

MULTI-FAITH INITIATIVES ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: ASSESSING RELEVANT ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR COOPERATIVE ACTION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

The present study has two primary objectives, the first being a focus on why the term “ multi-faith dialogue” seems more relevant than “interfaith dialogue,” and the second being a short account of some relevant (semi) multi-faith dialogical initiatives and their related cooperative actions for ecological sustainability. By surveying the available resources, the current research attempts to ensure readers are familiar with activities largely unexplored by contemporary scholars. In so doing, it will enrich the current discourse on the environmental crisis in light of multi-faith dialogical and collaborative initiatives.

Introduction

In different multi-faith dialogical initiatives and programs, some faith leaders, spiritual persons, religious scholars, theologians, and clerics (e.g., Azizan Baharuddin, Esther Sarojini Daniel, M Bala Thamalingam and K.V. Soon among others), are involved in working together to alleviate the current ecological crisis. In so doing, religious and spiritual traditions are also mutually illuminated, and at the same time, faith communities are becoming more hospitable to one another, despite their theological disputes and cultural demarcations. More significantly, such activities allow and inspire faith leaders (e.g., Rabbi Warren Stone, Sister Ilia Delia and Imam Yahya Hendi, to note just a few) and practitioners to share their respective religious and spiritual knowledge of nature, as well as their current experiences of environmental degradation, with their counter-parts from other religious and cultural traditions. As a result, some major faith and spiritual traditions are receiving updates and timely interpretations, thereby directing the attention of the communities concerned on a path of sustainable peace with people of diverse cultures, and also peace with the natural world. In this matter, faith and spiritual traditions have an essential role in reaching a solution. In fact, non-religious people and those in secular institutions and organizations do not deny the significant role of faith communities in reconstructing and reforming human attitudes and behavior to ease the present ecological crisis; they appreciate the potential contribution of faith traditions and urge faith communities to work with them in addressing ecological issues. Keeping all these positive ideas in mind, the present study attempts to review the significant contributions of various (semi) multi-faith dialogical organizations on ecological questions and some of their related initiatives to involve people of all classes in a commonly-shared burning issue of our time.



This is not a critical study of these co-operative initiatives. The focus is instead on assessing those objectives and activities that seem significant in addressing environmental issues from a collective perspective.

Why “Multi-faith Dialogue” is a more relevant term than “Interfaith Dialogue”

“Multi-faith dialogue” generally refers to a conversation among religious scholars and practitioners of different religious traditions on some common or specific grounds (Scarboro Missions 2018). While “multi-faith dialogue” is often used as a synonym for “inter-faith dialogue,” there are some basic differences in meaning and application between these two terms. “Interfaith dialogue” implies a dialogue between two faiths, while “multi-faith dialogue” indicates more than two faiths in a systematic conversation. When scholars and practitioners of two faith traditions are engaged in a conversation aimed at reaching some common ground, it is called an “interfaith dialogue,” and when such a conversation is held among scholars and practitioners of more than two faith traditions, it is called a “multi-faith dialogue.”

Both interfaith and multi-faith dialogue apparently serve the same purpose, but in a deeper understanding, they seemingly do not carry the same significance and weight. Scholars such as Roberts and Mullins are critical of the term “interfaith dialogue” and its methodology. Roberts (2012, 19) calls interfaith dialogue in which participants talk with one another about certain issues, but ignore the real truth about their theological differences, “loosey-goosey” (quoted in Saleem 2013). His criticism seems very negative; this could be phrased in a more constructive way. However, he proposes multi-faith dialogue in the place of interfaith dialogue, arguing that “we have fundamental differences, but the best of our faiths teach we should get along” with others for achieving some common purposes (quoted in Saleem 2013). Mullins argues that the term interfaith dialogue, can cause some to become confused about their own religious convictions. They may interpret it as a reason to turn from their exclusive belief systems. Thus a degree of anxiety and fear can be created among the followers of faith traditions when they first hear this term. Mullins’ statement seems partially true, for when interfaith dialogue began in the modern period about forty years ago, this kind of fear worked among the general practitioners of religious faiths, and it took time to dissipate. Moreover, Mullins distinguishes multi-faith dialogue from interfaith dialogue for three reasons: (1) unlike interfaith dialogue, multi-faith dialogue does not lead to misunderstandings about an amalgamation of theological conceptions; instead there is a common ethical understanding of shared problems; (2) multi-faith dialogue has the scope to include conservatives and fundamentalists in the conversation, while this a rarely-considered possibility in interfaith dialogue; and (3) multi-faith dialogue accepts theological exclusivism and promotes social inclusivism, while interfaith dialogue discourages expressions of theological exclusivism and only inspires social inclusivism (Mullins 2011).

From Mullins’ arguments it is clear that multi-faith dialogue engages a broader range of people from different faith traditions than interfaith dialogue. Similarly, Riddell offers clarification about the vast scope of a multi-faith dialogue compared with interfaith dialogue when he states: “inter-faith means between people of different faiths, suggesting two separate sides; whereas multi-faith indicates a space where everyone is welcome, no matter what their belief tradition” (Riddell 2012). It is thus explicit that multi-faith dialogue is broader than interfaith dialogue and covers more topics for discussion among the followers of different faith traditions. Contemporary scholars like Saleem (2013), Riddell (2012), Mullins (2011) and Knitter (1995) advocate multi-faith dialogue for working together, based on certain common purposes, in order to tackle shared problems.

As the present environmental crisis is both a global and local issue, its solution requires a collaborative and combined action plan by peoples from every corner of the world, irrespective of caste, colour, faith, nationality, gender, etc. A dialogue with this purpose should not be limited to

the scholars and practitioners of faith traditions, but should include as many religious and cultural traditions as possible, as well as secular people, public agencies, policy makers, non-governmental organizations, civil society members, businessmen and women, transnational and international organizations, media journalists and so on. The more people included in this process, the greater the force available to reduce environmental problems. To achieve a meaningful dialogue, the current researcher advocates an inclusive approach with a combined working plan. Such dialogue should not be mere gossip over some cups of tea or coffee, which some scholars, for example Roberts (2012, 19) have already questioned; it should instead be a heart-to-heart conversation that leads to cooperation in reforming attitudes presently shaped by materialistic and mechanistic world-views, in favour of an eco-spiritual world-view. Given the present study takes a religious perspective, it is quite reasonable to narrow down the discussion to the dialogical initiatives among people of multifaith cultures.

Collaborative Actions of Multi-faith Organizations

It is worth mentioning that there have already been multi-faith dialogues on environmental issues by scholars, religious leaders and practitioners of different religions. Multi-faith organizations are mostly voluntarily in nature, where clergy, religious leaders and general participants are inspired to work for the betterment of humanity. Below I review some of these organization and their activities to present a clearer picture.

The Cheltenham Area Multi-Faith Council, founded in 2001 in response to the situation in the United States after 9/11, is now working to increase awareness about the essential need for equilibrium between humans and the environment, alongside its main agenda of creating a more tolerant situation for people of all faiths (Epstein 2018). The council was initially formed by Muslims, Jews and Christians, but it works for other religious and cultural traditions, also. Irrespective of creed, colour, gender and ethnicity, local communities participate in its cooperative ventures on programs such as campaigning for recycling and making people conscious of the requirement for ecological equilibrium.

The Southern African Faith Communities' Environmental Institute (SAFCEI), founded in 2005, works with the noble vision of "people of faith caring for living earth" (SAFCEI 2018). SAFCEI aims to support faith leaders and their communities in the region by developing an inner consciousness and a deeper sense of responsibility about leading a balanced life of environmental sustainability. The institute accords the utmost importance to a spiritual feeling for the environment and a moral duty to non-human animals. As part of its routine work, SAFCEI celebrates world day every year with multi-faith leaders and collectively prays for the creation. In the meantime, SAFCEI (2018) has three common bases for ecological equilibrium: (1) the intrinsic value of nature; (2) being respectful in the service of nature; and (3) a sense of interconnectedness with the natural world.

Based on the eternal wisdom of religious and spiritual traditions, the U.S. organization, GreenFaith, founded in 1992 as Partner for Environmental Quality (PEQ), and in 2004 renamed GreenFaith, educates and trains people of multi-faith traditions to work for environmental sustainability (GreenFaith 2018a). Through various successful programs – e.g., faith-based solar initiatives, environmental justice tours and lawsuits, and joint programs with other international and local organizations, GreenFaith has become a global leader in addressing environmental issues (GreenFaith 2018b). With the Multi-Faith Sustainable Living Initiative project, funded by the KR Foundation, GreenFaith works to transform lifestyles among faith communities and to build a world-wide movement for behavior reformation in favor of sustainable living (GreenFaith 2018c).

The Australian Religious Response for Climate Change (ARRCC), founded in 2008, brings members from all major faith traditions of Australia to work collectively to address climate change (ARRCC 2018). Considering climate change a vital moral and spiritual problem for modern human

beings, the ARRCC promotes an ethical and ecologically friendly lifestyle, and advocates climate justice policies from multi-faith approaches (ARRCC 2018). Thirty-five faith-based organizations in Australia have agreed to cooperate with the ARRCC to reduce global warming. Through diverse programs and activities—e.g., negotiation with government and policy makers, publication of newsletters, the fossil fuel investment movement, climate marches, campaigns for lowering individual ecological footprints etc.—this multi-faith environmental organization is playing a noteworthy role in reducing global temperatures (ARRCC 2018).

The U.S. based National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE), founded in 1993, works with scholars of Catholic, Jewish and Protestant traditions on environmental issues by fostering religious voices and making religious practitioners aware of climate change and global warming (NRPE 2018b). The NRPE sees taking care of God's creation as "an inherent part of religious life" (NRPE 2018a). With this core objective, it provides relevant resources in the form of moral guidelines for environmental ethics and focuses on how humans of different faith traditions should act for environmental protection as a God's representatives on earth and as custodians of His beautiful creation. Though NRPE is primarily an alliance of Christian and Jewish environmental groups, it also supports other faith traditions in their efforts to achieve environmental sustainability.

The UK based Eco-Faith, founded in 2007, created "The Big Green Believers' Agreement" to encourage commitment to a more sustainable environment through significant change in lifestyle (Eco-Faith 2018b). This agreement is based on an idea of the common grounds of faith traditions. Eco-Faith realizes peoples of religious and spiritual traditions may differ from one another based on their theological and cultural differences, but they cannot deny their common and shared responsibility to the earth and moral obligation to take care of the environment (Eco-Faith 2018a). From its inception, Eco-Faith has tried to make people conscious of environmental challenges and educate them in how to respond to these from multi-faith traditions.

The Green Pilgrimage Network (GPN) was founded in 2011 by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) and the World Wildlife Federation (WWF) with the noble mission of keeping pilgrimage places green and clean through planting more trees and banning cars. Its members try their best to implement such policies by convincing the relevant authorities and the devotees performing their pilgrimages. In fact, GPN was created as an independent organization in response to the question: "Why are the world's holiest places not the world's cleanest and most cared for places?" (EGPN 2018). In line with this specific purpose, GPN has been working since its inception to keep pilgrimage sites as models of environmentally friendly places, according to the spirit of faith traditions. GPN has selected twenty-eight sacred places across the globe for its pilot project (EGPN 2018). In the meantime, it has produced a number of handbooks, for instance *Green Guide for Hajj* (for Muslims) and *Green Temple Guide* (for Hindus), instructing pilgrims to be attentive about keeping the holy places clean and green while performing their rituals.

Though the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) is basically a secular organization, its initiative in connecting multi-faith traditions with secular bodies in respect of environmental sustainability is considerable (ARC 2018). Since its inception in 1995, the ARC has been working with diverse religious communities, following a policy of be "proud of your own tradition, but humble enough to learn from others" (ARC 2018). Taking a similar approach, it also invites secular environmental groups to work with multi-faith communities for environmental protection. The ARC sees religious and spiritual traditions as campaigners for environmental sustainability, because these groups can protect the natural environment by educating people and developing in them a sense of responsibility. It thus assists faith communities to develop environmental programs in light of their religious teachings and moral imperatives regarding the natural world. More importantly, the ARC brings religiously-based environmental organizations and secular environmental groups together in a platform of mutual understanding in order that they might work collectively to alleviate the present ecological crisis.

Like the ARC, the Center for Earth Ethics (CEE) is a secular body working on environmental sustainability, but its working policy and pattern relate to a multi-faith approach. The CEE connects the global society with local people. It sees that without making a deep connection between global affairs and local interests it is not possible to reshape the economic paradigm from its presently destructive approach to more ecologically sustainable economic activities (CEE 2018a). With this end in view, the CEE seeks to work with multi-faith and indigenous communities among others, and inspire them to disseminate traditional wisdom and a deeper awareness of the human-nature relationship. Through its “Eco-Ministry” program, the CEE brings multi-faith leaders together with secular environmental leaders in a joint initiative to take combined action from local to global levels (CEE 2018b). Likewise, through its “Original Caretakers” initiative, the CEE hears the unheard voices of indigenous communities and brings those sayings into mainstream views of nature (CEE 2018c). Furthermore, the CEE argues that there are some important moral imperatives in indigenous and native people’s cultures and faith traditions that should be exposed and evaluated as significant means of finding our lost connection with the earth.

Religion, Science and the Environment (RSE), founded in 1993, is a UK based Non-Governmental Organization looking for common ground among multi-faith leaders, scientists and environmental activists in order to save the natural environment (RSE 2018a). It tries to create an alliance of faith leaders, professional scientists and environmental NGOs to enhance awareness of the need for ecological equilibrium and implement a combined action plan accordingly. Through its “Symposia Study,” the RSE focuses on the water environment. It arranges to “visit sites of special concern, to meet officials and NGO representatives in the countries visited, to propose solutions, and to initiate schemes or institutions for environmental cooperation and education” (RSE 2018b). The RSE believes that the analytical tools of science and the messages of faith and spiritual traditions of the world should function harmoniously for environmental protection. So far, the RSE has achieved some significant results, for instance, financial commitments from international institutions, and regional cooperation among governments and non-governmental organizations, etc. (RSE 2018b). With its Halki Ecological Institute and other training initiatives, RSE increases awareness of cooperation on environmental issues among regional states, and regularly conducts environmental training for clergy, journalists, educators and youth (RSE 2018b).

The Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation (RCFC), founded in 1997, works as a forum for various religious organizations and faith groups in order to save forests from further degradation. The RCFC emphasizes the religious and spiritual values of wild-life, and at the same time, criticizes a utilitarian world-view and the commercial interest in forests (FORE 2018e). It has composed a series of advisory statements based on religious and spiritual wisdom and moral imperatives for pursuing a policy that involves the complete cessation of commercial logging. Through projects like “The Reform the World Bank Initiative,” “Spiritual Value of Wilderness” and “Opening Book of Nature,” the RCFC attempts to achieve its goals.

Religious Witness for the Earth (RWE), founded in 2001, brings people from different religious and spiritual traditions together and organizes them based on a shared responsibility, i.e., the protection of the earth (Harvey 2017). Through teaching a “loving spirit, selfless courage, and moral authority of rights movements,” the organization attempts to grow a nonviolent public environmental movement (Harvey 2017). In the meantime, RWE’s public witness programs have received many positive responses in Canada and beyond.

The Spiritual Alliance for Earth (SAFE), founded in 2000 as an offshoot of the United Religious Initiative (URI), works for an environmentally friendly future for humans and non-human animals (FORE 2018b). SAFE tries to bring multi-faith communities together with secular environmental groups for combined action to reduce present environmental problems. It advocates environmental activism through dialogue, education, campaigning, celebration of Earth Day, and by conducting environmental fairs. SAFE sees “caring for creation” as a central task both for secular and spiritual groups (FORE 2018b).

An Oslo-based multi-faith working group focuses on “Ecology and Spirituality” in Norway. In a response to the call of “Emmaus”—a Church-based dialogue center in Oslo—the group was established in 1994 with seven representatives from major faiths (Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Catholicism, Lutheranism and Bahá'ism), as well as a representative from the alternative spiritual movement, Alternative Network (Leirvik 1994). From its inception, the group has fostered dialogue among multi-faith communities to enhance mutual collaboration and cooperation among people of diverse faiths and spiritual traditions. By focusing on a deeper connection of humans with the natural world, growing ethical and spiritual awareness, teaching religious moral imperatives, organizing multi-faith dialogues, and connecting individual and governmental responsibility to the environment, the group is playing an appreciable role in restoring interconnectedness between modern humanity and nature.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has launched a special program “Sacred Earth: Faiths for Conservation” to work with multi-faith leaders and communities to articulate moral guidelines, ethical imperatives and spiritual feelings concerning the sacred value of the natural world (WWF 2018). WWF’s Sacred Earth program emphasizes the point that faith traditions have enormous impact on human thought and behavior. Furthermore, it sees that the power of faith traditions is not limited to spirituality and ritual, but also carries a silent force to convince human beings to achieve targeted results by deploying their full efforts. With these influencing factors of worlds of faiths in hand, WWF’s Sacred Earth program attempts to build a global dialogue among multi-faith communities and faith-based institutions in order to reform the present destructive attitudes to the natural world.

Sisters of Earth International, originally founded in 1994 as “Sisters of Earth,” works as an informal network of multi-faith and multi-cultural women. Although it was primarily an informal organization of religious women, especially Roman Catholics in the United States and Canada, it has now become an international organization for both secular and religious women. Sisters of Earth International has had success in bringing women from different groups and diverse communities together, and convincing them to work for the common interest of Earth through dialogue and an exchange of views. Through a growing awareness of the essential need for ecological sustainability and the need to educate people about earth spirituality, Sisters of Earth International attempts “to attain spiritual and ecological healing on a global level” (FORE 2018c).

EcoFaith Recovery works as a network of multi-faith communities in the United States seeking to restore an earth-honoring and life-honoring lifestyle through growing a sense of belonging to the natural world (EcoFaith Recovery 2018). It is basically a voluntary organization, which brings leaders from diverse faith traditions to work for a combined leadership approach to healing the earth based on traditional wisdom and faith-based moral imperatives.

Interfaith Power and Light (IPL), founded in 2000, promotes multi-faith perspectives to address climate change by focusing on the religious concept of stewardship. IPL brings the voices of multi-faith communities to policy deciders at local, state, national and transnational levels (IPL 2018). With backing from religious and spiritual communities, IPL puts pressure on policy makers to reform present policies in favor of renewable energy sources. Concurrently, it suggests people need to be frugal in utilizing energy. Moreover, IPL attempts to convince congregations and people of multi-faith communities of the moral and ethical guidelines of religious and spiritual traditions in addressing the issue of climate change (Earth Ministry 2018a).

The Interfaith Network for Earth Concerns (INEC) was founded in 1992 as an offshoot of the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO) to work for environmental sustainability (FORE 2018d). Now INEC articulates people of diverse faith traditions and tries to convince them to work together over the shared issue of the present ecological crisis. INEC organizes conferences and workshops to promote multi-faith dialogue on environmental issues (FORE 2018d). In every program INEC connects faith groups with environmental issues and campaigns to develop awareness about people’s responsibility to natural world.

The Living Earth Center (LEC), formerly the Center for Earth Spirituality and Rural Ministry (CESRM), is a local organization based in Mankato Minnesota, and works to promote an ecologically-friendly environment through education, advocacy, campaigning, social gatherings, conferences, etc. (Living Earth Center 2018). The center regularly collaborates with people of different faith groups and emphasizes religious moral guidelines and spiritual insight for ecological sustainability. It runs Mankato's community garden on a voluntary basis using organic methods (Living Earth Center 2018), and inspires the community to concentrate more on organic cultivation and organic food productions.

The Center for Spirituality in Nature (CSN) is primarily based on Christian moral and spiritual guidelines, although it articulates other elements from different religions and spiritual traditions as well (CSN 2018). CSN aims to utilize the resource materials of the spiritual traditions of the world to transform humanity's broken relationship with the earth and to form a sacred community based on spiritual insights nature. With a variety of programs, such as campaigns, publications, and workshops, etc., CSN attempts to reconnect humans deeply with the natural world.

The Center for the Celebration of Creation (CCC) was founded in 1990 by Chestnut Hill United Methodist Church to "promote spiritual and environmental awareness" among people of all faiths and spiritual traditions (FORE 2018f). From its inception, the center has been celebrating Earth Day, organizing lectures on environmental issues, cooperating with public agencies with regard to renewable energy sources, educating congregations about environmental issues, requesting policy makers take steps for green technology, and providing guidance on measures for restoring the human-nature relationship (FORE 2018f).

Earth Ministry (EM) organizes multi-faith and spiritual communities to work collectively for environmental justice. EM attempts to transform faith-based moral guidelines into actions to alleviate the present environmental problems (Earth Ministry 2018b). With its resources of faith and spiritual traditions it cooperates with policy makers, public agencies, workers, businessmen, health partners, non-governmental organizations, the media, etc., to achieve environmentally-friendly policies (Earth Ministry 2018b). EM sees the earth as a sacred place for living peacefully with other creatures; thus it never supports any non-viable human actions in nature. By emphasizing environmental stewardship, it advocates responsible human behavior toward the creation of God. Through a variety of activities, it attempts to convince primarily multi-faith communities to be more effective advocates for ecological equilibrium, and trains them to work as environmental activists and let their voices heard by others (Earth Ministry 2018b). In order to bring about a revolutionary change in religious institutions, it works for greening worship places, such as churches, mosques, synagogues, pagodas, temples, etc.

On April 4, 2017, the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) and Tunku Abdul Rahman University College (TARUC) jointly organized a multi-faith dialogue on environmental issues, where four religious scholars representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam took part in the discussions, which were attended by some thousand students from Tunku Abdul Rahman University College (TARUC), the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) and the University of Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) (Bernama 2017). By focusing on the Islamic term "khalifa," Azizan Baharuddin argued protecting the ecological balance is an entrusted responsibility of humans. With reference to biblical stewardship, Esther Sarojini Daniel noted humans are custodians of God's creation. M Bala Thamalingam emphasized the inseparable partnership of humans with the natural world from a Hindu approach by connecting to the Hindu concept of "karma". For his part, K.V. Soon talked about an urgent need for an awareness development program from a Buddhist perspective (Bernama 2017). All the speakers unanimously declared that, despite theological differences, faith and spiritual traditions can work together for environmental sustainability by providing their followers with moral imperatives and ethical guidelines. They advocate multi-faith cooperation and action to address the present ecological crisis. Such mutual trust and combined effort may come from a fruitful dialogue among diverse faith and spiritual

traditions, as they argued, and thus multi-faith dialogues on ecological issues should be held frequently.

The Malaysian Climate Change Group (MCCG) works with Malaysian multi-faith communities—Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and indigenous people—to address climate change (WWF Malaysia 2015). The MCCG organizes dialogue between people of diverse faith and spiritual traditions and requests them to explore religious and spiritual moral guidelines from their various perspectives to focus concentration on the sustainability of the environment (WWF Malaysia 2015). The group thus attempts to create a platform of religions and spiritual traditions that will deepen the human relationship with the natural world and bring about a significant reformation in environmental attitudes and actions.

In an annual gathering of TRUST Women's Interfaith Network (WIN), held from June 17-18, 2013 in Jerusalem, more than fifty women from Christian, Druze, Jewish and Muslim communities gathered to talk on environmental issues from their respective faith traditions (ICSD 2018). In this women's multi-faith eco-gathering there were four study sessions, where a representative from each faith community talked about the importance of ecological equilibrium from their own faith perspective (ICSD 2018). Among other effects, this made participants conscious of the impact of their ecological impact on the environment and taught them how individuals can reduce their ecological footprints. During this two-day gathering, participants stayed overnight with women of other faith traditions and freely shared their views of nature with one another. Sometimes, they sang together to emphasize their deeper relationship with the natural world.

The Luther World Federation (LWF) engages in multi-faith dialogue to address the climate change issue. The federation sees climate change as a challenge common to all human beings, especially people of faith and spiritual traditions (LWF 2018). Daniel Sinanga of the Luther World Federation suggests connecting climate justice with multi-faith dialogue and an action plan (LWF 2017).

In a joint statement, religious and spiritual leaders—Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh—all supported the Paris Agreement and all other decisions adopted at COP 21 (*Interfaith Climate Change Statement to World Leaders* 2016). The statement was signed by 270 faith leaders among others. Here faith leaders unanimously emphasized the importance of protecting the earth from further degradation. They reiterated caring for the natural environment as an inviolable human moral responsibility. They criticized present rates of carbon emissions and urged world leaders to reduce these as quickly as possible. They called for world leaders to produce renewable energy and consider green technologies (*Interfaith Climate Change Statement to World Leaders* 2016). They expressed the hope that world leaders will take the necessary steps to implement the agreement and that governments will be committed to accelerate those decisions (*Interfaith Climate Change Statement to World Leaders* 2016.). Furthermore, religious scholars also urged the people of the world to take care of the earth at an individual level by considering it a sacred place.

On November 16, 2011, in a joint venture with the United States Embassy to the Holy See and the World Faiths Development Dialogue, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (BCRPWA), organized a video conference on multi-faith dialogue and cooperation to address ecological issues. In the conference, religious scholars from Christianity, Islam and Judaism presented moral guidelines for environmental sustainability from their respective faith traditions, and these presentations were heard by some representatives of the U.S. government and the World Bank. In his talk, Rabbi Warren Stone emphasized environmental activism and faith-based advocacy from the Jewish faith tradition. Stone advocated connecting religious moral teachings to action, by working from local to global levels, campaigning for green technologies, using renewable energy sources, and greening religious places and educational institutions with solar panels and gardens (BCRPWA 2011). While highlighting the legacy of St. Francis of Assisi, Sister Ilia Delia talked about the Christian view of environmental sustainability. Criticizing White's argument, she

stated Christianity is a creation-centered faith tradition where the natural world is regarded as sacred and humans are nominated by God to be guardians of the creation, not its tyrants or destroyers (BCRPWA 2011). Noting humans are an inseparable part of nature, Imam Yahya Hendi stated that unless one is an environmentalist, no one can claim to be a true human. In his view, to be a Muslim fundamentally means being an environmentalist (BCRPWA 2011). With regard to sustaining the environment, Hendi suggested raising moral voices from faith and spiritual perspectives, teaching environmental ethics in all sorts of educational institutions, and applying more pressure on political leaders for environmentally-friendly state policies. This video conference was moderated by Katherine Marshall of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, and attended by his excellency, Mr. Ertharin Cousin, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Agencies in Rome, and Mr. Kanta K. Rigaud, an environmental specialist of the World Bank, among others. Every speaker expressed their common concern about the environment and suggested creating a link between religions-based environmental ethics and human activities in nature by connecting multi-faith and spiritual traditions with the present ecological crisis.

As requested by Connect4Climate, multi-faith leaders from Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism gathered at Bologna, Italy, on the eve of the meeting of G7 ministers, where they issued a letter requesting the ministers of G7 countries to take the necessary steps to protect the earth's forest areas from further destruction (da Silva 2017). In the meeting, multi-faith leaders came to a unanimous decision that the earth is a common home for both humans and non-human animals, and thus should not be rendered unfit by human activities for non-human entities. They argued that humans are morally bound to make the earth a better place for all (da Silva 2017). Multi-faith leaders did not avoid the issue of poverty, which was the core agenda of the G7 meeting, and argued for a holistic development process where ecological sustainability is given priority by arguing that poverty cannot be addressed without tackling the ecological crisis (da Silva 2017).

All member states of the United Nations (UN) set up the agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The United Nations is working to achieve these goals by 2030. It is a challenge for the UN to reach a more sustainable world by this time. Undoubtedly the program is ambitious and considerable. Without cooperation from all sides it will be impossible to reach the targeted goals by 2030. Faith institutions, religious leaders, faith-based non-governmental organizations, and faith communities have all been asked by the United Nations to play an active role. They can do this by utilizing the precious resources of faith traditions, especially religious moral guidelines and ethical teachings, in order to change present perceptions of nature and human behavior in relation to the natural world. In different programs of the United Nations, multi-faith leaders are engaged in dialogue with one another alongside non-religious environmental activists, representatives of non-governmental organizations and policy makers. In a multi-cultural dialogue on environmental issues, held April 23-24, 2016, and organized by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Department of Environment (DoE) of the Islamic Republic of Iran, scholars and practitioners of diverse faith and cultural traditions talked heart-to-heart, seeking "lasting solutions" to current environmental problems (UNEP 2016, 2). From their respective faith and cultural traditions, they discussed some important notions—"Mother Earth" (coined by Bolivia), "ecological civilization" (proposed by the Chinese government) and the "Happiness Index" (used by Bhutan)—which are considered by some countries as alternative approaches to the sustainability of development (UNEP 2016, 2). Representatives of multi-faith and multi-cultural traditions unanimously supported environmental ethics, and furthermore, claimed that traditional moral concepts and spiritual world-views could make the present form of environmental ethics stronger. In this regard, they reiterated that the natural world should not be treated for its instrumental value, because it has its own intrinsic value; non-human animals are morally significant, so their rights should be preserved. They are inseparably connected to the cosmic order and God, and so any wrong treatment violates the natural system and ignores God's connection to His creation. Since human life is dependent on the natural world, humans should be

more gentle when they utilize natural resources and should express their gratitude when performing religious rituals. Human wellbeing is deeply related to the wellbeing of non-human animals, so suffering of non-human creatures adds suffering to humans. Sustainability should be given priority over greed and a consumer-based life-style, and humans should live harmoniously with nature (UNEP 2016, 7). Through all these ethical guidelines, religious and spiritual leaders brought the concept of a “duty of care” to modern human beings (UNEP 2016, 9).

At a multi-faith meeting in Bristol, organized by the United Nations and held in September 2015, spiritual and religious leaders requested world leaders to take practical steps for environmental protection (UNEP 2016, 28). More explicitly, they urged saving wildlife and forest areas, planting more trees, producing and using green technologies, reducing dependence on fossil-based energies, and investing more money in renewable energy sources as an alternative to fossil-based energies.

As part of developing multi-faith and spiritual approaches to ecology and environmental ethics, the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at the Divinity School of Harvard University and the Forum of Religion and Ecology (FRE) at Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies have been playing a significant role as academic institutes (Sayem 2019, 134). Between 1996 and 1998, CSWR organized international conferences on the theme of world religions and ecology, and religious scholars and leaders of diverse faith and spiritual traditions participated in academic discussions among themselves and with experts in the fields of ecology and environmental ethics. In the three years from 1996 to 1998, more than 800 scholars of multi-faith traditions and environmentalists attended the conferences (Tucker and Grim 2007). From the results of these academic dialogues, the Center produced a ten-volume series of books connecting the worlds of faith and spirituality with ecology (CSWR 2018). The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology (FRE) arose from the 1996-1998 series conferences held at the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) and now works as “the largest international multi-religious project” with regard to faith and the environment (FORE 2018a). The Forum is a very rich online platform providing information about diverse faith-based and spiritual approaches to the environment. It attempts to restore the human relationship with nature by focusing the resources of multi-faith and spiritual traditions. In addition, in the cases of both the CSWR and FRE, an ideal academic couple (husband-wife)—Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim—played a significant role connecting the worlds of faith and spirituality with environmental studies (Sayem 2019, 132, 147). More importantly, they successfully conducted multi-faith dialogues on environmental issues and managed academic gatherings where religious and spiritual leaders talked with, among others, scientists, economists, policy-makers, political leaders, and representatives of the World Bank and United Nations (Tucker and Grim 2007). In this way, both Tucker and Grim moved dialogue from being interfaith to multi-faith and multi-disciplinary. They are credited with the introduction of a multi-disciplinary dialogue on environmental sustainability, by connecting faith and spiritual communities with all other relevant stakeholders.

Conclusion

It has become evident that the above-mentioned dialogical initiatives and activities are promoting multi-faith cooperation and action to lower rates of environmental degradation. Such collaboration is not limited to faith communities; these programs are connecting non-religious people, secular environmental activists, policy makers, public agencies, non-governmental organizations, civil society members, scientists, businessmen, media-people, journalists, transnational organizations, international bodies, and the like. There is a growing optimism positive change will result from the combined efforts of people from all walks of life. To reach sustainable environmental levels, human beings have to do more work, and here faith and spiritual traditions can work as a very supportive force, with multi-faith dialogue expected to serve this purpose more

swiftly. Since many people follow faith traditions, leaders of these traditions can easily reach their audience, and make an appeal to their followers. Though it is difficult, it is not impossible that people will be convinced by these efforts to reform their attitudes and rectify their behaviors in favor of environmental sustainability.

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