

Religion and Environment: Exploring the Ecological Turn in Religious Traditions, the Religion and Development Debate and Beyond*

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Abstract

Achieving ecologically sustainable societies necessitates fundamental social and cultural transformations. Religion has the potential to foster the required paradigm shifts in mindsets, behaviour and policy. Moreover, in many religious communities there is increasing engagement with questions of environment, climate change and ecological sustainability. This has led to an increasing corpus of literature engaging with the nexus between religion, environment, development and sustainability. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of recent ecological trends in religious traditions as well as the literature on religion and sustainable development and on religion and ecology. While an ecological turn is evident in many religious communities and has been well documented in the literature, it emerges that more research is necessary on the way that this phenomenon manifests in environmental action at individual and institutional levels.

Keywords

Religion, environment, religion and development, sustainable development, ecological turn

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1 Introduction

Religion has a crucial role to play in the environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The complex task of achieving ecological sustainability, combatting climate change and adopting environmental protection measures “requires not only appropriate policies [and] scientific knowledge but necessitates radical paradigm shifts and changed mindsets and behaviour.”¹ As Sponsel argues,

ultimately the environmental crisis as a whole is a spiritual and moral crisis and ... it can only be resolved by radical transformations in the ways in which industrial capitalist and consumerist societies, in particular, relate to nature ... This transformation from the Industrial Age (Anthropocene) to the Ecological Age (Ecocene) involves fundamental changes in world views, values, attitudes, behaviors, and institutions relating humans to nature in far more sustainable and green ways.²

This points directly to the sphere of religion. Religious communities can play a fundamental role in such societal and cultural transformations: “[R]eligion shapes social imaginaries, and people’s values and religious communities have the ability to act as agents of social, cultural, economic, political and ecological change.”³ Consequently, policy makers have increasingly recognised faith actors as crucial for ecological sustainability. One of the most prominent examples is the United Nations Environment Programme’s (UNEP) Faith for Earth Initiative, which seeks to “encourage, empower and engage with faith-based organisations as partners, at all levels, toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and fulfilling the 2030 Agenda.”⁴

Against this backdrop, fundamental questions on the role of religion for the environment arise. They concern, first, what kind of values and attitudes faith actors bring forward in relation to the environment, climate change and ecological sustainability. To what extent can religious communities be considered as providing the ideological backbone of socio-ecological transformation? Second, it so far remains unclear whether the theological engagement in religious communities with ecological questions is reflected in environmental action (e.g. advocacy against climate change) at an organisational level – and whether such eco-theological engagement propels individual or collective environmental activism among the membership of these communities.

A rapidly growing body of literature has engaged with these questions, focusing on different religious traditions as well as approaching the field from different perspectives,⁵ and

¹ Juliane Stork and Philipp Öhlmann, “Religious Communities as Actors for Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond.” Report (Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2021), i. doi:10.18452/23587.

² Leslie Sponsel, “Introduction to Religious Environmental Activism in Asia: Case Studies in Spiritual Ecology,” *Religions* 11, no. 2 (2020): 1, doi:10.3390/rel11020077.

³ Stork and Öhlmann, “Religious Communities as Actors for Ecological Sustainability,” i.

⁴ “UNEP Faith for Earth Initiative,” United Nations Environment Programme, <https://www.unep.org/about-environment/faith-earth-initiative>. See also “The Role of Faith, Values and Ethics in Strengthening Action for Nature and Environmental Governance,” United Nations Environment Programme Faith for Earth Initiative 2021, https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/37804/faith_ethics.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.

⁵ Willis Jenkins, Evan Berry, and Luke B. Kreider, “Religion and Climate Change,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43 (2018): 85–108, doi:10.1146/annurev-enviren-102017-025855; Jens Koehrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber, “How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be? Tensions about Religious

several research initiatives are pursuing related agendas in this field.⁶ The aim of this contribution is to provide an overview of recent trends and key strands of the literature devoted to these questions. Section 2 provides an overview of selected religious traditions, tracing an ecological turn across different religions and presenting insights from recent survey results. Section 3 devotes closer attention to the religion-environment nexus in recent literature, showing how it provides evidence of an ongoing and intensifying scholarly and strategic interest in this area within and beyond the debate on religion and development. This leads us to a summarising conclusion.

2 An Overview across Different Religious Traditions

The role of religion and ecology has been debated for some decades already and is considered an emerging transdisciplinary field.⁷ A core point of contention has been Lynn White's assertion, made in the 1960s, that the anthropocentric nature of (Western) Christianity laid the ground for the global environmental crisis. "Christianity," in his view, "not only established a dualism of man (sic) and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man (sic) exploit nature for his (sic) proper ends."⁸ White attributed a core responsibility for ecological destruction to Western society's anthropocentrism, which he considered to be shaped by its Judeo-Christian religious heritage and culture, despite increasing secularisation.⁹ Consequently White argued that, as the root of the ecological crisis lies in religion, it can also play a significant role in remedying it: "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one."¹⁰

Since then, there has been considerable dynamic and theological debate in Christian churches and the ecumenical movement, leading to the emergence of discussions on eco-theology and sustainability,¹¹ in parallel – and interdependent – with the emerging global

Environmentalism," *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 6 (2022): 34–46, doi:10.1007/s41682-021-00070-4; Bron Taylor, Gretel van Wieren, and Bernard Zaleha, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr. to Pope Francis," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016), doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29011.

⁶ Examples are inter alia the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology (Yale School of the Environment, <https://fore.yale.edu/>), the Laudato Si' Research Institute at Oxford University (University of Oxford, <https://lsri.campion.ox.ac.uk/>), and the South-African German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability (SAGRaS), which emerged from a partnership between the University of Pretoria, the University of the Western Cape (South Africa), and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Germany), see Juliane Stork *et al.*, "The South African-German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability (SAGRaS): An Inter-Contextual Initiative for Transdisciplinary Research on the Role of Religion for Ecological Sustainability," in *International Handbook on Creation Care & Eco-Diakonia: Concepts and Theological Perspectives of Churches from the Global South*, ed. Daniel Beres *et al.* (Oxford: Regnum, 2022), 775–82.; Jacques W. Beukes, Juliane Stork and Ignatius Swart, "Youth, Faith, Climate Change and Environmental Consciousness: A Case for Sustainable Development," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2021): 1, doi:10.4102/hts.v77i2.7085.

⁷ Mary E. Tucker, "Religion and Ecology," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 819–35.

⁸ Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205, doi:10.1126/science.155.3767.1203.

⁹ Bron Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims that Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016), doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29010.

¹⁰ White, "The historical roots of our ecologic crisis," 1206.

¹¹ Louk Andrianos *et al.*, eds., *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth: The "Wuppertal Call" – Contributions and Recommendations from an International Conference on Eco-Theology and Ethics of Sustainability* (Solingen: Foedus Verlag, 2019); Ernst Conradie, "The Four Tasks of Christian Ecotheology: Revisiting the Current Debate," *Scriptura* 119, no. 1 (2020): 1–13, doi:10.7833/119-1-1566; Pope Francis,

debates on the limits of growth and ecological sustainability posited by the Club of Rome and the World Commission on Environment and Development.¹² One of the significant recent examples of this engagement is Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*,¹³ which has become a cornerstone frame of reference on the need for socio-ecological transformation from a religious point of view far beyond the context of the Catholic Church. The literature has also pointed to widespread ecological engagement in other religious traditions, for example, Islam,¹⁴ Buddhism¹⁵ and Hinduism.¹⁶

Islam has seen the development of an eco-theology and engagement with the environment since the 1960s. These approaches draw on inter alia the Islamic concepts of *Tawhid*, highlighting the unity of all creation, and *Khalifa*, highlighting the role of humans as stewards of creation.¹⁷ A recent key point of reference for this movement is the “Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change,”¹⁸ which seeks to “create greater awareness for climate change and calls on decision-makers in the Muslim world and beyond ... to take sound actions.”¹⁹ An important recent initiative in Islam is the Al-Mizan movement which, in parallel to the *Laudato Si’* movement in the Catholic Church, aims to provide “an Islamic outlook of the environment in a bid to strengthen local, regional, and international actions that combat climate change and other threats to the planet.”²⁰ Moreover, Koehrsen identifies a “rising field of Islamic environmentalism,” although this still constituted a minority phenomenon.²¹ One example of such activism is the emergence of the “Eco-Jihad” movement, a global Muslim environmental initiative.²²

Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home (Rome: Dicastero per la Comunicazione, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015); David Hallman, ed., *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995); WCC, *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 23 November–10 December, 1975*, ed. David Paton (Geneva: WCC, 1976).

¹² Donella H. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome’s Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972); WCED, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

¹³ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’*.

¹⁴ Richard C. Foltz, “Islam,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 207–19; Moegamad R. Gallant, “Sustainable Development: A Challenge to Muslim Countries” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009), <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/handle/10413/399>; Rosemary Hancock, *Islamic Environmentalism: Activism in the United States and Great Britain* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018); Jens Koehrsen, “Muslims and Climate Change: How Islam, Muslim Organizations, and Religious Leaders Influence Climate Change Perceptions and Mitigation Activities,” *WIREs Climate Change* 12, no. 3 (2021): 1–19, doi:10.1002/wcc.702; Ursula Kowanda-Yassin, *Öko-Dschihad: Der grüne Islam – Beginn einer globalen Umweltbewegung* (Salzburg, Wien: Residenz Verlag, 2018).

¹⁵ Stephanie Kaza, “The Greening of Buddhism: Promise and Perils,” in Gottlieb, 184–206; Donald K. Swearer, “An Assessment of Buddhist Eco-Philosophy,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 2 (2006): 123–37; Emma Tomalin, “Gender and the Greening of Buddhism: Exploring Scope for a Buddhist Ecofeminism in an Ultramodern Age,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 11, no. 4 (2018): 455–80, doi:10.1558/jsrnc.32469.

¹⁶ For an overview of key documents in the different religious traditions, see “The Role of Faith, Values and Ethics in Strengthening Action for Nature and Environmental Governance,” United Nations Environment Programme Faith for Earth Initiative 2021, https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/37804/faith_ethics.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.

¹⁷ Koehrsen, “Muslims and Climate Change.”

¹⁸ “Islamic Declaration on Climate Change,” United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, <https://unfccc.int/news/islamic-declaration-on-climate-change>.

¹⁹ Koehrsen, “Muslims and Climate Change,” 4.

²⁰ “Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth,” United Nations Environment Programme, <https://www.unep.org/al-mizan-covenant-earth>.

²¹ Koehrsen, “Muslims and Climate Change,” 2–4.

²² Kowanda-Yassin, *Öko-Dschihad*.

There has also been a substantial development of eco-Buddhist thinking and activism, in the context of the wider movement of “engaged Buddhism.” Buddhist perspectives on environmental protection and climate change – deriving from an emphasis on the interdependence of humans and the natural environment²³ – were prominently brought forward in the global statements “Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders”²⁴ and “The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change”²⁵ (both in 2015). A concrete example of Buddhist ecological activism is that of Buddhist monks in Thailand, who in the 1980s began ordaining trees to prevent them from being felled and to raise awareness of environmental destruction.²⁶

Looking at Hinduism, a key document emerging in the runup to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference was the “Bhumi Devi Ki Jai! A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change.”²⁷ While it is difficult to speak of “one” Hinduism in a general way, as is the case with many religions, Chapple highlights that “India, the birthplace of Hinduism, boasts the world’s largest environmental movement.”²⁸ Chapple and Tucker’s volume and the articles by Dwivedi and Haberman provide further insights into Hinduism’s relationship with the environment.²⁹ A concrete initiative is the Bhumi Project, which seeks to “engage, educate, and empower people and communities to address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution ... based on Hindu principles of environmental care.”³⁰

2.1 *The Greening of Religions Hypothesis*

In light of these developments, Gottlieb goes so far as to argue that “world religion has entered into an ‘ecological phase’ in which environmental concern takes its place alongside more traditional religious focus on sexual morality, ritual, helping the poor and preaching the word of God.”³¹ Recent scholarship has critically interrogated this “greening of religion hypothesis”³² and recent empirical studies have painted a more ambivalent picture.³³ The

²³ Richard Payne, “Buddhism and the Environment,” *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, 2010, doi:10.1093/obo/9780195393521-0067; Christopher Ives, “Buddhism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (London: Routledge, 2017), 43–51.

²⁴ “Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders 2015,” Plum Village, <https://plumvillage.org/articles/buddhist-climate-change-statement-to-world-leaders-2015/>.

²⁵ “The Time to Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change,” One Earth Sanga, <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/buddhist-declaration-on-climate-change/>.

²⁶ Robekkah Ritchie, “Environmentalism and the Forest in Thai Buddhism,” in *Religious Communities and Ecological Sustainability in Southern Africa and Beyond*, ed. Philipp Öhlmann and Juliane Stork (forthcoming 2022).

²⁷ “Bhumi Devi Ki Jai! A Hindu Declaration on Climate Change,” Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies/Bhumi Project, <https://hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english>.

²⁸ Christopher K. Chapple, “Introduction,” in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher K. Chapple and Mary E. Tucker (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), xxxiii–xlix.

²⁹ Onkar Prasad Dwivedi, “Hindu Religion and Environmental Well-Being,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 160–83; Christopher K. Chapple and Mary E. Tucker, eds., *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000).

³⁰ “The Hindu Movement for Mother Earth,” Bhumi Global, <https://www.bhumiglobal.org/>.

³¹ Roger S. Gottlieb, “Introduction: Religion and Ecology—What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 4.

³² Jonathan Chaplin, “The Global Greening of Religion,” *Palgrave Communications* 2, no. 1 (2016): 1–5, doi:10.1057/palcomms.2016.47; Taylor, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One).”

³³ Wylie A. Carr *et al.*, “The Faithful Skeptics: Evangelical Religious Beliefs and Perceptions of Climate Change,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 6, no. 3 (2012): 276–99, doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v6i3.276; Randolph Haluza-DeLay, “Religion and Climate Change: Varieties in Viewpoints and Practices,” *WIREs Climate Change* 5, no. 2 (2014): 261–79, doi:10.1002/wcc.268; Jens Koehrsen,

comprehensive review by Taylor et al. identifies “many themes and dynamics that hinder environmental understanding and mobilization by religious individuals, whether Abrahamic or involved in religions that originated in Asia.”³⁴ However, there seems to be a substantial ecological dynamic at a more local level, with indigenous traditions fostering “pro-environmental perceptions and behaviors as do some nature-based cosmologies and value systems, which are often deeply informed by the sciences and direct experience within environmental systems.”³⁵ This resonates with the findings of recent studies from African contexts on African Traditional Religion, Spirituality and Philosophy³⁶ and African Initiated Christianity,³⁷ which highlight a tension between different approaches to the natural environment from “dominion” over creation to “communion” with the natural environment.³⁸

What is clear, however, is that more research is needed on the role of religion and religious communities in relation to the environment and ecological sustainability. In particular, it remains unclear to what extent religious engagement and ecological religious content actually affect the adherents’ attitudes and actions.³⁹ As Taylor, van Wieren and Zaleha pointedly phrase the issue: “additional research is warranted to better understand under what circumstances, and with which communicative strategies, religious or other individuals and groups might be more effectively mobilized in response to contemporary environmental challenges.”⁴⁰

2.2 *The Importance of Ecology: Insights from the Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona Survey*

The recent reinvigoration of the sustainability debate, propelled by youth engagement in the Fridays for Future movement, has led to an “ecological turn” in many religious communities.

“Religious Agency in Sustainability Transitions: Between Experimentation, Upscaling, and Regime Support,” *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 27 (2018): 4–15, doi:10.1016/j.eist.2017.09.003; Koehrsen, “Muslims and Climate Change.”

³⁴ Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two),” 306.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ James N. Amanze, “From ‘Dominion’ to ‘In Communion’: Ecotheology from an African Perspective,” *Anglican EcoCare Journal of Ecotheology* 2 (Spring 2016): 11–21; Johannes J. Knoetze, “African Youth, African Faith(s), African Environment and Sustainable Development: A Missional Diaconal Calling,” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2021): 1–8, doi:10.4102/hts.v77i2.6607; Jacob K. Olúpòṅà, “Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 259–82; Nisbert T. Taringa, “The Potential of Ubuntu Values for a Sustainable Ethic of the Environment and Development,” in *Religion and Development in Africa*, ed. Ezra Chitando, Masiwa R. Gunda and Lovemore Togarasei, (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2020), 387–400.

³⁷ Emmanuel Anim, “Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice: Reflections from an African Pentecostal,” in *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth: The “Wuppertal Call” – Contributions and Recommendations from an International Conference on Eco-Theology and Ethics of Sustainability*, ed. Louk Andrianos et al. (Solingen: Foedus Verlag, 2019), 107–20; Marthinus L. Daneel, “African Initiated Churches as Vehicles of Earth-Care in Africa,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 535–67; Juliane Stork and Charel Du Toit, “Finding Ubuntu in the Bible: How the Zion Christian Church in South Africa Relates to Concepts of Ecology in African Traditional Religions,” in *Global Religious Environmental Activism: Case Studies of Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship*, ed. Jens Koehrsen, Julia Blanc and Fabian Huber (forthcoming, 2022).

³⁸ Amanze, “From ‘Dominion’ to ‘in Communion’.”

³⁹ R. Khari Brown, Edwin Eschler, and Ronald E. Brown, “Political Congregations, Race, and Environmental Policy Attitudes,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 60, no. 2 (2021), doi:10.1111/jssr.12701; Koehrsen, “Muslims and Climate Change;” Anabel Orellano and Emilio Chuvieco, “Examining the Relationships between Religious Affiliation, External and Internal Behavioural Factors, and Personal Carbon Footprint,” *Religions* 13 (2022): 416. doi:10.3390/rel13050416.

⁴⁰ Taylor, van Wieren and Zaleha, “The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis,” 306.

In the wake of the global debate on climate change, environmental degradation and its local effects, concerns with questions of environmental sustainability seem to be on the increase in religious communities. This can be seen in the results of the survey “Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona”, which was conducted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. This online survey, which ran from May 2020 until May 2021, includes the responses by over 1,200 persons in religious leadership positions from around the globe and from across different religions.⁴¹ The majority of the responses to the survey came from Africa, followed by Europe and the Middle East. In terms of religions, the largest number of responses came from Christians and Muslims. The survey included two questions related to ecology. In a set of questions, the respondents were asked “From your perspective, how important will it be to do the following after the coronavirus pandemic?” with “Strengthen environmental protection” as one of the statements to be ranked on a five-point scale from “1 = not important at all” to “5 = extremely important” (see Figures 1 to 3).⁴² Moreover, in a series of twelve statements on different themes, the survey asked participants to indicate to what extent they agreed with the statement “Environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus”, with five options ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “5 = strongly agree” (see Figures 4 to 6).

Overall, 67.7% of the respondents considered “strengthen environmental protection” as extremely important (46.9%) or quite important (20.8%) in the post-Covid-19 future (see Figure 1), with an average importance of 3.95. This ranked environmental protection as one of the highest priorities along with “increase international cooperation” (3.96) and “reduce inequalities between rich and poor” (3.93). This pattern became visible across the main regions covered by the survey. While it appeared least pronounced among the African respondents, still well more than half of the respondents from the Africa region (56.2%; mean importance: 3.54) considered strengthening environmental protection as either quite important or extremely important. For the Middle East and Europe regions, the values considering environmental protection quite or extremely important were 79.1% and 90% respectively, with the means at 4.29 and 4.47.

Differentiating the responses by religion displayed a generally similar picture for Christians and Muslims, but substantially more Christian respondents indicated that they considered strengthening environmental protection extremely important (50.3 compared to 36.8 in the Muslim category). The mean values were 3.95 (Christian), 3.63 (Muslim) and 4.46 (Other). The high value in the category “Other” is difficult to interpret, as it combines several other religions, and the number of responses in this category was relatively low.

Regarding the degree of the respondents’ agreement with the statement that “environmental destruction is of greater concern than the coronavirus”, 21.0% strongly agreed and 31.4% agreed, while another 21.5% indicated “undecided” (average response value: 3.38) – see Figure 4. This means that even during the height of the pandemic and the associated lockdown measures, more than half of the respondents considered environmental destruction a greater concern than the coronavirus, while only about a quarter of the respondents considered this not to be the case. Agreement with the statement was lowest among the respondents from the Africa region, with 29.7% of the respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (Europe: 13%, Middle East: 14.5%), but still almost half of the respondents from the region considered environmental destruction a greater concern than the virus (49.3%) – see Figure 5. For Europe and the Middle East regions, these values stood at 58.4% and 63%, respectively. The mean values were: 3.27 (Africa), 3.61 (Europe), and 3.71 (Middle East).

⁴¹ All data cited in the following are unpublished and taken from the survey database (accessible upon request).

⁴² The following six statements were provided: “Reduce inequalities between rich and poor”; “Increase international cooperation”; “Reduce globalisation”; “Strengthen national borders”; “Substantially change the way the economy works”; “Strengthen environmental protection”.

The breakdown by religion showed similar patterns across the Christian and Muslim respondents (Figure 6), with mean values of 3.28 (Christian) and 3.49 (Muslim). Again, the higher level of agreement in the category of “Other” is difficult to interpret for the reasons stated above. It is interesting to see that on the question of the importance of strengthening environmental protection, the Christian respondents leaned towards higher values than the Muslim respondents, but for the question on whether environmental concern constitutes a greater concern than the coronavirus, we see the opposite. However, these differences are relatively small and overall the data show a high level of concern for environmental protection and environmental degradation even during the pandemic. This is further illustrated by responses in the qualitative parts of the survey. Asked about their vision for the time after the coronavirus pandemic, a respondent from Kenya elaborated: “A different model for economic development that is green and inclusive. Build back better by adopting sustainable solutions to environmental challenges.”⁴³

– Figures about here –

3 The Religion-Environment Nexus in Recent Literature

We now proceed with our survey of the literature from the last five to six years (2016–2021) falling within the religion-environment nexus. This survey provides important evidence of an ongoing, intensifying scholarly and strategic interest in this topical focus. While it is not possible to do justice to the sheer volume of publications that appeared during this period, it seems helpful to distinguish between two strands of scholarly development that substantiate this ever-growing interest. The first consists of debates in the now established field of religion and development,⁴⁴ and the second of a broader range of debates of inter- and multidisciplinary scope falling outside of the sphere of religion and development as its explicit disciplinary placing.

3.1 *Environmental Debates Specific to Religion and Development*

The United Nations’ launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the new framework for development policy worldwide in 2015 provided important momentum in the field of religion and development to use the conceptual apparatus of “sustainable development”. A large segment of recent and current scholarship in the field has not only directed its focus on the SDG Agenda, but strategic think tanks such as the Faith 4 Earth initiative at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Environment, Water,

⁴³ Ekkardt Sonntag, Marie-Luise Frost, and Philipp Öhlmann, “Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona – Preliminary Findings,” Policy Brief 03/2020 (Berlin: Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2020), 6, <https://www.rcsd.huberlin.de/en/publications/policy-brief-03-2020-religious-leaders.pdf>.

⁴⁴ See Barbara Bompani, “Religion and Development: Tracing the Trajectories of an Evolving Sub-Discipline,” *Progress in Development Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019), 171–85; Katherine Marshall, “Impressions & Indications of Religious Engagement in Development,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19, sup. 1 (2021): 12–30, doi:10.1080/15570274.2021.1983358; Philipp Öhlmann *et al.*, “A New Journal for a New Space: Introducing Religion & Development,” *Religion & Development* 1, no. 1 (2022): 1–24, doi:10.30965/27507955-20220001; Ignatius Swart and Elsabé Nell, “Religion and Development: The Rise of a Bibliography,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016), 1–27.

and Climate focused workstream at the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) both demonstrate the growth of the environment as a focus area.⁴⁵

Yet, while “(s)ustainability and environmental issues, including the threat of global warming, are at the core of the ... Sustainable Development Goals,”⁴⁶ they have not been the primary focus of the religion and development concern with the SDG Agenda. Instead, there has been a noticeable preoccupation with the politics of the SDGs and the resultant question of religious actors’ role and strategic incorporation in the SDG Agenda,⁴⁷ while another trend has been an engagement with the various issues of social concern in the Agenda, such as women and gender, peace and conflict solution, poverty alleviation, HIV/Aids and health and human rights.⁴⁸ It can therefore be said that the focus on the environment has so far taken a secondary place in the post-2015 religion and development concern with the SDG Agenda. This is of course not to say that the political and social aspects raised in the discussions are not of considerable importance, but instead that limited attention has been given in comparison to the integrated discussion of the three pillars of the SDG Agenda – environmental sustainability, social sustainability, and economic sustainability.

Nevertheless, we can acknowledge the significance of a number of publications that have contributed to a more concerted environmentally-related focus in the post-2015 debates on religion and sustainable development/SDGs. These include the use of World Values Survey data by two World Bank researchers to study the (positive) correlation between religious affiliation, religiosity and environmental concerns,⁴⁹ a reflection on animal rights/animal-

⁴⁵ See e.g. UNEP and Parliament of the World’s Religions, *Faith for Earth: A Call for Action* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2020); “UNEP Faith for Earth Initiative,” UNEP; “Faith for Earth: Achievement Report 2020,” UNEP, <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/35071/FFEAR20.pdf>; “WECARE: Water, Environment and Climate Action,” International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/work-streams/water-environment-and-climate-action-work-stream-wecare/>; Ulrich Nitschke and Bennet Gabriel, “The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development/PaRD: A Global and Inclusive Partnership to Harness the Positive Impact on Religion in Development and Humanitarian Assistance,” *The Ecumenical Review* 68, no. 4 (2016): 378–86, doi:10.1111/erev.12242; Khushwant Singh and Judith Steinau-Clark, eds., *Voices from Religions on Sustainable Development* (Bonn: German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation, 2016).

⁴⁶ Clarence Tsimpo and Quentin Wodon, “Faith Affiliation, Religiosity, and Attitudes towards the Environment and Climate Change,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 3 (2016): 51, doi:10.1080/15570274.2016.1215850.

⁴⁷ Publications falling in this category are numerous and too many to cite here. However, see as a foremost example the work of prominent religion and development scholars Emma Tomalin and Jörg Hausteine that emanated from their recent research project “Keeping Faith in 2030: Religion and the SDGs”: Emma Tomalin, Jörg Hausteine, and Shabaana Kidy, “Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2019), 102–18; Jörg Hausteine and Emma Tomalin, “Religion, Populism, and the Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals,” *Social Policy & Society* 20, no. 2 (2021), 296–309. In addition, see also the journal special issues that have been published so far on the themes of religion and sustainable development/the SDGs post-2015. As a collective body of literature, they likewise give evidence of a strong albeit not exclusive preoccupation with the politics of the SDGs from a religion and development perspective. See *Sustainable Development* 24, no. 3 (2016); Dietrich Werner and Corrie van der Ven, eds., “Religion and Development,” *The Ecumenical Review* 68, no. 4 (2016), 359–479; Jill Olivier, ed., “Religion and Sustainable Development,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 3 (2016).

⁴⁸ Articles in this category are likewise too many to cite here. See likewise the three above-mentioned special issues that contain several articles in this category. For more recent examples, see also Marie Juul Petersen, *Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality in the Context of the Sustainable Development Goals: A Focus on Access to Justice, Education and Health* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2020); Grace N. Wamue-Ngare, Meg A. Warren, and Karen Torjesen, “Gender-based Violence and Fostering Women’s Well-being: Religion as a Tool for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Congo,” in *Handbook of Research on Novel Practices and Current Successes in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*, ed. Christina R. G. Popescu (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2021), 53–69.

⁴⁹ Tsimpo and Wodon, “Faith Affiliation, Religiosity, and Attitudes towards the Environment,” 51–64.

inclusive sustainability as a pertinent religious concern;⁵⁰ a Catalonian case study of the practical contribution of religious organisations to “integral sustainability” (i.e. sustainability inclusive of the environmental, social and economic concerns of the SDG Agenda);⁵¹ a consideration of religion as a potential driver of sustainable consumption (with specific reference to SDG 12);⁵² and Christian theological reflections on the challenge of environmental justice and wholeness in the context of Africa.⁵³

3.2 *Laudato Si’, Integral Ecology and Catholic Teachings*

However, if our exploration so far sketches a scattered and diverse picture of an environmental focus in the context of post-2015 scholarship on religion and development, a far more consolidated picture emerges with the growing body of literature around Catholic social teaching and engagement with the SDG Agenda.⁵⁴ At the centre of this inspiration is Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*,⁵⁵ which was issued in the same year (2015) as the SDGs, but in the growing body of literature it is also contrasted with the SDGs.⁵⁶ Whereas the SDGs are seen to remain trapped within the paradigm of global economic development, *Laudato Si’* is praised for its far-reaching conceptual paradigm shift from “integral human development” to

⁵⁰ Yamini Narayanan, “Where Are the Animals in Sustainable Development? Religion and the Case for Ethical Stewardship in Animal Husbandry,” *Sustainable Development* 24, no. 3 (2016): 172–80, doi:10.1002/sd.1619.

⁵¹ Montserrat Gas-Aixendri and Silvia Albareda-Tiana, “The Role of Religion in Global Sustainability: A Study on Catalonia’s Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals,” in *Sustainability and the Humanities*, ed. Walter Leal Filho and Adriana Consorte McCrea (Cham: Springer, 2019), 1–18.

⁵² Anabel Orellano, Carmen Valor, and Emilio Chuvieco, “The Influence of Religion on Sustainable Consumption: A Systematic Review and Future Research Agenda,” *Sustainability* 12, no. 19 (2020): 1–21, doi:10.3390/su12197901.

⁵³ We do not claim to be all-exhaustive with respect to our identification of this category of literature. The following cited literature nevertheless indicate the scholarly publications that we discovered through our exploration of the post-2015 religion and development literature falling within this particular category. Mwawi N. Chilongozi, “The Role of Religion in Sustainable Development: Theological Reflections on Sustainable Development Goals and Mother Earth,” in *Mother Earth, Mother Africa & African Indigenous Religion*, ed. Nobuntu P. Matholeni, Georgina K. Boateng and Molly Manyonganise (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2020), 163–77; Dietrich Werner, “The Challenge of Environment and Climate Justice: Imperatives of an Eco-Theological Reformation of Christianity in African Contexts,” in *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development: Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches*, ed. Philipp Öhlmann, Wilhelm Gräb and Marie-Luise Frost (London: Routledge, 2020), 51–72.

⁵⁴ For a sample from this body of literature, see Ian Christie, Richard M. Gunton and Adam P. Hejnowicz, “Sustainability and the Common Good: Catholic Social Teaching and ‘Integral Ecology’ as Contributions to a Framework of Social Values for Sustainability Transitions,” *Sustainability Science* 14, no. 5 (2019): 1343–54, doi:10.1007/s11625-019-00691-y; Séverine Deneulin, “Religion and Development: Integral Ecology and the Catholic Church Amazon Synod,” *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 10 (2021): 2282–99, doi:10.1080/01436597.2021.1948324; Séverine Deneulin, *Human Development and the Catholic Tradition: Towards Integral Ecology* (London: Routledge, 2021); Paul Freston, “Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals,” in *Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: Global Governance Challenges*, ed. Simon Dalby et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 152–69; Alexandre A. Martins, “*Laudato Si’*: Integral Ecology and Preferential Option for the Poor,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 410–24, doi:10.1111/jore.12224; Željko Pavić and Antun Šundalić, “Environmentalism and Development in Catholic Social Teaching: A Case of the Encyclical *Laudato Si’*,” *Ekonomski Vjesnik / Econviews* 29, no. 2 (2016): 323–34; Wolfgang Sachs, “The Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si’*: Varieties of Post-Development?,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 12 (2017): 2573–87, doi:10.1080/01436597.2017.1350822; Jaime Tatay-Nieto, “Sustainability, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and the Catholic Church’s Ecological Turn,” *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 1–11, doi:10.3390/rel11100488.

⁵⁵ See fn. 11.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Freston, “Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals,” 160–161; Sachs, “The Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si’*.”

“integral ecology.”⁵⁷ This implies nothing less than a vision for “a post-capitalist era, based on a cultural shift towards eco-solidarity.”⁵⁸ At its core is an integral approach that recognises the cry of the earth along with the cry of the human poor.⁵⁹ The idea of development no longer seems to play an explicit role and there are no longer targets to achieve, such as the SDGs.⁶⁰ The emphasis falls instead on a call for “ecological conversion,” which is seen to inspire a new worldwide movement of “religious environmentalism on the ground, as well as the field of religion and ecology in academia developing new ecotheologies and ecojustice ethics.”⁶¹

3.3 *The Religion-Ecology Nexus (not Specific to Religion and Development)*

The new inspiration found in *Laudato Si'* and the movement towards post-development thinking that this inspiration is giving rise to present a meaningful bridge to also very briefly report on the second strand of scholarly development identified at the start of this section, i.e. debates and scholarship noticeably concerned with the religion-environment nexus but with no explicit relationship to development discourse. Indeed, here a survey of the literature falling within this strand over the last five to six years provides evidence of a proliferation of scholarly output that resonates well with recent claims that it has now become possible to speak of the “emerging field of religion and ecology”.⁶² Accordingly, as the coinage of “religion and ecology” indicates, “ecology” has become the preferred term in addressing the religion-environment nexus,⁶³ although, as an exploration of the literature suggests, this does not cancel out the possibility that “environment” continues to be used in other instances.⁶⁴

It follows that the emerging field of religion and ecology is typified as multi-disciplinary and wide-ranging in scope. According to one source, it can be described as “an emerging area of study, research, and engagement that embraces multiple disciplines, including environmental studies, geography, history, anthropology, sociology, and politics.”⁶⁵ This description certainly fits well with another recent identification, namely the “environmental humanities” as “a growing and diverse area of study within humanistic disciplines.”⁶⁶ At the same time, however, it falls short of acknowledging the natural sciences⁶⁷ and the fields of theology and religious studies as contributing disciplines. In the fields of religion and theology,

⁵⁷ This does not mean that the concept of integral human development is not still used in Catholic social discourse, but integral ecology has now become the guiding concept that also assumes the former concept. Cf. Deneulin, “Religion and Development,” 2288.

⁵⁸ Sachs, “The Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si'*,” 2584.

⁵⁹ Martins, “*Laudato Si'*.”

⁶⁰ Deneulin, “Religion and Development,” 2288; Sachs, “The Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si'*,” 2579.

⁶¹ Mary E. Tucker and John Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and Dynamic Force,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 11–12.

⁶² Tucker and Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology,” 9.

⁶³ See e.g. John Hart, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017); Jenkins, Tucker and Grim, *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*.

⁶⁴ See e.g. Vegard Skirbekk *et al.*, “Religious Affiliation and Environmental Challenges in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Religion and Demography* 7, no. 2 (2020): 238–21, doi:10.1163/2589742X-12347110; William Avis, “Role of Faith and Belief in Environmental Engagement and Action in MENA Region,” K4D Helpdesk Report No. 1005 (Birmingham: Institute of Development Studies, 2021), doi:10.19088/K4D.2021.086; Jesse L. Preston and Adam Baimel, “Towards a Psychology of Religion and the Environment,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 40 (August 2021): 145–49, doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.09.013; Marisa Ronan, “Religion and the Environment: Twenty-first Century American Evangelism and the Anthropocene,” *Humanities* 6, no. 4 (2017): 1–15, doi:10.3390/h6040092.

⁶⁵ Mary E. Tucker and John A. Grim, “Ecology and Religion: An Overview,” *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ecology-and-religion>.

⁶⁶ Tucker and Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology,” 9.

⁶⁷ See Tucker and Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology,” 5–6.

a review of the most recent literature, for instance, brings to the fore new engagements with the issues of climate change,⁶⁸ sustainability⁶⁹ and religious environmental activism.⁷⁰

Indeed, synthesising constructions and perspectives are emerging from the recent literature that are helpful in providing a more informed orientation of the development of religion and ecology as an emerging multidisciplinary field. One of these new conceptions is the distinction between three methodological approaches that are shaping the field in terms of scholarship, debate and practical considerations: retrieval, re-evaluation and reconstruction.⁷¹ Another is the identification of three phenomena that are driving novel thematic developments in the field: climate change, technology and space/place.⁷² Finally, a new concept that is also gaining ground and shaping the field is that of “spiritual ecology.”⁷³ Yet, as suggested by the following quote from the literature, this concept is just one of a range that tie religion and spirituality to ideas of nature, the environment, earth and ecology. As this field develops, it is helpful to understand that there are many ongoing terms and debates from people of all religious and spiritual perspectives that are shaping the discussions:

As an umbrella term, spiritual ecology may be recognized as a vast, complex, diverse, and dynamic arena of intellectual and practical activities at the interfaces of religions and spiritualities with nature, ecologies, environments, and environmentalisms. It embraces other narrower fields, such as dark green religion, deep ecology, earth spirituality, earth mysticism, ecomysticism, ecopsychology, ecospirituality, ecotheology, green religion, green spirituality, nature mysticism, nature religion, nature spirituality, religion and ecology, religion and nature, religious ecology, religious environmentalism, religious naturalism, and sacred ecology. The qualifier spiritual is used instead of religious, because it is far more inclusive. Religion usually includes the spiritual, but some spirituality is not associated with any particular religion ... Even some atheists are spiritual.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ See e.g. Ernst M. Conradie and Hilda P. Koster, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change* (London: Bloomsbury; T&T Clark, 2019); Paul Tyson, *Theology and Climate Change*, Routledge Focus (Milton Park: Routledge, 2021).

⁶⁹ See e.g. the special issue of 14 articles on the theme of “Religion and Sustainability” in *Consensus: A Canadian Journal of Public Theology* 41, no. 1 (2020), including the foreword, Chad R. Rimmer and Mary J. Philip, “Sustainability and Religion,” *Consensus* 41, no. 1 (2020): 1–5.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Koehrsen *et al.*, “How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be?”; Louk A. Andrianos and Tom Sverre Tomren, eds., *Contemporary Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Environmental Stewardship in World Religions*, Ecothee Volume 6th-Orthodox Academy of Crete Publication (Steinkjer: Embla Akdemisk, 2021); Jens Koehrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber, eds., *Global Religious Environmental Activism: Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2022); Stork and Öhlmann, “Religious Communities as Actors for Ecological Sustainability.”

⁷¹ Retrieval involves the exploration of scriptural and other sources in particular religious traditions for evidence of traditional teachings regarding human-Earth relations; reevaluation involves the evaluation of such traditional teachings with respect to their relevance to contemporary circumstances; and reconstruction involves the suggestion of ways that religious traditions might adapt their teachings to current circumstances in new and creative ways. Tucker and Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology,” 6–7.

⁷² Sigurd Bergmann, “Developments in Religion and Ecology,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, 13–21.

⁷³ See e.g. Kelly D. Alley, “River Goddesses, Personhood and Rights of Nature: Implications for Spiritual Ecology,” *Religions* 10, no. 9 (2019): 1–17, doi:10.3390/rel10090502; Elizabeth Allison, “The Reincarnation of Waste: A Case Study of Spiritual Ecology Activism for Household Solid Waste Management: The Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative of Rural Bhutan,” *Religions* 10, no. 9 (2019): 1–19, doi:10.3390/rel10090514; Sam Mickey, “Spiritual Ecology: On the Way to Ecological Existentialism,” *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 1–12, doi:10.3390/rel11110580; Leslie E. Sponsel, “Spiritual Ecology, Sacred Places, and Biodiversity Conservation,” in *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Anthropology*, ed. Helen Kopnina and Eleanor Shoreman-Ouimet (London: Routledge, 2017), 132–149; Sponsel, “Introduction to Religious Environmental Activism in Asia,” 1–6.

⁷⁴ Sponsel, “Introduction to Religious Environmental Activism in Asia,” 1–2.

4 Conclusion

In summary, there seems to be increasing interest in the relationship of religion with the environment, climate change and ecological sustainability as evidenced by a rapidly growing corpus of literature. This literature can be categorised into two broad strands: a first strand emerging from a longer period of scholarly focus on the nexus between religion and ecology; and a second strand emerging to a large extent from the new international impetus on the concept of sustainable development after the adoption of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. While the contributions in the first strand do not refer to the conceptual apparatus of development or sustainable development, much of the literature in the second strand approaches the relationship of religion and ecology within the conceptual framework of sustainable development and the SDGs. As part of the second strand, noticeably included is also the growing engagement with the Catholic encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which is leading some scholars to move beyond the SDGs to adopt post-development positions.

The increasing attention paid to the religion and environment nexus in the literature has coincided with an increasing ecological engagement by religious actors, which is evident both at the ideological level as well as in concrete environmental actions and advocacy. However, this often seems to be a partial movement in religious communities. Speaking of a unanimous “greening of religions,” in the sense that ecological concerns constitute a major focus throughout, seems to be premature,⁷⁵ perhaps with some pioneering exceptions. A more fitting term might be to speak of an ecological turn in religious communities across the globe, indicating increased ecological awareness without this becoming a central element in theological tenets and religious activities.

The concurrence of the turn to religion and ecology in the literature and the ecological turn in religious traditions is no coincidence but seems to be propelled by reciprocal influences. While the religious traditions’ ecological turn generates scholarly interest in this matter, the scholarly engagement – inter alia in the form of eco-theologies emerging from academic spaces – also contributes to this ecological turn by increasing the attention to ecological matters in religious communities.

Moreover, while the ecological turn varies across religions and world regions, the literature suggests that there is considerable untapped potential for promoting values conducive to environmental protection and socio-ecological transformation in traditional and indigenous spiritualities beyond the main religious traditions. However, what clearly emerges from a review of the literature is that more research is needed, particularly with respect to the effects of the ecological turn in religious communities on their members’ attitudes, values and environmental actions.

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⁷⁵ Cf. Koehrsen, Blanc and Huber, “How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be?”

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