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# Integral ecology as a common commitment for the Christian Churches and the different religions



## INTRODUCTION

Just over fifty years ago, we set foot on the moon. The moon landing of 20th July 1969 will forever remain an extraordinary and unique moment in the history of humanity. Since then, mankind has experienced enormous changes at all levels. The global population has more than doubled, and great masses of people have moved from rural to urban areas. On average, people live longer practically everywhere on our planet. Within a few decades, mankind has made extraordinary scientific and technological progress that has changed our lifestyles forever and brought along undeniable benefits. At the same time, however, for the first time in the history of humanity, we can no longer take the stability of nature and of the planet that is our home for granted. The very design of our future heavily depends on our present relationship with nature, which poses a challenge to our development models and to our very humanity.

In recent years, many people and institutions have spoken up in support of environmental protection. On the international governance front, the United Nations, with its 2030 Agenda, is pushing the international community to reach environmental sustainability through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On 24th May 2015 Pope Francis launched his second encyclical letter, *Laudato si'*: on care for our common home. Strategically published just before COP21 in Paris, it is an invitation to “enter into dialogue with all people about our common home” (LS 3). ‘Dialogue’ and ‘our common home’ are two expressions that pervade the entire text of this extraordinary document, mapping out a path which the Pope invites the Church and the whole of humanity to take, “...before it is too late” (LS 193). Pope Francis appeals for a dialogue “about how we are shaping the future of our planet”, a conversation that is urgent and should involve everyone “(...) since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all” (LS 14). The Pope suggests an integral ecology approach, highlighting how deeply intertwined the ecological problem is with economic, social and cultural issues, “so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49).

## NATURE AND RELIGION

Through *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis launches a heartfelt and express appeal to believers of every faith to forge a new alliance to protect the future of our planet. He observes that “the majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers, and this should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity” (LS 201).

What specific contribution can religions offer at this delicate and crucial moment in history? Although we tend to see the environmental issue primarily as an issue that science and technological societies should deal with, it can, at its root, be viewed as a spiritual and religious issue. That is not only because faith cannot remain silent in the face of

a crisis that affects the future of all believers, but above all because the environmental crisis has its roots in a distorted religious vision of the relationship between the human being and nature. In this regard, the philosopher Michel Serres (1930—2019) subtly contrasts the word 'religion' with its etymological opposite, 'neglect' — failure to give attention. In fact, where 'religio' tends to look attentively, with care and respect, modernity — he observes — "neglects, in absolute terms". And so, for Serres, environmental damage is nothing other than the act through which the human being defines himself as 'detached' from the world of connections, distancing himself more and more as a 'knowing being' from the 'known objects', to the point where this becomes a defining characteristic of modernity. As a way out of this crisis, Serres suggests searching for values such as beauty and peace which would result in a new 'natural covenant' between human beings and the world. Religions, which are founded on moral and spiritual values such as those suggested by Serres, can and should have something significant to say today on such a pressing and important matter.

In launching an appeal for a global alliance of religions on the environment,

Pope Francis is well aware that, for most people living on our planet, religion and spiritual values are fundamental in guiding individual and collective behaviour. In fact, the encyclical found a great echo in the religious world and beyond, and, following its publication, several religious leaders — Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew and Muslim — were inspired to produce similar declarations. In this sense, *Laudato si'* can be seen as an important platform for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

*Ecumenical aspects.* In the encyclical, Pope Francis openly declares that this document is part of a process to which other Christian leaders have already contributed, particularly His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (cf. LS 7-9). In this regard, the presence of Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon on behalf of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople at the official presentation of the encyclical alongside Cardinal Turkson was significant.

*In dialogue with Islam.* The references to Islam are probably the most surprising in *Laudato si'*, and carry the significance that is typical of Pope Francis' prophetic gestures. In the encyclical, at least three points of encounter with the Muslim world can be identified. First, the choice of the language: Pope Francis chose to add Arabic to the list of official languages the encyclical was published in. This was a significant act of openness towards the Muslim world and the Arabic-speaking world in general. Second, the time frame: the encyclical, dated 24th May 2015, the Christian feast of Pentecost, was officially published on 18th June, the first day of Ramadan. Third, the explicit references to Islam: for the first time in history, an encyclical directly refers to a Muslim author (cf. LS 233, note 159), Muslim poet and mystic Ali al-Khawas.

## **THE ECOLOGICAL JOURNEY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES**

For the Catholic Church, the first and most explicit reference to ecology emerged during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II with the *Centesimus annus* encyclical (cf. 38-39). Later, Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate* (cf. 51) mentioned human ecology. Within the Catholic Church, the work of the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM) is significant. The movement comprises over seven hundred Catholic organisations and communities. In the ecumenical sphere, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has been active in the environmental field for several years, with a particular focus on the connection between care for creation and social justice. The most decisive contribution in the Christian sphere, however, comes from the Eastern Churches. Drawing on the very rich theological and spiritual heritage of the Byzantine Church, in 1989 Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I of Constantinople established 1st September, the beginning of the liturgical year for the Orthodox Church, as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. Later, in 2007, during the third European Ecumenical Assembly held in Sibiu, Romania, this date became part of the so-called "Time for Creation", a time for prayer and reflection on creation that

is now celebrated every year, from 1st September to 4th October, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Today, one of the most influential voices in the ecological field is His Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Known worldwide as 'the green Patriarch', he has been at the forefront in promoting the defence of our planet and of the future of humanity. He has perhaps contributed more than any other religious leader to highlighting the profound theological value of nature. Bartholomew has not only addressed the issue of the ecological crisis through encyclicals and official pronouncements, but he has also promoted a series of scientific symposia, such as the ones held in Pasmos (1995), on the Black Sea (1997), on the Danube (1999), on the Adriatic Sea (2002), on the Baltic Sea (2003), on the Amazon River (2006), on the Arctic (2007), on the Mississippi River (2009) and, more recently, the Green Attica Symposium in Greece (2018). More recently, in his message for the World Day of Creation on 1st September 2020, he clearly stated the reasons behind such strong commitment: "...we repeat that the environmental activities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate are an extension of its ecclesiological self-consciousness and do not comprise a simple circumstantial reaction to a new phenomenon. The very life of the Church is an applied ecology."

## **A GLOBAL RELIGIOUS ALLIANCE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

On 12th May 2020, during a meeting organised by Morocco with the United Nations, the UN Secretary General António Guterres addressed world religious leaders in a video conference on the role of religions in dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic: "we are all vulnerable, and that shared vulnerability reveals our common humanity", he said, adding that the current crisis "lays bare our responsibility to promote solidarity as the foundation of our response — a solidarity based on the human rights and human dignity of all". The United Nations has long since recognised the importance of major religions in shaping the future of the

international community with respect to the environment and other global challenges, with the creation of the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and development (UN-IATF) in 2010 and, more recently, of the Multi-Faith Advisory Council (MFAC), with the aim of providing strategic guidance at the intersection of religion, development, human rights and peace based on the experience of the various Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs). Moreover, in the last few months, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) has relaunched the “Faith for Earth” initiative, aimed at strengthening a global strategy to mobilise the various religions towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.

## ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENTALISM

The Islamic environmentalist initiatives that have taken place over the last few years are particularly noteworthy. The Muslim religious experience is deeply rooted in the relationship between the believer and nature. In 1986, the first Islamic Declaration on nature was issued during the historical meeting in Assisi, marking the beginning of a period of institutional commitment to the environment within the variegated Islamic world. The most important Islamic ecological event to date, the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium (IICCS), took place in Istanbul in August 2015, with the aim of addressing the climate issue from a global Muslim perspective rooted in Islamic morals and legislation. Following that event, a number of Muslim environmentalists drafted an Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, which was the result of a long consultation process among Islamic scholars of various currents. The document was endorsed by several personalities from the Muslim world, including the Grand Mufti of Uganda and Lebanon. More recently, in collaboration with UNEP, a *Mizan* Islamic environment charter is being elaborated with the aim of linking current environmental issues with the related social and economic challenges, so as to provide practical guidance to individuals, communities and institutions in the light of the teachings of Islam.

## CONCLUSIONS

Today, all our hopes concerning the environmental issue seem to rest exclusively on science. However, it is clear that science alone cannot solve the ecological problem. It is necessary to find other forces alongside human intellect to help us decide the path along which we, as humanity, want to set out. It is indispensable to identify and involve other actors alongside scientists and international institutions in order to fully harness the power of science to address major global challenges. It is becoming increasingly clear that a lasting and effective social engagement needs to take into account the cultural, sociological and religious dimensions. The current environmental crisis, in particular, has shown how effectively religious communities have mobilised in response to climate change. Therefore, in order to implement a truly ecological transition, it is essential to find a way to motivate individuals and communities on the basis of their fundamental values. Religions, with their emphasis on knowledge, social cohesion and interrelations, can represent a strategic actor to ensure effective integral human development. In this regard, *Laudato si'* provides an unprecedented and practical pathway on which to set out. The vision of integral ecology that inspires the encyclical prompts us to deepen our understanding of the roots of our ecological commitment, which becomes an opportunity for encounter with other religions. Particularly, the encyclical extends a threefold invitation to the Christian Churches and the different religions. First, it urges us to consider nature as the bearer of a spiritual meaning, a sign of the presence of God, carrying a metaphysical significance that transcends it. Secondly, it invites us to see creation as a gift, and, as such, to enter into a relationship with it rather than consume it. Finally, it inspires us to rethink the role of human beings primarily as communal beings, capable of relating to the rest of creation.

From this perspective, the current ecological crisis could therefore be re-read as a crisis of our humanity and our spirituality. *Laudato si'* has triggered an important process, precisely aiming to elaborate

a new cultural paradigm, a truly renewed worldview. Looking at the reality we are immersed in, with its complexities and crises, the encyclical reminds us, first of all, that “rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise” (LS 12). The encyclical helps us above all to refocus on the relationship between the cosmos and God and, therefore, to go beyond the dramatic ‘human being-nature’ opposition to re-establish a triangular ‘human being-God-Nature’ relationship. Only within such a logic of communion can humanity be freed of the risk of excessive anthropological narcissism and be oriented towards something greater than itself. Thus, *Laudato si’* becomes a universal anthropological proposal as well. In the text we find the word ‘love’ and its synonyms repeated seventy times, showing us a path that we can all follow. As Chiara Lubich realised in a particular moment of intellectual enlightenment, “on Earth, all things are in a mutual relationship of love. We need to be love in order to find the golden thread that unites all beings”. Today, humanity seems to be called upon to recover that vision of ‘being love’, in order to regain that view of itself and of the rest of creation so as to rediscover the bond that unites all beings.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/world-population-growth> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>2</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>4</sup> M. Serres, *The Natural Contract*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1995, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/buddhist-declaration-on-climate-change/> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://theshalomcenter.org/civicrm/petition/sign?sid=17> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <http://www.ifees.org.uk/declaration/> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Cf.

[https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/ar/encyclicals/documents/pa-pa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/ar/encyclicals/documents/pa-pa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-09/bartholomew-i-message-for-world-day-of-creation-full-text.html> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>12</sup> A. Guterres, *The Role of Religious Leaders in Addressing the Multiple Challenges of COVID-19*, New York, 12 maggio 2020 <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-05-12/remarks-role-of-religious-leaders-addressing-multiple-challenges-of-covid-19>.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. Puglisi - J. Buitendag, *The religious vision of nature in the light of Laudato Si': An interreligious reading between Islam and Christianity*, «HTS Theological Studies», 76 (2020/1), pp. 1-10.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. <https://www.silene.org/en/documentation-centre/declarations/the-muslim-declaration-on-nature> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. <https://unfccc.int/news/islamic-declaration-on-climate-change> (consultato il 5 giugno 2021).

<sup>16</sup> P. McDonagh *et al.*, *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy*, Routledge, London-New York 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. Mauss, *The Gift. The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, Routledge, London-New York 2002.

<sup>18</sup> C. Lubich, *Scritti Spirituali/1. L'attrattiva del tempo moderno*, Città Nuova, Roma 1997, p. 134.