



Ecojustice and the Voices of Faith

"The traditions that we represent have unique capacities to convince, convene and contribute meaningful moral, economic, spiritual and social substance to public deliberations."
Stockholm +50 Interfaith Statement

1. Introduction

As the world seems to be coming out of the woods with the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of familiar challenges are slowly beginning to re-gain traction on the global scene. The advent of 2022 was marked by the unfolding of some important conferences, including the UN Biodiversity Conference; the Desertification Conference; and the Stockholm +50 Conference. And then there is the Climate Change Conference (COP 27) which will take place in November in Egypt.¹ These conferences are meant to provide a platform for various stakeholders to engage with policy-makers across the globe on environmental and climate change issues. They offer a space where governments, civil society, business, academia and policy representatives come together to find areas of common priorities that they can collectively work on in tackling these environmental challenges.

2. The Various Stakeholders

Despite progress in bringing in more voices to the discussions on environmental and climate change responses, more still needs to be done to ensure inclusion and equality in decision-making and implementation of programmes. Over the years, these discussion platforms have striven to bring to the table some long-overlooked stakeholders across the globe, such as youth and women – recognizing the heightened and dispro-

portionate impact of climate change on young people and women, who are among the most vulnerable groups in society. However, a challenge remains: this group of voices is yet to be allowed meaningful participation in the designing and implementation of environmental and disaster reduction programmes, or to influence actual change and decision-making both at local and global levels. Moreover, there are other vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities and elderly people, who have not been included in these discussions, even though they, too, are extremely vulnerable.

Interestingly, these challenges have been highlighted by women, themselves the most recently recognized stakeholders in some of these platforms. This speaks to the fact that each stakeholder has an important role to play in bringing to the table the missing links and areas that need to be taken into consideration. Discussion platforms must be equally accessible to the various groups of representation in society through the provision of mechanisms which enable such participation.

3. The Role of Faith

The presence of faith actors creates an opportunity to bring to the table a much more comprehensive approach to public policy deliberations, for it is estimated that about 85% of the world's population is religious.² In addition, faith leaders

have the ability to reach and inspire a wide body of people; their combined perspective covers a wide range of views and concerns. Moreover, the kind of influence that faith leaders exert inspires people of faith to make significant efforts in their work for justice, including environmental justice. Thus, the general disregard for voices of faith in international conversations has the potential to exclude significant views and much needed perspectives in policy development and implementation. The faith platform remains one of the most underutilised avenues for meaningful public engagement that could take robust conversations to the place where it matters the most – to ordinary people in communities.

3.1. The Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is uniquely positioned to influence international deliberations on a wide range of issues including environment and development. It has a long history as the first religious organization to be accredited as a participant at conferences of the United Nations as the Holy See,³ with permanent observer status. This has enabled the Church to contribute to the most high profile conversations at various platforms over the years, while creating precedent for other religions to claim space in these significant discussions. This has allowed the Church to accumulate much experience in public engagements and to bring some of the most controversial, yet necessary, conversations to the attention of the public. It has also provided a radical shift in perspective in the area of development and the environment by drawing the interlinkages between the Earth's welfare and the spiritual well-being of all living creatures. Believers have been encouraged to move from thinking that asserts human beings as dominant over natural resources and the planet, to a space where they can see themselves as stewards of the Earth and its resources. This is a perspective that Pope Francis continues to promote in his contribution to deliberations on the concept of sustainable development.

The encyclical *Laudato Si: on Care for our Common Home*, lays out for all people the ethical and moral implications of climate change and eco-justice. In this letter, Pope Francis emphasises the importance of what he refers to as “integral ecology”⁴ – the concept of an integrated and holistic approach to political, social, economic, and environmental problems. It is through the popularization of works such as this that people

of faith are inspired to change their perspective on the environment around them, and to advocate in political platforms for public policies that take this new approach into consideration. This encyclical also inspired the establishment of initiatives such as the ‘Laudato Si Movement’,⁵ a vibrant structure of the Church that seeks to put into action the commitments of the document by harnessing efforts of those working to achieve climate and ecological justice across the globe.

The Pope's conviction, demonstrated through this encyclical, is that a new definition of progress must emerge, one that is not based solely on Gross Domestic Product growth, or on narrow scientific findings that rarely translate into pro-poor strategies. Rather, what is needed is progress that helps people figure out how to relate to nature in a way that is mutually beneficial for both humans and the planet. The work of this encyclical continues to inspire people of various faith denominations, as well as non-faith actors to come up with new ways of seeking and implementing justice in various areas of human development, including the eradication of poverty, hunger, conflict and the displacement of people; and the mitigation of climate change and environmental degradation.

3.2. Other significant voices of faith

The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, is one of the most prominent advocates of environment preservation among the Orthodox leadership. His efforts to promote environmental awareness across the globe began prior to 1991, the year in which he assumed his responsibility as a Patriarch. Upon assuming this role, he used the platform strategically to champion environmental advocacy, and commissioned work that earned him the title of ‘Green Patriarch’, an attribute that continues to reflect in his commitment to highlight the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the ecological crisis facing humanity today. Much of his work is done through seminars and symposia which focus on the seas and water – for example, organizing initiatives such as an ecological symposium which took place in Athens in 2018, entitled ‘Toward a Greener Attica – preserving the planet and protecting its people’. During this event, which brought together theologians, scientists, activists and political leaders from all over the world,⁶ the Patriarch shared his message of interfaith tolerance and coexistence – the basis from which the Orthodox Church conducts its collaboration

work with other religions and organizations to advance environmental protection and justice.

The Anglican Church is an active participant in the United Nations Environment Programme's *Faith for Earth* initiative, a platform that presents an opportunity for faith leaders to work in collaboration with UN policy-makers. This is in addition to their accreditation status as an observer organization to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Their commitment to environmental and climate justice led to the establishment of the Anglican Communion Office at the UN, through which they engage various UN agencies and opportunities.⁷

Many people of faith continue to find their voices in international deliberation platforms, and are working to elevate the voice of the many who have no access to such platforms. Faith communities all over the world are joining efforts to increase awareness in issues of ecology and to help identify the roles they can play as stewards of the Earth and advocates of human dignity. Under the umbrella of the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI), a wide range of Christian denominations, African traditional healers, Buddhist, Baha'i, Quaker, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu communities organize and give people of faith a much stronger voice. SAFCEI creates a space for the various leaders of these communities to increase awareness and to inspire collaborative action on eco-justice, sustainable living and climate change.⁸

The World Council of Churches (WCC) also works as a platform through which people of Christian faith have come together to join efforts to deal with the issues facing humanity. It has a long tradition of addressing the links between justice, peace and integrity of creation through initiatives such as the Ecumenical Water Network, the Climate Justice project, and the Poverty, Wealth and Ecology Project. The work of the WCC mostly focuses on increasing understanding on the balance between economic justice and care for creation.⁹

The Lutheran World Federation helps to bring local voices to the attention of the UN policy makers, and facilitates advocacy on behalf of grassroots communities. Their advocacy work for justice, peace and reconciliation is informed by their faith, and follows an approach that sees creation as a gift that has to be taken care of. Accordingly, justice requires the protection of the most vulnerable from the impacts of climate

change; holding governments accountable for their climate commitments; addressing inter-generational justice; and building interfaith collaboration.¹⁰

Islam actively challenges issues of corruption and greed by the wealthy and those in positions of power, believing that the devastating state of the ecological system and climate change is caused by human interference, motivated by relentless pursuit of economic growth and over-consumption. Their work is demonstrated through a wide range of research, demonstrations and public deliberations focusing on water, environmental justice and dignity, the rights of the environment, Islamic legislation and ethics governing people's responsibility for ecological health and food security, amongst other goals.¹¹

Hinduism offers a wealth of perceptions in relation to human and ecological interactions. It is a religion that embraces the essence of life in its wholeness, in that Hindus believe that their existence originates from other species, the plants and animals that surround them as sources of life. This perception of integral unity means that they do not separate their religion from their daily life – what they believe is made evident in how they ultimately carry out activities that make life functional on a daily basis.¹²

With a comprehensive psychological framework, the Buddhist faith offers a deep perspective through which to understand nature and the world. This is demonstrated through an array of psycho-therapeutic techniques, developed over 2 500 years, which elaborates their connection with, and faith in, nature rather than what they see as overly scientific and exploitative ways of healing and attaining happiness. The Buddhist emphasises practice above beliefs, and that how people understand the Earth is more a way of life. They are of the perspective that nature is not separate from human life, and that it is neither sacred nor perfect, neither good nor evil, and not something to be conquered. Life is interrelated and interdependent, with no distinct categorization between sentient and non-sentient beings.¹³

4. What is Eco-Justice and Why is it Important?

Eco-justice focuses on the principle of equitability with respect to ecological sustainability and protecting the environment. It takes into consideration social and economic issues when dealing with access to and use of natural resources, as well as in the distribution of environmental risks

between the wealthy and the poor. Put in simple terms: eco-justice is equitable exposure to environmental good and harm.¹⁴

Eco-justice is important in that it mandates the right to ethical, balanced and responsible use of natural resources to ensure a sustainable planet, not only for human beings but for other living things as well. The key point here is that it is not only in the interest of benefiting the human race that the Earth should be taken care of; non-human beings such as animals also have entitlements, to adequate habitat for instance. Moreover, eco-justice demands that public policy reflect mutual respect for all people and that there is no form of discrimination based on gender, age or race when distributing environmental gains or harms. There must also be a recognition of the ecological unity and the interdependence of all species. These are some of the key principles embraced by faith actors in their approaches to provide holistic solutions to challenges of

ecological degradation and all the other environmental problems facing the Earth and its inhabitants.

5. Conclusion

Religion and faith influence behaviour in general, including environmentally relevant behaviours, because they mark people's identity and guide how they interact with other people, as well as with other living beings. They influence people's ability to change perspective and their willingness to take action. These are some of the crucial aspects in human behaviour needed to abate environmental degradation and to improve the way we use natural resources. Faith determines how people view their immediate surroundings and their role in protecting what is precious to them. For all these reasons, therefore, it is important to consider the dimensions of religion and faith when tackling issues of environmental protection and sustainability.

Lovedonia Mkansi
Project Co-ordinator
lovedonia@cplo.org.za

(Endnotes)

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/why-2022-will-matter-climate-action-0>

² <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country>

³ <https://www.state.gov/countries-areas/holy-see/#:~:text=Holy%20See%20Relations-,U.S.%2DHoly%20See%20Relations,State%20and%20the%20Holy%20See.>

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁵ <https://laudatosimovement.org/>

⁶ <https://www.focolare.org/en/news/2018/06/11/italiano-maria-voce-a-green-attica/>

⁷ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/at-the-un/environmental-and-climate-justice.aspx>

⁸ <https://safcei.org/about-us/>

⁹ <https://archived.oikoumene.org/en/about-us.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/action-justice-0>

¹¹ <https://fore.yale.edu/World-Religions/Islam/Misc/Videos#Ramadan>

¹² <https://www.psychiatristimes.com/view/climate-change-and-hinduism>

¹³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288824509_BUDDHIST_PERSPECTIVES_ON_ENVIRONMENTAL_CONSERVATION_AND_SUSTAINABLE_DEVELOPMENT_DR_SUBHASH_DONDE

¹⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339719803_Environmental_Justice_in_the_Context_of_Urban_Green_Space_Availability