy Spirit there is the likeness of God, and the highest of all things to be desired, to become God."[38]

**The Church as new creation**

To the Eastern Church, the primary means by which the Holy Spirit works to give grace and deify people are the Church's sacraments and human

[33] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[34] Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 95-96.

[35] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 110; Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics"; Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom,* 10-12.

[36] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God,* edited by J.H. Erickson (Crestwood. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 109.

[37] Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: An Inspiring Presentation of Man's Purpose in Life According to Orthodox Theology,* trans. Stanley Harakas (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1976), 29.

[38] Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1994), 117.

efforts. Most clearly, deification occurs in the sacraments, especially Baptism, Penance, and Eucharist. In Baptism, God begins the process of deification by bringing the believers into the life of Christ. Penance is the act of returning to the divine life that they have left through sin. And in the Eucharist, they become one body in Christ and the Mystical Body of Christ. Thus, the believers enter the union with Christ or undergo the process of deification through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. In the sacraments is consummated the Incarnation, the actual reunion of humans with God in Christ.[39]

Then, with the sacraments instituted and entrusted to the Church by Christ, the Church plays a crucial role in deification. Georgios Mantzaridis calls the Church the new building formed by Christ through His Incarnation and recapitulation of all things to Himself. According to him, this new building has a singular purpose: the deification of its members. He echoes the teaching of Saint Gregory Palamas (1295-1357/59), who defined the Church as the "communion of deification."[40] Recently, in an interview, Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon affirmed, "The Church exists to sanctify and unite all creation and to highlight something sacred, which contains within it the presence of God himself, and therefore offers it to God as Eucharist."[41]

After reminding the Colossians that Jesus Christ is the firstborn of all creation and all things were created in Him (cf. 1:15-16), Saint Paul mentioned the Church as the Body of Christ (cf. 1:18). Then he reminded them of the mission of Christ that is to reconcile all things and make peace with those on earth or in heaven (cf. 1:20). So, because of being united with Her Head and the place where union with God is accomplished, the Church is already implied in the idea of cosmos. In other words, the Church is united to Christ and participates in His Body that in Church, that creation is forever confirmed and established, unto all ages, in union with Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the mystery of our salvation, revealed by

[39] Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 149-159; cf. Fairbairn, "Salvation as Theosis."

[40] Georgios Mantzaridis, *Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press*,* 1984), 57.

[41] John Zizioulas, "The Role of Eastern Orthodoxy in Addressing the Climate Crisis," in *The Orthodox Church addresses the climate crisis*, edited by Theodota Nantsou and Nikolaos Asproulis, (Athens and Volos: WWW Greece and Volos Academy Publications, 2021), 35.

the Church and in the Church, has meaning to the universe. Through the Church, creaturely efforts are crowned and saved. And creation is restored to its fullness and reality.[42]

Saint Gregory the Theologian (329-340) has a very contemplative view of the Church as a new creation. He writes that the creation was completed in six days; and after the seventh day, the day of repose from works, the first creation begins. Just as the first creation starts on the day following the Sabbath, the second creation begins again on the same day, the day of Resurrection.[43] Besides, in the Word of God, all creatures had been created in the first creation. And again, in Christ, the Incarnated Word of God, new creation came to existence in the Church. So, through the sacraments in the Church, the new life of Christ is extended to and bestowed upon the members of His Body.[44] Thus, the Church is called to make the union with God a reality in liberty, in the free harmony of the created will with the will of God – this is the mystery of the Church inherent in creation.[45]

Following humanity's Fall, the vocation of creation, which means to be in union with God, remains. The idea of the Church was fully realized after Pentecost as the indestructible Church of Christ. From that moment, the created universe has borne within itself a new body, possessing an uncreated and limitless Person which the world cannot contain. This new body is the Church, the plentitude that contains grace, the profusion of the divine energies in the Word of God and the Holy Spirit by which and for which the world was created. So in the Church, the Word of God makes all things new (cf. Rev. 21:5). Only in the Church, within the unity of the body of Christ, that they are conferred, given to humanity by the Holy Spirit; it is in the Church that the energies appear as the grace in which created beings are called to union with God.[46]

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[42] Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 77-78; Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 105.

[43] Gregory the Theologian, *Homily 44*, "On New Week, Spring, and the Commemoration of the Martyr Mass," 675, quoted in Rose, 402.

[44] Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption,* 159

[45] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 112-113.

[46] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology,* 113.

## 3. The Response of Eastern Christianity to the Ecological Crisis Today

### Shifting the vision of creation

According to Ellis, the universe is the research object of cosmology in Western philosophy as a "theory dealing with physical cosmology and related mathematical and physical issues."[47] Doubtlessly, many people, including political, economic, civic, and spiritual leaders, are concerned about the environment and ecology as a hot topic for discussion. However, generally, in a highly secularized world like today, modern people think of problems pertaining to the earth, nature, universe, environment, ecology, and climate as scientific and technical matters that should be resolved through political, social, and economic policies or movements. However, the interdependence of creatures, humans included, charted by ecological science is not only something we must recognize to avoid disastrous physical consequences but something we must embrace and learn from to be fully human.[48]

In reality, the terms people use express what they believe. For example, the words such as environment, nature, ecology, earth, and universe cannot be equally alternatives to "God's creation" which relates to God as the Creator.[49] At the same time, how humans view and relate to nature reflects their faith. In the modern world of science and technical developments, humans treat natural resources in a godless manner precisely because they forsake God. The Russian Orthodox Church views the environmental crisis as the fruit of selfish and irresponsible consumption with a pagan worldview.[50]

According to the Eastern Christianity, unless we change the way we see the world by viewing it through the eyes of faith, then we shall

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[47] George F. R. Ellis, "The Domain of Cosmology and the Testing of Cosmological Theories," in *The Philosophy of Cosmology,* edited by Khalil Chamcham, Joseph Silk, John D. Barrow, and Simon Saunders (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 4.

[48]Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[49] Elizabeth Theokitoff, *Living in God's Creation*, 26.

[50] Holy Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, XIII.4, assessed August 4, 2022, http://orthodoxkansas.org/Bases_of_Social_Concept.html

simply be dealing with symptoms, not their root causes. Ultimately, our struggle against climate change is a battle over how we imagine our world; it is a crisis of worldview and faith.[51] Eastern Christianity encourages developing, in the Church's institutions of higher education, church theological studies of the relationship of human and the created world. It is important to maintain a theological understanding with fraternal local Orthodox Churches as well as exchange of experience in this field of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. In theology, it is necessary to provide a new vision of environmental and ecological issues through the lens of theology and teleology of creation.[52]

Therefore, Eastern Christian Tradition provides a view of environment and ecology, through the lens of theology, as a creation of God in relation to God. In connection with the creation, humans are living with God. In other words, humans cannot live a good relationship with God without living a good relationship with God's creatures. The Great and Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church at Crete in 2016 reminded us that the earth's natural resources are not our property but the Creator's. We need to protect God's creation through cultivating human responsibility and promoting the virtues of frugality and self-restraint.[53] Equally, Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon wrote, "If we live in a relational universe not as external visitors to it but as parts of it, any individualistic approach to existence is bound to contradict not only the will of God but also the truth of our own being."[54] Thus, Eastern Christianity invites humans to "integrate our spiritual lives with the life of the universe."[55]

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[51] John Chryssavgis, "The Green Patriarch."

[52] Holy Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, *Statement on the Environment (February 4, 2013),* assessed August 4, 2022, https://www.orth-transfiguration.org/statement-on-the-environment-by-the-russian-orthodox-church/

[53] Great and Holy Synod Crete (2016), *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's world,* 10, in *The Orthodox Church addresses the climate crisis*, edited by Theodota Nantsou and Nikolaos Asproulis, 125.

[54] John Zizioulas, "Relational Ontology: Insights from Patristic Thought," in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physics and Theology,* edited by John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), 156.

[55] Lev Gillet, *The Burning Bush* (Springfield: Templegate, 1976), 19.

## Creation in cosmic liturgy

Hans Urs von Balthasar used the term "cosmic liturgy" to describe Maximus' vision of the world that became familiar.[56] Actually, in Eastern Christian Tradition, the meaning of cosmic liturgy is evident. All creation is a crucial part of worship, sacramental life, ascetic discipline, liturgical celebrations, and even traditional customs, encapsulating an entire view of creation as a whole and its relation to God.[57] Moreover, in dialogue with the liturgical movement in Roman Catholicism, there was a liturgical renewal which began with the rediscovery of sacramental life not as "more or less isolated acts of the Church" but as expressions of "the world as a sacrament," "holy materialism," and "some healing of man's estrangement from the good creation."[58] The liturgical cosmology of Eastern Christian Tradition provides modern ecological thinking to respond to the environmental crisis today. The entire universe is called to enter the Church because it was created to participate in the fullness of divine life.[59]

More particularly, in the liturgical renewal movement, the world is seen as the matter of a cosmic Eucharist symbolized in bread, water, and wine. George Theokritoff, based on the word of St Irenaeus,[60] to see how by human labor, wheat and grape undergo a process to become bread and wine. And then they become spiritual food for human souls. He concludes that the entire cosmos participates in the preparation of the matter used by the Church in celebrating the Eucharist and that in the Eucharist, there is the whole cosmos, everything, including ourselves. So in the Eucharist, we recognize more clearly that the universe is transparent in Christ. Therefore, the cosmic Eucharist's vision "points to creation as a sacrament, a means of communion, a gift from God, but certainly not a commodity to be abused."[61]

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[56] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Liturgy, Cosmic Worship, and Christian Cosmology," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration,* edited by John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, 295.

[57] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[58] Alexander Schmemann, *Church, World, Mission: Reflections on Orthodoxy and the West* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: 1979), 221.

[59] Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 111-13.

[60] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, V 2,3, quoted in George Theokritoff, "The Cosmology of the Eucharist," *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration,* edited by John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, 131.

61 George Theokritoff, "The Cosmology of the Eucharist," 135.

In the view of the cosmic Eucharist, the human being is described as the priest of creation who unites the world in his hand to offer it to God in thankfulness (*eucharist*) so that it can be united with God and thus saved and fulfilled; and, in return, brings God's blessing to the universe.[62] Similarly, Patriarch Bartholomew says, "Human beings are eucharistic animals, capable of gratitude and endowed with the power to bless God for the gift of creation."[63] Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon views humans as priests, revealing the profound link between humans and nature ontologically that humans embrace nature instead of managing it. And as the priest of creation, human beings transform and improve it into something better than what it is naturally and refer it to God.[64]

The liturgical texts and celebrations of the Eastern Christian Church illustrate the idea that we live in a worshipping cosmos. For example, nature's vital, interactive participation in Christ's suffering is imperative in the Good Friday Martins Services readings: "All creation was changed by fear when it saw you hanging upon the cross, O Christ. The sun was darkened, and the foundations of the earth were shaken. All things suffered with the Creator of all."[65] Gschwandtner also lively describes how creation participates in the Liturgies for the Feasts of the Theotokos in the Orthodox Church.[66]

Thus, in thinking of liturgical and sacramental life in terms of ecological implications, Eastern Christianity tries to shift the worldview

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[62] John Zizioulas, "Proprietors or Priests of Creation?," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration,* edited by John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, 167.

[63] John Chryssavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University, 2012), 125.

[64] John Zizioulas, "Proprietors or Priests of Creation?" 169-71.

[65] Elizabeth K. Zelensky, "Nature as Living Icon: Ecological Ethos of Eastern Orthodoxy," *Religions* 2012, 1 (October 2012), 171, assessed July 12, 2022, https://doi.org/10.5339/rels.2012.environment.11. Moreover, Theokritoff mentions many citations from liturgical celebrations with the participation of the creatures, cf. Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Liturgy, Cosmic Worship, and Christian Cosmology," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration,* edited by John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, 295-300.

[66] Cf. Christina M. Gschwandtner, "All Creation Rejoices in You: Creation in the Liturgies for the Feasts of the Theotokos," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration,* edited by John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, 307-23.

that shapes the culture of abusing creation into a sacramental vision of the universe created to become *eucharist* (thanksgiving) with the foundation of the Mystery of Incarnation. It is the essence of the "*eucharistic ethos*" in using the word, which Bartholomew and others so often call for.[67] Everything remains God's own"; it is "given" so that we have something to give back so that all our use of creation should be a way of relating to a Giver. And by the same token, since it is a gift to all, the world is "a sacrament of communion with God and neighbor."[68]

In that vision, humans, as God's priests—giving thanks (*eucharistia*) and offering all of creation in a transfigured form back to its Divine Source—must begin to heal the rift created through their self-centeredness between creation and Creator. As the angels perpetually praise God (cf. Is 6:3; Lk 2:13), humankind must return to its Edenic liturgical function and thus recover its original fellowship with the rest of creation rather than abusing and destroying it.[69]

**Repentance from ecological sin**

Playing a central role among creatures as the priest of creation, humans have the responsibility to take care of God's creation, sustaining its goodness and bringing it to the union with God. However, in reality, with the current situation of nature, humans fail in fulfilling their priesthood of creation in sustaining the goodness of creation.[70] And it is a sin because in Greek, the word for "sin" is "*hamartia*," which literally means to miss the mark, be mistaken, to ignore or wander from the path of uprightness and honor, to do or go wrong.[71] So, sin (*hamartia)* in the Bible is seen within the framework of teleological, or goal-oriented, ethics. So, in the vision of creation, it is *hamartia* if humans lead the universe in the wrong direction.

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[67] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[68] Patriarch Bartholomew, quoted in Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer,* 315.

[69] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes 2nd edition* (New York: Fordham University: 1987), 136.

[70] Chris Durante, "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin," *The Orthodox Christian Studies Center,* Fordham University, assessed July 11, 2022, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2021/09/03/green-patriarch-and-ecological-sin/.

[71] *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon*, s.v. "*hamartia,*" assessed July 11, 2022, https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/hamartia.html

Thus, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew firmly persuaded that environmental problems have spiritual roots and spiritual solutions that do not have to be sought in Eastern religions or neo-paganism but can be deeply rooted in the Christian tradition.[72] In Christian life, repentance is a critical attitude that should be applied in ecology as well. Patriarch Bartholomew first expressed the idea of ecological sin while delivering a speech in Santa Barbara, California in 1997:

> For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... For humans to degrade earth's integrity by causing climate changes, stripping the earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands. For humans to injure other humans with the disease, for humans to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances. These are sins.[73]

In 2009, Patriarch Bartholomew argued, "The root cause of our environmental sin lies in our self-centeredness and in the mistaken order of values, which we inherit and accept without any critical evaluation."[74] The Patriarch calls human conscience to be sincere in acknowledging that the root cause of our ecological sinfulness is our personal and civilizational egoism and our disordered value system, which seems to be based upon the pursuit of vice rather than virtue. Ecological sin is global and involves all economic and social systems. In modern society, humans run after material and financial growth at the expense of ethical and psycho-spiritual maturation.[75] Metropolitan Ignatius Georgakopoulos also has the same

[72] Bron Taylor, "Earth and Nature-based Spirituality: From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism," *Religion* 31 (2001): 175–93; Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[73] Patriarch Bartholomew, Address at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, November 8, 1999, quoted in Chris Durante, "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin." Pope Francis repeats this word of Patriarch Bartholomew in *Laudato Si'*, 8. Moreover, Dr. Chris Durante develops the idea of ecological sin in his article "Ecological Sin: Ethics, Economics & Social Repentance," in *Journal of Orthodox Christian* 3, 2*,* December 2020.

[74] Patriarch Bartholomew, Message at the International Conference on Ethics, Religion, and Environment, University of Oregon, April 5, 2009, quoted in Durante, "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin."

[75] Durante, "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin."

understanding when he views climate change as the ultimate consequence of the evil of our activities—the result of human disobedience to God's commandment. Humans used their freedom to abuse God's creation.[76]

Thus, the Eastern Christian Church urges humans to undergo a process of repentance that in Greek means "a change of mind."[77] Bartholomew claims, "We need a new way of thinking about ourselves, our relationship with the world and God. Without this revolutionary change of mind, all our conservation projects, however well-intentioned, will remain ultimately ineffective."[78] Familiarly, the Russian Orthodox Church also calls for a change in the inner world and that the transformation of nature should begin with addressing the spiritual crisis of humanity.[79] Durante suggests a long-term solution by applying the Christian virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice; as a global civilization—especially within the industrialized world—we have allowed ourselves to be governed by the vices of avarice in the guise of economic growth, and gluttony, in the guise of maximal consumption and enrichment.[80]

**Asceticism and spiritual maturity**

Because the environmental crisis is seen as a consequence of ecological sin, the urgent call for repentance (*metanoia*) from ecological sin demands a critical change in human's attitude to nature and material things. Eastern Christianity introduces asceticism, a traditional way of spiritual life rooted in a long history of Christian spirituality, as a timely resolution for caring for creation.[81]

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[76] Ignatius Georgakopuolos, "Climate Change and our Theological and Pastoral Responsibility Today: Reflection of a Bishop," in *The Orthodox Church addresses the climate crisis*, edited by Theodota Nantsou and Nikolaos Asproulis, 48.

[77] *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon,* v.s. "*metanoia*," assessed July 11, 2022, https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/metanoia.html

[78] Patriarch Bartholomew, Message at the International Conference on Ethics, Religion, and Environment, University of Oregon, April 5, 2009, quoted in Durante, "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin."

[79] Holy Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, *Statement on the Environment (February 4, 2013),* 3, Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration, assessed August 4, 2022, https://www.orth-transfiguration.org/statement-on-the-environment-by-the-russian-orthodox-church/

[80] Durante, "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin."

81 Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics.

Asceticism (*askesis*) means practices intended to eliminate vice and inculcate virtue in Christian mystical tradition. Especially in the Christian East, ascetic practice is necessary to spiritual life as the first step of the growth in spiritual maturity. Ascetical practices such as fasting, celibacy, and nocturnal vigils are not ends in themselves. Still, they are tools that help keep physical drives in balance, such as hunger, thirst, sleep, and the desire for intimacy. Through asceticism as a process of purification, humans are more accessible to the influence of higher forces and thus approach closer to God and live in union with Him (mysticism).[82]

According to Irinej, Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the ascetic experience of the Fathers, commanded to us by God-Man Christ Himself (cf. Mt 16:24), lies in the very nature of the Christian philosophy of life and means a radical change of relationship with the world and with oneself, and a change of the way of life.[83] Asceticism has been refined in the Eastern monastic tradition into a highly sophisticated science of the soul and is most tangibly experienced by Christians in the form of fasting discipline. Moreover, asceticism offers practical actions such as reducing our consumption (*enkrateia*) or self-control to live a simple life. Asceticism teaches humans to "walk lightly on the earth" and distinguish wants from needs, providing an antidote to a "consumerist" approach to the world.[84] Concretely, the Russian Orthodox Church calls people to cultivate moderation and restraint in the necessities of life, responsibility for their actions, avoiding excesses, including wasteful use of food, respect for the needs of others, and understanding the importance of spiritual values for a person.[85] However, asceticism in Eastern Christianity is not only a mere lifestyle; rather it is a process

[82] Cf. Luke Dysinger, "The Ascetic Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology,* edited by Edward Howells and Mark A. McIntosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 164-85; Constantinos Athanasopoulos ed., *Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism: Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work)* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).

[83] Patriarch Irenej of the Serbian Orthodox Church, "Statement," in *The Orthodox Church addresses the climate crisis*, edited by Theodota Nantsou and Nikolaos Asproulis, 19.

[84] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[85] Holy Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, *Statement on the Environment,* 3-4.

of purification, struggling against temptation, and growing in virtues. It is not a personal matter but a matter of cosmic significance. Such an ascetic struggle restores the human capacity to be the priest of nature and interpreter of the cosmos.[86]

Humans purify themselves from passions, disordered appetites, and sinful desires in ascetic practices. Then they can apprehend God's meaning in creatures, God's intention in the world, and all its parts. Besides, humans can see the world in interrelation and interaction among themselves and read into it the meaning, dignity, and vocation of human life.[87] Moreover, asceticism liberates humans from the slavery of consumerism of modern society, which is the root reason for abusing natural resources. With obedience, discipline, and self-denial, humans discover their true freedom. Thus, asceticism does not end up as a way of dealing with the environmental crisis as a superficial reason. Asceticism, first and foremost, is the entrance of spiritual growth and aids in our spiritual life.[88]

Therefore, Eastern Christianity sees the environmental crisis concerning the crisis of value and faith that the solution she offers is rooted in the fundamental cause rather than technological fixes based on the same consumption-oriented values and methods of the industrial economy. Patriarch Bartholomew insists that no real protection of the environment can be based on the same utilitarian logic that has led to its destruction.[89] Archbishop Seraphim of Zimbabwe, Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, said, "To restore the planet, we need a spiritual worldview which cultivates frugality and simplicity, humility and respect.[90] Thus, asceticism integrates ecological concerns with spiritual life because they come from the same source. [91] At the same time, in ascetic practices, humans see the natural world and its systems not just

[86] Louth, "The Cosmic Vision of Saint Maximus the Confessor," 190.

[87] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

[88] Elizabeth Theokritoff wrote in detail about "the Ascetic Tradition and the use of the world" in her book *Living in God's Creation,* 93-116.

[89] Chryssavgis, *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer*, 144

[90] Seraphim of Zimbabwe, said on 18, 2014, quoted from the Film "The Face of God: Orthodox Statement on Global Climate Change," assessed August 3, 2022, https://faceofgodfilm.com/orthodox-statements-on-global-climate-change/

[91] Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Green Patriarch, Green Patristics."

as something we take care of but as something we listen to and meditate on because it speaks to us of God, who cares for all His creatures. So, in Eastern Christian Tradition, asceticism is a path "through the creation to the Creator."[92]

## 4. Conclusion

According to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the ecological crisis and COVID-19 pandemic are interrelated and raise ultimate questions about human life that challenge churches to respond with faith and science. He called for collaboration among the leaders in the scientific and academic world and political domains because creation care is a "common task that we must face together."[93] Before, in 2017, in a joint message, Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew called for a sincere and enduring solution based on concerted and collective, shared and accountable, priority to solidarity and service.[94] At the same time, they expressed their conviction about the importance of prayer because, without prayer, "we labor in vain if the Lord is not by our side." So prayer should be at the center of our reflection and celebration so that we may "change the way we perceive the world to change the way we relate to the world."[95]

In Eastern Christian spirituality, conversion or changing the way we perceive (*metanoia*) is crucial as the first step to entering spiritual

[92] Kallistos Ware, "Through Creation to Creator," in *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration,* edited by John Chrysssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz, 86-105.

[93] Patriarch Bartholomew said on October 28, 2021, at the University of Notre Dame, where he received an honorary doctorate, cf. Barbara Fraser, "Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew says young people can save democracy and our planet," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 30, 2021, assessed July 14, 2022, https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/eastern-orthodox-patriarch-bartholomew-says-young-people-can-save-democracy-and-our

[94] Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Joint Message of Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for the World Day of Prayer for Creation, 01.09.2017," *Vatican,* September 1, 2017, assessed July 13, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html

[95] Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Joint Message 2017*.

life. Equally, changing our view of the world, human life, and creation should be the first step also in responding to the ecological crisis. The earth is not only our common home but also the work of God's hand as the gift and Revelation of the mystery of God. Moreover, by the Incarnation of Divine Logos, the universe was sanctified and called back to union with God. After providing a new vision of the world through the lens of faith, then Eastern Christianity encourages humans to enter ascetic life as the next step to realize the act of conversion with concrete actions of purification, so that we may read exactly the divine Revelation in creation and enter an intimate relationship with God to become "partaker of divine nature" (2Pt 1:4) in the process of deification.

Metropolitan Ignatius Georgakopuolos of Demetrias is certain that what we need now is not simply a new political program or movement. Still, we need to seek the true meaning of human life in relationship with the divine purpose of the entire world.[96] As soon as we recognize the ultimate value and meaning of creation and the human role in the universe as the priest of creation, we may change our way of dealing with the world. Instead of destroying and abusing, we should know how to nurture and embrace all creation that was entrusted to us, and bring them into cosmic liturgy with Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all creation (cf. Cl 1:15). So that, in the end, all things in heaven and on earth will be restored in Christ (cf. Ep 1:10) and with the Holy Spirit to be in the perfect union with Trinity God, as its divine design, in eternity.

[96] Ignatius Georgakopuolos, "Climate Change and our Theological and Pastoral Responsibility Today," 45.

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*ESSAY*

# Ecological Disaster and the Role of the Church in Indonesia

*Batara Sihombing*[1] *and Desri Maria Sumbayak*[2]

**Abstract**

*The contemporary ecological crisis characterized by global warming and climate change is a betrayal of the good earth that God created. Human activities stemming from greed for material wealth serves as the underlying cause for the problems being faced today. This essay presents the overview of the environmental problems and ways in which this problem can be addressed by religious communities. In particular, this essay presents the ecological initiatives by the Indonesian Christian Church (Huria Kristen Indonesia – HKI). These initiatives can be categorized as two types: (1) promoting an environmental mindset among the people, and (2) promoting environmental protection and climate justice through interreligious dialogue and collaborative actions. This essay also affirms that these efforts can take place even during difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.*

**Keywords**: *Global warming, climate justice, greediness, environmental issues, ecological projects*

## 1. Introduction

Climate change is a global present-day disaster that all countries in the world must work together in their respective contexts to resolve. Without

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cooperation, the world will be worse off due to increasing global warming that causes climate change. Therefore, the Indonesian Christian Church (*Huria Kristen Indonesia* – HKI) is taking part in keeping the earth running well because God created it very well. This essay will discuss the issue of global warming and plastic pollution, greediness in the form of idolatry that leads to environmental destruction. It will also discuss the ecological projects which HKI Church is undertaking to help bring climate justice to the world.

## 2. Global Warming and Plastic Pollution

The Scripture declares that the earth's ecosystem and the creatures that God created were very good: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (NRSV; Gen 1:31-2:1). The earth initially had a balanced, comfortable, harmonious, and healthy condition suitable for occupation by human beings and other creatures. The creator, a loving God, did not create a hot, dangerous, polluted, and vicious place for God's creation. God gave the mandate to human beings to work and maintain the earth with its ideal ecosystem: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). Thus, human beings were not given the freedom to be lazy and passive figures on this earth, and indeed not to be the planet's destroyer.[3] In other words, the role of human beings are never oriented to environmental destruction; rather, they are called to maintain the goodness of this earth's ecosystem. While Christian teachings say that the fall of human beings into sin (Gen 3) has led to destructive human behavior, the act of redemption of Jesus, the Son of God (Jn 3:16), has fostered reconciliation between God and human beings as well as the reconciliation between humans and creation. In this regard, in the face of climate change due to global warming, it is the task of the believers to work towards climate justice in order to restore God's creation to its initial state of well being and flourishing.

Climate change can take place either by natural processes or through human activities.[4] Natural events such as solar energy change, ocean current movement, and so on could affect the climate on earth. However, it is

[3] J.T.E. Renner, Genesis (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1984), 33-34.

[4] https://www.ippc.ch/publications and data /ar4/syr/en/mains.html

worth noting that natural phenomena cannot explain the changes taking place in the Earth's climate that have been observed over the past 25 years. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) in 2014 stated that the Earth's climate has been warmer and human activities significantly have caused global warming.[5] According to the US National Academy of Sciences, climate change, which presents great risk to human life, is real and is mostly anthropogenic.[6] The contribution of human activities to global warming can be seen in the delivery of billions of tons of carbon dioxide (CO2) and other greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere every year. As much as 97% of experts agree that climate change is not only a reality but also agree that humans are the primary cause of the crisis.[7] This crisis has presented numerous impacts to human wellbeing and environmental balance, including the following:[8]

- Hot temperatures increase the frequency, intensity, and timing of heat waves that can endanger the health of children and parents.
- Climate change also worsens water quality and increases the spread of epidemic diseases.
- Rising sea levels threaten human settlements on beaches and ecosystems.
- Changes in weather events such as long dry seasons and floods are detrimental to human property and people's lives.

Confronting the reality of the environmental crisis, there is an increasing awareness among Christians regarding their stewardship task of caring for creation as part of the overall Christian mission.[9] The mission of the Church is theocentric because the source of the mission

[5] R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer Eds. *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I,II,III to the Fifth Assessment Report on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Geneva: LWF Press), 2014.

[6] National Academy of Sciences (2010). Advancing the Science of Climate Change, Washington, DC.

[7] http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/science/overview.html

[8] Yasmine Sherif, "The Climate-education crises" *The Jakarta Post* (22 April 2021), 7.

[9] Victor Aguilan, "Mission and Climate Justice: Struggling with God's Creation" in *Mission Still Possible*? Ed. Jochen Motte and Andar Parlindungan Pasaribu (Wuppertal: UEM, 2016), 85.

is God Himself. Thus, the mission of earth care also comes from God the Creator. The mission of providence is earth-oriented because the mission of the Church is not directed to another world but to this very world, where God continues to carry out God's work, especially to maintain the earth as a suitable place for humans and other creatures to live.[10] In this regard, it is necessary to listen to the ethical statement expressed by Larry Ramussen[11] about faith that respects the earth. Faith that honors the earth is discipleship, calling, and practice. In other words, there is a shift in the subject from humans to nature comprehensively as a starting point. All species, earth, water, and air are good because they are all part of the planet whose existence is interrelated. God created the world and its contents in an awesome way. When all the elements of creation function in harmonious relation to one another, it demonstrates the goodness of God. The Christian calling is to maintain that goodness.

The Church needs to initiate programs to restore climate justice such as planting trees, recycling garbage, reducing waste pollution, and protecting the environment from deforestation and forest burning. Forests have an enormous influence on the earth's climate because they absorb carbon dioxide gas from the atmosphere helping to keep the earth surface cool. Forests also absorb sunlight to keep the earth from being warm. Concerning the greenhouse effect, forests also play a role in absorbing carbon dioxide while simultaneously releasing oxygen and water into the atmosphere. In fact, about 80 percent of carbon absorption occurs by forest vegetation. Because of the important role of forests in climate justice, they need to be carefully and responsibly maintained.[12]

In addition to concrete actions to protect the environment, the Church could speak out her prophetic voice on the earth's behalf.

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[10] Norman Habel, "Earth-Mission: The Third Mission of the Church." *Currents in Theology and* Mission 37 (2010): 114-125.

[11] Larry Ramussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

[12] Erika Pardede, "Menyikapi Pemanasan Global dan Perubahan Iklim" (Attitude Towards Global Warming and Climate Change) in *Pelayan Yang Memperlengkapi Jemaat. Buku Pengucapan Syukur 25 Tahun Pelayanan Pdt. WTP Simarmata, MA (A Servant Who Equips Church Members.A Thanksgiving Book to Commemorate 25 years the Ministry of Rev. WTP Simarmata*, MA).Eds. Nekson Simanjuntak, et.al.(Medan: PGIW Sumatera Utara, 2009), 299.

This includes supporting governmental programs to reduce the use of hazardous coolants that produce a lot of chemicals that contribute to global warming. Together with 200 other countries, the Indonesian government has supported the movement to end the use of powerful planet-warming substances in air conditioners and refrigerators. In this case, the government has set a plan to stop obtaining new production containing hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) by 2024.[13]

Another task that needs close attention is maintaining the marine ecosystem. The melting of polar ice caps and rising sea levels mean that there is a lot of coastal land entering the sea. This causes great disturbances to human settlements and livelihoods of fishermen and people who depend on the land to make a living. Another equally grave threat to the marine ecosystem is the abundance of garbage pollution,[14] especially plastic in the ocean. The plastic which is eaten by the fish not only causes sickness to the fish but also to humans who eat the fish that they catch. Indonesia is the world's second-largest producer of plastic waste after China, which gave 187.2 million tons of plastic waste according to 2015 statistics. In the era of industry 4.0, while plastic constitutes 80 percent of the waste made by humans, only 9 percent of that amount can be recycled. The Church must advocate the reduction of plastic use, such as for shopping and for buying drinking water. This practice, fortunately, has been applied at HKI Church Head Office and followed by many HKI Churches.

## 3. Greed Is Idolatry

The environmental crisis is the consequence of sinful behavior stemming from human greed to exploit nature. In the Indonesian context, this greed can be seen in the forest fires every year in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. In the Bible, gluttony is deemed as an idolatry (Col 3:5) and was expressed in the form of worshiping material objects such as statues made of wood and stone. The prophets rebuked

[13] Hans Nicholas Jong, "RI agrees to quit using hazardous coolants". *The Jakarta Post* (19 October 2016), 1.

[14] See "Our Ocean Conference 2018, Bali, 29-30 October 2018", *The Jakarta Post* (1 November 2018), 3.

the practice of idol worship, that is, worshiping inanimate objects created by human hands (Hos 10:1-8; Isa 56:6-13; Jer 10:1-10). In the New Testament, the concept of idols is shifted from worshiping concrete objects to worshiping abstract objects by submitting human lives to the pursuit of money or mammon. The Bible forbids people to serve mammon (Mt 6:24; Lk16:13), which represents all forms of worldly treasure or money. While mammon in itself is a neutral object, it can be used by Belial or Satan (2 Cor 6:15) to draw humans away from God and to cause harm to others. The problem of climate change is fundamentally related to the pursuit of money, which according to 1 Timothy 6:10, is the root of all evil. The Bible thus, calls on the faithful to avoid being corrupted and trapped in the bondage of evil by serving God alone (Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30).[15]

Greed for money can be seen in the extraordinary annual forest fires in Indonesia, especially on the island of Sumatra. The poisonous smoke from the forest fires has become a health disaster not only within the country but also in neighboring countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Because of the enormous amount of CO2 emitted from the forest fires, residents have fallen ill and children have died due to shortness of breath. The existence of these fires, in addition to bringing about enormous environmental and health tolls, has also negatively impacted the nation's image in the eyes of the international community. Unfortunately, the effort to curb the fires has failed because even when the perpetrators are caught, the cost of punishment is not severe enough to discourage them from setting the fires. It is easier for companies to give bribes to get out of the heavy legal snares. Consequently, every year there are forest fires and there are always arrests, but the problem never stops. The forest fires are intended to open oil palm plantations that suck much water and make the earth warmer. As a result of this environmentally destructive behavior, several European countries have decided to boycott Indonesian palm oil.[16]

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[15] Batara Sihombing, "A Narrative Approach to God and Mammon (Matthew 6:19-34) and its Relevance to the Churches in Indonesia". *Asia Journal of Theology* 26 (2012): 37-40.

[16] Tri Ananto Wicaksono, "Indonesia's Fight against the EU Palm Oil Ban" in *Geopolitical Monitor* (17 February 2021), https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/indonesias-fight-against-the-eu-palm-oil-ban/

## 4. HKI Church Ecology Projects

As one of the Lutheran Churches in Indonesia, the Indonesian Christian Church (*Huria Kristen Indonesia* – HKI) was the first self-reliant Church in 1927 due to equality and nationalism reasons.[17] With its head office in Pematangsiantar, the church currently has 340,000 members. The faithful come from Batak tribe background and are scattered throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The following section describes the eco-theology projects of HKI Church which is supported by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) since 2018.[18]

### Shaping the mindset on environmental issues

To get involved in environmental issues we need to bring ecological themes to the mindset of the Church members regardless of sex, age, and background. Ecological degradation is the destruction of this earth as the home of all people. Thus, to build up a healthy and clean house or planet is the task of every individual. As a result, HKI Church has carried out training initiatives on environmental themes for the youth, Sunday school teachers, women, and pastors. The goal of the training, which started in 2018, is to increase awareness among Church members, other people of faith, and the wider community about the need to treat the earth as our common home that should be managed and maintained responsibly (Gen 2:15).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted some of our programs, we still managed to carry on with some activities. In July 2019 the Church organized a three-day workshop[19] attended by 450 young people in Parapat, Simalungun District, near Lake Toba, one of Indonesia's most famous tourist destinations. The youth festival for ecological issues brought together young people from local parishes to

[17] Batara Sihombing, "Batak Churches".In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*. Ed. Daniel Patte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 103-104.

[18] Batara Sihombing, *Shaping Mindsets, Strengthening Community, "for the Sake of Ecology*." Geneva, LWI, 2022. https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/shaping-mindsets-strengthening-community-sake-ecology

[19] Pucuk Pimpinan, *Laporan Umum ke Sinode HKI ke-63 (General Report to 63th HKI Church Synod*; Pamatangsiantar: Kantor Pusat HKI, 2021), 25-26.

reflect on caring for the country's rich natural heritage. Resource persons including a health practitioner, environmental activist, and theologian explored the relationship between faith and the environment. Samosir Island, where Lake Toba is located, was also the venue of the cycling for justice campaign, in which university students ride to the island on bicycles and learn about the local culture and traditions.

The other program was a youth camp in which young people from other regions stayed with HKI congregation members in the Sigaol village, Tobasa District, in order to gain skills on being peace bearers for a just climate. A group of nearly 50 young people spent three days with their hosts who led them in Bible studies related to environmental issues, field exposure, and personal reflections. The goal was to enable the youth to critically connect ecology to politics, economy, social and cultural dimensions, to ecumenism, and religious diversity. Around 40 percent of Indonesia's city dwellers do not have access to efficient waste management services. Concerning this, on 3-5 June 2019, the HKI eco-theology program organized the youth in Pematangsiantar to clean the streets and marketplaces as a way of encouraging joint efforts to keep the city clean and healthy. If the youth have a good mindset on the environment, it would be a good capital to maintain human and environmental well being because it is the youth who have inherited this crisis from the previous generations.

Similarly, early childhood environmental education is critical in shaping the mindset about responsibility toward creation. HKI Church, therefore, works with Sunday school teachers on how to inculcate environment-loving characteristics in children from an early age. This includes identifying children's songs, which are embedded in environmental themes, and getting family members interested in ecology-sensitive activities not only at the church but also in schools and community playgrounds.

The training on ecological issues that involved all Church members (pastors, women, men, and youth) was done in Java Island and Borneo Island, outside of Sumatera Island. The ecological workshop in Borneo took place on 3-5 June 2022 and was attended by 152 participants from five different Churches and also representatives from

the local government and non-governmental organizations (NGO). The workshop equipped the participants with the topics of ecological crisis and climate change, and what the people could do to establish climate justice. This workshop served as a significant forum for the faithful to raise their environmental awareness considering Borneo is Indonesia's biggest island and is the placed with many palm oil plantations and coal mines. During the three-day workshop, it was decided that the participants and other believers should start initiating a green and healthy environment by using their own budget without depending on the donor's support. The participants also decided that the green environment could be begun within the Church altar by putting fresh flowers on the altar every Sunday. The ecological workshop in Java was conducted in Jakarta on 1-2 June 2022 and attended by 145 participants from HKI Church as well as other churches. The participants received presentations on various ecological themes and how people living in a crowded city like Jakarta could participate in promoting climate justice and in reducing the usage of plastic in daily life.

### Promoting interfaith dialog on climate justice

One of the significant initiatives by HKI Church ecology projects is an interfaith dialogue initiative on climate justice.[20] For example, on 13 December 2019, the Church held an interfaith dialog program attended by 120 people in Medan city. Religious leaders representing the Batak traditional beliefs, Buddhism, Hinduism, Ahmadiyah and Moslem, joined Catholic, Lutheran, and other Christian leaders to share their understanding of ecology from their respective spiritual and sacred scriptural perspectives. In the course of this dialogue, the participants agreed that our religions and beliefs shared a common understanding of caring for the Earth and creation. Each religious representative was given an equal chance to address the issue of ecology from his/her own spiritual and textual beliefs. The religious participants shared their common concerns instead of their differences on ecological issues. It was an opportunity for people of different traditions to lend a prophetic voice reminding us that our ways of living disrupted the rest of the earth. We must act together for the sake of our shared environment. In

[20] Pucuk Pimpinan, *Laporan Umum Sinode HKI ke-63 (General Report to 63th HKI Church Synod)*, 24-26.

the jubilee for the earth (2020) God the Creator reminds God's creatures that we should love the earth as well as all of creation. The second interreligious workshop on climate justice action held in Medan on 19 January 2021 was attended by 51 participants from different religions (Christian, Moslem, Buddhism, Hinduism, and traditional belief).

The first implementation program of the interfaith dialogue was a safari on eco-theology done in the predominantly Moslem Langkat District in North Sumatera on 15 December 2020.[21] The safari on eco-theology involved interfaith groups initiating campaigns for the environment by planting trees at the UNESCO's Leuser conservation site. The participants comprised around 125 people from Church members and followers of other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. In addition, there was also participation from Healthy Planet Indonesia Foundation (HEPI), an NGO dealing with the environment. Besides the involvement of interfaith communities, there were about 47 participants representing local governments and schools. Apart from planting trees together as green action, the participants were also involved in discussing environmental projects that needed to be implemented soon in our respective contexts, particularly in Sumatera Island. Through this collaborative effort to promote environmental sustainability, it can be observed that religions served as a source of peace instead of conflict. In addition, students who participated also realized that various endangered animal species in Sumatera such as the orangutan, elephant, tiger, and rhino needed serious protection.

The second implementation program was an interfaith camp organized on 4-5 December 2021. This activity which took place in the middle of the forest in Besitang, Langkat District was attended by 56 participants. Various faith communities were invited including Buddhist, Ahmadiyah, Moslem, Catholic, Lutheran, Pentecostal, and Methodist. The groups addressed the interfaith collaboration needed to protect the forest and advocate for the rehabilitation of 100 hectares of lands formerly cultivated for palm oil. The participants shared their views of how their interfaith mindset was molded by the event and the sharing of love despite the religious differences each of the participants held.

[21] Pimpinan, *Laporan*, 24-25.

In connecting the ecological projects to interfaith programs, HKI Church visited the Moslem *Pesantren* Al-Huda in Deli Serdang District in North Sumatera. This *Pesantren* or boarding school, which is run by an ex-terrorist who has reformed himself, educates the children of the terrorists. The parents of the students have either died from their suicidal actions or serving their time in prison for their terrorist activities. According to the chaplain of the Al-Huda School, 47 children are being educated to help them not resorting to revenge for their parents' punishment or following the parents' path as terrorists. The HKI Church ecological team was kindly welcomed in the school on 19 October 2019. As a symbol of hope, we planted trees together in the area of the school. As the trees grow providing the surrounding with shade, they symbolize the hope that the children's lives in the future will be characterized by peace instead of violence. In addition, we also donated other materials such as masks, books, rice, and other supplies to help the school face the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5. Conclusion

Global warming has given rise to the phenomenon of climate change with its multiple negative impacts on the good earth that God has created for humans to inhabit. Unfortunately, human irresponsibility has caused all of God's creatures to suffer. Environmental awareness entails the notion that earth as a common home must be maintained together by humans regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, and background. In the context of Indonesia, the Church must also take on a role by inviting its members to work for climate justice and reduce the use of plastic and other harmful actions detrimental to the environment. These ecological issues need to be addressed by children, young people, and adults, as carried out by HKI Church Ecology projects. The notion of earth as a common home also entails that interreligious cooperation and collaboration is an imperative. Only through an interreligious and dialogical approach can environmental wellbeing be accomplished. In this essay, we have demonstrated how the HKI Church has promoted environmental awareness and actions among our members as well as with adherents of other religious traditions in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental entities.

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**Photos**:


HKI Church ecological team organizes an interfaith workshop on environmental issues for the youth in Medan.


HKI Church ecological team and the teachers of Al-Huda boarding school plant trees as a symbol of hope for a green environment. This school in Deli Serdang aims to educate the terrorists' children to love the truth and other creatures.

The workshop and the action of planting trees for the sake of climate justice were done by various interfaith followers, government and NGO apparatus at the Leuser conservation site in Langkat District.

*ESSAY*

# Environmentalism for the Post-Pandemic World: Lessons from Jainism and Jain Monks

*Bhumi Shah*[1]

**Abstract**

*Jainism, which originated in India, is one of the oldest living ancient religions of the world. Jainism teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to conduct lives of harmlessness and renunciation. The essence of Jainism is concern for the welfare of every being in the universe and for the health of the universe itself. Jains believe that animals, plants as well as human beings contain living souls. Each of these souls is considered of equal value and should be treated with respect and compassion. Jain monks, who are strict vegetarians, and Jain followers are protectors of the environment in the true sense as their way of living minimizes harm done to the environment. This essay discusses how some fundamental Jain teachings are conducive to promoting environmental wellbeing and flourishing. It also examines how the lives of Jain monks per personal interviews demonstrate a way of life that is in harmony with nature and can inspire others to live their own lives in such a way that would cause less unnecessary harm to others, even the smallest creatures.*

**Keywords:** *Jainism, environmental protection, non-violence, ecological crisis*

## 1. Introduction

Jainism, which began somewhere near sixth century BCE in India, is one of the oldest living ancient religions of the world. The term Jain means the devotee of Jinas (Spiritual Victors), individuals

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who have won victory over passions of attachment and aversion that defile the soul, and therefore, attains omniscience and supreme bliss. Jinas, as enlightened human teachers, are also called *Thirthankaras* (Ford-makers) whose words and teachings help living beings to cross the ocean of misery or transmigratory existence (Shah 2015). Jains believe in reincarnation and seek to attain ultimate liberation, which means escaping the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth so that the immortal soul lives forever in a state of bliss. Liberation is achieved by eliminating all karma from the soul. As a religion that emphasizes self-help, Jains do not believe in gods or spiritual beings that will help human beings. They live in accordance with the three guiding principles known as the 'three jewels,' consisting of right belief, right knowledge, and right conduct. The supreme principle of Jain living is non-violence (*ahimsa*), which constitutes one of the five *mahavratas* (the five great vows). The other *mahavratas* are non-attachment to possessions, not lying, not stealing, and sexual restraint (with celibacy as the ideal). Mahavira is regarded as the man who gave Jainism its present-day form.

As Jainism teaches that the way to liberation and bliss is to conduct lives of harmlessness and renunciation, the essence of Jainism is concern for the welfare of every being in the universe and for the health of the universe itself. Jains believe that all beings – humans, animals as well as plants – contain living souls that possess equal value and should be treated with respect and compassion. Jains are strict vegetarians and live in a way that minimises their use of the world's resources. Thus, Jainism is fundamentally a religion of the ecology and has turned the ecology into a religion. This outlook has enabled Jains to create an environmentally friendly value system and code of conduct. Because of the insistence on rationality in the Jain tradition, Jains are always ready and willing to look positively and with enthusiasm upon environmental causes. In India and abroad, they are in the forefront of bringing greater awareness and putting into practice their cardinal principles on ecology. Their programs have been modest and mostly self-funded through volunteers (Finlay 2003).

This essay presents the Jain outlook on the ecology and how Jain teachings could greatly contribute to the effort to promote ecological wellbeing in the post-pandemic world. This essay approaches the

topic by examining the environmentally relevant teachings as well as the examples modelled by Jain monks (both male and female) in the Svetambara School, one of the two main schools of Jainism.

## 2. Jain Environmental Outlook

According to the *Tattvartha Sutra* there are 8,400,000 species of living things – each of which is part of the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, and is therefore precious. This central teaching of Jainism was made famous in recent times by Mahatma Gandhi who was greatly influenced by Jain ideas and who made *ahimsa* the guiding principle of his struggle for social freedom and equality in India. The notion of *ahimsa* not only refers to the act of not hurting others but also the intention to not cause physical, mental or spiritual harm to any part of nature. According to Mahavira, "You are that which you wish to harm." This represents the positive aspect of non-violence – to demonstrate an attitude of compassion towards all life. Jains pray that forgiveness and friendliness may reign throughout the world and that all living beings may cherish each other. This ancient Jain principle teaches that all of nature is bound together, and says that if one does not care for nature, one does not care for oneself. Another important Jain principle is not to waste the gifts of nature, and even to reduce one's needs as far as possible. As Gandhi said, "There is enough in this world for human needs, but not for human wants" (Jain Ecology 2022). Chandaria (2008) writes:

> Lord Mahavira preached about the environment in the first book of 'Acharanga Sutra', which is accepted, as His direct words. The elements of nature were described as living beings and under the fundamental principle of AHIMSA these were to be protected in all ways – no waste, no overuse, no abuse, no polluting. If we follow these principles, then we would stop destroying our environment as well as preserve the resources that are available for all to share. If there are more resources available for all, then the poor will also get a fair share thereof.

Therefore, Jainism aims for the welfare of all living beings and not of humans alone. Jainism maintains that living beings are infinite

and are present everywhere, even in empty space. The Jain dictum *parasparopagraho jivanam* (living beings render service to one another) offers an endearing alternative to the Darwin theory of 'survival of the fittest.' Instead of engaging in unceasing competition, the life of a living being is ideally a life of mutual cooperation and assistance. "All humanity is one," is one of the fundamental teachings that Jainism offers (Desai 2008).

Because of this Jain outlook on life, social service constitutes a prominent aspect of Jain ethics. It prescribes six daily duties for every lay person or householder, viz. Jina (deity) adoration, Sadhu (mendicant) veneration, study of Jain literature and scriptures, practice of self-discipline, observance of fasts and the curbing of appetites, and giving of charity. Jain ethics, which ultimately are directed towards the liberation of individual human beings, is a blend of *Achar* (conduct) and *Vichar* (reflection) (Ibid.). A Jain Sadhu (mendicant), in order to acquire the rightful status, has to study Jain scriptures and scriptures of other religions also. By and large, Jainism is considered a progressive religion with adherents spread across the globe.

It can be asserted that environmental protection is intrinsic to Jainism because concern for environmental wellbeing is in-built and integrated into every principle, tenet and fundamental doctrine of Jainism, as well as in its epistemology, ontology, and metaphysical concepts. Enlightened Jain icons, Arhats, Tirthankaras, learned saints, and Acharyas pondered over and considered every aspect of the environment including causes of its degradation, necessary preventative measures, as well as remedial actions to address and rectify environmental harm. These religious figures developed and prescribed principles and codes of conduct to ensure a sustained, healthy, and symbiotically harmonious environment. The Jain notion about the environment is much wider than generally understood. The environment in the Jain worldview implies not only the physical environment consisting of air, water, soil, and animals, etc. but also the social environment of multitudinous relationships between individual human beings, families, groups, societies, and nations. Moreover, the environment includes interdependent interactions between all life forms that also interact with physical constituents. Both the physical environment and the social

environment are interactive, mutually reinforcing and influencing to mould and condition each other (S.M. Jain 2012).

## 3. Jain Principle of Non-Violence for Environmental Protection

Since the last two hundred years, intense industrialization and human population growth have resulted in an ecological imbalance. This, in turn, affects the wellbeing and flourishing of human beings and other living beings as seen in the continual extinction of animal and plants species each day. Jainism has been described as ecological religion or religious ecology. The three principles of Jainism that support this assertion include *ahimsa* (non-violence)*, aparigraha* (non-attachment), and *anekantvada* (non-absolutism). Among these three, there is no exaggeration to say that the Jain ecological philosophy is virtually synonymous with the principle of non-violence which runs through the Jain tradition like a golden thread. It is a concept which is at once ancient and refreshingly modern. Along with these other two principles, non-violence helps Jainism to be able to offer a sound environmental ethic which can ensure sustainability. This ethics is integrally connected with an enlightened spirituality about the nature of the world and the human relationship with other entities in the universe. Jain spirituality is one that does not "permit us to exploit nature for our self-chosen purposes" (Aparigraha 1998).

The Jain worldview has implications for the emergence of a non-violent culture necessary for environmental preservation. Non-violence or 'harmlessness,' though not unique to Jainism, is the first and foremost tenet of this tradition. It is also an essential precondition for environmental protection. Jainism is perhaps the only religion to allow this tenet to permeate every aspect of its teachings and practices, turning violence into a moral duty to prevent causing harm to beings that are already suffering. 2,500 years ago, Lord Mahavira affirmed, "There is nothing in this world higher than Mount Meru or anything more expansive than the sky. Likewise know that no religion is greater than non-violence" (Bhavpahud 91).

Recently, I carried out a series of interviews with Jain monks in the city of Ahmedabad in order to gauge their ideas on environmental

protection. Ahmedabad is one of the largest business centres of India and has a sizable presence of Jains within the religiously diverse city. The main objective of the interview was to: (1) Understand changes adapted by Jain monks in their day-to-day lives during pandemic times; and (2) Understand the beliefs of Jain monks about environmental protection and how they view the pandemic from an ecological perspective. My interviews were conducted with a total of 10 ascetics (6 males and 4 females) in two separate sub-sects of the Svetambara School. As we know, there are different schools, sects, and sub-sects within the Jain tradition. However, the scope of this essay does not allow for detailed descriptions of these various groups.

From my interview with the ten male and female monks, I was able to draw some salient points that pertain to the contemporary ecological crisis. The sentiments expressed by the Jain monks also convincingly demonstrate how their way of life are truly conducive to promoting environmental wellbeing and balance. Following are some important points:

- *The monks organize their lives in a way that is in touch with nature.* They build their daily activities in accordance with the natural cycle. Therefore, they always wake up before sunrise in order to perform meditation to prepare themselves for the day. The Jain monks also schedule their dinner time for after sunset. While monks do travel about, they do not travel during the monsoon season when many living creatures surface to the ground due to the rain. Thus, the lives of the Jain monks are closely tuned to the processes in nature. Many environmentalists have pointed out that humanity's estrangement from nature has been a significant contributing factor in causing the ecological crisis. The monks' lives which are greatly in harmony with nature has the opposite effect.

- *The lives of the monks are characterized by environmentally friendly virtues such as moderation, detachment, and responsibility.* The monks interviewed said that they never use electricity or technological gadgets such as a mobile phone, and use minimal water for bathing and washing clothes, which are all white. While

the monks in the Svetambara School, unlike their counterpart in the Digambara School, are allowed to wear clothes, each monk is only allotted five sets of clothes that can only be replaced when the old ones are torn. As vehicles are never used, Jain monks walk when traveling about for their activities, such as entering houses of adherents asking for food, and even when traveling from city to city. By not using modern transportation, they reduce greatly the amount of resources that they consume and the ecological footprint that they produce. Jain monks eat whatever is given them and do not let the food go to waste. Even the small amount of water that the monks use to clean their eating utensils are consumed afterward. When facing illness, the monks resort to Ayurvedic medicine instead of allopathy medicine because they feel that the latter method of making medicine is not environmentally friendly as animals are involved in experimentation before being used by humans. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the monks became infected with the virus, they also only made use of the natural medicine.

- *Jain monks demonstrate a great amount of respect for natural entities.* As part of their daily routines, the monks perform the *pratikaman* meditation, in which they seek forgiveness for the bad actions in their daily activities, especially those that bring harm to others, even the smallest living creature, through their words, thoughts, or actions. This practice is consistent with the Jain doctrine of non-violence or harmlessness, which demonstrates the utmost respect for life. While it is true that it is impossible to eliminate all violence from one's life because even the act of breathing or drinking water can cause harm to various bacteria in the air or in the water, the essential thing is the effort to avoid all unnecessary violence. The Jain monks exemplify a way of life that avoids unnecessary harm to others, a complete opposite from the consumerist mentality of contemporary society which has caused the ecological imbalance and degradation being witnessed today.

- *Jain monks in my interview believed that the COVID-19 pandemic is evidence of the negative karma created by human's destructive acts towards nature.* The balance of nature is disturbed due to the

enormous amount of pollution, excessive use of chemicals, over-extraction of natural resources, and wasteful use of water and other resources. The development of science, instead of helping human beings to live more harmoniously with nature, in reality, has caused disturbance to ecological systems. While many believe that science has made people's lives easier, the fact is science has weakened the human power and deprived today's generation of peace of mind. The pandemic warns humanity of the errors of their ways and the need to protect the environment in order to avoid natural disasters and future pandemics. These phenomena serve to remind humanity of the enormous toll towards themselves and others that can take place when they are not responsible in their actions.

## 4. Conclusion

Jainism advocates the values of non-violence as a life-style discipline, which is also the core of any environmental ethic. Non-violence is not a ritual or an abstract concept in Jainism but a way of life to be lived out all the time. The COVID-19 pandemic that has been wreaking havoc globally since late 2019 should not be blamed on the coronavirus but should be considered as a symptom of human failings that allow for the virus to appear. From the Jain perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic could be an opportunity for humanity to pause to examine its actions that cause harm to themselves and others. In this essay, I have showed how the Jain notion of non-violence as exemplified by the lives of the monks interviewed can inspire the world to re-evaluate its own outlook and habits that are impacting the environment. While it is not possible for everyone to live as the Jain monks do, what can be taken from the Jain teaching and the lives of the monks is the desire to not cause harm and the effort to minimize violence the best way possible. Indeed, if individuals and communities make this effort, the ecological crisis today can be significantly rectified.

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***ESSAY***

# Blessed be the Vulnerable: An Environmental Spirituality Arising out of the Pandemic

*John Patrick Murray, OSA*[1]

**Abstract**

*A pandemic, named COVID-19, took an unprepared world by surprise. In response. we went into lockdown. Were we going into a quiet space or a confined space? Even to a world that knows chaos so well, this was something new. The God of surprises was surely showing humanity who was in charge. This time of pandemic was giving the world a rare opportunity to slow down and take stock. What were we being taught? Here humanity could glimpse that spirituality matters. Spirituality tells us that we are so much more than what we may realize. Spirituality tells us we are called to look after each other on the planet, without distinction or discrimination, to look after our planet as we look after each other. This is our common home, graciously gifted to us by a loving God. We need each other. Did we learn from this experience? Life is a journey, a process. It is cyclical, rather than linear, not running according to well thought out plans, offered by humanity. The bottom line is that spirituality matters.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, environmental spirituality, Laudato Si, Asian environmental response*

## 1. Chaos Leads to Change

At the end of January this year, I came down with COVID-19. My experience proved to me that this is much more than a health crisis, for this pandemic has raised questions around what it means to be a

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person and to be a person in relationship with family, friends, and our world community. This time has served to highlight where our world is failing or lacking. As I look around my sphere of influence in Bangkok, I note a trend among businesses and individuals; namely, those who were on the edge before the pandemic have tended to be more likely to fail, while the stronger standing businesses and individuals have endured. It seems that the latter have a reserve lacked by the former. As one motto of the pandemic says – 'It will impact more adversely the vulnerable'. I have experienced a pandemic as showing up what is wrong in our world or as exacerbating the world's woes, thus laying bare so much that is not working. We can easily choose to tolerate or ignore the wrongs of our world for the sake of ease or of making life more comfortable. This approach is a short-term way of coping, resolving nothing. Ultimately, what is wrong will remain so, never being faced for the sake of furthering the greater good. Worse still, it may eventually cause utter chaos, when the wrong then has to be righted in some way, like it or not. Depending on the nature of the issue at hand, the fault will have its impact upon the individual, the local community, and the global community.

The other side is that a pandemic serves as a possible catalyst for dealing with harsh realities, for producing good change. This falls in line with a popularly known interpretation of the Chinese word for 'crisis.' In Chinese, two characters make up the word 'crisis,' one means danger, the other opportunity. For better or worse, the pandemic has taken its toll on our world, with its adverse impacts upon health, livelihoods, trade, income levels, and social inequality. In responding to social ills and issues arising during the pandemic, another motto arose – '*Leave no one behind.'* This shared a powerful message, highlighting human solidarity is a key to our moving forward out of our mess towards a better world. The pandemic poignantly has highlighted another essential component to human solidarity, namely, our solidarity with our environment. Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si* (2015), providentially served as a forerunner for helping deal with the issues of, as well as responding to, a future pandemic. *Laudato Si* teaches us that the environment and the human family stand together (LS, no. 141). Everything is interconnected. We all stand together in the pandemic – humanity and creation. Leave no one behind, neither humanity nor creation. In addressing the needs and ills of one, the needs and ills of the

other are being addressed simultaneously. A motto may be – *A healthy planet and a healthy humanity go together.*

An example may be the public health strategy for a pandemic of social distancing, which has been upheld universally. This one strategy can be applied to looking after the social good of both our world and each other. Enforced lockdowns served to give the planet a needed breathing space for inducing a healthier environment. Social distancing between people aimed to reduce infection levels. It has thus been seen to have a double impact on both humanity and creation. It has allowed humanity an opportunity to stand back, take a good look at life and the environment, and then act to make it better. Social distancing applied at the communal level granted an opportune social space for communities to look anew at life, with the hope of honestly facing social realities that are pulling us down. A pandemic shows change can occur, not just that it needs to occur. This reflects Pope Francis' constant and continually voiced challenge to the Church that we are in a seminal period of history. He clearly names this as: "*We are not living an era of change but a change of era"* (Florence 2015). One may apply this critical reflection beyond the Church to the world, a world that is tiring and sickly, and presently experiencing so much chaos. This lends weight to the theory that chaos leads to change.

## 2. 'Circuit Breaker'

In the pursuit of deeper reflection, I share two entries from my blog.[2] I wrote these during my COVID-19 experience. My first sharing describes how I experienced time in self-isolation as a 'circuit breaker':

> *During a pandemic, everywhere goes into lockdown, except Singapore which uses an unusual sounding term to my ear – 'circuit breaker.' Well, here I am now in my room isolating due to catching the virus and so I learn the wisdom of Singapore, for this time alone is truly a circuit breaker in life.*
>
> *On first learning of the possibility of my contracting the virus, I*

[2] Sanctasophiafan.blogspot.com

*went into shock and then denial, followed closely by forcefully diving into acceptance and doing something about it. What caused my forceful, personal response, acting not to be driven by denial? I hold it is my key sense of responsibility and my commitment to human solidarity and respect. Not by accident, these remain with me as the three keywords I have learnt from the experience of this pandemic. I could do no other.*

*What have I found as I spend time alone? Life is truly fragile. One's tenure over life is fleeting. So much that may seem important simply goes to one side. The busyness about time consuming, essential matters and tasks just subsides. The importance that one places on so many daily relationships is placed within perspective. While they add to the colour of life, they come and go. Key to sustaining a life that makes meaning is the invested, purposeful engagement we have with primary others in our sphere of influence. That takes a lot of work. We invest too little in such essential engagement and too much in what is easy and fanciful. Still, no matter what, life goes on. It is true that no one is indispensable, not even me.*

*Circuit breaker is a good term to name this experience of human lockdown, shared or individual. For better or worse, it makes you stand back and look at life, reflect on what really matters and hopefully appreciate with renewed vigor what are the true treasures of a worthwhile life. Perspective is the gift it offers.*

For me, a key learning of the pandemic has been to reinforce forcefully that spirituality matters in life. It is a response humanity yearns for amid the human struggle, especially during the extraordinary times of a pandemic. So arose from my experience of this pandemic three key themes for shaping a good life shared by all – *respect, responsibility,* and *solidarity*. Amazingly, these three words came naturally to me and came together as a 'learning package.' They have stayed with me, giving me clear directions for our proceeding together in life. They teach us about much more than just getting out of a pandemic, remaining as intrinsic ingredients used in caring for our brother, our sister, our world.

## 3. Respect, Responsibility, Solidarity

The human family has been caught in a multi-faceted crisis, not just a health crisis. The many faces of this crisis include the individual, social, political, economic, environmental, and spiritual components of life. All are interconnected and a response to one helps a response to all. Helping humanity is helping our environment, and vice-versa. Building up humanity is building up *'our common home,'* and vice versa. This description of our planet as 'our common home' is one constantly used in *Laudato Si.* The pandemic raises questions concerning how we live together and how we treat each other and creation. As Francis so creatively and passionately expresses it – "Hear both the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth" (LS, no. 49). Respect, responsibility, solidarity are benchmarks for our measuring how well we hear those cries and, in response, treat our brother and sister, and treat creation accordingly.

Yes, creation is very much our neighbor as are all our brothers and sisters, who may be sitting beside us at church or in the workplace. This is a powerful insight offered by the Christian tradition, based on the theological insight of naming our world as a sacrament, which Pope Francis reassert in *Laudato Si* (no. 9). As sacrament, our world brings us into communion with God and neighbor, and so Francis creatively claims creation as our neighbor: "Human life is clearly grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself" (LS, no. 66). He talks of how the environment is part of society, of how we are in relationship with creation. Just as we relate with our neighbor as our brother and sister, so it is with creation. Francis assumes the language of St Francis of Assisi, referring to the earth as our sister (LS, no. 2).

In describing our relationship with creation, the pope writes, "Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth" (LS, no. 92). This philosophy is revolutionary in a world dominated by the ideology of conquering and using the planet for profit and development. Our planet is better recognized as our brother, our sister, and being respected

as such. As we approach our neighbor with respect, responsibility and solidarity, so we approach our planet. This is reflected in the theme for the Church's Season of Creation 2022, "Listen to the voice of creation." Just as the church is called to listen to the voice of the poor, the marginalized, the vulnerable, so it is called to listen to the voice of a suffering planet. This is treating the planet as an equal partner in dialogue. This is pointing to a truly creative innovation for mission.

## 4. An Asian Church Response

Like our neighbor, our planet is suffering in our fractious world. It needs our care. Climate change is destroying it. Like every other issue or challenge in our life and world, if we are to face climate change, we need a circuit breaker of great force. As one who lives in Bangkok, I see a city suffering under the pressures of ruthless development. The once beautiful canals are now filthy, unsafe water channels full of waste. High-rise office buildings and condominiums crop up everywhere. This is all happening in a city threatened with rising water levels predicted to make their impact felt by 2050. Yet, what do we see in response? Development is more of the ruthless same, continuing the race to build more and build bigger. Where is the vision? Where is the concern for the environment? A circuit breaker is truly needed. It is time to stand back and look at one's reality with a new perspective. Does not a pandemic allow the opportunity to take on a new and healthier perspective? After all, a pandemic is not just a time to stand still, or as a friend says – "a pandemic is not time to pause but to reset."

Taking up the challenge to plan, restart and renew our shared life on this planet is witnessed by the Catholic Church in Asia in mission, with its purposefully choosing to establish the *Laudato Si* Action Platform – Asia (LSAP – Asia). This is the local Church's response to the universal Church's call to actualize *Laudato Si* in our world, by inviting people to join and form a global platform for action leading to real change. LSAP-Asia states its vision as seeking "a resilient and just Asia built on a strong ecological spirituality that inspires oneness between God, people and all creation" (Vision Statement of LSAP-Asia). As shared in an introductory workshop (29-12-21), this vision is for an Asia that

is hurting and vulnerable. Fact is Asia does not stand alone, standing in solidarity with our suffering world.

A key to a strong response to focus our perspective: As Christians, committed to the gospel, we take the gospel perspective, doing so globally and locally, as with LSAP-Asia. The gospels are transformative documents. Their power is to transform us. Another way of putting it is that the gospels 'turn everything around.' They make us look at life and the world differently, from the edge, with a new heart and new eyes. The gospel is revolutionary. It is revolutionary, for the gospel takes us beyond what we see before us to the unseen, the deeper, the essential elements of life and creation, showing us what it truly means to be human.

The revolution firstly and foremostly happens within each of us committed to the gospel. It puts us in touch with our human vulnerability for the sake of taking us beyond ourselves towards the other. The gospel is a communal document, thus sparking a universal, spiritual event that has far-reaching consequences in reality, taking us far beyond our limited boundaries. Therefore, we become much more than we ever imagined possible. It leads us to building the reign of God in this world, here and now. It empowers us to renew and recreate our world. Such a revolutionary thrust is basic if anything is ever to be done to tackle climate change, by a weak humanity out of touch with its soul, seemingly reluctant to act. A weak humanity is one not in touch with its own vulnerability and that of the earth. As one who knows what it means to be vulnerable, as one hopefully not afraid to own his vulnerability, I return to my blog, sharing what I know of myself. I stress that I am first speaking to myself, and I share in the hope that it sheds further light on the life we live together.

> *Blessed are the vulnerable, for they will receive much*
> *-a fertile time for enriching their humanity;*
> *-a new and deeper perspective on life;*
> *-the unrequited kindness, thoughts and prayers of others.*
>
> *Woe to us when hiding our vulnerability, when being held back by it.*

*It's as simple as, we are naturally frightened to be vulnerable, as we may surrender control; enter the unwanted and the unknown; lose what we value.*
*Who cares in the end?*

*The fact is the opposite happens for we appreciate*
*-more deeply who we are;*
*-what truly matters;*
*-with new eyes the basic goodness of others.*
*We see that we are limited and that is okay.*
*We see that every person / every life situation has a redeeming side.*
*It takes vulnerability to see that.*

*So we receive so, so much.*
*We know ever deeper that we are all loved by God as we are.*
*It is that simple; it is that difficult.*

With the easing of the pandemic restrictions around the world, fear and uncertainty feature as continuing themes of these extraordinary times. There are the raging wars throughout our world, one in our neighboring Myanmar and now a new one in Ukraine. Social problems are taking centre stage around the world, with an energy crisis, plus the rising cost of living, food shortages, unemployment, poverty and inequality. Innocent people more and more are dying, suffering, going hungry, becoming poorer. All this is happening beyond a pandemic. As a result, the world becomes more threatening, a place of loss and destruction. The world becomes a more unsafe place, where we are stepping deeper into the unknown. Despite all that befalls us, life continues in a 'crazy world.' Life must go on. Our planet must survive for it remains our one and only common home. There is no Plan B. We are not God. Rather we are co-creators thanks to God's graciousness towards us.

An essential response to our ever-troubled world is one based on a healthy spirituality. If not, we might end up suffering terminal depression, living a life of hopelessness, going nowhere except into a falling spin, like a plane going out of control. To live life to the full, we need to be a people of hope. Our hope must be real and based on a firm foundation. Hence, let us build upon a healthy spirituality. The

LSAP-Asia points to an ecological spirituality, calling us to be one with the gentle and creative Spirit, indwelling in all of creation, binding all creation together. This same Spirit is making God's dream for a new heaven, a new earth, a new creation alive. Here lies the basis for a living hope. In spite of all that befalls people and creation, Christian hope is real, for it is based on the love that God initiates with creation and on the faith arising within the relationship of love between creator and the created. So, the Christian motto may be expressed: 'Hope is eternal, no matter what.'

## 5. Mystery, Communion, Spirituality

Within this age of a pandemic and beyond, I am identifying triads that speak of a deeper reality. They begin with the one already named here, arising naturally from the pandemic. So, life during a pandemic and beyond may be defined by those three key themes – *respect, responsibility, solidarity*. As the time and experience of this pandemic and its impacts upon our life have progressed, a second triad came to me. It imparts a deep meaning, named as *mystery, communion, spirituality.* The veil of the pandemic revealed in natural light God as mystery. God is the sacred that is not primarily explained, but experienced. Breathe in the mystery. Sit with the mystery. Life carried on in the silent streets of lockdown where one could experience communion. One could know communion with the other, experiencing it in real and deep ways, knowing that one was not alone but truly one with others. This was all about spirituality, taking one to our deeper, human reality as ones being created by the sacred. The third triad is expressed by my three defining questions for life: *What seduces us? What nourishes us? What sustains us?*

These triads mirror the Christian faith, the Christian concept of a triune God. They came to me naturally through my experience of the pandemic. They were never forced. They are mine but are not for me alone. I share these insights as I experience them so powerfully, lighting up a deeper understanding of life and its meaning in the midst of our ongoing struggle. Over time, they stay with me, never decreasing in their impact on my approach to life. They serve to speak to my experience of

life and enrich it, as it is lived with neighbor, immersed in creation. They show me a direction in caring for both neighbor and creation. I offer them in the hope that they may have a beneficial impact upon a wider humanity, that they may help lead us to spiritual well-being and deeper insights into life and creation. As we relate with our brother, our sister, our environment, a deeper spirituality hopefully leads us to our building up the well-being of our environment, of both neighbor and creation.

The truth is that the world does not have to be as it is, for we made it thus through our choices. As Christians, we strive to live the gospel, that revolutionary document, calling us to 'ecological transformation' (LSAP-Asia's overall goal). Life truly could be different and much better for all of us. Do we really get that? Or do we still feel compelled to follow the unrighteous games of our world? Let us not be overcome by routine, conformity, or fear. Dare to be different. Dare to trod the path never taken. Face our fears and let's do it anyway. Dare to embrace the gospel.

In the light of our faith, deepened by our shared and lived experience, a challenge is before us. As Pope Francis names it in *Laudato Si*, the essential challenge facing humanity arises out of our not caring for our planet, 'our common home.' We too easily choose to abuse our planet, using it for our own short-term gain and profit – dominating it, not loving it. So we pay the price, as with suffering a pandemic. As we do not care for our planet, so we do not care for our brother and sister. Thus, once again we pay a price, as seen in terrible wars. These human-made tragedies lay a challenge before the human heart to live with love, not fear; to care for our common home and humanity with a sense of fraternity, not seeking control, not seeing the other as a threat to our power and avarice. We are called to take risks, to live in new and surprising ways, to be brother and sister to each other and to our planet. All this demands spirituality, which the Mission Statement of LSAP-Asia clearly reinforces: "The mission of LSAP-Asia is to advance ecological spirituality, resilience and creation justice across Asia."

## 6. *Imitatio Dei*

We are "created in the image and likeness of God." Being the '*imitatio Dei*,' thus God calls us to be co-creators, not to be passive

bystanders, nor warrior dominators. As co-creators with the one God, we have a grave responsibility and a humbling role in the world to look after each other and our planet. We are not about earning points for a greater destiny. Rather we are engaged together in the Divine Narrative for the good of humanity and creation. As *Laudato Si* teaches us, the two stand together in unity, everything is interconnected. We are responsible for and with each other. The Beatitudes give us a possible summary of our role and call within this narrative – love, do good, bless, and pray.

On this note, it seems appropriate to finish with my Gospel reflection that I shared at Mass at Bangkok's Assumption Cathedral, on Sunday, February 13, 2022. COVID-19 was remaining high in people's minds. In the light of the Gospel, Luke's Beatitudes (6:17, 20-26), we were being given a lesson on how to live the moral, the better life for the sake of all.

*Fear, uncertainty – themes of these extraordinary times.*
*We do our daily tasks, we meet with friends, and what happens?*
*The person next to me has Covid and I step into the unknown.*
*Another business closes; another job is lost, and what happens?*
*Real people suffer and they step into the unknown.*
*Wars are being played out, new ones threaten on the horizon, innocent people go hungry and what happens?*
*The world is a more unsafe place and we step into the unknown.*
*So the list could go on but no need to follow through until the end, as maybe we not have the time. Who needs to be depressed?*
*We get the picture.*
*Truth is that it does not have to be this way.*
*The gospel turns everything around.*
*Life could be different for all of us.*
*Do we get that?*
*Or do we still need to follow the unrighteous games of our world?*
*Don't be overcome by fear.*
*Dare to be different; dare to embrace the gospel.*
*Face our fears and let's do it anyway.*
*A challenge to the human heart is to be lived.*
*We are called to take risks, to live in new and unexpected ways.*
*This is not human! Hmmm!!!*
*Imitatio Dei. Expect nothing in return.*
*Love; do good; bless; pray.*
*It is as simple and as difficult as that.*

*ESSAY*

# Religion, Education, and Ecology in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India

*Pravat Kumar Dhal*[1]

**Abstract**

*The foundation of Indian culture, which embraces all religions, is spirituality. The basic faith of India is Sanatan, which means that is eternal cannot be destroyed. Sanatana teaches the ultimate aim of human life is self-realization through four-fold means:* Dharma *(religion),* Artha *(finance),* Kama *(worldly pleasure), and* Moksha *(liberation). In Bharat,* 'vidyalaya*' was begun at religious foundation with enriched natural environment. This essay explores the relationship among religion, education, and environmental wellbeing from the perspective of the Hindu tradition. The author believes that the teachings found in the ancient scriptures of this tradition can greatly help to address the modern-day ecological crisis. However, to do so, religious education must lead to development of spirituality for human transformation. It is through spirituality that not only the problems of the environment, but other social problems can be adequately addressed.*

**Keywords:** *religion, education, ecology, COVID-19 pandemic*

## 1. Introduction

"ॐ पूर्णमदःपूर्णमदिं पूर्णात्पूर्णमुदच्यते ।
पूर्णस्य पूर्णमादाय पूर्णमेवावशिष्यते ॥
ॐ शान्तःशान्तः॥"

*Om, the world is full of Divine Consciousness. The world is manifested from the fullness of Divine Consciousness. Taking*

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*whole from Whole, the whole remains, because Divine Consciousness is infinite. Om, Peace, Peace, Peace!*
- Ishopanishad

The original name of India is Bharatbarsha because here the year has six seasons with their various distinct characteristics. It is a young country but with old traditions and a rich culture. It is the largest democratic country in the world with multiple faiths among the population. For a long time, Mother India has embraced all religions in her lap. The foundation of Indian culture is spirituality. Religion is the gateway to delve into spirituality. The basic faith of India is '*Sanatan'* i.e., '*abinyastu binasyaatam*,' meaning that is eternal cannot be destroyed. It was firmly rooted in rich traditions, an awakened culture benefiting from the visions and wisdom of sages. At different times, invaders came to this country for commerce and became powerful rulers, exploiting the country's resources. Still, it has survived with its '*swabhava'* and '*swadharma.'* The West has developed extensively with its focus on matter, but India has developed through the spiritual route. What is needed for perfection is the blending of both matter and spirit. Now India is growing enormously as self-dependent Bharat, combating challenges with the means of its own experiences, ancient wisdom, and conscious vision. The COVID-19 pandemic affected it like a jolt, and it had to turn to its farsighted visionary ideas and spiritual consciousness to successfully combat the crisis. In this worldview, the ultimate aim of human life is self-realization through four-fold means: *Dharma* (religion), *Artha* (finance), *Kama* (worldly pleasure), and *Moksha* (liberation). Most people are idealistic in nature. They believe in '*ishavasyamidam sarvam*'[2] or '*ishvarah sarva-bhutanam,*'[3] and '*sarvam khalvidam brahma*'[4] – concepts that mean God exists everywhere: in human beings, plants, animals, in water, space, soil, and even inanimate objects.

COVID-19 was a serious pandemic which affected the whole world. Despite all the efforts to fight the coronavirus, the beautiful earth lost innumerable human beings. As it continued, the pandemic impacted

[2] Isa Upanishad, 1.
[3] Bhagavad Gita, 1.61.
[4] Chandogyopanishad, 3.14.1.

the environment and all the living beings on the earth. Moreover, the earth is trembling due to misdeeds of human beings, leading to various sufferings such as natural disasters, pandemic, pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, production of nuclear weapons, use of harmful chemicals, ecological imbalance, loss of biodiversity, harmful politics, terrorism, and war, etc. God created the beautiful world with vast nature, animals, and humans endowed with wisdom for the wellbeing of all. If people threaten God's creation, the consequence is great dissolution. Today's pandemic is human-made – may it be in ignorance or knowingly. Neither science, modern technology nor any advanced innovative thinking was able to thwart the crisis. In this circumstance, it is the right time to ponder the cause and effect of this pandemic. Moreover, it is important to examine whether religion, education, and ecology have any impact on the COVID-19 pandemic. This essay seeks to: 1) Find the foundation of Indian education; 2) Examine the relation among religion, education, and ecology; and 3) Analyze the impact of religion, education, and ecology on the COVID-19 pandemic in India.

## 2. The COVID-19 Pandemic in India

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global pandemic which emerged in 2019 due to the spread of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) identified as acute respiratory syndrome. This virus was first detected from an outbreak in the Chinese province of Wuhan in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it an International Public Health Emergency on 30 January 2020 and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. To date, hundreds of millions of people have suffered from COVID-19 with millions of confirmed deaths, making this pandemic one of the deadliest in history.[4] The pandemic brought about severe social and economic disruption including the largest global recession since the Great Depression (1929-1939).

Some of the numerous memorable effects of the pandemic included supply chain disruptions, global lockdowns, social distancing, constant handwashing, mask wearing, temporary closing of educational institutions, and the cancellation or postponement of numerous events and programs around the world. India is the largest democratic country

with a population of nearly 1.4 billion people. The country is rich in culture and traditions with diverse religions. Undoubtedly, while the whole world was gripped by COVID-19, India was no exception. During the pandemic, tens of millions of Indians were infected with COVID-19 with deaths in the hundreds of thousands.

## 3. The Impact of the Pandemic on Indian Education

Regarding the state of education in India, the UNICEF (IHD) in a study entitled "Assessing Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Socio-Economic Situation of Vulnerable Populations through Community-Based Monitoring" observed that in 2020, the pandemic had greater impact on vulnerable families, especially those who had less access to digital technology and the internet. Students in urban areas had better access to online classes than those in rural areas. The primary means that students used to attend online classes were mobile phones. However, some children did not attend classes even though they were offered by their schools because of lack of access to the necessary gadgets. Despite these negative impacts, the report states that "an encouraging finding was that despite the threat of the COVID-19 infection, most respondent mothers reported in December (Phase 4) that they were willing to send their children to school when the schools would re-open."[5]

## 4. Foundation of Indian Education

The ancient education system of India was started through '*Gurukulas'* in the midst of floras and faunas and the beautiful features of nature. The foundation of education itself was spirituality. At that time the physical world was considered illusory. Learning by doing was the essence of education in Indian thought. There was a good relationship between teacher and pupil which helped the pupil to be fully acquainted with all the cherished social traditions. The pupil

[5] UNICEF (IHD), "Assessing Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Socio-Economic Situation of Vulnerable Populations through Community-Based Monitoring," xxiii.

was eligible for admission based on his fitness, peaceful and patient demeanor, perseverance, good character, and committed faith in preceptors. The entire educational structure was pervaded by sacrificial rituals and religious ceremonies. The primary aim of education was to train and prepare the individual for the struggle of life. The learner was to follow an austere life that molded his personality. The austere practices of an academic career made them capable of supreme realization. The external imposition created inner discipline in the pupils. They had to overcome certain passions, negative habits like sex, extravagant desires, taste of fragrance, and love of physical adornment, etc. 'Simple living and high thinking' served as the motto of their life. Education, considered as an end in itself, preached unity and concord of humanity. It was not confined to religion only, but it illumined all obscurities and darkness of life.

Indian education was called *'vidya.'* It is said *'Saa vidhyaa yaa vimuktaye*' (Vishnupuran, 1.19.41), meaning it is the *vidya* which liberates human beings from spiritual bondage. It was divided into two types of learning – *'paravidya'* and '*aparavidya.'* The former is learning related to the self or spirit, and the latter is related to matter. The disciples learned *vidya* at the *vidyalaya* (school) considering it as an abode of the deity of learning to achieve the four goals of *Dharma* (religion), *Artha* (finance), *Kama* (worldly pleasure), and *Moksha* (liberation) through the four stages of life comprising of *Brahmacharya* (learner has to maintain celibacy), *grhasta* (householder), *vanaprastha* (doing penance in forest), and *sannyasa* (detached life). Self-realization was the ultimate objective of life, which education attempted to support. Unfortunately, in the course of Indian history, invaders destroyed the Indian education system and culture, and the *vidyalaya* was converted to a school. The root *'vidya'* of Indian culture has been converted to the type of education which emphasized matter and eliminated the dimension of spirit. This development represented the deterioration of Indian education. In the contemporary age, India faces the challenge of reestablishing its own culture and education.

## 5. Relation among Religion, Education and Ecology

There is a unique relationship among religion, education, and ecology. In world history, the first education center was begun at a religious

place which was located in a harmonious environment. The concept of ecology, advocated by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, implies the harmonious living of organisms in a good physical environment. It was developed with Carl Linnaeus and his work with the economy of nature. Nonetheless, these facts were already developed thousands of years ago in Vedic texts. Education in ancient India was established upon a religious foundation and took place in a natural environment such as the forest. Hence, religion, education and ecology are integrally related and essential for achieving the same goals.

In ancient times, people worshiped, respected, protected, and worked with nature peacefully and harmoniously. They revered nature as mother. At present this relationship has been diluted. Living in harmony with silent nature was put into practice in ancient India, where the earth was worshipped as mother and nature as a deity. In the Upanishad, it can be seen that a good relationship existed between human beings and the natural environment. According to Chandogyopanishad text, "The earth is the essence of all beings. Water is the essence of the earth. Herbs are the essence of the water and man is the essence of the herbs" (1.1.2). The Bhagavad Gita says, "This Prakrti of Mine (supreme reality) is divided eight-fold thus: earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intellect and also egoism" (7.4). According to Prasad (2015), the Rigveda calls for "mankind be of one mind, have a common goal, and the hearts with united love and the mind and soul be one and the same for all to live a life of happiness. Vedas always related to all biotic and abiotic entities on the earth, and did not relate to any particular geographical region." In the PrithviSukta of Atharva Veda, an environmental invocation of humankind to the Mother Earth coined by ancient sages of India proclaims: '*Mata Bhumih Putroham Prithivyah*' (Earth is my mother, I am her son).

In traditional Indian culture, Mother Earth was celebrated for all her natural bounties and particularly for her gifts of herbs and vegetation. Her blessings were sought for prosperity in all endeavors and fulfillment of all righteous aspirations (Ibid). Signs of warning about future disasters appeared in the form of environmental and natural degradation. In the Vedic age, people were more conscious about nature. The Ayurveda, a natural system of medicine produced by Indian sages, helped save millions of lives and represents the great contribution to the world in the field of

medical science. Fruits, flowers, leaves, and roots were widely used as medicine. Forests served as chief resources of these natural medicines. The Himalayan range was well known for the lifesaving medicinal herbs from where the *Sanjeevani* (used in Ramayana), a kind of herbs, could be obtained. The ancient people understood protecting plant biodiversity and natural resources was essential to maintaining ecological balance. Fresh air, beautiful sunlight and blowing wind, the open sky, green fields, colorful flowers, presence of birds, and the presene of different creatures created a charming atmosphere. In the third century text *YajnavalkyaSmriti*, deforestation and killing of animals were strictly forbidden. Fines and punishments were exacted on tree fellers and animal poachers. During that period, home waste was decomposed in soil, and there were no air, water, and sound pollution. There was also no package food, drinking water bottle and magnesium paper.

Of course, there was an awareness of poison in ancient India. According to the Atharvaveda, "Foods like raw/cooked rice, fruits, water, milk and clothes, vessels, living space are liable to be contaminated due to their contact with three types of poisons" (Ibid, 8.2.19). Sushruta in his '*Sushruta Samhita,'* refers to three types of poisons: those that originated from plants and minerals, those that were of animal origin, and those that were artificial or man-made (Sushruta Samhita, 5.2.24). Regarding cow urine, the Atharvaveda declares, "O go arka (cow urine), you are the destroyer of all germs and toxins. You wage war against hereditary diseases. You are the giver of long life" (6.44.3).

What can be seen from examining these scriptural religious texts is that in ancient times, there was a natural lifestyle in which people believed that the divine existed in nature. People followed nature, lived in nature, worshipped nature, played in nature, and took rest in nature. The five great elements (*pancha mahabhuta*) of soil, water, fire, air, and sky are fundamentals of all things existing in nature. These five great elements are compared to five important organs of the human being. "These Five *Mahabhutas* are cosmic elements which create, nurture and sustain all forms of life, and after death or decay they absorb what was created earlier; thus, they play an important role in preserving and sustaining the environment." People depended on the twittering of birds and the rising sun to awake from bed and pray to God so that their day

would be peaceful, harmonious, and blessed. Then they did their daily activities in nature, taking a bath in natural water to have a pray and wash the body so that it would remain healthy and free from all aberrations. They took natural food having prayed that this *'anna'* brahma would provide them with energy to remain healthy, free from all diseases, and to be a suitable instrument of Thyne (God). They also offered all the work of the day to the divine. Children played in nature with natural play instruments. In the evening young people prayed in various means like meditation, singing songs, and chanting, etc. The old people did '*kirtan*' and '*bhajans*' (reciting the songs of God and Goddesses). The rhythm of their lives was in accordance with the proverb, "Early to bed, early to rise, keeps the body healthy, wealthy and wise." At night they slept on a wooden mat or on the floor. In the community, different festivals were observed to maintain a peaceful, harmonious, pleasant, and holistic environment. The plants, animals, and other aspects of nature were revered and worshiped in traditional Indian culture. The people were happy due to this simple and natural lifestyle. They believed in helping others in need. Social life was enjoyable, holistic, and happy. When humans acted against nature, they had to face natural disasters like tsunami, flood, droughts, diseases, and other calamities.

Viva Kermani (2016) in her article "Hindu Roots of Modern Ecology" writes:

> What the western discourse in general and the western academia and its textbooks in particular forget to inform us is that the roots of ecology lie in Sanatana Dharma or Hinduism and no other religion pays as much attention to environment and environmental ethics, and to the understanding of the role and value of nature. Hinduism is inherently an ecological religion. It can quite easily be said that Hinduism is the world's largest nature-based religion that recognizes and seeks the Divine in nature and acknowledges everything as sacred. It views the earth as our Mother, and hence, advocates that it should not be exploited.

Ancient Indian scriptures preaches respect to animals, plants, and other creatures as to humans. They are considered to have consciousness. This wisdom of care and reverence towards the environment is common

to all Indic culture. In the Upanishads it is mentioned that loving nature and all creatures in the mother Earth is one of the core principles of spirituality followed in Bharatbarsha. In the Vedas, which contain 1028 hymns, there are many verses which mention love for nature. Kermani points to the following verses which illustrate this point:

> Plants are mothers and Goddesses. (Rig Veda Samhita x-97-4)
> Trees are homes and mansions. (Rig Veda Samhita x-97-5)
> Sacred grass has to be protected from man's exploitation (Rig Veda Samhita vii-75-8)
> Plants and waters are treasures for generations. (Rig Veda Samhita vii-70-4)
> We invoke all supporting Earth on which trees, lords of forests, stand ever firm (Atharva Veda 12:1:27)
> Do not cut trees because they remove pollution. (Rig Veda 6:48:17)
> One should not destroy the trees. (Rig Veda Samhita vi-48-17).

Bharat is blessed with a rich biodiversity, which was able to be sustained because of the spiritual consciousness that Hindus maintained towards nature. According to Kermani, "There exists *sthala vriksham* shows that trees were intimately associated with spiritual tradition (In Sanskrit, *sthala* is a place, especially a sacred place, and *vriksh* is tree). Every temple is associated with a tree and every tree is associated with a deity and a story." There are many trees that are considered sacred and worshiped in Bharat, namely, peepal, neem, bel, banyan, asoka, amla, arjuna, and tulsi, etc. It is indicated in Indian mythology that some trees are favourite dwelling places for various deities. For example, for Lord Shiva Rudraksh, Bel, and Lord Vishnu, it is the peepal and tulsi trees; for Hanuman, it is the mango tree. Each Hindu temple is surrounded with trees. The leaves of the bilva, neem, tulsi, mango, various fruits and flowers are used in many rituals. These examples illustrate the deep connection that Indians have to nature. Likewise, the banyan tree is considered as a *kalpavriksh* (wish fulfilling tree) and is held as sacred by followers of the Jain religion. Planting this tree is considered auspicious; its leaves are used in some rituals and its fruits can be used as medicine. The peepal tree or *asvatta* (*ficus religiosa*) is very important in Indian civilisation. Lord Buddha achieved enlightenment under a peepal tree and was born in a sacred grove in the area of Lumbinivana, which was full of sal trees. In the Atharva Veda

(V.4.3), it is referred to as the dwelling place of gods.

The scripture '*Vrikshayurveda'* **(**an ancient Sanskrit text on the science of plants and trees**)** was written by Acharya Surapala around the 10th century. It contains information about trees and their benefits, as well as instructions for how to plant seeds and care for the plants and trees. In addition, it provides details regarding soil conservation, sowing, propagating, eliminating pests, and treatment of diseases, etc. It also provides knowledge about the sides or direction of planting different trees. The extent of information in this text symbolizes the depth of ancient Indian ecology. These examples show the Indians' love, understanding and respect for nature. They also illustrate the profound knowledge of ancient Indians about the role of trees and forests in the ecosystem. Sanatan dharma preaches about conservation of nature and living in harmony with nature without any destruction.

Further, Kermani (2016) writes, "For Hindus, nature is a manifestation of the Divine. Brahman exists as the innermost Self (Atman) of not only humans, but also of all forms and beings in nature. Hence, a large number of pilgrim centres in India are the sacred rivers, mountains, trees, forests and groves themselves." Moreover, in Indian tradition, animals are also considered as '*vahanas'* (vehicles) of the gods and goddesses, and hence, they are worshipped. The list includes for example, Garuda (eagle) is the bahan of Vishnu, the bull is of Shiva, the mouse is of Ganapati, the peacock of Kartika, the lion is of Goddess Durga, the hans of Goddess Sarasvati, and the thewl is of the Goddess Lakshmi, etc. It is written in the Yajur Veda that "no person should kill animals helpful to all and persons serving them obtains heaven" (13.47). According to the Atharva Veda (12.115), the earth was created for the enjoyment of all – human beings, bipeds, quadrupeds, birds, and all other creatures. Such respect to animals and protection of forest shows the great significance of biodiversity and ecological balance in ancient Bharat. Regarding the approach of Hinduism towards animal it is appropriate to quote the verse from the Bhagavad Gita (5.1): *"vidya-vinaya-sampanne brahmane gavi hastinisuni caiva sva-pake capanditah sama-darsinah"* (Wise and humble men treat equally the Brahmin, the cow, the elephant, the dog, and the dog-eater).

## 6. The Ecological Crisis

In his discussion on climate change, Roger S. Gottlieb (2009) points out the wide-ranging impacts on the ecosystem due to misuse of natural resources and other human activities. These negative effects include species extinction, degradation of habitats for animals and plants, loss of water supplies, and extreme and unpredictable weather patterns. Gottlieb remarks, "Unsustainable patterns and quantities of consumption deplete natural resources and contribute to global warming and the accumulation of waste. In the underdeveloped world, overpopulation relative to existing technological resources and political organization decimates the landscape." Frederick Buell (2003) also asserts, "It should be stressed that the environmental crisis is not just a problem 'out there.' It has decisively changed people as well, inscribing itself in our bloodstreams, our breasts and prostates, our very mothers' milk, all of which carry unhealthy amounts of toxins. It also taints our sense of what is to come, as we realize, perhaps only subliminally, that the future is likely to be worse than the past." In the face of the environmental crisis, many individuals have called for developing an environmental consciousness based in religion. Sallie McFague (2001, 176) comments,

> Theologies have been created which stress the spiritual value of nature, our kinship with the nonhuman, and our ethical responsibilities to the earth. New concepts of the divine, holiness, spiritual life, and sin are being forged. Innovative liturgies and rituals are being practiced, and a unique sense of moral responsibility that stresses the interdependence of our treatment of nature and our treatment of other people has emerged as the strikingly new concept of 'ecojustice'.

According to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin…to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation…to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands…to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances—these are sins" (Quoted by Gottlieb 2004, 229-30). He further stated that there needs to be "ethical, legal recourse where possible, in matters of ecological crimes."[6]

[6] John Pergamon, "Orthodoxy and the Ecological Problems: A Theological Approach," on the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople website: http://www.

Historian Michael P. Nelson calls for preservation of wilderness as "a site for spiritual, mystical, or religious encounters: places to experience mystery, moral regeneration, spiritual revival, meaning, oneness, unity, wonder, awe, inspiration, or a sense of harmony with the rest of creation—all essential religious experiences" (1998, 168). Gottlieb (2009) writes, "It is my firm belief that religion's response to the environmental crisis, as well as to the social forces of industrialization, globalization, militarization, and consumerism which give rise to the crisis, will be the single most important factor in determining whether religion will be a vital part of humanity's future or sink into increasing irrelevance… (H)umanity can somehow learn to live without destroying other species and poisoning itself, religion will have been one of the forces teaching us how to do it and encouraging us to do so."

## 7. Religion, Education, Ecology, and the COVID-19 Pandemic in India

In the scriptures of Sanatana Dharma, there were many instructions given regarding healthy body, mind, and spirit. These instructions went back 5,000 years ago when no advanced science and technology existed. Using Vedic knowledge, insight, experience, and wisdom, the saints of India forewarned about the importance of maintaining personal hygiene through '*Sadaachaaram*' (good behavior), which are more useful to prevent diseases.

"लवणं व्यञ्जनं चैव घृतं तैलं तथैव च ।
लेह्यं पेयं च ववि धिं हस्तदत्तं न भक्षयेत् ।।"
-धर्मसन्धि ३पू. आह्नकि
(Certain food items like salt, ghee, oil, rice, and others should not be served with bare hand. It is advised to use spoons for serving.)

"अनातुरःस्वानि खानि न स्पृशेदनमित्ततः।"
-मनुस्मृति ४/१४४
(Unnecessarily touching one's own '*indriyas'* (organs) like eyes, nose, ears, mouth, etc. is forbidden.)

"अपमृज्यान्न च स्नातो गात्राण्यम्बरपाणभिः।।
-मार्कण्डेय पुराण ३४/५२
(Clothes already worn should not be worn again without washing and drying first.)

patriarchate.org/.

"हस्तपादे मुखे चैव पञ्चाद्रे भोजनं चरेत् ।।"
-पद्म०सृष्टि.५१/८८
"नाप्रक्षालति पाणपिादो भुञ्जीत ।।"
-सुश्रुत संहिता चकित्सिा २४/९८
(Before taking food, washing hands, feet and mouth is necessary.)

"स्नानाचार वहीनस्य सर्वाःस्युःनष्फिलाःक्रयिाः।।"
-वाघल स्मृति ६९
(To do any work (*karma*), one has to take a bath and prayer for *suddhi* (purity). Otherwise, the work will be fruitless.)

"न धारयेत् परस्यैवं स्नानान्न वस्त्रं कदाचन ।।"
-पद्म० सृष्टि.५१/८६
(One should not dry other's using cloth after a bath.)

"अन्यदेव भवद्वासःशयनीये नरोत्तम ।
अन्यद् रथ्यासु देवानाम् अर्चायाम् अन्यदेव हि।।"
-महाभारत अनु १०४/८६
(In the Mahabharata, it is advocated to use different clothes during sleeping, while going out, and during worship.)

"तथा न अन्यधृतं (वस्त्रं) धार्यम् ।।"
-महाभारत अनु १०४/८६
(One should not wear clothes worn by others.)

"न अप्रक्षालतिं पूर्वधृतं वसनं बभृियाद् ।।"
-वष्णिुस्मृति ६४
(Clothes once worn should not be worn again before washing.)

"न आद्रं परदिधीत ।।"
-गोभसिगृह्यसूत्र ३/५/२४
(Wearing wet clothes were prohibited.)

"चताधिूम सेवने सर्वे वर्णाःस्नानम् आचरेयुः।
वमने श्मश्रुकर्मणि कृते च।।"
-वष्णिुस्मृति २२
(It is advisable to take a bath upon returning from cremation ground and cut hair to purify the body.)

These verses demonstrate the close relationship among religion, education, ecology, and physical wellbeing. Religious

education promotes ecological and human flourishing by: a) Promoting environmental consciousness; b) Inspiring an inner spiritual journey; c) Bridging matter and spirit; d) Encouraging a lifestyle free from greed and selfishness; e) Teaching detachment from sex, money and power; f) Promoting understanding about communalism, religion, and spirituality; g) Aspiring always the welfare of humanity; and h) Teaching respect and reverence for nature, both living being and non-living objects.

## 8. Conclusion

The world is grappling to find solutions to multiple problems pertaining to the environmental crisis. This problem cannot be resolved simply through scientific or intellectual means. The Hindu traditions have much to contribute to address this crisis. As Kermani asserts, "For ecology to be truly saved and revived, we have to return to the meanings and practices that infuse sacredness and reverence towards nature as in Hindu traditions, re-awaken our relationship with nature and not view religion and ecology as separate. For Hindus, the environment is not protected because of the selfish urgency to save biodiversity and hence save human future, but because it is the Dharmic way of life and hence a righteous duty that all humans are obliged to perform." However, all religions have immense positive values and serve as the gateway to spirituality. Ultimately, developing a proper spirituality will be essential to resolving not only the ecological crisis but other social issues as well. A new consciousness will lead to human, social and global transformation, characterized by a healthy ecology, world peace, and human flourishing.

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***ARTICLE***

# Communication Leading to Communion: Social Communications in the Digital Culture through the Catholic Church's Engagement in Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Roderick Evans M. Bartolome*[1]

**Abstract**

*With the prohibition of religious gatherings by the Philippine government to help curb the spread of the COVID-19, the Catholic Church had to close its doors to the public and instead hold masses and other activities online, primarily utilizing the livestreaming features of Facebook. The study probed how select parishes in the province of Bulacan engaged their parishioners online in light of the quarantine restrictions imposed in the area. Specifically, the study explores the concept of social communication as embedded in a new culture that is shaped by digital communication, in the context of the engagement of the Catholic Church and its faithful through Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by ideas regarding social communication by Eilers, participatory culture by Jenkins, and COBRA typology by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit, as its theoretical lenses, this study utilizes a multi-method approach to achieve its objectives. Qualitative focus interviews were conducted with social media managers of Facebook pages of three parishes, as well as for parishioners who follow the selected parish Facebook pages. Data obtained from the content analysis and Facebook insights of the top performing posts of the parishes selected were also analyzed. Findings show that social media has changed how the Church communicates, and thus has forced the evolution of the concept of social communication. Given the size and scope of the various social media pages, they offered the Church viable fora for its visibility and evangelization. Moreover, although social media cannot totally substitute face-to-face gatherings,*

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*especially in-person worship, social media can support the Church's community in a myriad of ways such as providing information about the parishes' events, activities and advocacies, and allowing a space for the parishioners to engage in dialogue. Viewing communication as one that leads to communion or unity of its community, the current digital culture reshapes social communication as one that fosters a greater sense of participation in the creation and sharing of information among its members.*

**Keywords:** *Facebook, social media, engagement, Catholic Church, COVID-19*

## 1. Introduction

On March 17, 2020, then Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte placed the entire Luzon Island, the largest and most populated island in the country, in lockdown in a bid to contain the spread of COVID-19. A strict quarantine was implemented for all households, and all mass gatherings, including religious services, were prohibited (Tomacruz 2020). In response, the various archdioceses and dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church covering Luzon suspended public Masses in all its parishes and chapels. Several parishes also began to livestream Masses and other religious activities on their official social media pages to enable the faithful to celebrate the Holy Mass even in their own homes. Among the prominent churches that provided online liturgical celebrations as cited by media organizations included the Manila Cathedral, the episcopal seat of the Archdiocese of Manila, the San Agustin Church, considered the oldest church in the country, and the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene commonly known as Quiapo Church, recognized for its millions of devotees (Madarang 2020).

Later on, various parishes also began steps to provide the public with online Masses, community prayers, spiritual recollections and retreats and Eucharistic adoration, among others for the benefit of their own parishioners. In the *'Recommendations and Guidelines for the Liturgical Celebration in 'New Normal' Condition'* issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) on May 16, 2020, then conference president Romulo G. Valles states, "The social

distancing needed to inhibit the spread of the virus has taught all of us to maximize the potentials of Social Media." He recognized that the Sunday, Holy Week and daily Masses, spiritual conferences and preaching streamed online had reached many of the faithful, especially the youth. Archbishop Valles strongly recommended the continued streaming and broadcast of masses especially for the elderly and the sick, the young and children who are required by the government to stay home and not to attend Mass.

According to Castillo, Biana, and Joaquin (2020), the global health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the need to cater not only to the public's physical health but to their mental health and spiritual well-being as well. They said that religious and spiritual interventions play a crucial role during a public health crisis and they guide people to find meaning and acceptance in the midst of suffering, providing counsel, refuge, hope, and rejuvenation for those who need it.

As social distancing, home quarantine, and cancellation of mass gatherings have become a must, the Catholic Church intensified its engagement with the faithful through social media. Parishes brought Masses in the comfort of people's homes and updated the people with news around the parish through various social networking sites. Although Masses, recollections and other devotions presently available online have been going on for quite some time, they became more prevalent in 2020 due to the stricter preventive measures of the government against the pandemic. This study involves 3 out of 105 parishes and four quasi parishes in Bulacan, namely the Immaculate Conception Parish – Cathedral & Minor Basilica, commonly known as Malolos Cathedral, the ecclesiastical seat of the Diocese of Malolos; St. Augustine Parish in Baliwag, Bulacan; and St. Ildephonse of Toledo Parish in Guiguinto, Bulacan. The above-mentioned parishes have significant followers in their official Facebook pages at the time of the writing of this study, with St. Ildephonse Parish (Guiguinto)'s [@SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto] Facebook page having more than 111,000 page likes; Malolos Cathedral's [@CathedralMalolos] Facebook page with more than 60,000 page likes; and St. Augustine Parish (Baliwag)'s [@AngBatingawOnline] Facebook page with more than 30,000 page

likes.

## 2. Objectives

This study focuses on how the Catholic Church, through select parishes in Bulacan under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Malolos, engaged their parishioners online in light of the quarantine restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the time when a large group of Catholics could not go to Church to attend Masses and avail of the sacraments, this study sheds light on how select parishes utilized social media such as Facebook as the 'new pulpit' of the Church to spread its teachings. The study seeks to understand how the concept of social communication is being reshaped by digital communications, specifically in the context of the engagement of the Catholic Church and its faithful through social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also explores the concept of social communication as embedded in a new culture that is shaped by digital communication, and aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue with the various cultural developments brought by social media and mobile media applications, specifically focusing on new media as the dominant communication in the digital age.

## 3. Literature Review

### Engagement in social media

According to the Digital Marketing Philippines (n.d), engagement in social media is the active participation between an organization or company and other users who belong in the same social media sphere where the former is operating from. Citing digital marketing professionals, engagement relates directly to the level of interaction of an individual, group, organization or company with other people, companies, and brands. According to the webpage, positive engagement is one of the most effective ways of building trust and credibility between an organization and its various audiences, which over time can lead to loyalty and even championing of the organization.

It also provides a measurement as to how effectively an organization is creating interactions with its audiences in the social stream. The metrics include likes, mentions, shares, views, comments, participation in live chats, subscriptions, tagging or mentioning someone in a post of photo, among others – and directly correlates with the number of people who are forming a relationship with the organization through its social media platforms.

The Philippines, being one of the countries with a significant number of social media users, is a good context to probe the concept of engagement. The "Digital 2019: Global Digital Overview" by the creative agency We Are Social and social media management platform Hootsuite shows that Filipinos spend an average of 10 hours and two minutes each day on the internet via any device. The worldwide average for hours spent on the internet is at six hours, 42 minutes, down a few minutes from 2018's six hours and 49 minutes. The report also indicates that Filipinos usually spend over four hours on social media daily, followed by Brazilians (3 hours, 34 minutes) and Colombians (3 hours, 31 minutes). The worldwide average for social media use is at two hours, 16 minutes.

The same report says that as of January 2019, there were 4.39 billion internet users worldwide, an increase of 366 million (9 percent) compared to January 2018. There were also 3.48 billion social media users in 2019, with 3.26 billion using social media on mobile devices. The advent of new media technologies also made the communication field in general, and of strategic communications in particular, to be at the crossroads. In the age of social media and Web 2.0, there are many tools available for people to create, share and publish content and build authority online.

**The Church engaging the Catholic faithful in the cyberworld**

When the Vatican II document *Inter Mirifica* (1962) and the subsequent pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio* (1971) were promulgated, the term "social communication" primarily referred to broadcast media such as print journalism, television and radio, film, and even theater to some extent. On the twentieth anniversary of *Communio*

*et Progressio*, the pastoral instruction *Aetatis Novae* (1992) is first among these documents to mention computer networks. A decade later, in 2002, the Vatican released *Church and Internet* and *Ethics in Internet*. At present, social communication is a term that continues to imply the traditional broadcast media, but it increasingly bears a closer association with the digital media and internet-mediated communication.

For social communication, the significance of the internet also ushers in new assumptions about communication on this massive scale. Social communication through the traditional broadcast media implies a one-to-many model of sharing information, that is, there is a clear source of information and a clear audience who receives it. Social communication through the internet, especially since the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, reshaped this one-to-many model into an interactive web. Internet-mediated communication since the rise of social media and mobile media applications has become "a chorus of many voices who co-participate in the creation, sharing, and dissemination of information" (Zsupan-Jerome 2015, 6-7).

Pope Francis, in his message for the 50th World Communications Day (2016), said that the internet and social networks are "a gift of God" if used wisely. "Emails, text messages, social networks and chats can also be fully human forms of communication," he stated. Archbishop Claudio Celli, the former president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, in his talk during the 2014 celebration of World Communications Sunday organized by the Diocese of Brooklyn said the Catholic Church cannot ignore the opportunities for evangelization that the Internet offers. He said that unless the Church engages social media, "we will wind up talking to ourselves" (quoted in Gibson 2014). According to Cellli, "In our church we are always fishing inside the aquarium. And we forget that most fish are outside the aquarium" (Ibid). He also referred to social media as a digital continent that the Church must consider as mission territory.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) media office director, Monsignor Pedro Quitorio III also cited the important role being played by social media in "helping spread the culture of truth." Msgr. Quitorio, as cited in a news report, explained

that aside from traditional media platforms like radio, television, and print, "social media in today's times has become a very efficient platform in spreading the message of the Church" (Garcia 2019). An article published in *Rappler* in 2015, citing the findings of US-based Pew Research Center in March 2014 said that social media is fertile ground for evangelization (Esmaquel 2015). It says that Filipinos in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter find religion more interesting compared to politics. The said study also shows that religion is the third most popular social media topic with 26 percent of Filipino internet users utilizing social media to share their views about religion, preceded only by movies and music (71%) and sports (50%). Politics only come in 5th (16%), after products netizens use (21%). Moreover, the same study also reveals that in contrast to other emerging and developing countries, more Filipinos think that increasing use of the internet has had a positive influence in morality, with 47 percent of Filipinos seeing the internet as positive for morality, as opposed to 42 percent of global respondents stating that internet has a negative influence.

**Social communications in the Diocese of Malolos**

As stated in its official website (www.malolosdiocese.ph), the Diocese of Malolos was created on November 25, 1961 through the Apostolic Constitution *Christi Fidelium* by Pope John XXIII. It comprises the civil province of Bulacan and Valenzuela City in Metro Manila. The diocese is headed by Bishop Dennis C. Villarojo, D.D., who was formerly the auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Cebu. The Catholic Directory of the Philippines (2020) indicates that the Diocese of Malolos has 105 parishes, 4 quasi-parishes, and 7 chaplaincies, and is served by 180 active priests.

The *Acts and Decrees of the Second Synod of the Diocese of Malolos* (2013) recognizes how new media "has created a new pace in human life, making access to the vast world of communication and information easier and more reliable. Social communication has turned the world into a global village." The same document says new technologies may be utilized to "present the timeliness message of God's love for His people more attractively and in ways that may engage new

audiences." Moreover, Declaration 35 of the document mandates that the Diocesan Commission on Social Communications shall maintain its presence in social media and in other forms of information and communications.

Social communications by the diocese are being managed by its Commission on Social Communications headed by a priest serving as chairman. Currently, the commission manages the diocesan website and its social media presence, produces a few radio programs aired in Radio Veritas 846, conducts media relations, and provides ongoing formation and training of social communication workers in the parishes. The various parishes in the diocese, meanwhile devises their own social communication program to respond to their particular needs. Most parishes have their own social media presence, particularly on Facebook, while only a few maintain a website. A few parishes also have printed newsletters.

## 4. Study Framework

To enable the researcher to probe the concept of social communication as embedded in a new culture that is shaped by digital communication, this study was undertaken under the lens of the following:

First, since it is a study of the Catholic Church's engagement with its faithful through social media, Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD's ideas regarding social communication (2009) were utilized. Second, as this study intends to probe and investigate the engagement of social media users to the posts of the official Facebook pages of selected parishes, it was also guided by Participatory Culture by Jenkins (2009) and consumers' online brand related activities (COBRA) typology by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011).

### Social communications

The term 'social communication' was officially used by the Roman Catholic Church in the Vatican II decree *Inter Mirifica: On the Means of Social Communication* (1963). According to Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD,

the term encompasses "all forms and ways of communicating in human society from traditional forms like storytelling, rumor, drama, dance and music to the Internet and cyberspace" (2005, para 11). Moreover, in his book, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication*, Eilers explains the concept of social communication as communication in and of human society. "Mass media are only but one part of such communication which also includes books and group communication media as well as traditional means or communication in human societies" (2009, 17). Citing the works of Rogers and Kincaid critiquing past communication theory and research as linear, one-way act rather than two-way process over time, Eilers explains that social communication may be considered as a horizontal process of sharing between participants, and that there is an ongoing feedback and change of roles of participants to converge on a common understanding that takes place in a particular social network and structure. Theologically, such concept takes the view of communication as leading to communion and this communion is creating or documenting community.

The online and social media posts of the parishes selected and analyzed in this study are considered social communications, specifically pastoral communications, as utilized by the Catholic Church. How they achieve the above-mentioned theological goal of social communication, that is leading to communion during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, is the focus of this study.

**Participatory culture**

Henry Jenkins, in the book *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* which he wrote with Ravi Purushotma, Margaret Weigel, Katie Clinton, and Alice Robinson, defined participatory culture as follows:

> A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care

> about others' opinions of what they have created). (Jenkins 2006, 5-6).

Jenkins argues that participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful ways. Moreover, Jenkins asserts that participation is used as a term that cuts across educational practices, creative processes, community life, and democratic citizenship: Catholics follow and interact with their respective parishes' social media pages. They engage in these social media pages by sharing and commenting on the various posts, and may even create their own contents such as memes and videos and share them in their own social media accounts. The concept of participatory culture was utilized to understand how to further these engagements, and in turn understand how ordinary Catholics through their own social media accounts can also spread the "Good News" to others.

**COBRA typology**

According to Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), who proposed the concept of consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRA) typology, the rise of Web 2.0 has provided many opportunities for netizens to share and create content about anything. They recognize that social media have transformed online consumer behavior which has important consequences for firms, products and brands, for instance. As such, consumers are becoming increasingly influential with respect to the brands they are interacting with, and these interactions have a much stronger impact on consumer behavior than traditional forms of marketing and advertising. In their study to understand the motivations of consumers' online brand-related activities, they developed the 'COBRA typology' which categorizes into three dimensions what corresponds to the path of gradual involvement with brand-related content on social media, namely consuming, contributing, and creating. The typology takes activeness of social media use into account and establishes a continuum from high to low brand-related activity.

First, the consuming COBRA type represents the lowest level of online brand-related activeness. It means minimal participation, without

actively contributing to or creating content. Second, the contributing COBRA type is the middle level of online brand-related activeness. It covers both user-to-content and user-to-user interactions about brands. Third, the creating COBRA type represents the highest level of online brand-related activity. It means actively producing and publishing the brand-related content that others consume and contribute. The COBRA typology guided the researcher in initially probing the depth of interaction of the Facebook users who are parishioners of the selected parishes with regard to the latter's engagement with them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 6. Methodology

In achieving the objectives set by the study, the researcher utilized a multi-method approach. To be able to appraise the extent by which strategies and tactics in social media typically employed by secular institutions and businesses were utilized by the Catholic Church, the researcher employed content analysis of top 100 performing posts of three parishes in the Diocese of Malolos from March 17 to August 17, 2020, the during the time the strictest lockdown and home quarantine protocols were imposed in the Philippines. Pernia (2004) defines quantitative content analysis of media materials as to designing, operationalizing, and analyzing manifest elements of communication message – that is, the measurable characteristics of messages such as format, topic, length, and use of words/language, visuals, and other symbols present in a communication material.

In the context of this study, the content analysis was done by first, determining the content of each post. Second, the type of each post was also identified. Third, the source or persons featured in the posts was also identified and counted. Informant interviews of social media managers of their official Facebook pages were also undertaken to achieve the above mentioned objective.

Specifically, there were two priests and two lay persons who served as the study's informants. One of the priests and the two lay persons who were part of the managing team of the Facebook pages of the selected parishes were interviewed. They were specifically chosen to provide insights on the strategies and tactics employed by their respective pages

on how they attempted to engage their parishioners and other faithful through social media during the Luzon pandemic lockdowns. Another priest who was part of the team managing the social communication efforts of the Diocese of Malolos was also interviewed to provide a 'big-picture' perspective on how the diocese directed and/or guided the selected parishes in their social media endeavors.

To probe the level of engagement by the followers/likers of the said Facebook pages, the researcher measured and analyzed the following among the top 100 performing posts using the data culled from Facebook Insights:

- reach (the number of people who have seen the post in their timelines);
- likes and reactions (the number of people who click the like or the other reaction buttons on the post);
- comments (the number of people who posted their comment on the post); and
- shares (the number of times users share the post in their own page).

These indicators show how well the page's posts are performing and which type of posts are performing better.

Lastly, to be able to examine how Catholic netizens re-approportionate the messages conveyed through social media by the Church, the researcher conducted qualitative in-depth focus interviews from March to May 2021 with parishioners of the three above-mentioned parishes selected through snowball sampling. As explained by Merton and Kendal (1956) as cited by Portus, et. Al. (2018), focus interviews discuss the participant-informant's experience, where they are encouraged to speak non directively about their retrospective reaction to a specific event or phenomenon.

They were 12 parishioners who followed their respective parishes' official Facebook pages that were interviewed to gain the perspective of the audience, with each interview taking one to two hours. Among them, two were from St. Augustine Parish, four from St.

Ildephonse of Toledo Parish, while six from Immaculate Conception Parish – Cathedral & Minor Basilica. They were asked to share their lived experience of engaging the Church through social media during the height of the restrictions in movement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participant-informants were met in person by the researcher in locations chosen by the former for their convenience, ensuring that the said places were conducive in the conduct of interviews, and complies with the minimum health and safety protocols being imposed by the government at that time.

## 7. Data Analysis

Data from the content analysis were also analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the engagement rate per reach (ERR) were computed from the data derived using Facebook insights. Qualitative data were coded and categorized by the researcher to be able to come up with a descriptive textual analysis. For the qualitative data gathered by the researcher, coding and categorizing leading to a descriptive textual analysis was conducted. Particular focus was given in the unique experiences, and trends and patterns alluded by the participant-informants.

## 8. Results

### Engaging the faithful: strategies used by parishes in Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic

To understand the strategies utilized by the three Facebook pages to engage their parishioners and other audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, two methods were utilized. First is the content analysis of the top performing Faceboook posts of the three parishes from March 17 – August 17, 2020, when the strictest lockdown protocols were imposed by the government. Second is focused interviews with key informants who were part of the social media team managing the three parishes, and of the diocese. Using Facebook Insights, the top performing posts based on reach of the three parishes were sorted. They were then analyzed

based on their content, format, and sources/persons mentioned or cited.

Based on the results of the two methods, it was shown that the parishes included in this study prioritized ensuring that the faithful would have access to the celebration of Masses despite the prohibition on public gatherings and religious services. As mentioned by the informants, the major adjustment done by their parishes during the start of the Luzon-wide lockdown beginning on March 17, 2020 was to shift the holding of public Masses to the online platform, Facebook in particular. This was also reflected in the results of the content analysis, where it was identified that the top performing posts in terms of reach of @AngBatingawOnline and @CathedralMalolos were the Eucharistic celebrations, while it is among the top three for @SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto.

Apart from Masses, the Facebook pages also posted live videos and cross-posts of religious activities such as Marian devotions and popular piety, as well as info posters of prayers, inspirational messages, and Gospel reflections.

**Table 1. Contents of Posts of three Parishes**

| | Baliwag | Guiguinto | Malolos |
|---|---|---|---|
| Announcement | 3 | 16 | 2 |
| Catechism | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Eucharistic Celebration | 77 | 15 | 60 |
| Eucharistic Devotion | 3 | 0 | 4 |
| Gospel Reflections | 0 | 12 | 2 |
| Inspirational message | 1 | 13 | 0 |
| Liturgical Prayer | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Marian Devotion | 0 | 4 | 14 |
| Other devotions | 4 | 0 | 5 |
| Popular Piety | 5 | 1 | 5 |
| Post-event coverage | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Prayer | 0 | 37 | 6 |
| Recollection | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Religious Image | 0 | 1 | 0 |

The content analysis' results show that live videos of Masses and other Church activities were the 95 percent of the top performing posts

for @AngBatingawOnline, and 91 percent for @CathedralMalolos. The then priest-moderator of @AngBatingawOnline explained that due to the lockdown, and with mainstream media also not producing new content as most of their productions were also halted, they realized it was the best opportunity to use social media to catechize and evangelize.

The results, moreover, show that the Facebook page @SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto took a somewhat divergent strategy compared to the other two pages included in this study. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of their posts were infoposters, with contents ranging from various prayers, announcements, inspirational quotes/messages, and Gospel reflections. This strategy was also mentioned by the lay coordinator of their parish social communications as their tactic to encourage more likes /followers of their page. San Ildefonso de Guiguinto's page deliberately posted info posters of prayers or inspirational messages/ quotes that were closely connected with a significant or current event. As the lay coordinator explained, "For example, there was an earthquake, we had the Oratio Imperata [during earthquakes] right away."

The results also show that based on the contents and strategies of the three Facebook pages, they all conform to the guidelines and best practices stipulated in the *2017 Pastoral Guidelines on the Use of Social Media* issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. The parishes concerned indeed utilized Facebook as a tool for evangelization, and their engagement, though limited, still strengthened the mission of the Church to be inclusive. The use of the Facebook pages by the Church, at least through the parishes included in this study, indeed falls within the purview of pastoral communication, which was defined by Eilers as "the communicative activities of the Church and her members." During the height of the Luzon-wide lockdown, it was practically through social media that the Church was able to communicate with her faithful.

Results of the two methods so far show that the Church, through its social communications in the form of Facebook pages of her parishes, utilized social media to help address what it believed were the needs of its parishioners. As the informants surmised, it signaled that the Church was in business, that the Masses did not stop just because of the pandemic, and in fact, the Church never left the faithful during the

height of the health crisis.

**Engagement of likers/followers in the churches' Facebook pages**

To ascertain the level of engagement of the followers/likers of the Facebook pages of the parishes selected in this study, the researcher used Facebook Insights, with the following indicators and engagement to the top performing posts of the parishes gathered and averaged, namely, likes and reactions, shares and comments. To ascertain whether the engagement was effective or not, the engagement rate was computed. As mentioned in the methodology, the research utilized the engagement rate by reach or ERR as reach can be a more accurate measurement than follower count, since not all the page's followers will see all the content, while non-followers may have been exposed to the posts through shares, hashtags, and other means. A recent dissertation that studied social media engagement of sports fans (Cadilhe 2020) utilized the description given by scrunch.com to understand what engagement rates mean:

- Low engagement rate: 0% and 1.64%
- Good engagement rate: 1.64% and 3.48%
- High engagement rate: 3.48% and 6.67%
- Very high engagement rate: 6.67% and 10%

The results show that the three parishes were successful in engaging their faithful through their social media pages. Based on the computed engagement rate, the parishes obtained 'very high' engagement through the likes/reactions, comments and shares they received.

**Table 2. Engagement Averages and Engagement Rates**

| *Avarege Engagements* | *Baliwag* | *Guiguinto* | *Malolos* | *3 Parishes* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Reach* | 38,897 | 464,842 | 55,917 | ***186,552*** |
| *Likes and Reactions* | 1,872 | 35,703 | 3,819 | ***13,798*** |
| *Comments* | 852 | 6,921 | 1,046 | ***2,940*** |
| *Shares* | 155 | 2,458 | 241 | ***951*** |
| *Engagement Rate* | 7% | 10% | 9% | 9% |
| *Interpretation* | Very high | Very high | Very high | Very high |

The average engagement rates of the various posts of the parishes were then computed to determine the level of engagement they received from those who saw their posts. In terms of specific contents, 'other prayers' received the highest average likes and reactions in @ SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto and @CathedralMalolos, while for @ AngBatingawOnline, it was popular piety. Almost all types of contents received thousands of likes and reactions in the three parishes.

**Table 3. Comparison of Average Likes and Reactions by Type of Posts**

| | *Baliwag* | *Guiguinto* | *Malolos* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Announcement | 2,402 | 34,775 | 4,308 |
| Catechism | 1,074 | | |
| Eucharistic Celebration | 1,615 | 6,669 | 2,444 |
| Eucharistic Devotion | 1,844 | | 3,378 |
| Gospel Reflections | | 23,987 | 3,671 |
| Inspirational message | 1,751 | 41,193 | |
| Liturgical Prayer | | | 1,692 |
| Marian Devotion | | 14,273 | 3,228 |
| Other devotions | 2,723 | | 2,973 |
| Popular Piety | 3,858 | 8,341 | 3,129 |
| Post-event coverage | 3,295 | 8,610 | |
| Other Prayers | | 54,038 | 21,119 |
| Recollection | 2,131 | | |
| Religious Image | | 17,102 | |

Other prayers also received the highest number of comments on @SanIdefonsoDeGuiguinto and @MalolosCathedral, while Eucharistic celebration was the highest for @AngBatingawOnline. It was @ SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto that consistently received comments by the thousands, while there were only two types of contents that received thousands of comments in @CathedralMalolos. The comments in @ AngBatingawOnline's page were in the hundreds only. The numbers are also lower compared to average likes and reactions received by the pages.

**Table 4. Comparison of Average Comments by Type of Posts**

| | *Baliwag* | *Guiguinto* | *Malolos* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Announcement | 260 | 6,862 | 772 |
| Catechism | 125 | | |
| Eucharistic Celebration | 981 | 1,196 | 1,111 |
| Eucharistic Devotion | 192 | | 632 |
| Gospel Reflections | | 2,627 | 485 |
| Inspirational message | 140 | 7,806 | |
| Liturgical Prayer | 878 | | 473 |
| Marian Devotion | | 3,121 | 558 |
| Other devotions | 212 | | 286 |
| Popular Piety | 683 | 1,120 | 755 |
| Post-event coverage | 282 | 1,184 | |
| Other Prayers | | 11,201 | 3,161 |
| Recollection | 694 | | |
| Religious Image | | 2,136 | |

In terms of shares, the results mirror that of likes and reactions, where 'other prayers' received the highest average number of shares in @SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto and @CathedralMalolos, while it was popular piety for @AngBatingawOnline. Only a few types of posts in @SanIldefonsoDeGuiguinto are in the thousands in terms of shares, while it is only one for @MalolosCathedral. The number of shares in @ AngBatingawOnline average in the hundreds. The average shares of the three parishes are also lower compared to the average likes and reactions, and average comments received by their top performing posts.

**Table 5. Comparison of Average Shares by Type of Posts**

| | *Baliwag* | *Guiguinto* | *Malolos* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Announcement | 204 | 2,534 | 252 |
| Catechism | 157 | | |
| Eucharistic Celebration | 127 | 268 | 181 |
| Eucharistic Devotion | 70 | | 208 |
| Gospel Reflections | | 1,738 | 410 |
| Inspirational message | 245 | 3,288 | |
| Liturgical Prayer | 266 | | 194 |
| Marian Devotion | | 897 | 153 |
| Other devotions | 75 | | 98 |
| Popular Piety | 522 | 466 | 335 |
| Post-event coverage | 435 | 200 | |
| Other Prayers | | 3,586 | 1,068 |
| Recollection | 179 | | |
| Religious Image | | 731 | |

Following the COBRA typology suggested by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), this study was also able to ascertain that its Facebook users reached up to the second level or dimension of activeness in social media based on the engagement numbers received by the three social media pages in this study. Likes and reactions are considered at the level of 'consuming' content, where netizens only view only photos and videos, and click like and other reactions to them. Comments and shares are considered 'contributing' content, as the netizens are able to provide a moderate level of contribution to page contents when they comment on the posted photos and videos or share it among their friends. The third level of dimension of the COBRA typology was not reached in this study, as the researcher was only able to see content generated by the pages themselves among the top performing posts of the parishes. There was none of the user-generated content that is required by the COBRA typology.

The findings show that based on the engagement numbers, netizens who saw the top performing posts of the three parish Facebook pages aimed to create or maintain a relationship with the latter primarily

through likes and reactions. Through likes and other reactions, netizens provided positive feedback, which indicated that they were connecting with the things they cared about in the pages of the parishes included in this study.

**'Re-approportioning' the social media contents of the parishes' Facebook page by their likers/followers**

Qualitative focus interviews were conducted to examine how Catholic netizens re-approportionate the messages conveyed through social media by the Church. Twelve parishioners who were followers of the parish Facebook pages in this study were interviewed – six from Immaculate Conception Parish – Cathedral & Minor Basilica (Malolos City), four from St. Ildephonse of Toledo Parish (Guiguinto), and two from St. Augustine Parish (Baliwag). When public Masses were canceled in mid-March 2020, all the interviewees said they resorted to attending the livestreamed Eucharistic celebration on their respective parishes' Facebook page. When asked why they preferred this over watching Masses on television as some broadcast networks also aired them daily, they said they were more familiar with their own priests, and would also like to see what was happening in their parishes even though they were not physically present there.

The parishioners-informants all followed their own parishes' Facebook pages to be able to view Masses and be updated with parish activities and other developments. Though some said they also followed other Catholic pages on Facebook, they primarily relied on their parish Facebook page for the Eucharistic celebration as they were more familiar with their priests. It was also their way of connecting with the rest of their parish community. The informants said they specifically sought out their parishes on Facebook as they felt more emotional connection to it compared to other similar Catholic Facebook pages. An informant even felt emotional when he watched the online Mass for the first time during the lockdown. A youth volunteer from Malolos Cathedral said during the interview that he became emotional when he first watched the live streaming of Mass by their parish. "What was memorable for me was the very first Sunday Mass during the lockdown that was live streamed, I felt like crying because I was not in the church physically."

Apart from the obvious reason of being able to still take part in the Eucharistic celebration virtually, the informants also gave other advantages of online Masses, at least from their perspective. One informant said he needed less time to prepare to attend as he could catch one on Facebook anytime. "Sometimes, when I wake up late, I just attend Mass there [on Facebook]," an interviewee from Guiguinto said. Another interviewee said, "That is also the case for me when I do not feel like getting up early." An interviewee from Baliwag, for her part, said watching the Mass on Facebook was more convenient as she did not have to dress up compared to when she was attending masses in her parish.

While they recognized the limitations imposed by attending Masses online, such as being unable to receive communion, they felt they were still given the opportunity to practice their faith and hear the Word of God. However, they still felt the need to eventually go back to their parishes once restrictions begin to ease, as attending the Masses in person was much better than online. An interviewee from Malolos also shared that while the livestreamed Masses helped during the beginning of the lockdown, he eventually felt he wanted to go back to church and physically take part in the Mass. He commented, "At the start of the pandemic, I felt that the live Mass [on Facebook] helped. I looked for the page of the Cathedral because I was looking for the Sunday Masses at first. But eventually, it didn't feel complete. I get distracted easily and I begin to long for the actual Mass."

Apart from not being able to receive Communion, the most common disadvantage the informants said was the propensity to be distracted while watching the live streamed Mass. They also affirmed the concerns that the priests who were interviewed expressed with online Masses – that the faithful are indeed distracted while watching Masses on Facebook, and most of them are not in the proper disposition. When they were asked how they interacted with their own parish Facebook pages, the informants responded they would sometimes like and react to the posts, as well as post comments and share announcements and videos. None of the interviewees said they would contribute actual content to their parish Facebook pages, and they also did not expect their parish to encourage it.

The informants affirmed the findings from the data obtained from Facebook insights with regard to engagement in the parishes' Facebook pages. As the informants said, their interaction was limited to likes and reactions, commenting the appropriate responses during the Mass, and sharing the online Masses, the parish announcements and biblical passages to their own social media contacts. They did not take the opportunity to collaborate further by contributing their own content, and in fact did not see the need to do so. As such, similar to the earlier findings, in terms of the COBRA typology, they only reached the levels of consuming and contributing, and not the level of creating.

Relating further the insights and feelings expressed by the informants to participatory culture by Jenkins, they re-approportioned the social media contents of their parish Facebook pages as substitute to in-person participation to the Masses and other religious activities, and as a means to maintain their sense of community with their parish.

## 9. Discussion

Apart from livestreaming Masses, the Church also used their Facebook pages to cater to the various spiritual needs of their faithful despite the limitations and disruptions brought by COVID-19. As the results of the content analysis of the parish Facebook pages included in this study show, parishes also posted prayers for various intentions and addressed to several saints, Gospel reflection from their pastors, inspirational quotes/messages, a myriad of devotions and popular piety for the benefit of their likers/followers. The parish Facebook pages in this study aimed to mimic, so to speak, the experience parishioners had when they were physically attending Masses and other activities in their churches. They tried to fill the gap the COVID-19 forced all organizations and institutions with regard to limiting face-to-face interactions among their members.

Despite the social isolation brought by COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino Catholics found ways to express their unity and togetherness in professing their faith by attending online Masses, reciting devotional prayers online, and taking part in popular piety through Facebook. After

being restricted to physically attend Masses and other devotions in their parishes, based on the interviews and engagement numbers, parishioners took to social media to follow and take part in the various activities livestreamed and posted in Facebook by parishes' official pages.

The netizens-informants interviewed in this study all followed their own parishes' Facebook pages to be able to view Masses and be updated with its activities and other developments. Although some said they also followed other Catholic Facebook pages, they primarily relied on their parish Facebook page for the Eucharistic celebration as they were more familiar with their priests. It was also their way of connecting with the rest of their parish community.

Relating further the insights and feelings expressed by the informants to participatory culture by Jenkins, they re-approportioned the social media contents of their parish Facebook pages as substitute to in-person participation to the Masses and other religious activities, and as a means to maintain their sense of community with their parish. As for the specific elements of participatory culture, the findings show that the parishes' Facebook pages indeed provided them with a relatively low barrier to practice and express their faith. Followers/likers of the social media pages also felt some degree of social connection with one another since they all belonged to the same parishes and were commonly served by the same priests.

The informants also manifested a 'better-than-nothing' attitude regarding their participation in Church liturgies and other activities on social media. While they recognized the limitations of attending Masses online, such as being unable to receive Communion, they felt they were still given the opportunity to practice their faith and hear the Word of God. However, they still felt the need to eventually go back to their parishes once restrictions began to ease, as attending the Masses in person was considerably better than online. This is a recognition that virtual liturgies, such as livestreamed Masses on social media, cannot substitute in-person attendance at Sunday Mass as the former does not fulfill the obligation of attending Sunday.

As the audience of the parishes' social media pages exponentially

grew to tens of thousands starting from March 2020 onwards, the Church, as it were, was able to create its own dedicated media channels through Facebook. Instead of competing for airtime and coming up with content for broadcast in the national media which entailed a lot of cost, parishes were able to create cost-effective programs to achieve the same goal: spread the Word of God to the people. These emerging themes allowed the researcher to revisit the concept of social communication as expounded by Eilers, and how it is enriched by the concept of participatory culture and consumer online brand-related activities. Eilers, as mentioned in the study framework, points out that the expression 'social communication' was introduced in the Catholic Church's vocabulary through the Vatican II document *Inter Mirifica*, and is a broad expression that covers "all ways, means and situations of communication in human societies." Eilers has also earlier noted that given the increasingly social nature of digital communication today due to the prevalence of social media, the term social communication as coined by Vatican II is crucial for engaging in conversation in digital culture.

## 10. Conclusion

This study's findings reveal that the parishes, through their Facebook pages, took a proactive social media strategy by regularly posting content such as live streaming of Masses, devotions and popular piety, as well as infoposters of prayers for various intentions, inspirational messages, and Gospel reflections. These contents, in turn, provided parishioners who followed their parish Facebook pages an avenue to continue engaging with their parish, and provided them a means to substitute physical presence inside the Church with online participation, as well as a sense of continued belongingness and affiliation to their parish community. This allowed the Catholic churches to utilize their Facebook pages, which had gathered thousands of followers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a potent tool to disseminate and reinforce her teachings, traditions and authority, and continue to build and engage with its members despite the physical structures of the Church being empty with people.

Based on these conclusions, social communication, although originally coined to refer to traditional media, may now be considered to have closer association with digital media. Viewing communication as one that leads to communion or unity of its community, the current digital culture reshapes the understanding of social communication as one that fosters a greater sense of participation in the creation and sharing of information among its members. This participatory digital culture, in turn, provides opportunity for the faithful to take part in the Church's mission to evangelize, and thus connect with others to show how they together understand and live the faith.

The field of social communication in this age of social media, when viewed in light of participatory digital culture, will truly be, in the words of Eilers, a "communication as leading to communion, and this communion is creating or documenting community."

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*ARTICLE*

# Some Pastoral Challenges and Perspectives on Shrines and Pilgrimages in the Philippines in Light of the 500 Years of Christianity Celebration and the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Kendrick Ivan B. Panganiban*[1]

**Abstract**

*A momentous occasion during the 500th anniversary of Christianity in the Philippines (2021-2022) was the opening of the doors of churches around the country for the Jubilee. It featured the country's pilgrimage sites as dynamic sources of Catholicism. However, the pilgrims faced two challenges: the restrictions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and the appreciation of the Jubilee despite these limitations.*

*This researcher gathered testimonies from people from selected shrines in the Philippines in connection with challenges and perspectives on how shrine programs are developed. This was channeled through interviews in a weekly podcast on Marian devotions by Faith Watch of Areopagus Communications with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines Media Office. Here, the researcher created focus group discussions concerning the pastoral situation of the shrines to identify a number of pastoral challenges met by shrines during the pandemic while celebrating the Jubilee.*

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*Through these, this paper also classifies efforts for evangelization vis-à-vis the endeavors of the shrines despite the pandemic. It also sees the need for pilgrims to return to the shrines for a concrete pilgrimage experience, to go back to the normal celebration of the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and to appreciate the shrines close to home. On the part of shrine administrators, the perspectives of shrine management today reveal the need for promoters to expand the influence of shrines outside their locality, to improve the use of social communication, and, to establish charity centers in the shrine for those in need.*

**Keywords:** *Shrines, Pilgrimages, COVID-19, Philippines, Social Communication*

## 1. Introduction

### 500 years of Christianity in the Philippines

The years 2020 to 2022 have been both a gracious blessing and a pastoral challenge for the Catholic Church in the Philippines. This period represents the climax of the "nine-year journey for the New Evangelization," which was initiated in 2012. The Church in the Philippines initiated a look into its pastoral priorities adopted from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), developed during the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1991), and enumerated into nine priorities during the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal (2001).[2] As the bishops of the Philippines mentioned clearly in the journey of 500 years of Christianity, "Let this year be a year of looking back in history so that we can understand better who we are in the present as communities of disciples, and an opportunity also to look forward in the next 500 years with the same missionary zeal that made it possible for us to receive the Christian faith."[3] This has indeed been a remarkable opportunity

[2] cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Pastoral Exhortation on the Era of New Evangelization (Longer Version)* (July 23, 2012), no. 32.

[3] cf. _____, *Pastoral Letter Celebrating the 500th Year of Christianity in the Philippines* (May 23, 2021), no. 24.

as it appreciates the Catholic faith of Filipinos over the centuries.

## The COVID-19 pandemic during the Jubilee Year

However, at the approach of this celebration, the Philippines and the entire world faced the assault of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020.[4] This would result in the decision to "prolong by one year the quincentennial celebration of the arrival of Christianity in the Philippines" and with the "International Mission Congress (IMC) and the 2nd National Mission Congress to April 2022."[5] Despite the pandemic, the celebrations already began in 2021 as a total of 546 churches in different dioceses in the Philippines were declared "Jubilee churches," and Pope Francis himself inaugurated the celebration from Vatican City on March 14.[6] In his homily for the celebration, the Pope highlighted "the joy with which [Filipino Catholics] bring [their] faith to other lands." He also added, "It is part of your genes, a blessed 'infectiousness' that I urge you to preserve. Keep bringing the faith, the good news you received five hundred years ago, to others."[7] The pandemic situation presented a challenge to the Catholic Church in the Philippines on how the shrines could further implement efforts for evangelization and devotional promotion at a time of quarantine.

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[4] cf. World Health Organization, "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19", *World Health Organization,* March 11, 2020 (accessed: February 11, 2022) https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020#:~:text=WHO%20has%20been%20assessing%20this,to%20use%20lightly%20or%20carelessly.

[5] CBCP News, "Church pushes back 500 Years of Christianity celebration due to Covid-19", *CBCP NEWS,* September 24, 2020 (accessed: February 11, 2022) https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/church-pushes-back-500-years-of-christianity-celebration-due-to-covid19/.

[6] cf. Areopgagus Communications, Inc., "List of 'Jubilee Churches' and Decree of Papal Blessing with Attached Plenary Indulgence", *Gifted to Give,* 2021 (accessed: February 11, 2022) https://500yoc.com/list-of-jubilee-churches-for-the-celebration-of-the-500-years-of-christianity-in-the-philippines/.

[7] Pope Francis, *Homily during the Holy Mass for the 500th Anniversary of the Evangelization of the Philippines* (March 14, 2021), no. 8.

**The contribution of Catholic social communications ministry during the pandemic**

Because of these two occurrences in the life of the Church in the Philippines, there came a need for the advancement of tools for evangelization. This included the use of new means of social communication such as social media platforms, and video blogs, which are now by far different from the basic media of the age. According to Ocampo, "Thanks to this kind of technology, those who could not be physically present during such occasions are still able to participate in some capacity."[8]

Even before the pandemic era, the Church regarded the Internet as a new medium of communication that can help "bring about revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture—changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives."[9] The impact of this means of social communication has not only affected every secular institution but also religion and the Church itself. The pandemic has proven this as Christian families are forced within the walls of their homes. This media has been largely helpful in programs of evangelization, especially now in shrines as places of Christian pilgrimage.

It is a basic presumption that shrines could not function normally as people's movements are restricted. However, the cause for doing individual or small-group pilgrimages during the time of the Fifth Centenary of Christianity in the Philippines has been encouraged. This paper hopes to shed some light on particular pastoral challenges and perspectives concerning the conditions of several shrines in the Philippines through sharing that are also seen at present in social media. This shows not only the evolving Catholic social communications ministry but its role in the current situation of the Church in the Philippines during this quincentennial year in this pandemic age.

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[8] Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo, "Catholic Liturgical Teleparticipation Before and During the Pandemic, and Questions for the New Normal," *Religion and Social Communication: Journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication* 19, no. 1 (2021): 37.

[9] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and the Internet* (February 22, 2002), no. 2.

## 2. Faith Watch Channel's *Pueblo Amante de María* and Selected Philippine Catholic Shrines

Faith Watch Channel was founded by Areopagus Communications, Inc., a media agency in collaboration with the Media Office of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines in 2011. It was later developed into a mobile and web application ("Your Catholic App") that serves as "an integrated platform designed to help users find the nearest church to avail of services such as schedules of live-streamed masses and the scheduling of other sacraments." According to the app's developers, it "also features biblical reflections and catechetical materials in video and digital format—and even news, among others."[10] It contains a number of programs that were launched to give catechesis to Filipino Catholics who are now "in the web."

One of its most popular programs is *Pueblo amante de María: Isang Bayang Sumisinta sa Mahal na Birhen* (PADM) – the name taken from a line describing the people of the Philippines found in a Spanish Eucharistic hymn which Emeritio Barcelon (1897-1978) and Norberto Careceller (1950-2014) composed for the 1937 International Eucharistic Congress in Manila.[11] It means "a people in love with Mary." Since 2021, this podcast, available in both video and audio, has created content discussing different Marian shrines in the Philippines. With these discussions connected to the pastoral programs of these churches as places of pilgrimage, this medium has become a way for the Church to assess the conditions of shrines in the country that is patterned after a focus group discussion.

Besides special episodes of Marian feasts and solemnities, its regular episodes focus on Marian shrines and its initiatives in history and

[10] cf. Areopagus Communications, Inc., "Description", *Faith Watch*, 2011 (accessed: February 13, 2022) https://www.youtube.com/c/FaithWatch/about; Faith Watch, "Your Catholic Companion App", *Faith Watch*, 2021 (accessed: February 13, 2022) https://faithwatch.app/?fbclid=IwAR0LdWHnZTHarqp207aS2jtYwM_FRuSoF-7tJ5bP3V2tPv1k0Ooz7psLJhfo.

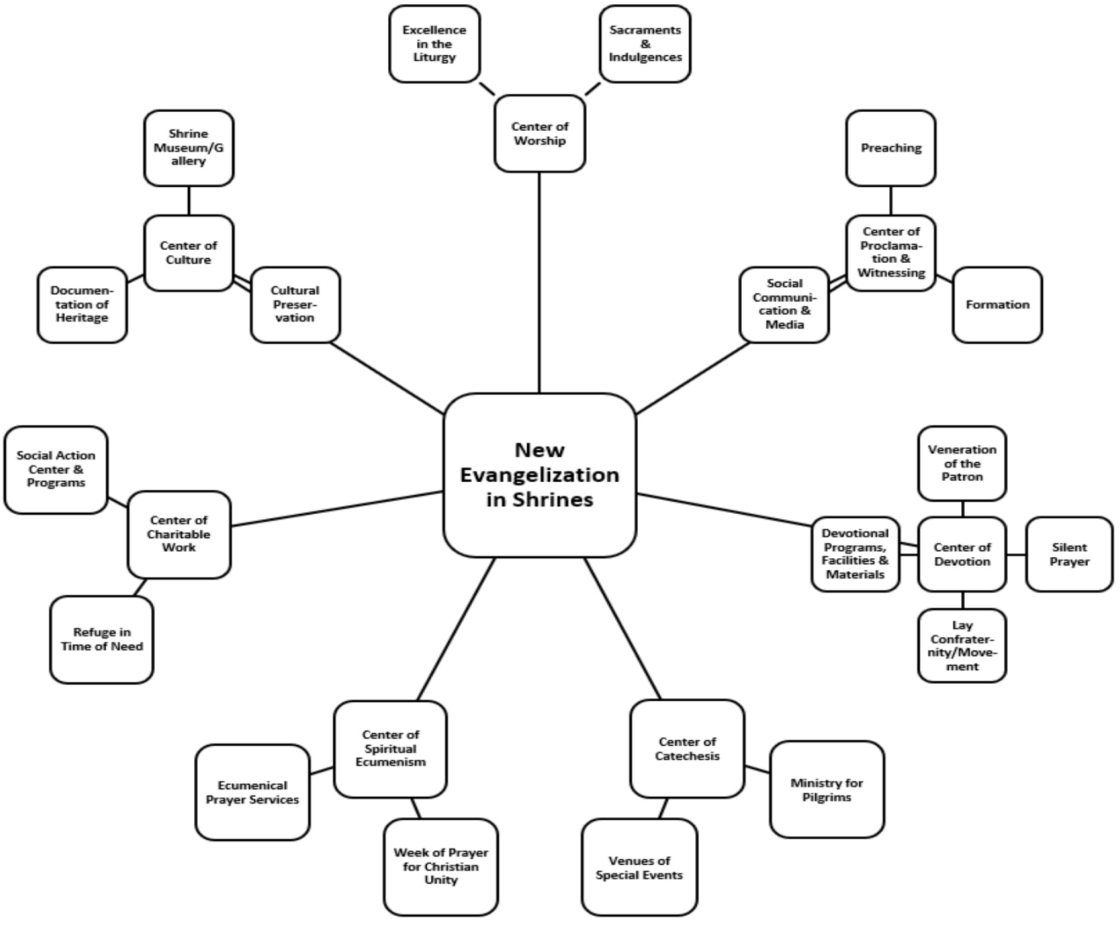
[11] Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (March 6, 1997), no. 45; Catalino Arevalo, S.J., "Introduction" in Vilma Roy Duavit, Louie Reyes and Peachy Yamsuan, *Pueblo Amante de Maria: The Filipino's Love for Mary* (Manila: VRD Publishing, Inc., 2012), 9.

in light of the pandemic. The questionnaires during each episode are based on research on each of the shrine's historical backgrounds and the pastoral scheme endorsed by the Association of Catholic Shrines and Pilgrimages in the Philippines (ACSPP) noted in this author's book, *The Role of Shrines in View of the New Evangelization: Pope Francis' Theology on Shrines and Pilgrimages applied in the Philippine Context* published in 2021.[12] It discusses seven aspects of Shrines in the New Evangelization and the applicability of this pastoral schema in these shrines. These are:

1. Center of Worship,
2. Center of Proclamation and Witnessing,
3. Center of Devotion
4. Center of Catechesis,
5. Center of Spiritual Ecumenism,
6. Center of Charitable Work, and
7. Center of Culture.

Each of these aspects has its own pastoral principles and priorities that contribute to a working pedagogy

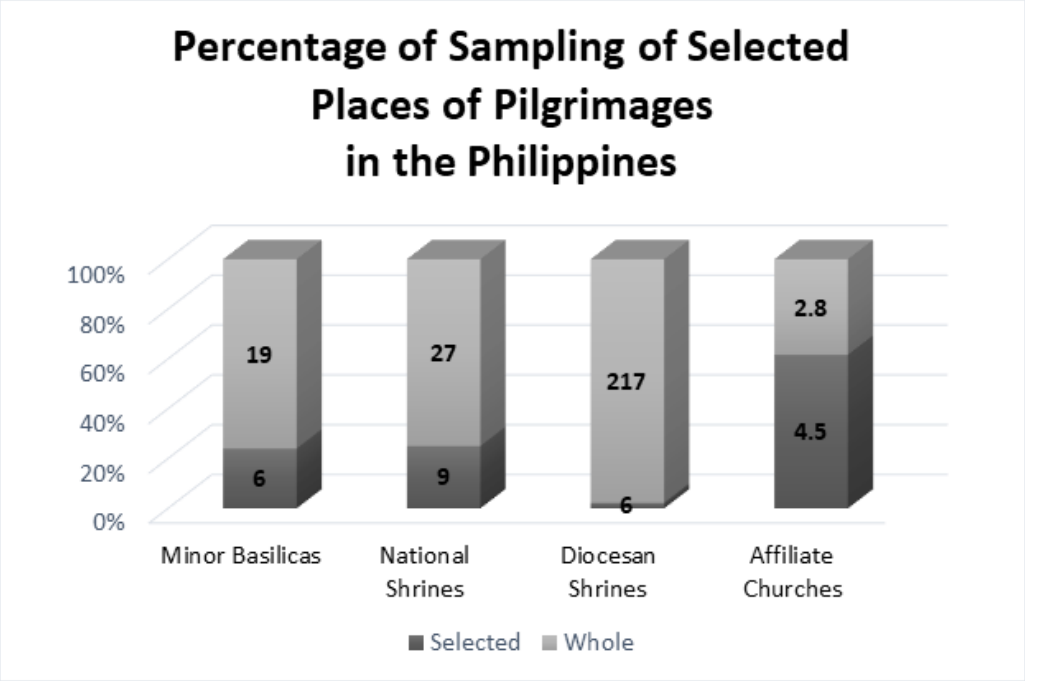
[12] Association of Catholic Shrines and Pilgrimages in the Philippines, "Letter of Acceptance and Endorsement of the Evaluation Tool in *The Role of Shrines in view of the New Evangelization* by Kendrick Ivan B. Panganiban", January 30, 2021 in Kendrick Ivan B. Panganiban, *The Role of Shrines in view of the New Evangelization: Pope Francis' Theology on Shrines and Pilgrimages applied in the Philippine Context* (QC: Claretian Communications Foundation, Inc., 2021), 146.




**Schema of New Evangelization in Shrines**
*Based on the Seven Aspects of Shrines in the New Evangelization*
(Panganiban, 2021)

Of the program's 44 episodes as of February 26, 2022, there were 20 shrines across the country that have participated in the program. There were 6 of 19 minor basilicas or 30% of the total number of basilicas in the country. There were also 9 of 27 national shrines or 1/3 or 33.33% of the Philippines' national shrines. There were 6 of 217 diocesan shrines or 2.28% of local shrines. Lastly, there were 4 of 11 affiliate churches to the Papal Basilica of St. Mary Major, Rome, Italy or 36.36% of the number of these churches with special bonds of spiritual affinity.[13] These are the following:

[13] cf. Areopagus Communications, Inc., "Pueblo Amante de Maria", *Faith Watch*, 2021-2022 (accessed: February 13, 2022) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8Azq-dbd1M&list=PLAkgPe23Zmqh5tqg25zSbwkF_rqJsP66l.




| Episode No. | Shrine No. | Shrine and Location | No. of Episodes | Dates |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 1 | National Shrine of Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage – Immaculate Conception Parish – Antipolo Cathedral, Antipolo City, Rizal | Part 1 | April 18, 2021 |
| 6 | | | Part 2 | April 24, 2021 |
| 11 | | | Part 3 | June 19, 2021 |
| 8 | 2 | National Shrine of *Nuestra Señora de la Inmaculada Concepción de Salambao – San Pascual Baylon* Parish, Obando, Bulacán | Part 1 | May 29, 2021 |
| 9 | 3 | National Shrine and Parish of Our Lady of Fatima, Valenzuela City | Part 1 | June 5, 2021 |
| 10 | 4 | National Shrine and Parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Makati City | Part 1 | June 12, 2021 |
| 12 | 5 | Minor Basilica of Our Lady of Piat, Cagayan | Part 1 | June 26, 2021 |
| 13 | 6 | National Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help – Baclaran Church, Parañaque City | Part 1 | July 3, 2021 |
| 14 | | | Part 2 | July 10, 2021 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15 | 7 | National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette, Silang, Cavite | Part 1 | July 17, 2021 |
| 16 | | | Part 2 | July 24, 2021 |
| 17 | 8 | Diocesan Shrine of *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores de Turumba* – San Pedro de Alcantara Parish, Pakil, Laguna (Affiliate Church to the Papal Basilica of Santa María Maggiore/PBSMM) | Part 1 | July 31, 2021 |
| 18 | | | Part 2 | August 7, 2021 |
| 20 | 9 | National Shrine and Parish of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary – Sto. Domingo Church, Quezon City | Part 1 | August 21, 2021 |
| 21 | | | Part 2 | August 28, 2021 |
| 23 | 10 | Minor Basilica and (Diocesan) Shrine Parish of Our Lady of the Rosary, Orani, Bataan (Affiliate Church - PBSMM) | Part 1 | September 11, 2021 |
| 24 | | | Part 2 | September 18, 2021 |
| 25 | 11 | Minor Basilica and Parish of Our Lady of Manaoag, Pangasinan (Affiliate Church - PBSMM) | Part 1 | September 25, 2021 |
| 26 | | | Part 2 | October 2, 2021 |
| 27 | 12 | Minor Basilica of St. John the Baptist – Shrine (*de facto*) of *La Virgen Milagrosa de Badoc*, Ilocos Norte | Part 1 | October 9, 2021 |
| 28 | | | Part 2 | October 16, 2021 |
| 29 | 13 | National Shrine and Parish of Our Lady of the Candles – Jaro Metropolitan Cathedral, Iloilo City | Part 1 | October 23, 2021 |
| 30 | | | Part 2 | October 30, 2021 |
| 31 | 14 | Diocesan Shrine of *Nuestra Señora de Soledad de Porta Vaga – San Roque* Parish, Cavite City | Part 1 | November 6, 2021 |
| 32 | | | Part 2 | November 13, 2021 |
| 33 | 15 | Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal National Shrine and Parish, Muntinlupa City | Part 1 | November 20, 2021 |
| 34 | | | Part 2 | November 27, 2021 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 36 | 16 | Minor Basilica and Parish of *La Purísima Concepción,* Santa María, Bulacán | Part 1 | December 11, 2021 |
| 37 | | | Part 2 | December 18, 2021 |
| 40 | 17 | Diocesan Shrine and Parish of Our Lady of the Abandoned, Muntinlupa City | Part 1 | January 8, 2021 |
| 41 | | | Part 2 | January 15, 2021 |
| 42 | 18 | Minor Basilica and Parish of *San Sebastian* – Shrine (*de facto*) of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Quiapo, Manila | Part 1 | January 22, 2021 |
| 43 | | | Part 2 | January 29, 2021 |
| 44 | 19 | Diocesan Shrine and Parish of *Nuestra Señora de Candelaria,* Silang, Cavite | Part 1 | February 5, 2022 |
| 45 | | | Part 2 | February 12, 2022 |
| 46 | 20 | Diocesan Shrine and Parish of *Nuestra Señora de la Merced,* Matatalaib, Tarlac City (Affiliate Church - PBSMM) | Part 1 | February 19, 2022 |
| 47 | | | Part 2 | February 26, 2022 |

There was also a special episode on May 8, 2021, entitled "The Role of Shrines in the New Evangelization" discussing the book by this author.[14]

These churches served as a working sample for gathering an account of some of the pastoral challenges and perspectives in connection with shrines being places of pilgrimages, especially in this "new normal." With the data gathered from these churches, the different challenges and perspectives could be summarized and assessed. Moreover, it would assist the discernment of ways to aid shrines not only in the Philippines but perhaps in other countries as well.

[14] _____, "Pueblo Amante de Maria: The Role of Shrines in the New Evangelization", *Faith Watch*, May 8, 2021 (accessed: February 13, 2022) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtQAvBP_YJw&list=PLAkgPe23Zmqh5tqg25z-SbwkF_rqJsP66l&index=35.

## 3. Pastoral Challenges

With a framework of seven aspects of shrines in view of the New Evangelization, there is now a schema for which the pastoral challenges may be categorized. Several pastoral situations either happen in one shrine or more but are compiled together to form a situational profile. Following are the challenges:

| Pastoral Aspect | Situation 1 | Situation 2 | Situation 3 | Situation 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CENTER OF WORSHIP** (*Liturgy in General* – Excellence in the Liturgy; *Sacraments* – Holy Eucharist, Confession and Indulgences)[15] | Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant decrease in the number of regular and Sunday Masses at the shrine. | The decrease in Masses also leads to the decrease in the number of lay liturgical ministers present during shrine activities. | Caution is noted for the pilgrim and the priest who administers the Sacrament of Reconciliation due to the possibility of contracting COVID-19 due to close contact. | The pilgrims are unable to come to the shrine and so they cannot receive the shrine indulgence without being in the church itself. |
| **CENTER OF PROCLAMATION AND WITNESSING** (Preaching; Basic Ecclesial Communities and the Youth; Social Communications)[16] | There is regular, albeit limited, preaching by the priests due to the reduced number of Masses. | There are less programs for the youth at the shrine than before due to the inability of some youth to come. | Some shrines have not initially invested on adequate social communications platforms due to the pre-pandemic onsite presence of pilgrims. | n/a |

[15] cf. Panganiban, 63-68.

[16] cf. Ibid., 69-85.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CENTER OF DEVOTION** (*Popular Piety* – Veneration of the Patron; Silent Prayer; Confraternity/ Movement; and Devotional Programs and Facilities)[17] | Irregularity on the regular day of devotion (e.g. First Saturdays for Marian shrines) for members of the confraternities. | Lack of the premier devotional activities such as devotional dances, processions, and other devotional practices | Lack of use of devotional facilities such as chapels (adoration or devotional chapels), and other prayer facilities, like gardens. | n/a |
| **CENTER OF CATECHESIS** (Ministry for Pilgrims; Venue for Church Events)[18] | The inability of pilgrims to come in large groups for pilgrimages (i.e., *visita iglesia*, pilgrimage seasons) | The inability of formation personnel and staff to come together in a large group for gatherings is noted. | n/a | n/a |
| **CENTER OF SPIRITUAL ECUMENISM** (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; Ecumenical Prayer Services)[19] | At the moment, there are no specific data mentioned for this aspect of Shrinehood. | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| **CENTER OF CHARITABLE WORK** (Pastoral Dialogue and Action; Social Action Center)[20] | The shrine would be a venue where people would find shelter during calamities (e.g., volcano eruption, flood) | Because of the "new normal," there is a slight decrease in visits to social action centers. | n/a | n/a |

[17] cf. Ibid., 86-100.
[18] cf. Ibid., 101 – 105.
[19] cf. Ibid., 106-109.
[20] cf. Ibid., 110-116.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CENTER OF CULTURE** (*Cultures and Inculturation* – Museum/ Gallery; Cultural Preservation; Documenting Heritage)[21] | Due to the lack of a large presence of devotees during the shrine *fiesta*, there is less attention taken for the cultural event. | Shrine museums are unable to attract visitors during the pandemic. | n/a | n/a |

In general, there is a significant impact on the pastoral situation of the shrines in the country due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Bartolome noted:

> The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted dioceses, parishes, and Filipino Catholics at home. While quarantine restrictions are sometimes relaxed, there are still many restrictions on Mass participation, and access to other sacraments and parish activities is still limited in many areas. Safety and health restrictions forced parishes to enhance their media technology potential and ability, and in areas under lockdowns, the use of media was the only option.[22]

However, with the celebration of 500 years of Christianity in the country also came different efforts to create ways to *adjust* the pastoral programs of shrines. These efforts aim to *develop* new initiatives that would create a similar impact to the devotees in order to ensure the sustainability of the devotional practices that they still practice even if they are not in the shrine itself. With this, the Church would maintain an atmosphere of popular piety even if the devotees are confined to their homes or are unable to come to the churches.

[21] cf. Ibid., 117-118.

[22] Roderick Evans M. Bartolome, "Communication leading to Communion: Social Communications in the Digital Culture through the Catholic Church's Engagement in Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic", Ph.D. Diss. (University of the Philippines – Open University, 2021), 101.

## 4. Pastoral Perspectives

With the development of the new media, there has been a transformation in the ways pilgrimage centers have adjusted to the pastoral situation of the country's shrines. As Bartolome pointed out in the case of the ministries for social communications:

> The use of social media by the Church is not entirely something that was brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the current health crisis, the Church has been utilizing the platform to reach its faithful in the realm of the Internet and online media. Various parishes and Church organizations and movements have created and maintained their social media presence for several years now, hoping to reach a younger audience who are more disposed to current technology.[23]

These could be seen in the interviews made with shrine administrators on how they have adjusted to some of the noted challenges with the situation of shrines that have been identified. The ministry of social communications has developed enormously in the age of the pandemic as shrines and other Catholic parishes and institutions have organized and improved their social media platforms, trained their media ministry volunteers, and formed collaborations with other media groups. Here are some of the pastoral perspectives:

| Pastoral Aspect | Situation 1 | Situation 2 | Situation 3 | Situation 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CENTER OF WORSHIP** (*Liturgy in General* – Excellence in the Liturgy; *Sacraments* – Holy Eucharist, Confession and Indulgences) | Although there is a decrease in Masses, the remaining number of Eucharistic celebrations were transmitted through social media platforms for the case of "online Masses" with Spiritual Communion. | Lay liturgical services may have decreased, but the schedules of lay ministers have been adjusted as needed. | Confessions have been made available as the restrictions were loosened. | There are more efforts to promote shrines near the localities of parishioners to focus on the "pilgrimage experience." |

[23] Ibid.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CENTER OF PROCLAMATION AND WITNESSING** (Preaching; Basic Ecclesial Communities and the Youth; Social Communications) | Besides the regular preaching during live-streamed Masses, there are also online reflections by priests on social media platforms | The youth are given the chance to participate in shrine-connected activities, but on small scales due to pandemic restrictions. | Shrines are now emphasizing the need for social communications ministers, equipment, and programs that would invite pilgrims to participate in the activities of the shrine. | n/a |
| **CENTER OF DEVOTION** (*Popular Piety* – Veneration of the Patron; Silent Prayer; Confraternity/ Movement; and Devotional Programs and Facilities) | The regular days of devotions are announced on social media and devotional prayers are available on social media. | Although some devotional practices such as processions or dances still cannot be done on a large scale, they are done on a small scale (motorcades/ processions on church grounds) | Devotional facilities are being used for live streamed devotional activities, wherein participants can join virtually. | Some shrines have opted to bring their pilgrim images to different places in the diocese or around the country for pilgrims to practice their devotional prayers and be led to a spiritual encounter with the Divine. |
| **CENTER OF CATECHESIS** (Ministry for Pilgrims; Venue for Church Events) | Pilgrims are gradually being invited to come in person to shrines as groups, however in small numbers. | Formation is being transferred from onsite assemblies to online meetings and gatherings. | n/a | n/a |
| **CENTER OF SPIRITUAL ECUMENISM** (Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; Ecumenical Prayer Services) | At the moment, there are no specific data mentioned for this aspect of Shrinehood. | n/a | n/a | n/a |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **CENTER OF CHARITABLE WORK** (Pastoral Dialogue and Action; Social Action Center)[24] | In times of calamities, the shrines have been chosen as evacuation centers | With the decrease of pilgrims going to shrines, efforts are made to extend the Church's work outside (i.e., community pantries and outreach programs). | Efforts for the creation of social action centers in shrines have been established either as clinics, soup kitchens, gift sorting rooms, and scholarship program offices. | n/a |
| **CENTER OF CULTURE** (*Cultures and Inculturation* – Museum/Gallery; Cultural Preservation; Documenting Heritage) | *Fiesta* activities have been uploaded or live streamed online for those who are sickly or in need of isolation. | Some shrine museums have been opened gradually. Some cultural committees have resorted to "virtual museum tours." | n/a | n/a |

These solutions may be considered as full or partial given the circumstances. However, due to liturgical and theological difficulties regarding the situation of a "virtual participation" to shrines and pilgrimages, there are certain matters which should always be considered in the future. With the Church in the Philippines' Jubilee of 500 years of Christianity, these pastoral initiatives have become an important way to make the Catholic faith alive not only in the churches of pilgrimage but in the homes of Catholic families as well.

## 5. Conclusion

The shrines in the Philippines are "gifts" as places of pilgrimage. The Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle, as quoted by the bishops of the Philippines, says,

[24] cf. Ibid., 110-116.

"The gift must continue being a gift. If it is kept for oneself, it ceases to be a gift." He added that "by God's mysterious design, the gift of faith we have received is now being shared by the millions of Christian Filipino migrants in the different parts of the world."[25] With this, the Catholic faithful is now being reminded of important factors connected to their faith life despite the challenge of the pandemic. These factors include the following:

**On the part of pilgrims**

- *Having a 'concrete' pilgrimage experience over a 'virtual' one* – Despite the transformation of the regular Sunday Mass into an "online activity" with "teleparticipation" or going on a pilgrimage in the form of a "virtual visit," the Church remains steadfast in the necessity of having a "concrete experience" of pilgrimage. Pope Francis has demonstrated this point by gradually going to pilgrimage churches in Rome to inspire the faithful to go to these places. Praying for the Holy Father is an essential part of the requirements for indulgence at shrines. As Pope Francis mentioned in his historic visit to Iraq, "I am coming as a pilgrim, as a *penitent pilgrim*, to implore from the Lord forgiveness and reconciliation after years of war and terrorism, to beg from God the consolation of hearts and the healing of wounds." He added, "I am coming among you also as a *pilgrim of peace*, to repeat the words: '*You are all brothers and sisters'* (Matthew 23:8)."[26]

- *Going back to the normal celebration of the Holy Eucharist* – The Eucharist is often participated online now by a number of Filipino Catholics, with the actual Communion being replaced by praying an "act of spiritual communion." But as the pandemic gradually decreases, Catholics are now being called to return to the churches, to receive the actual Communion. This is one of the three essential requirements for indulgence at shrines.

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[25] *Pastoral Letter Celebrating the 500th Year of Christianity in the Philippines,* Ibid.

[26] Pope Francis, "Video Message of the Holy Father Francis prior to his Apostolic Visit to Iraq", *Apostolic Journey to Iraq* (March 5-8, 2021), no. 3 (accessed: February 13, 2022) https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_2021-0304_videomessaggio-iraq.html.

- *Going back to Confession* – To complete the three essential requirements for an indulgence at a shrine, one must also come to the priest for confession. However, fear brought about by the pandemic has developed into a disinterest or an attitude towards the sacrament of reconciliation as something unnecessary or not a priority. Now Catholics are called to fill once again the confession rooms. This is also one of the three essential requirements for indulgence at shrines with the last being a prayer for the intention of the Pope.

- *We appreciate the shrines close to home* – With the recognition of 263 shrines in the Philippines as of February 2022, there are many pilgrimage centers that are now present in different places across the archipelago.[27] Although some are not as famous as Quiapo, Manaoag, Antipolo, or Cebu City, there are shrines that have the same privileges as these churches just around the corner. If it is an era of the pandemic and there is a need for pilgrimage, these places would be vital to one's pilgrimage experience.

**On the part of shrine administrators and promoters**

- *Expanding the influence of the shrines by "going outside"* – Since a shrine is fixed in a certain place, the influence of devotion of a shrine is sometimes limited to the region where it is located. However, with the need to introduce the shrine's devotion to other places outside the area where the shrine patron or activities of veneration to the saint or title of Christ or Mary are often witnessed. More places that are unfamiliar to the devotion could be visited through out-of-the-door programs such as pilgrim image visits or appointing "pilgrim centers" in different regions (like a parish being designated as a place of pilgrimage of common devotion, i.e., shrines of the Black Nazarene designated in the Philippines outside Metro Manila).

- *Improve the use of social communication* – The means of social communication have been seen throughout the experiences

[27] cf. Panganiban, 269. In the list provided by the author, there are 249 shrines. However, with the churches designated as shrines or basilicas in later 2021 and early 2022, there are at present 263 shrines in the country.

documented in this paper. Even if the pandemic passes, it is important for shrines to continue to use these media in order to reach out further to devotees who are still unable to come to the shrines or are outside the region of influence of the shrine.

- *Charity will always be available in the shrine* – Although charity programs are held inside the shrine, these places of pilgrimage now focus on outreach activities. There are now shrine social action initiatives being held outside of the community with donations to places afflicted by calamity, and those in need of support due to the pandemic, among many functions.

With these factors, shrine administrators and devotees are able to acknowledge that shrines in the Philippines are "gifts." It is a gracious blessing that the shrines of the Philippines are present as signs of the lively faith of Filipinos after 500 years and despite the challenges of the pandemic.

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# *BOOK REVIEWS*

**Kanchan K. Malik and Vinod Pavarala (Eds.). *Community Radio in South Asia: Reclaiming the Airwaves*. London and New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xvi, 294. ISBN 978-0-367-52058-8 (paper).**

The editors and authors of this collection define community radio in both negative and positive terms. Negatively, community radio stands apart from government broadcasting (even public service broadcasting) and commercial radio. Positively, community radio is radio rooted in local communities, broadcasting to limited areas in attempts to provide a voice for the local community and to reach the people that other radio does not reach, particularly to supply them with information on sustainability and development. Bhat indicates "four broad models identified for the framing of community media: Serving the community, providing an alternative to mainstream media, acting as part of civil society, and offering a rhizomatic approach, the latter denoting a flexible, non-linear, fluid, and slightly anarchic approach to community media" (p. 117). Manchi adds that community radio "serves important archival and mnemonic functions for the community" (p. 233). All of the contributors to this collection agree on "the centrality of community voice" (Sen, p. 168) as a defining characteristic.

Beyond that key aspect, community radio represents a number of different things in its different instantiations throughout the world. The editors describe its characteristics in South Asia, "Over the years, community radio (CR) has gained credence worldwide as an alternative to the mainstream broadcast media, as an entity owned and managed by marginalized groups, and as a tool for sustaining development, giving voice to the voiceless and contributing towards strengthening the communication rights of people" (p. 1).

This book tells the story of community radio in four South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The three parts of the book focus on policy (discussed country by country), issues in practice, and case studies. In effect, however, each of the chapters touches on these topics to one degree or another. The first section

presents very helpful background on the introduction of community radio in the four countries, focusing not only on policy issues but also on the history of setting up the stations. The second section calls attention to particular challenges such as the role of NGOs, radio spectrum management, the introduction of somewhat advanced technologies into rural communities, the role of women, the possibilities of community radio for disaster response, and issues of sustainability. The third section (the case studies) offers a good deal of practical suggestions to address challenges such as conflicts in the communities, assessment of the stations, and the practices of democracy.

Writing about policy issues in Sri Lanka, M. C. Rasmin and W. A. D. P Wanigasundera offer a comment that could well apply to the whole region, "Policy is not just licensing alone. It is accepting community radio as a fundamental necessity and alternative democratic means to address voice concerns, demonstrating the legal commitment of the nation to foster the 'medium,' ensuring the survival of the community radio sector as well as its autonomy and Independence, and enabling a convenient licensing process" (p. 89).

Many of the contributors agree on the challenges community radio stations face throughout the region, although these appear in different guises in different countries. They include restrictive legislation, weak infrastructure, a lack of information exchange and support, little cross-regional exchange, and few media models or networks (Sen, p. 179–180). These lead to issues of sustainability for the stations: social sustainability (tied to community support and participation), institutional sustainability (policy, democratic processes, management style, etc.), and financial sustainability (Ramakrishnan & Arora, p. 186–187).

The communication for development perspective, supported by various NGOs and resting on a long tradition of communication research guides the set up and operations of many community radio stations. However, this perspective, particularly in India, is not without its problems. Pavarala identifies several unintended consequences of the connection between community radio and NGOs. NGOs do not always observe what he calls "non-negotiable principles" of community radio, that is "community participation, autonomy from the state and

the market, and independent programming that is free from extraneous pressures" (p. 103–104). Community radio itself, like all technologies introduced into a community, "reconfigures power relations in a community's life" (Manchi, 232), including those of sponsoring NGOs or communication scholars. This is not to say that such problems affect every instance of community radio but to identify issues to which scholars should attend. Similar calls for more careful study arise with the allocation of spectrum for community stations, although spectrum allocation is simplified in some ways due to the low-power nature of the stations. Finally, the technology itself can lead to other dependencies since the nature of radio technologies demands a certain sophistication that may lie beyond the abilities of local community members (Babu, p. 133).

*Community Radio in South Asia* provides a thoughtful and challenging overview of (and introduction to) community radio in circumstances and regions quite different from its other use in Latin America and Africa. The book is well worth the time spent with it and should appeal to those interested in communication for development, communication technology, democratization, and community development.

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**Ismail Fajrie Alatas. *What is Religious Authority? Cultivating Islamic Community in Indonesia.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics, xvi + 268 pp. ISBN: 9780691204314 (paper).**

The book investigates the past and present of Islam and Ḥaḍramī diaspora in the Indonesian archipelago. In general, it offers theoretical approaches to Islamic studies and the anthropology of Islam, drawing some groundbreaking anthropological insights to provide a new understanding of what constitutes Islamic religious authority and community. By challenging some theoretical paradigms within the comparative study of Islam, the book shows how religious leaders unite diverse aspects of life and contest differing Muslim perspectives to create distinctly Muslim communities in Indonesia.

Ismail Fajrie Alatas is an assistant professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies and History at New York University. He obtained his Ph.D. in anthropology and history from the University of Michigan, an M.A. in history from the National University of Singapore, and a B.A. (Hons.) in history from the University of Melbourne. Trained as both an anthropologist and a historian he has written extensively on Sufism, the Ḥaḍramī diaspora in Southeast Asia, and Islamic religious authority. Despite being born into a Ḥaḍramī family in Indonesia, as a child, he did not grow up among the Ḥaḍramī communities and scholars. At the age of 13, his parents sent him to Australia for high school and college.

Taking readers from the 18th century to the present day, Alatas traces the movement of Muslim saints and scholars from Ḥaḍramawt to Indonesia and looks at how they traverse complex cultural settings while opening new channels for the transmission of Islamic teachings (p. 27). The book describes the rise to prominence of Indonesia's leading Sufi master and preacher Habib Luthfi bin Yahya (b. 1947). Drawing on several theoretical interlocutors such as, among others, Hanna Arendt, Bruno Latour, Talal Asad, and Louis Althusser, Alatas navigates between ethnography and history as well as the histories of diaspora and migration, transnational and multi-sited ethnography, and new theoretical and methodological openings in Islamic studies.

The book, therefore, is the result of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in and beyond Pekalongan, Central Java, in 2011-2012, as well as a long meticulous study of the biographies, hagiographies, networks, and communities of its interlocutors and historical subjects. The book is divided into two parts. The first part, 'authority in motion,' contains three chapters; the second 'assembling authority' has four chapters, in addition to an introduction and an epilogue.

Alatas found that Habib Luthfi was just one among several Muslim actors with various orientations who were actively cultivating the Islamic community in Pekalongan. These actors often clashed over legitimacy, followers, and limited resources. Although they may show some respect, most members of one community do not recognize the authority of other community leaders, nor take their word seriously. Some people, however, may actively follow more than one leader. Each of the community leaders claims to transmit the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, presenting them as *sunna* (prophetic tradition) or a model for action. Each exhibited some recognizable form of connection to the prophetic past, whether bloodline, textual mastery, Sufi genealogy, or chain of *ḥadīth* transmission which allows them to represent the past as a model for others in an authoritative manner.

What Alatas found particularly interesting is that the manifestation of the *sunna* in this community is, in some cases, similar everywhere but in other cases varied. These actors are performing a work of alteration, selection, and translation that is inextricably linked to their audience. And what one community considers as *sunna* may not be so to another. Others may even call it a *bidʿa* (innovations in religious matters). Alatas also found that cultivating an Islamic community demands continuous labor. This includes teaching, delivering lectures, receiving guests at home, visiting members of the community, attending to their various worries and problems, offering help or consolation, establishing and refurbishing physical sites of the congregation, organizing ritual gatherings, fundraising, formalizing relationships through Sufi rituals and others. This ongoing labor takes place in a crowded, competitive environment. Alatas then came to the central question of his research; how authority as an unstable relationship is formed, maintained, questioned, and challenged, and how those contingencies shape Islam as a historical and sociological reality.

Through his fieldwork in and beyond Pekalongan and his reading of the textual materials, Alatas could see some forms of continuity and changes in inculcating religious authority among many actors. He situates Habib Luthfi in a longer history of Islamic transmission that links Ḥaḍramawt and Java. The structure of the book shows this intellectual and geographical trajectory of Habib Luthfi in a kind of temporal movement between two different moments: contemporary ethnography and historical ethnography or writing. In this way, Alatas can observe a constant dynamic interaction between religion as a textual ideal or religion as a textually defined corpus with religion as a lived social reality.

In the book's introduction, Alatas argues that "there is no one common, global Islamic community, or *umma*. Instead, there have always been, historically, many communities, each revolving around a different articulation of the *sunna*" (p. 3). He proposes a theoretical claim that the study of Islam and Islamization should not proceed based on the assumption that a single 'Islam' has radiated out from its 'central lands' (p. 6) through a culturally purified or abstracted Islamic normativity that interacts with local culture' (p. 11).

In chapter 1, Alatas looks at different configurations of Islamic community or *jamāʿa* that had historically emerged in Java and Ḥaḍramawt. For Java, he looks at the *perdikans,* the free and autonomous villages led by a Muslim scholar or saint, and the *kraton*, the Javanese royal. For the Ḥaḍramawt, he looks at *ṭarīqa* or Sufi order that emerged among the elites of the urban centers, and the *ḥawṭa* or sacred sanctuaries in tribal hinterlands. Each of these figurations of *jamāʿa* revolved around particular figures of authority with the scholars, Sufi masters, saints, or sultans who were recognized by members of the community as connectors to the prophetic past and living embodiments and perfect purveyors of prophetic teachings.

Chapter 2 looked at the 17th/18th century Ḥaḍramī Bā ʿAlawī Sufi scholar, ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAlawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1720), who came up with a new mode of articulatory labor that has sustained a vision of an objectified and culturally Islam, and who was reacting to the prolonged political instability in the Ḥaḍramawt and the perceived inability of Islam to serve as a common mode of thought. The chapter shows how

a vision of an objectified Islam emerged through a particular mode of 'articulatory labor' (*passim*) that is less tied to authoritative figures and through the convergence of several mobilities that came to form a synergy at a particular point in time.

Chapter 3 traces the development of Islamic communities established by Ḥaddādian scholars and continues to look at this articulative labor of migrating Ḥaddādian scholars in the late 19th and early 20th century Java. It focuses on the case of Aḥmad b. ʿAbdallāh al-ʿAṭṭās (d. 1929) who arrived in Pekalongan around 1876. Al-ʿAṭṭās is just one among several Ḥaddādian scholars from this period who enjoyed posthumous famous as a saint and who cultivated communities that developed into saintly dynasties.

Chapter 4 follows the biography of Habib Lutfi and his labor of cultivating the Islamic community. Habib Lutfi does not come from any esteemed scholarly family background. And unlike his fellow Ḥaḍramī who usually travel to the Ḥaḍramawt or Mecca to be recognized as a credible connector to the prophetic past by embedding himself in an established genealogical chain, such as a genealogy of Sufi initiation or chain of *ḥadīth* and other textual chains, Habib Lutfi traveled across Java in search of teachers who could connect him to the prophetic past. The chapter shows how an inspiring scholar like Habib Luthfi may assume a position of authority by tapping into different genealogies, networks, and itineraries of Islamic transmission.

Chapter 5 focuses on the infrastructural underpinnings of Habib Lutfi's articulatory labor. It deals with a Sufi order or the *ṭarīqa* as an ordering mechanism that transforms volatile networks into a durable and hierarchical relationship between master and disciple. As a Sufi master, Habib Lutfi was able to employ the Sufi order as a mechanism to stabilize and legalize his relationship with his followers through the practice of by oath of allegiance (p. 143). In this sense, Sufi order can be understood as an ordering mechanism, made-up of networks and infrastructure.

Chapter 6 on politics describes Habib Luthfi's relationships with different actors and institutions of the Indonesian state, and how

he used the state as an "infrastructure of religious authority" (p. 164). It focuses particularly on his militarized *mawlīd* or celebration of the prophet's birthday together with the military officers. This proliferating militarized *mawlīd* becomes a site where Habib Luthfi was able to transmit his interpretation of Islam to an increasingly broader audience even in places that were formerly hostile to him.

Chapter 7 turns to Habib Luthfi's labor of recovering Indonesia's saintly past by identifying old graves and saintly tombs, building new mausoleums, providing them with recognizable histories and genealogies, and instituting a commemorative ritual. Building new mausoleums, in particular, "form[s] an interconnected spatial network that serves as a material attestation of Habib Luthfi's saintly talk" (p. 201).

The epilogue reiterates the book's postulate of Islam as a sociological achievement or the outcome of historically contingent and culturally embedded articulatory labor. Alatas proposes a way of thinking about Islam's universality as a 'concrete universality,' which is, 'the labor of articulating the *sunna* and the community as an ongoing process,' thereby 'reproduces various social realizations of Islam, each of which is particular and may differ from others... but all are historically connected to, and developed from, one foundational moment of Prophetic labor' (p. 214).

Alatas argues that despite the presence of common doctrines and practices of Islam in particular historical settings, its universality cannot be identified 'as an essence nor a particular outlook integral to the religion,' but as a historical development that involves 'contingent processes of reproduction and extension across time and space,' and at the heart of which is 'the labor of human actors' who 'reproduce Islam in their own way by performing different modes of articulatory labor' (p. 214).

The book sets an excellent example on how to think of Islam's universality as an object of historical and ethnographic inquiry and of the perennial or ongoing process taken by the varied Muslim actors globally in cultivating the normative teaching of the Prophet Muhammad through articulatory labors. The book represents a groundbreaking contribution

to the history of Islam in Indonesia, particularly of religious authority, through a rare combination of prolonged ethnographic fieldwork and an elaborate theorized historical and anthropological analysis. The book will certainly find its ways to become an important reference in the historical and anthropological study of Islam and religious authority in Indonesia from the premodern to the present times.

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**Eric Hoenes Del Pinal, Marc Roscoe Loustau, and Kristin Norget, eds. *Mediating Catholicism: Religion and Media in Global Catholic Imaginaries.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 245 pp. ISBN: 978-1-3502-2817-7.**

As part of a series titled "New Directions in the Anthropology of Christianity," this book brings together perspectives from all over the world on the religious use of media and the mediation of religion, particularly in the case of the Catholic Church. Coming in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many faith communities to make use of modern communications media to continue to provide spiritual care to their adherents despite health restrictions, this welcome volume provides invaluable insights on this increasingly important and emerging area in the contemporary dynamics of religion.

Building upon the principle of the Incarnation, Catholicism has always been a religion very much at home with mediation and mediatization. One of the articles in this book aptly calls this juxtaposition of religion and media a "pleonasm" since religion always involves mediation in one form or the other. Aside from the seven sacraments, vibrant and colorful expressions of popular piety in various places around the globe enflesh invisible realities by means of sensible signs. With the advent of modern technology, mediation takes on a distinct dimension, which this book explores, this time from the perspective of communication instead of systematic theology or sacramentology.

In the first article titled, "Mediatizing Holy Week: Guatemalan Catholic Experiments with Radio and Facebook," Eric Hoenes del Pinal reflects on two experiences of using modern media to promote traditional Lenten observances in Guatemala: first in 2005 using FM radio and second in 2020 using social media at the height of the pandemic. His riveting and holistic analysis involves not only the use of technology or other communicative elements but also encompasses the sociological factors at play, such as commercial and economic interests, that are equally important to understand the way these media platforms operate.

Next, Katherine Dugan's "NFP Online: The Mutable Religious Space of Social Media" traces the experiences of a Catholic Facebook

group made up of couples who have been using or are trying to use Natural Family Planning. Here we see the dynamics of Web 2.0 or the so-called 'social media' that brings together people of similar interests or concerns in online communities, more popularly known as social networks. Looking deep into the group's exchanges where practical and technical matters such as menstrual cycles coalesce with faith convictions, she examines it deftly from the framework of three tensions that she identified in this virtual religious space: intimacy and anonymity; vulnerability and authority; the exceptional and ordinary.

From Africa, we have Ludovic Lado's "The Stakes of Catholic Media Practices in Chad." Here he probes the local Catholic Church's use of media in comparison with the practice of other faith communities in the area. What he discovers is a deficit in engagement, especially when it comes to newer forms of media such as the Internet. He then proceeds to analyze this in a brief but incisive manner revolving mainly on the horizontal nature of online communication versus the Catholic Church's traditionally vertical disposition.

Marc Roscoe Loustau's chapter, "'This station only runs on love': Post-bureaucratic Evangelism in a Transylvanian Catholic Media Organization" looks into the experience of Radio Maria Transylvania, an affiliate of The World Family of Radio Maria which is present in over seventy countries around the world. Tracing the success of what is now "one of Romania's largest Hungarian-language broadcasters" in a highly ambivalent climate that seems to stifle but at the same time support religious expression, this very interesting article, filled with many anecdotes, explores the management aspect of Catholic broadcasting where effective business practices combined with the values of Christian leadership and service.

Meanwhile, Hillary Kaell's "A Touch of Love: On Words, Things and the Global Aspirations of U.S. Catholics" investigates the entextualization of the word "love" and how it is used particularly in the sponsorship materials of Unbound, the largest Catholic sponsorship organization in the United States. Here she tries to understand how the use of the word love, beyond being an effective way to bolster sponsorship appeals, is able to shape a certain theology of sponsorship

in the process. Aside from this, a section of the article explores the organization's relationship with the institutional Church, and the role of media in its dynamics, which is certainly of interest to any Catholic organization.

Julius Bautista's contribution titled "Religious Celebrities and the Expansion of Suffering in the Philippines and Timor-Leste" analyzes how the celebrification of religious figures like Bishop Belo of Timor-Leste and the transformation of religious events such as Lenten crucifixion rituals in the Philippines into a media spectacle often "flattens" them to a formulaic narrative that barely does justice to their deeper existential, spiritual and moral aspects. In this intriguing ethnography, Bautista takes a critical look at the way media can sometimes distort religious subjects when it covers them without enough rigor, depth, and nuance or usurps them for various agenda.

Afterward, we have Thomas Csordas' article, "Exorcism in the Media" which touches on the Catholic ritual of driving out demons, frequently portrayed in different forms of media especially in horror films, at times even based on actual events. In particular, this article focuses on two documentaries that feature exorcists, as it analyzes and later on compares their treatment of exorcism.

We also have "Abundance and the Late Capitalist Imagination: Catholicism and Fashion at the Metropolitan Museum" by Elayne Oliphant. In this very keen and insightful article, she reflects on the highly phenomenal yet equally controversial 2018 exhibit at the Met, titled, "Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination." Her discussion centers on the notion of abundance, which, as it turns out, can be a curious meeting place for Catholicism – at least in its sense of fashion as in bygone days – and today's capitalist and consumerist culture.

Penultimately, Kristin Norget's "Miraculous Sovereignties: Mediation and the Señor de los Milagros in Lima, Peru" inquires into the cult of the famed image of Christ in Peru and how grand spectacles such as these, beyond being "merely religious" can also be mediations of power and instruments of its legitimation and consolidation. In what she

terms as the "theopolitics of the miraculous," Norget's rich and detailed ethnography of the largest Catholic procession in Latin America if not the whole world delves into the not-so-subtle political undercurrents at work in this sacred event.

Last but not least, we have Luis Mauro Sá Martino's "The Mediatization of Catholicism: Some Challenges and Remarks" as a fitting close to the volume, where he highlights certain insights and questions that he had while reading the earlier essays. An especially interesting section of his chapter dwells on the figure of Brazilian charismatic priests, Father Marcelo Rossi and Father Fábio de Melo who rose in popularity due to the way they engaged with media and popular culture.

Overall, this book, which comes at a very exciting time when faith communities are at various levels of discovering, exploring, and maximizing the media at their disposal, would be a great addition to any library as an indispensable resource when it comes to the field of religion and society, especially under the aspect of communication. It certainly helps that the book is written in a way that is accessible and engaging not only for scholars and academics but also for communicators and pastors for whom they would surely be of much interest and help.

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**Minabere Ibelema. *Cultural Chauvinism*: *Intercultural Communication and the Politics of Superiority*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 154 pp. ISBN: 9780367710026 (paper).**

In the closing paragraph of the book's preface, Ibelema defined cultural chauvinism as "the tendency of people of the world to think of themselves as superior to others and, therefore, more valuable." He also added in the said section that "it is a tendency that manifests in matters of religion, social values, political culture, and even the extent that others are deemed human." The different manifestation of cultural chauvinism was discussed historically until it led to understanding its primary contribution to the politics of superiority and recognition.

Ibelema, a Nigerian professor of communication, explicitly shows his field of expertise by how the book is written. It is conversational; thus, an easy read. The term chauvinism itself can be traced to a fictional character with an extreme form of nationalism. The reason why chauvinism was used might speak of the author's relation in the field of communication with the origin of the word. An anthropologist might have easily used the term ethnocentrism.

Nonetheless, the historical communication of events makes it even easier to understand the points raised in each chapter. In the later chapters, the contents become more philosophical but still comprehensible enough for any reader from any field of specialization. However, one would have an easier understanding of Fukuyama when he was associated with the German thinkers if they had a background in the different philosophers. For instance, Fukuyama speaks of the ascendancy of liberal democracy due to its capability to resolve conflict in nature (p. 101). He can be understood more with Hegel with his basic idea of the cycle of thesis and anti-thesis, which is profoundly historical. They would be seen with their common point on the cycle of history and that it would come to the point of saturation, the "end of history" for Fukuyama and the "absolute spirit" for Hegel. Hobbes being linked to Fukuyama could be better understood regarding their similarities and nuances in their Political Theories/Philosophies. Nevertheless, the author made the issue of the history of superiority and struggle easier to comprehend.

In the first chapters, Ibelema exposed how cultural chauvinism is engrained in both the cultures of the west and east. Though it appears in the exposition, it is not the entire west to be recognized as that which Ibelema is exposing in the aspect of western supremacy. Instead, it could only be America, the Atlantic, and the United Kingdom. This observation also goes with Jan Nederveen Pieterse, one of the book's reviewers. The sequence of the different chapters shows the alternating manifestation of chauvinism from both the west and non-west. The multicentric focus of the discussions opens a clear understanding of the constant remarks and prejudice of the west and the east, particularly Asians, toward each other. The prejudices are exemplified by how the different political leaders express their beliefs, ideals, and objectives from direct quotations from reputable newspapers. The book, from chapters 1-8, is an eye-opener to the many realities of chauvinism in both west and non-west settings. It is basically about the distinction of which is western and which is not in views that are usually untoward and mostly accusations. It is a reality happening on both micro and macro scale. One can immediately relate to the situations being cited in the book.

I, for one, easily related to the reality of cultural chauvinism with my experiences as a Kankanaey native here in the Philippines. We are usually regarded as inferior due to our "barbaric" way of living in the mountainous regions of Cordillera from the perspective of other cultural and ethnic groups in the Philippines, thus uncivilized. Yet, we also have our version of superiority when we regard visitors as those who are always law violators and immodest dressers. In more particular regard, the assertion of superiority between the Kankanaeys and Ibalois, another indigenous group in the Cordillera in the North Central Region of the Philippines, can also be the point of chauvinism on a micro-scale. On the macro scale, I can also relate to the discussions of Ibelema in Chapters 2-8: *Democracy is Western, All things modern are Western, All things nefarious are non-Western, The hell of war is non-Western, All things decadent are non-Western, and Immodest dressers and desecraters*. The views I hold against the west go the same as what Ibelema is speaking. Those which are the bias of the east to the west. This can quickly go with other readers.

A section on Kagame doctrine and other African issues (i.e.,

Biafra Civil War) worth noting was also provided. It is a critical perspective that needs to be emphasized considering the topic of cultural chauvinism. The provided issues, vis-à-vis the "western" bias of press freedom, shed light on the reality that both parties have contributed to the problems with press freedom. In the discussion of press freedom, Ibelema debunked the idea that "Democracy is western" and press freedom. The RSF (Reporters Without Borders) released the first index in 2002, indicating the US is 17th among 137 countries. The US, then, ranked 44th in 2005 among 167 countries. In 2019, the US was 48th out of 180 countries (p. 69). The generic claim that "press freedom and democracy are western" is a myth. The observed restrictions of the press in some Asian countries do not totally equate to the absence of press freedom and democracy in the east and, thus, its exclusive presence in the west, or America in particular.

Also in line with press freedom is the claim that corruption is non-western, which implies that corruption is not the practice of the west. However, Ibelema shows supporting data that says otherwise. The European Union had been facing challenges on corruption as well, according to Anderson Perry as cited by Ibelema. Corruption cannot be used as a reason for one to assert superiority and recognition because it is present in every institution, thus in every country. It just differs with the level. The quoted paragraph below exposes such.

> France happens to be one of the three pillars of the EU, the others being Germany and Italy. In Transparency International's Index of Perception of Corruption, Germany (9th) is the only one of the three countries to rank in the Top 10. With a score of 69 out of 100, France tied with the United States at 23rd. This is behind the non-Western countries of the United Arab Emirates and Uruguay. Italy has a score of 53 and ranking of 51st, tied with Grenada, Malaysia, Rwanda, and Saudi Arabia. Among the non-Western countries scoring higher are Barbados, Botswana, and Cape Verde. (pp.35-36)

In the later chapters, the deep historical rootedness of cultural chauvinism is unveiled. It comes from the constant struggle for recognition and superiority. Some significant turns in history seemingly intensified the assertion of superiority, like the Renaissance, the Enlightenment,

Magna Carta, and industrialization. These are good backgrounders of some countries' direction towards being the most powerful who can, to much extent, dictate the world economy and the world as a whole.

However, some things may seem to be the point of criticism in the book. These are on the issues of political convergence, the primary driving force of democracy (French Enlightenment or the Magna Carta?), and the "western" Ibelema seen in the last chapters.

Ibelema, citing Fukuyama again, anticipates a political convergence on liberal democracy driven primarily by globalization. Political convergence is coming into a common ground of different political perspectives with an expected compromise. While it is possible, it should not be seen as "westernization." Sticking to the idea that globalization is western as well would contribute to unending cultural chauvinism. If an Asian country pushed for freedom and egalitarianism, it should not be called upholding "western values." It should be seen as a drive for self-determination and actualization. It is not the east being assimilated into the western culture. Also, sticking to Fukuyama pointing out liberal democracy as the point of saying it is the end of history is debatable. Ibelema admits the number of criticisms to Fukuyama on this point. A point worth considering here is that Fukuyama, being followed by Ibelema, is in favor of the evil things (like new forms of cultural chauvinism) in democracy because it is seen as perfect as if there is nothing already that can transcend it. Is it?

The Magna Carta is, accordingly, the seminal document on democracy. However, many critics of Ibelema state that an earlier major event led to the realization of democracy – that is, the French Enlightenment. Ibelema correctly points out the first document (Magna Carta). However, the French Enlightenment is also of the same importance. On the other stance, sociological and anthropological perspectives should also be worth noting to unearth human dynamics that have impacted the turn to democracy. Philosophical views are included, though only on the leaning of Fukuyama, which Ibelema used. Other philosophical perspectives, especially anthropological philosophy, might as well work to extract more reasons to explain the phenomena of democracy and the possibility or existence of political convergence.

On the last note, it can be understood that the book is an exposition rather than a thesis that would provide possible solutions or mitigations to the intensifying cultural chauvinism (impacting all aspects of human living). However, it appears from the words of Ibelema that there is nothing that can be done about it. He states there that the world can be better if the impulses weaken. The point of acceptance there is Ibelema portraying a western perspective. That is also shown in the interpretation of Fukuyama of Nietzsche, which Ibelema cited. Accordingly, the ideal society is where people are driven by "Megalothymia," or the desire to be recognized as better than others. From these closing statements in the book by Ibelema, there is an acceptance that the world is what it is – the prevalence of cultural chauvinism. After all, it was a "Western" Ibelema talking in the book.

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## Submission Guidelines

**RELIGION AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION** is the semiannual scholarly journal of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) based at St. John's University, Bangkok, Thailand. The ARC aims to:

- Facilitate, support and publish research on subjects related to Religion and Social Communication in Asia;
- Promote related publications in the field;
- Develop a network of interested researchers and institution;
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**Author guidelines:**

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- Manuscripts may be in the range of 1,000-1,500 words for book reviews; 3,000-4000 words for essays; and 6,000-8,000 words for research articles.
- Submissions should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 16th edition, 2010 for in-text citing, footnotes and bibliography; avoid excessively long footnotes.
- Include an abstract of 200-250 words (for research articles)

and 100-150 words (for essays) and keywords below the main title of the article.

- A short biographical note will appear in connection with your article. Please supply your name, position, institutional affiliation, and any pertinent data (about 50 words) such as publications and professional experience that you wish included at the end of your submission.
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- Although the journal gives special attention to the Asian religious and cultural contexts, we also accept papers that address the global milieu and local contexts outside of Asia.
- Both British and American English are accepted as long as one or the other is consistently used throughout the entire paper.
- Main text – 12 pt. font; footnote – 10 pt. font; single-spaced between words, only one space at end of sentence; single space between paragraphs; no justification
- All illustrations, figures, and tables are placed within the text at the appropriate points, rather than at the end.
- Submit all documents as WORD file.

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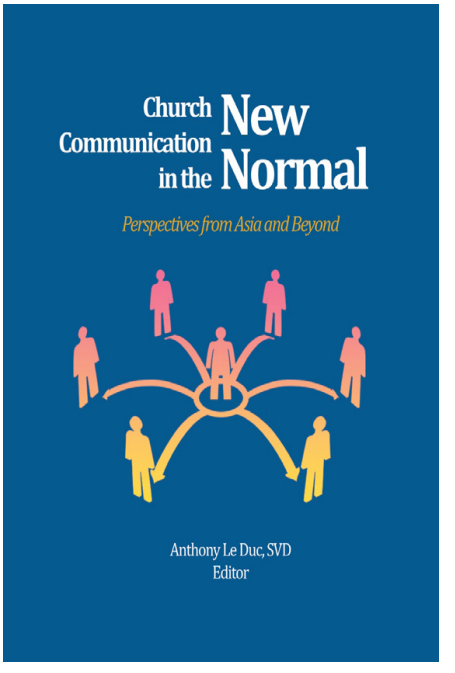


## *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*

Edited by Anthony Le Duc, SVD (2022)

COVID-19 has devastated many Asian countries causing untold deaths and destroying their economies and social relations, especially among the poor, who could not have access to vaccines. The virus has also severely disturbed the rhythm of Church life, particularly in worship and daily Christian activities. While the pandemic is still causing long-term havoc in Asia, it has introduced a 'new normal' into the continent. Church Communication in the New Normal, a collection of essays written by Asian social scientists, theologians, and pastoral agents, is the first volume that deals with how the Church in Asia can resume its prophetic mission, liturgical worship, and pastoral ministry in times of pandemic and post-pandemic. I enthusiastically recommend this volume, a fruit of profound scholarship and pastoral sensitivity, not only to all who live and work in Asia but also to those living on other continents, both Christians and followers of other religions, who work for human flourishing.

***Peter C. Phan***
*The Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought*
*Georgetown University, USA*

This fascinating volume helpfully combines compelling case studies of the Church responses to the pandemic from throughout Asia with analyses examining the opportunities and challenges offered by the pandemic both to Church communication and to the self-understanding of the Church. It should be essential reading for pastoral ministers, scholars, and communication officers.

***Paul A. Soukup, S.J.***
*Santa Clara University, USA*

Church Communication in the New Normal does timely and important scholarly work exploring the across-the-board emergence of faith communication as an essential aspect of ministry. Using COVID-19 as an overall case study, each chapter of Church Communication in the New Normal demonstrates the integral role of communication in the way a community of faith gathers, worships and extends care. The book also showcases creative directions for ministry in light of the pandemic experience, all the while rooting the study contextually across a variety of cultural locations both distinct but common, especially from the perspective of faith. This book is an essential addition to global scholarly reflection on pastoral communication.

***Daniella Zsupan-Jerome***
*Saint John's University School of Theology and Seminary, USA*

The book can be downloaded free from the ARC website at: https://asianresearchcenter.org/blog/arc-books/new-book-church-communication-in-the-new-normal-perspectives-from-asia-and-beyond

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