

Education for sustainable development - spiritual dimensions

Manfred L. Pirner, Elisabeth Naurath, Johannes Lähnemann, Werner Haußmann

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Pirner, Manfred L., Elisabeth Naurath, Johannes Lähnemann, and Werner Haußmann, eds. 2026. *Education for sustainable development - spiritual dimensions*. Erlangen: FAU University Press. <https://doi.org/10.25593/978-3-96147-930-6>.



FAU Studien aus der Philosophischen Fakultät 35

Veröffentlichungen der Forschungsstelle für Öffentliche Religionspädagogik 1

**Manfred L. Pirner / Elisabeth Naurath / Johannes Lähnemann /
Werner Haußmann (Eds.)**

Education for Sustainable Development -
Spiritual Dimensions



Veröffentlichungen der Forschungsstelle für Öffentliche Religionspädagogik 1

Manfred L. Pirner, Elisabeth Naurath, Johannes Lähnemann,
Werner Haußmann (Eds.)

Education for Sustainable Development - Spiritual Dimensions

FAU Studien aus der Philosophischen Fakultät

Band 35

Herausgeber der Reihe:

Prof. Dr. Michele C. Ferrari und Prof. Dr. Rainer Trinczek


Veröffentlichungen der Forschungsstelle für Öffentliche Religionspädagogik 1

Manfred L. Pimer, Elisabeth Naurath, Johannes Lähnemann,
Werner Haußmann (Eds.)

Education for Sustainable Development - Spiritual Dimensions

**Erlangen
FAU University Press
2026**

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind
im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Kontakt: Prof. Manfred L. Pirner, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg ( ROR: <https://ror.org/oof7hpc57>), ORCID:
0000-0002-6641-4690, manfred.pirner@fau.de

Bitte zitieren als

Pirner, Manfred L. / Naurath, Elisabeth / Lähnemann, Johannes / Hauß-
mann, Werner (Eds.). 2026. *Education for Sustainable Development - Spi-
ritual Dimensions*. FAU Studien aus der Philosophischen Fakultät 35.
(Veröffentlichungen der Forschungsstelle für Öffentliche Religionspä-
dagogik 1). Erlangen: FAU University Press. DOI: 10.25593/978-3-96147-
930-6.

Das Werk, einschließlich seiner Teile, ist urheberrechtlich geschützt.
Die Rechte an allen Inhalten liegen bei ihren jeweiligen Autoren.
Sie sind nutzbar unter der Creative-Commons-Lizenz BY.

Bei der Erstellung des Umschlagbildes wurde das ChatGPT Image Tool
(OpenAI) eingesetzt.

Der vollständige Inhalt des Buchs ist als PDF über OPEN FAU
der Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg abrufbar:
<https://open.fau.de/home>

Verlag und Auslieferung:
FAU University Press, Universitätsstraße 4, 91054 Erlangen

Druck: docupoint GmbH

ISBN: 978-3-96147-929-0 (Druckausgabe)

ISBN: 978-3-96147-930-6 (PDF)

ISSN: 2363-720X

DOI: 10.25593/978-3-96147-930-6

Table of contents

Introduction.....	5
<i>Manfred L. Pirner, Elisabeth Naurath, Johannes Lähnemann & Werner Haussmann</i>	
Public Spirituality. Towards a Conceptual Framework for Integrating Spiritual Dimensions into Education for Sustainable Development	9
<i>Manfred L. Pirner</i>	
Keynotes and Responses.....	35
Why Spirituality Matters for Education for Sustainable Development.....	37
<i>Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia</i>	
Why Spirituality Matters for Education for Sustainable Development.....	47
<i>Johannes Lähnemann</i>	
Reimagining Education for Ecological Civilization.....	53
<i>Mary Evelyn Tucker</i>	
Response to Mary Evelyn Tucker’s Keynote “Ecological Civilization and Confucian Values”	61
<i>Markus Vogt</i>	
Spiritual Dimensions of Education for Sustainable Development from a Philosophy of Science Perspective	67
<i>Pascal Frank</i>	
Response to Pascal Frank’s Keynote on Spirituality as a Compass for ESD.....	85
<i>Joan Hernandez-Serret</i>	
Indigenous Spiritual Education for a Sustainable World.....	91
<i>Blair Stonechild</i>	
Indigenous Education for a Sustainable World by Blair Stonechild: A Response	99
<i>Eunice Kamaara</i>	
Connectedness as the Spiritual Basis of Religious Education for Sustainable Development	105
<i>Elisabeth Naurath</i>	
How can a Holistic Approach Be Successful? (Response to Elisabeth Naurath’s Keynote).....	123
<i>Simone Birkel</i>	

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives	129
Lack of Sustainability Leadership Education in the Catholic Clerical and Religious Formation Systems: A Missed Opportunity for “the Care for our Common Home”	131
<i>Jerin Jacob</i>	
Care Less Pedagogy Instead of Conservation of Creation	141
<i>Simon Wiesgickl</i>	
Spiritual Dimensions of Leadership for Education for Sustainable Development.....	149
<i>Simone Birkel & Ulrich Müller</i>	
Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Shared Perspectives on a Love-Centred Approach to Moulding Responsible Young Adults in Kenya.....	163
<i>Eunice Kamaara, Eric R. Masese & Claire Medard</i>	
Compassion as a Key to Education for Sustainable Development – Mission and Advancement of a Theological Concept	173
<i>Maike Maria Domsel</i>	
Empirical Studies	183
Protestant Religious Education Teachers’ attitudes towards Sustainability. Findings from a Qualitative-Empirical Study	185
<i>Jennifer Jakob</i>	
South African and Swedish Children on the Human Being, Sustainability and the Future.....	193
<i>Karin Sporre</i>	
Religious and Worldview Education as an Existential Resource in Grieving More-Than-Human	203
<i>Saila Poulter, Emma Kurenlahti, Arniika Kuusisto, Lasse Lipponen</i>	
What Is Taught about Climate Change? – The Biblical Motives of Stewardship and Dominion within the US-Evangelical Climate Debate.....	211
<i>Phillip Angelina</i>	
On the Connection Between Spirituality and Sustainability of Highly Religious Christians. Findings from the Study <i>Faith.Climate.Hope</i>	221
<i>Anna-Lena Moselewski</i>	
Practical Approaches and Experiences	229
Education for Sustainable Development: The Krishna Valley Model	231
<i>Zoltan Hosszu & Istvan Tasi</i>	
Spirituality, Justice and Sustainability: Lessons from the Summer School 2024 at <i>Mission EineWelt</i>	241
<i>Sung Kim & Christian Pfliegel</i>	

How to Deal with a ‘Pressure to Act’ Facing Ecological Issues when Teaching?.....	249
<i>Michael Holzwieser</i>	
Fostering Global Learning in Religious Education – the reliGlobal Approach	257
<i>Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl & Bianca Kappelhoff</i>	
A Critique of the Competence Model and of the Morality Laid out in Religious Education, and How We Can Get Over It	269
<i>Annika Krahn & Axel Siegemund</i>	
Conclusion	283
The Nuremberg Memorandum for Integrating Spiritual Dimensions into Education for Sustainable Development.	285
Complementary Perspectives	293
A Plea for Multi-Religious Civil Accountability.....	295
<i>Azza Karam</i>	
A Global Ethic and Spiritual Perspective on Education for Sustainable Development	303
<i>Ulrich Hemel</i>	
List of Authors and Editors.....	313

Introduction

*Manfred L. Pirner, Elisabeth Naurath, Johannes Lähnemann
& Werner Haussmann*

This book publication documents the keynotes and papers presented at the 13th International Nuremberg Forum Conference that took place from 30 September to 2 October 2024 in Nuremberg, Germany.

It is a widely shared insight that *sustainability implies spiritual dimensions*. This is so, because issues of sustainability touch on the fundamental questions of who we are as human beings, how our relationship with nature can be understood, how we want to live, what makes life worth living and how a life worth living can be achieved for all humans on our planet. To put it in another way, the global ecological crises that we are facing today are so dramatic that they require in-depth transformations of individual and collective mind-sets in order to bring about those profound changes that are urgently needed to prevent severest catastrophes. Not least, they require a sense of hope, confidence and solidarity that can support the motivation and endurance in addressing the huge challenges. In this situation, it makes sense to use *all cultural sources available that could facilitate such transformations and such motivation* – which brings the spiritual (including indigenous) and religious traditions into view. They seem to be particularly promising, because through the centuries to this very day they have proven their potential to change individual as well as collective mind-sets and patterns of behavior.

Interestingly, spiritual dimensions of sustainability have been discussed, analyzed and researched by diverse scholars, activists, politicians, business managers as well as cultural and religious leaders from a variety of different disciplinary, cultural or worldview backgrounds. In this wide-ranging discourse, *education has repeatedly emerged as another major aspect and important approach* concerning the question of how the widely deplored mind-behavior gap can be overcome. Moreover, “*Quality Education*” is No. 4 of the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are intended to be closely interrelated with each other. At the same time, it seems that in the extensive treatment of ESD in educational science and public discourse *the spiritual dimension has not yet received the attention it deserves*, especially when it comes to public education at schools or institutions of higher education.

Therefore, the 13th International Nuremberg Forum conference was established with the aim *to explore possible intersections between spirituality, sustainability and education*. This implied to promote, on the one hand, the *integration of spiritual dimensions into ESD* as well as, on the other hand, *the integration of sustainability perspectives into diverse forms of religious or spiritual education*. In order to achieve this aim, theoretical perspectives and academic research were brought into conversation with concepts and experiences from good educational practice.

The *subject focus* of the conference was on *ESD with an emphasis on ecological, environmental issues*, also including similar educational approaches such as Climate Change Education, Ecological Education, Environmental Education, Human Rights Education and Global Learning. The *focus area of action* of the conference was on *public education at schools and institutions of higher education*.

The conference was organized and conducted by the *Research Unit for Public Religion and Education (RUPRE)* of the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), headed by Professor Manfred L. Pirner, supported by Dr. Werner Haussmann and the RUPRE team, in cooperation with *Religions for Peace International (RfP)*, represented at the conference by Professor Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia (Co-President and International Trustee of RfP), Professor Johannes Lähnemann (Chairman of the Peace Education Standing Commission of RfP International), Professor Joan Hernandez-Serret (Secretary General of RfP Europe), and Professor Elisabeth Naurath (Secretary General of RfP Germany).

More details on the conference can still be found on the website <https://www.evrel.phil.fau.de/nuernberger-forum/nuremberg-forum-2024/>. Also, video-recordings of all the lectures and presentations of the conference are available on the RUPRE YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/@rupre7828>).

For this book publication, the altogether 30 contributions were grouped in four major sections:

- 1) Keynotes and responses
- 2) Papers I – Conceptual and theoretical perspectives
- 3) Papers II – Empirical studies
- 4) Papers III – Practical approaches and experiences

These sections are complemented – right after this introduction – by a foundational contribution by Manfred L. Pirner that outlines in more detail the framework idea that was used as a basis for the conference – the idea of “public spirituality”.

The sections are followed by the documentation of the “Nuremberg Memorandum for Integrating Spiritual Dimensions into Education for Sustainable Development” that was adopted by the conference participants on the last day of the event and confirmed in a post-conference online-meeting.

Finally, there are two prominent authors who agreed to contribute complementary perspectives to the conference papers, namely Professor Azza Karam who served as Secretary General of RfP International for several years, and Professor Ulrich Hemel who, among many other important positions, was director of the Global Ethics Institute in Tübingen.

Neither the conference nor this book publication would have been possible without much support from various sides. First of all, we would like to thank all the contributors and authors. We are also grateful to the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) for funding the conference. We owe thanks to the TV-Team of the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) for streaming and documenting the conference. The New York office of Religions for Peace International provided valuable support in finding speakers for the conference. And finally, special thanks go to the fantastic team of the chair of religious education at FAU who made the conference such a positive experience: Phillip Angelina, Verena Bedruna, Leander Lingen, Alexandra Christl, Feline Friedrich, Jermaine Irebor, Dr. Jasmin Kriesten, Dr. Ursula Leipziger, Benedikt Markert, Nele Orlemann, and Dr. Marcus Penthin. Leander and Feline also did a great job in support of the editorial work on this publication.

We do hope that a bit of the stimulating and communicative spirit of the conference will be conveyed in this book.

The Editors

Manfred L. Pirner, Elisabeth Naurath,
Johannes Lähnemann, and Werner Haussmann

Public Spirituality. Towards a Conceptual Framework for Integrating Spiritual Dimensions into Education for Sustainable Development

Manfred L. Pirner

1. Introduction

This chapter attempts to outline and theoretically reflect on the basic ideas that led to the establishment of the Nuremberg Forum conference and that have been further developed in the Nuremberg Memorandum that was adopted by the participants at the end of the conference (see pp. 285-291 in this volume).

In the process of designing an online university course on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and exploring the existing literature, we, the project's development team, had frequently come across the diagnosis of a "mind-behavior gap" that hampered the desperately needed deep transformation: Most people know a lot about the climate and ecological crises and about the changes in our behavior that would be necessary to address them, but they – or rather we – find it hard to transform our ways of life, our economic patterns and our political strategies. Obviously, scientific knowledge and moral appeals are not enough to stimulate people to change their mindset and behavior.

In light of this sobering situation, a considerable number of scholars, religious leaders and public figures from different academic disciplines, cultural and religious backgrounds have advanced the hypothesis that our environmental crisis has a "spiritual dimension" and that addressing this dimension may help to overcome the mind-behavior gap and promote the kind of transformation that we so urgently need (e.g. Besthorn & Hudson, 2017; Bellehumeur, Bilodeau & Kam, 2022; Pihkala, 2018; Tarusarira & Parsitau, 2022; Thathong, 2012). With reference to the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG) some authors have even spoken of the religious-spiritual aspect as a "missing pillar" (Burford et al., 2013) or a "missing link" (Banerji & Prasad, 2018) in the SDGs.

This view, that is actually not really new but can already be traced back at least to the 1990s (e.g. Hull, 1994; Nasr, 2000), has become the basis of conceptual frameworks and movements such as "spiritual ecology" (e.g.

Sponsel, 2012; 2014) or “eco-spirituality” (e.g. Boff, 2015) whose proponents come from a range of faiths or worldviews. The fact that the intersections between spirituality/religion and ecology/sustainability have become increasingly important focus points of discussion and research over the past years is also indicated by the number of recent high-level handbooks in this field (e.g. The Oxford Handbook on Religion and Ecology, 2006; The Routledge Handbook on Religion and Ecology, 2018; The T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Theology and Climate Change, 2019; The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology, 2022; The Handbook of Traditional Spirituality and Sustainability, 2025; The (Elgar) Handbook on Religion and the Environment, 2026).

In their programmatic, widely read article *Inside-out sustainability*, Ives, Freeth and Fischer (2020, p. 208) argued that the “preoccupation with external phenomena and collective social structures has led to the neglect of people’s ‘inner worlds’ – their emotions, thoughts, identities and beliefs” and demanded that sustainability science should enquire “into how spirituality, contemplation and sustainability transformation relate” (ibid.).

A first international empirical study among 100 teachers at higher education institutions in 25 countries has revealed that “there is widespread awareness about making connections between spirituality and sustainability and a general agreement about the usefulness of including spiritual aspects of experience in sustainability teaching and research practices” (Filho et al., 2022, p. 2). However, the findings also showed several factors that hinder this integration, among them a missing common definition and understanding of spirituality.

I will return to the definition problem later in this chapter. For now, I suggest that there are at least *three fundamental arguments for addressing the spiritual dimension of the ecological crisis* that dominate the current discussion and reveal basic characteristics of the concept of spirituality. *First*, spirituality involves asking the deeper existential questions of who we are as human beings, how we relate to nature and what living a “good” life really means – it has to do with our deepest convictions that guide our life and motivations. Therefore, it seems plausible that the ‘deep transformation’ that we need should address these deep anthropological, existential and worldview issues. *Second*, spirituality is not just about cognitive beliefs, but encompasses emotions and practices – and thus has the potential to shape a holistic life style. *Third*, spirituality always implies the confidence that a better world and better human beings are possible, it implies what Finnish theologian Panu Pihkala (2018, p. 555) has called a “tragic hope” that does not deny the tragedies of reality, but still offers

hopeful perspectives – that can counter feelings of depression and helplessness and motivate active engagement.

In all these three ways, spirituality is perceived to imply a *political dimension* as it usually connects the individual with the social and natural world, and an *educational dimension* as it inevitably involves learning processes. In postcolonial or decolonial approaches, this insight takes a specific emphasis. It is argued that the “western” or “Eurocentric” mindset that created the ecological problems cannot be the same one to address them. Thus, for instance, from a Global South perspective, Patara and Nayak point out “the need for more inclusive, pluralistic approaches” that also integrate “spirituality, culture, and collectivism in sustainability discourses and practices to advance other ways of knowing, thinking, and doing” (Patara & Nayak, 2025, p. 81). It is in this context that indigenous epistemologies and spiritualities come into view as alternatives from which a lot can be learnt – which may imply *unlearning* some typical western ways of thinking and living.

In the following, I will first try to contextualize and deepen this rough outline of possible relations between (public) spirituality and ecology by referring to three exemplary theoretical approaches and discourses from three different academic disciplines. The three approaches are those of *Michael Sandel* (philosophy), *Hartmut Rosa* (sociology) and *Jonathan Rowson* (political science). I believe they hold the potential to further stimulate our thoughts, research and discussions on this matter, and one of the reasons they have this potential is that their representatives take a non-religious stance. In this way, I hope, it can be demonstrated that spirituality can serve as what I call a *bridging concept* that can link diverse secular and diverse religious views and lifestyles – even if the first two authors do not use the notion of spirituality as a fundamental concept. In my final section I will discuss what these perspectives on public spirituality might mean for (Christian) public theology and public religious pedagogy.

2. The Search for the Deep (Spiritual) Dimension of Humanity in Philosophical, Sociological and Political Discourse

2.1 Michael Sandel: “Don’t be Afraid of the Idea of the Good Life!”¹ – A Philosophical Perspective

For four decades now, Harvard Professor of Philosophy Michael Sandel has made it his mission to uphold social and human values against the mainstream of political liberalism and largely unbridled capitalism. He is considered one of the co-founders of the political-philosophical movement of communitarianism, which emerged in the 1980s as a critical response to the influential liberal philosophy of John Rawls. His basic thesis is simple: most major social and global conflicts cannot be resolved on the basis of general rational arguments or ideologically ‘neutral’ principles of law or justice, but require the inclusion of strong moral and religious or worldview convictions. This is firstly because they are important to people on certain life issues and secondly because they often offer helpful sources of normative orientation for dealing with social challenges in society (Sandel 2013).

On topics such as the use of genetic engineering and digital technologies, as well as on fundamental issues of a just and democratic society, Sandel has spoken out clearly against technical perfectionism, capitalist consumerism and the principle of meritocracy, and instead has taken a stand for social and human values (Sandel 2009; 2010; 2013; 2020). By discussing specific social issues and identifying and taking up the audience’s intuitions and arguments during his lectures, he makes it clear that the fundamental question of what constitutes human nature is always at the center of his work. In other words, one could say that he traces social issues and conflicts back to their anthropological (and, in this respect, also spiritual) depth.

In this way, in a remarkable panel discussion in Harvard’s digital video studio with 60 young people from 30 countries around the world, Sandel discussed the fundamental philosophical questions raised by climate change. Starting with the specific question “Should the Rich World Pay for Climate Change?”, the discussion ultimately led to the questions of what

¹ “We are afraid of the idea of good life“. This quotation by Michael Sandel was chosen as title of an interview with him that was published by the German journal *Philosophie-Magazin* in 2015 (Legros, 2015).

human solidarity means in global terms and how our relationship to nature and material prosperity can be rethought.²

In his writings and arguments, Sandel remains in the position of a secular philosopher. And yet it is striking that he not only advocates openness to moral and religious convictions, but also repeatedly ends up with values and perspectives that resonate with religious values and perspectives. For example, when he emphasizes the gift-like nature of human life in contrast to genetic manipulation, or when he contrasts the principle of unconditional recognition of others with the principle of meritocracy. Yet, he remains reticent about his personal position on religion. All we learn from an interview with him is: "I grew up in a Jewish family, and we have raised our children in a Jewish tradition. Religion gives a framework for moral inquiry in young minds and points us to questions beyond the material." (Adams, 2013). In a discussion with Charles Taylor and Homi Bhaba at Harvard, Sandel emphasized his closeness to Taylor: "The discussion was meant to debate the meanings of the sacred traditions in a secularized modern world. We're both trying to make room in public and civic discourse for these discussions."

As indicated above, Sandel developed his basic philosophical position in critical conversation with John Rawls' liberal views in his major work *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971) that addresses the fundamental question of how a liberal democratic society whose citizens are deeply divided in their views of what a "good life" looks like can still retain a stable common democratic society. While in this book Rawls argued that a societal consensus on a just society is based on rational reasoning, he integrated some of the criticism by communitarians like Sandel and others in his modified theory that he advanced 1993 in his book *Political Liberalism* (Rawls, 1993). Here, he conceded that a consensus in a liberal democratic society on common basic values and principles need not exclusively be based on rational reasoning, but that such a consensus can become deeper and more sustainable when it can be linked to the diverse religious and non-religious beliefs that are important for people. For instance, the core value of human dignity and the related principles of human rights can, on the one hand, be endorsed by simply acknowledging that they are 'reasonable' – without any reference to a religious or worldview belief system (Rawls calls this a "freestanding" justification). On the other hand, the approval of these values and principles can be enhanced when Jews or Christians can link them to their religious belief that God created humans in his image – which in those religious traditions is seen as a root of the

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmlczMVqgHY>

idea of human dignity. Similarly, Muslims can link these values and principles to the Qur’anic tradition that humans were created by Allah as *khalifa*, God’s stewards on earth (see e.g. Syafaruddin, 2025). In this way, what Rawls refers to as an “overlapping consensus” can come about. This overlapping consensus cannot only be expected to be deeper and more sustainable than a consensus that is founded merely on rational arguments, but also implies the possibility that people from different religious or worldview beliefs can bring in their perspectives and motivations to the further development of the political values and principles. In a later essay Rawls specifies that religious views – Rawls terms them “comprehensive doctrines” – that support common political values can be thought of as their “vital social basis, giving them enduring strength and vigor” (Rawls, 1999, p. 592). Clearly, Rawls made a significant shift in his theory that brings him closer to Sandel and other communitarians (see for more details, Sandel, 1998; Baxter, 2011; Pirner, 2022).

In my opinion, the Sandel-Rawls debate can give important impulses for the discussion about human rights and human rights education (see Pirner, 2016; 2022; 2025), but also for the discourse about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). It can point to the insight that rational arguments and contractually agreed norms such as the human rights or the SDGs are important, but not enough to ensure the vigorous joint efforts that are needed to address the global ecological crisis. It makes sense to also engage people’s personal religious or non-religious worldviews, their spiritualities and their values – because they are affected anyway and they can provide additional “enduring strength”, “vigor” and motivation. This has remained Sandel’s point even after Rawls’ revision of his theory in the second, “expanded” edition of *Political Liberalism* (Rawls, 2005): People should be able to introduce their visions of a good life to the public debate, and – this is how I interpret Sandel – viable solutions can only be found when an “overlapping consensus” can be achieved *not only on the level of general overarching rights and principles but also on the level of more concrete values and views about what makes human life unique and worth living* – which may be termed as a spiritual level. This also implies that neither the international human rights nor the SDGs are ‘neutral’ in respect to visions of a good life. Of course, human rights and SDGs *do* prefer and advocate certain ideas of a good life and critically challenge others. They remain indispensable as guardrails and criteria, even though they do not represent what Rawls referred to as “comprehensive doctrines” of a good life. Yet, Sandel is certainly right when he contends that human rights and other international conventions are in danger of foundering “for their failure to

cultivate the shared identities and civic engagement necessary to sustain them” (Sandel, 2022, p. 5). Dustin N. Sharp has gone a step further and argued – in my view convincingly – that “a more spiritual grounding for human rights” – I would add: and the SDGs – is possible and can be sensible as well as helpful (Sharp, 2021, p. 37).

2.2 Hartmut Rosa: Resonance – A Sociological Perspective

Hartmut Rosa is Professor of Sociology at the University of Jena and Director of the renowned Max Weber College at the University of Erfurt. In his book *Resonance*, published in 2016 (and translated into many languages, the English translation was published in 2021), he develops what he calls “a sociology of the good life” (Rosa 2016, p. 14³) as a positive counter-concept to the undesirable developments in our modern, Western societies that he has identified in previous publications (e.g. Rosa, 2010). These include the idea, typical of modernity, that a successful life is primarily or even exclusively about increasing resources and options. This idea of escalation and acceleration ultimately leads to an alienated and aggressive, unhealthy relationship to the world. As a result, people ultimately close themselves off from the world and from others and do not experience the resonance that actually makes life worth living.

By contrast, a resonance-oriented relationship to the world is characterized by the fact that one allows oneself to be touched by a phenomenon or to be called by the voice of another, that one interacts with it and thereby experiences both self-efficacy and transformation: I am changed, something new emerges. This resonance is uncontrollable, non-disposable, not feasible, not predictable; this is precisely what makes life alive. Rosa has repeatedly used the experience of snowfall or music as examples of this, and – increasingly in the course of his reflections – also the example of religion: For most people, entering a church stimulates a different experience of the world than, for example, entering a supermarket or the workplace; it interrupts everyday life and leads us into a mode of listening and perceiving. It allows us to become open to the experience of something non-disposable, to resonance. Rosa has specified the aspect of uncontrollability in the process of resonance in a further book publication in which the proximity to religious, theological motifs is explicated (Rosa, 2018/2020).

Rosa spells out his understanding of resonance in the various basic relationships between people and the world. First of all, it is about people's

³ In the following, I prefer to use the original German version of Rosa's publications and present my own translation into English.

relationship to themselves, in particular to their bodies, which modern people often see, in a kind of “self-alienation”, merely as a “resource, instrument and object of design” (Rosa 2016, pp. 164–165). It also has to do with the resonance spheres of interpersonal relationships (family, friendship and politics); it refers to our relationships to the material everyday world (work, school, sport, consumption); and it involves what Rosa calls the “vertical resonance axes”. In these, people enter into a relationship with the world *as a whole*. Religion is located here as a resonance sphere, but also “the voice of nature”, “the power of art” and “the mantle of history”.

Rosa sees the essential core of religion in the “idea of an accommodating, responding world” (Rosa 2016, pp. 438–439). God is, as it were, the expression and subject of a vertical “promise of resonance”: “There is someone who hears you, who understands you, and who can find ways and means to reach you and respond to you” (Rosa 2016, p. 439). For Rosa, the form of communication known as prayer that corresponds to this promise becomes the ideal expression of a “deep resonance”, namely an equally listening and responding speech that is directed inwards and outwards, at the same time connects all resonance axes with each other and – also typical of resonance – is aware of the uncontrollable and non-disposable character of the divine counterpart. He refers to Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices, but assumes “that similar experiences and ideas are also constitutive for Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic forms of religiosity” (Rosa, 2016, p. 439).

In his best-selling book *Democracy Needs Religion* he takes this argument further and suggests, with a focus on the Christian churches, that religion offers stories, images, beliefs and practices that promote a resonant relationship to the world. They cultivate a “listening heart”, namely the willingness and ability of people to exit the hustle and bustle of everyday life and listen up, to let themselves be called by something or someone other – and to listen to each other with the expectation that the other may have something important or helpful to tell me. This, Rosa argues, is a central foundation of democracy. Democracy does not work in an “aggression mode”, but it needs a “listening heart”, needs the mode of resonance (Rosa, 2022, p. 53).

In Rosa’s reflections on the “voice of nature” he points out that in Romantic thought, “Listen to yourself! and listen to nature! have become [...] two complementary imperatives that can merge into one attitude and action.” (Rosa 2016, p. 457). In terms of resonance theory, the deeper cause of the environmental crisis can then be seen in the fact that modern thinking – in contrast to other cultures – “denies all non-human entities

the quality of resonance and strictly distinguishes between an animated culture and a mute nature” (Rosa 2016, p. 461).

“From a resonance theory perspective, the silencing of nature (within us and outside us), its reduction to what is available and what is still to be made available, is the actual cultural ‘environmental problem’ of late modern societies. However, environmental sociology and environmental policy, and even more so the natural science-oriented disciplines, lack the conceptual means to grasp and articulate the emerging resonance catastrophe. They therefore continue to interpret the ecological crisis as a crisis of ‘dwindling resources’ and disastrous causal chains of effects.” (Rosa 2016, p. 463).

This should suffice to introduce the central motifs of Hartmut Rosa’s extraordinarily multifaceted work. It has understandably found wide resonance, also among theologians. Even if the term spirituality does not appear in his book, there are obvious references. No wonder that some authors (e.g. Groß, 2022; Riedenauer, 2023) have suggested that Rosa’s theory of resonance can also be read as a theory of spirituality – so do I. As difficult and varied as the definitions of spirituality are, a consensus seems to have emerged in recent times that spirituality can essentially be understood as connectedness with oneself, with others, with the world/nature and with the transcendent (e.g. Bucher, 2014; de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012; Pihkala, 2018; Sharp, 2021, p. 38). These are precisely the basic relationships of resonance that Rosa spells out, and clearly, Rosa’s explication of resonance can be understood as a specification of what “connectedness” in spiritual terms may mean.

Rosa himself has supported such interpretations by explicitly referring to spirituality in one of his essays. In it, he refers to Charles Taylor’s suggestion that the starting point of modernity can be described as a kind of “spiritual declaration of independence” (Taylor, 1988, p. 265; 278, quoted from Rosa, 2019, p. 41). Proclaiming a spatial, temporal, political, social and existential independence can be regarded as typical of the “sovereignty” of the modern individual. For example, the spatial, territorial sovereignty implies an instrumental relationship to nature that should be understood as a spiritual attitude that reaffirms our autonomy; it reaffirms that our goals are not predetermined by the supposed order of things: “The instrumental attitude toward nature is intended as a spiritual declaration of our independence from nature.” (Taylor, 1988, p. 277, quoted from Rosa, 2019, p. 42).

Rosa agrees with Taylor’s diagnosis of the problematic relationship of modern humans to the world that he has elaborated on in his early books: “In that sovereignty means a spiritual declaration of independence from the

world and life as such, it does not accept any conception whatsoever of inviolability, of fundamental unavailability, or of the sacred; and thus, ultimately, no form of existential relatedness.” (Rosa, 2019, p. 43). Consequently, and in line with his resonance theory, Rosa advocates – “tentatively” – a “spiritual declaration of dependence” as a counter-movement against modernity’s “spiritual declaration of independence”. However, he hurries to add that he does not mean “the acceptance of human dependence on historical or natural powers in the sense of helplessness and powerfulness, but rather the recognition of a constitutive but self-effective relationship” (Rosa, 2019, p. 46) that is characterized by not being fixed to the binary of perpetrator or victim, agent or sufferer, but by the “mediopassive”, the in-between.

2.3 Jonathan Rowson: Spiritualize! – A Political Science Perspective

An extraordinary publication appeared in 2014. It was produced as result of the two-year research and consultation project “Spirituality, Tools of the Mind and the Social Brain” of a British think-tank, the Royal Society of Arts. They investigated the question of what spirituality can contribute to overcoming current political and social challenges. Jonathan Rowson, PhD, academic researcher, journalist and chess grandmaster, directed the project and authored the project report. In the introduction, he explains the major intentions of the project.

“Our inquiry was motivated by the fact that, while survey data is not clear, many if not most people appear to self-identify as being in some way ‘spiritual’, without quite knowing what that means. Moreover, many seem to recognise that the world’s major problems have ‘spiritual’ elements that are not adequately acknowledged or addressed, partly because we don’t seem to know how to conduct the debate at that kind of fundamental level.” (Rowson, 2014, p. 6)

The interdisciplinary discourse and numerous expert discussions on the topic conducted with renowned scientists as part of the project have resulted in a broad, multi-layered understanding of spirituality – its openness to diverse interpretations is seen as a strength rather than a disadvantage. A distinction is made between three main understandings of spirituality, which are also repeatedly reflected in empirical surveys (Rowson, 2014, p. 25).

1. Religious spirituality = the way in which religious faith is lived and expressed in different religions and denominations;

2. Non-religious spirituality (“I am not religious, but I am somehow spiritually oriented/interested”)

3. Secular spirituality (of atheists or conscious agnostics). One example of this is weddings or funerals conducted by humanist ministers.

What are the commonalities of these three kinds of spirituality? The report elaborates them as being “about the fact that we are alive at all, rather than our personality or status; it’s about our ‘ground’ in the world rather than our ‘place’ in the world. [...] The primary spiritual injunction is to know what you are as fully and deeply as possible.” (Rowson, 2014, p. 7). Often, such an awareness comes in face of death or in the experience of deep love.

As documented throughout history and across cultures, spirituality seems to concern a specific change in the quality of human experience that has several essential characteristics (Rowson, 2014, p. 46):

- “A degree of aliveness and intensity that makes ‘normal experience’ (NE) seem vapid and attenuated.
- A sense of belonging and connectedness, of being part of a larger whole, of being naturally ‘at home’, that highlights a common background feeling of loneliness or alienation in NE.
- A sense of caring and compassion towards other people in general, and even aspects of nature and the environment, that makes their well-being matter in a non-possessive way, and compared to which NE seems apathetic or of less meaning.
- A feeling of depth, of calm connectedness and open involvement with mystery and uncertainty without any insecurity, compared with a rather anxious dogmatism – a need to feel right or certain – that attends NE.
- A feeling of ease and lightness, of peace, acceptance and harmony, that contrasts with a background sense of agitation, restlessness or unsatisfactoriness that seems often to accompany NE.”

Rowson describes the core characteristic of spirituality as its deep existential and transformative power. Spirituality, he emphasizes, is not just a lifestyle or making everyday life a little nicer with candles in the bathroom, but implies a completely different way of living. Thus, spirituality is *the most important bridge between personal and social change*, and this is precisely where its public, political significance lies.

“We need the spiritual to play a greater role in the public realm, because it highlights the importance of connecting personal and social and political transformation. [...] The overarching societal role of spirituality [...] however

is to serve as a counterweight to the hegemony of instrumental and utilitarian views. At an economic level, that means intelligently critiquing the fetishisation of economic growth and global competition. At a political level, it means that citizens need to be the subjects of social change, not just its objects, with spiritual perspectives playing a key role in shaping and expressing the roots and values of democratic culture.” (Rowson, 2014, p. 8)

In its final chapter “Spiritual pathways to personal, social and political transformation” the report explores such links between the personal and the political. For instance, Martha Nussbaum is quoted with her statement that “Public culture needs something religion-like [...] something passionate and idealistic if human emotions are to sustain projects aimed at lofty goals [...] Mere respect is not enough to hold citizens together when they must make sacrifices of self-interest.” (Nussbaum, 2003; quoted from Rowson, 2014, p. 83).

Rowson takes the climate and ecological crisis as one example of a crisis that has a spiritual dimension. But he also speaks more broadly of a meta-crisis that underlies the various societal and global crises and challenges we face. This meta-crisis, it is argued, consists of a lack of depth and perspective in collective thinking, and an underdevelopment of our assessments and concepts of what constitutes a “good life”. This is why the book advocates revitalizing spirituality and especially to rediscover the significance of spirituality for politics, to “re-spiritualise the public realm” (Rowson, 2014, Afterword by Philip Sheldrake, p. 93).

This short account of the project report “Spiritualise!” cannot do justice to the rich and multifaceted perspectives that it offers. In particular, its value lies in the fact that renowned scholars from various disciplines were engaged in several symposia and conferences, with a focus on what I call “public spirituality”, namely the question of what spirituality might mean for the public realm and for politics.

3. Perspectives from Public Theology and Public Religious Pedagogy

3.1 Perspectives from Public Theology

Despite all the differences between the three approaches presented, one commonality should have become clear: All three are concerned with what I call the “search for the deep dimension of humanity” in and behind the current global crises. According to the conviction of the authors presented, dealing with the ecological crisis in particular requires dealing with the deeper questions of what constitutes our humanity and, consequently,

what constitutes a good life, which can be understood as spiritual questions. The core of spirituality can, according to a broad consensus, be seen in addressing such deep questions and refers to the fundamental relationships of humans to themselves, to others, to nature/the world and to the transcendent. It does so in a holistic way that besides cognitive beliefs includes practices and emotional qualities and thus has the potential to inform as well as transform individuals and groups of people. This is why spirituality is of public relevance and political importance – and why I suggest speaking of “public spirituality” in such contexts.

These assessments coincide with the basic lines of recent (Christian) church and theological contributions on the topic of sustainability such as the encyclical “*Laudato si*” by Pope Francis and similar statements and initiatives by the World Council of Churches (e.g. WCC, 2025) or the Protestant churches (e.g. the *Denkschrift* by the Protestant Church of Germany, Kirchenamt der EKD, 2009).

However, there have been critical voices, too. I would like to address two substantial critical arguments.

Critical Arguments and the Necessity of Critical Assessment

In general, the public, political engagement of Christian leaders has repeatedly been criticized for distancing church and theological pronouncements from their actual spiritual core and religious commitments. One example of such criticism is an essay by the then German Federal Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble, in which he on the one hand appreciated the political engagement by Protestant Christian leaders, but also pointed to the dangers of one-sided politicization. He argued that in some cases political engagement had caused the Protestant church to lose sight of its “spiritual core” without which “even the best-intentioned political program remains hollow and its self-imposed goals unattainable.” (Schäuble, 2016, p. 50). Schäuble does not deny that religion must be political, but he argues that “in order to be political, it must first be religion”. The Basel systematic theologian Johannes Fischer took up Schäuble’s criticism and, in line with its meaning, critically asked whether public theology takes the spiritual dimension in a person’s life seriously enough (Fischer, 2016).

As a response to this kind of criticism, it can be pointed out that the examples described above of a search for spirituality in political and social contexts can be understood as a perfect opportunity to bring precisely the “spiritual core” and the “spiritual dimension” of the Christian faith (and of other religions) to the fore and into the public sphere. What is obviously

searched for is not merely an ethical orientation in the narrower sense, but an orientation that reaches into the fundamental questions of human existence and practice – questions that are spiritual and therefore also theological.

However – and this is a second critical question that has to be faced: Does not the advocacy for a multireligious and trans-religious spirituality devalue the specific religious traditions and their distinctive theologies and spiritualities? Even more, does it not carry the risk of dissolving spirituality either into something shallow or transforming it into an uncritical kind of civil religion that is appropriated by political or ideological interests? No doubt, this critical question must be taken seriously. Yet again, all three approaches presented above clearly do *not* intend to *substitute* traditional religions by a general kind of spirituality, but a) are committed to ensuring that religious traditions including their spiritualities can be brought more effectively into public political culture, and b) aim at exploring to what extent and in which fields an overlapping consensus between them can be realized.

To avoid these two problematic forms of spirituality – superficial and instrumental spirituality – critical reflection from within and without a certain religious or worldview tradition are necessary. For instance, there has been quite a discussion in Christian theology about Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance (see e.g. Hollstein & Oberthür, 2025; Kläden & Schüßler, 2017; Kläden, 2018; Schüßler, 2025). Some theologians asked the critical question, whether experiences of evil, of suffering and manipulation are inappropriately neglected in Rosa's theory. His view of human nature sometimes seems to be very, maybe unrealistically positive. Also, theologians have expressed their skepticism as to the presentation of resonance as a kind of general path to redemption, an all-around solution for every crisis. These same critical questions can be asked regarding the concept of spirituality.

Such criticism indicates that, in general, well-reflected criteria are necessary to ensure that diverse forms of spirituality can be distinguished concerning their positive potential and their negative risks for human life, but also that idealistic contentions need to be empirically tested. In my view, such critical reflection can come mainly from three sources, a) universal political norms and values such as those of the international human rights; b) the theological perspectives and norms of specific spiritual traditions; and c) empirical research, especially from psychology and sociology, that examines whether certain claims about the effectiveness or harmfulness of certain spiritual beliefs and practices can be

substantiated (see on the latter aspect section three – empirical studies – in this volume).

(Public) Spirituality in Public Theology

In Christian theological discourse, two tendencies seem to be prevalent on the topic of ‘spirituality’. One is that many publications focus on specifically *Christian* spirituality as the way Christians live their faith (see e.g. Louth, 2024; Möde, 2007; Zimmerling, 2017–2020). This trend may be stronger in German theology, because in the German language, compared to English, the word “Spiritualität” has a narrower range of meanings in which spirituality is often equated with piety (“Frömmigkeit”) and closely linked with pneumatology, the theology of the Holy Spirit (see, however, the open, interdisciplinary approach in Allolio-Näcke & Bubmann, 2022). The other tendency is that spirituality is largely considered to be something individual or congregational. For instance, in the comprehensive three-volume *Handbook of Protestant Spirituality (Handbuch Evangelische Spiritualität, Zimmerling, 2017–2020)* there is no chapter on the political or public relevance of spirituality.

Together with a focus in theology on theoretical thinking, these tendencies may have contributed to the fact that in the discourse of public theology, spirituality has so far not played a major role. For instance, a search in the *International Journal of Public Theology* from its beginning produces only seven articles that have ‘spirituality’ or ‘spiritual’ in their title (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2008; Geoffrion, 2023; Louw, 2012; Mukherjee, 2011; Nullens, 2013; Schaab, 2008; Sihombing, 2021). Of these, most programmatically and with a wide horizon Baker and Miles-Watson use the notion of spirituality in their concept of “secular spiritual capital” for “mapping and negotiating increasingly complex and contested public spaces between religion and secularity” (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2008, p. 442). Also, there is one article (Sihombing, 2021) that explicitly addresses the ecological crisis, blames “market fundamentalism” as its major cause and suggests that public theology should promote a “spirituality of volunteer sacrifice in order to challenge and provide an alternative to the underlying philosophical attitudes of the capitalist system” (Sihombing, 2021, p. 329).

To be sure, spirituality has been dealt with by other public theologians, mostly in an effort to point to the fact that public theology is not just a theoretical, cognitive enterprise, but is also to be understood as a practice that is not only carried out by theologians, but above all by ordinary Christians and congregations and that involves aesthetic and emotional

dimensions (see e.g. Forster & Machinkowski, 2024; Wabel, Höhne & Stamer, 2017).

The exact term ‘public spirituality’ has been used by a modest number of authors, by some of them in the distinct and programmatic way to which I would also subscribe. Three book publications shall be highlighted in chronological order. In 2004, community workers Lisa and Brian Lanford Heron published the book *Public Spirituality. A Personal Workbook* in which they report about a “Call to an American Public Spirituality,” as a consequence of increasing religious and worldview diversity in the US.

“At the same time, Americans have been uncertain about the role religion and spirituality should play in American public life. People have tended either to impose their religious values on others or refrained from sharing their religious or spiritual point of view. Neither approach serves us well. [...] It is time to learn how to talk about our spirituality, including all religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality [...] It is time for a public spirituality.” (Langford & Langford, 2014, p. 2)

The authors mention that they founded *The Center for Public Spirituality* that “is committed to helping people honor religious diversity and spiritual connection” (Langford & Langford, 2014, p. 87) – which obviously is what the book also intends to do by very practical exercises and stimulating inputs. However, the website of the center given in the book does not exist anymore, and the internet provides no information neither about the authors nor about the call and the center.

In his Boston College PhD dissertation *Educating Religiously Toward a Public Spirituality* Daniel O’Connell aimed at making Catholic believers aware that “our public lives must be a part of our spirituality” (O’Connell, 2008, Abstract). He argues that the task of religious education is to educate for such a spirituality, and using the work of Boston College professor Thomas H. Groome, he outlines a particular way in which this can happen.

In a more recent edited volume, case studies of urban religious events such as processions, festivals and spectacles from various parts of the world are presented as examples of “public spirituality in contested spaces” (Bramadat et al., 2021, book subtitle). They intend to demonstrate that urban public spaces are not necessarily secular spaces, but can be spiritual spaces in diverse and sometimes controversial forms.

Among the few journal articles that use the term ‘public spirituality’, that by US-American Protestant theologian Richard J. Mouw stands out. As a public theologian, he advocates that churches should not only argue theologically, but should also attend to the “spiritual dimensions of our

public consciousness” and help to nurture a “civic spirituality” (Mouw, 2005, p. 481) or “public spirituality” (p. 484).

From the perspectives of public theology introduced and discussed above I draw three conclusions.

1. Public spirituality can be understood as those dimensions and forms of spirituality that are relevant not only for individuals and their closer community, but for the common good of societies and the world, and that should therefore be publicly recognized and critically but constructively discussed. Spirituality always has a public, political dimension, because even if it is conceptualized as strictly individual and inward-oriented, this will influence people’s attitude towards the wider community and political issues. However, there are concepts and forms of spirituality that consciously take account of spirituality’s public and political significance.

2. In pluralistic societies and in multicultural contexts, public spirituality emerges from diverse religious and non-religious spiritualities that bring their specific traditions, beliefs and practices into public spaces and public discourse. These spiritualities may, in their various specific ways, have positive significance for all members of society and thus imply interreligious and transreligious dimensions. People of different religious or worldview orientation may also learn and benefit from each other’s spiritualities and explore communalities in the sense of an „overlapping consensus“ (John Rawls), which may enhance the impact of public spirituality on dealing with the challenges and chances of an endangered, pluralistic world.

3. For such reasons, public spirituality is an important, yet to date often overlooked theme in public theology. Public theologians are called to participate in the necessary public critical reflection and discussion of diverse concepts, forms and practices of spirituality in their own and in other traditions. They can also support people, especially of their own tradition, in discovering the public, political relevance of their spirituality and encourage them to practice public spirituality. Rich traditions such as the spirituals sung within Martin Luther King’s civil rights movement, Gandhi’s protest marches or the multireligious political prayer meetings of *Religions for Peace* (Lähnemann, 2024) can be recalled and new forms such as demonstrations of *Christians for Future*, multireligious chains of lights or candlelight remembrance sites can be valued. In particular, public theologians can help individuals, groups and congregations to mobilise their “spiritual resources” for faith-based environmental or climate action (Bomberg & Hague, 2018).

3.2 Perspectives from Public Religious Pedagogy

In the German language discourse on religious education, *public religious pedagogy* (“Öffentliche Religionspädagogik”) has been established as a concept equivalent to public theology in the field of education (see for an overview Grümme & Pirner, 2025; Pirner, 2017; 2019). It builds on basic tenets of public theology, especially a) on the insight that religion, and likewise religious education, has a public, political dimension, and b) on the aim to make the treasures of diverse specific religious traditions understandable, accessible and beneficial to all people, irrespective of their religious or non-religious beliefs, and thus to contribute to the common good of all. While public theology is the most important conversation partner – in reality, of course, there are diverse public theologians that represent diverse public theologies –, educational science, including philosophy of education, is the other important conversation partner. Therefore, I will first indicate a trend that I perceive in general educational discourse and research, before I explore the links of the approaches presented above to the field of public education and finally offer some concluding remarks.

Interfaces between the above-mentioned approaches and public education

The “fear of the idea of the good life” diagnosed by Michael Sandel for pluralistic modern societies also appears to apply to parts of public education in Germany and other Western countries. There seems to be a certain normative abstinence in school education theory and research that often results in a focus on pragmatic and functional aims of education. Elsewhere (Pirner, 2021) I have demonstrated this using the example of the influential so-called *Klieme Expert Report* that was issued in Germany in 2003 (Klieme et al., 2003) and stands for what can be called a *pragmatic turn* in educational policy. In face of the diverse ideas of a good life in German society, which the report primarily perceived as heterogeneous and conflictual, it recommended to focus mainly on the undisputed teaching of basic cultural techniques such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and foreign language proficiency. However, this kind of normative restraint in schools and school-related educational sciences is in blatant contradiction to the major challenges that are seen as current urgent tasks for schools: democracy education and human rights education, racism and anti-Semitism prevention, peace education, digital education and AI – as well as education for sustainable development.

In the international context, as early as 2001, the American-Israeli professor of philosophy of education and Jewish rabbi Hanan Alexander

called for the rediscovery of the question of the good life and of the spiritual for public education in his book with the programmatic title *Reclaiming Goodness* (Alexander, 2001). In it, he refers explicitly to the controversy between liberal and communitarian philosophies around Rawls, Sandel and others, and clearly positions himself on the latter side. As far as I can see, his book unfortunately received virtually no attention in German educational science at the time – nor in religious education. I can only briefly note here that it is worth rereading, as is his follow-up volume, *Reimagining Liberal Education* (Alexander, 2015).

As to Hartmut Rosa, it is interesting that not only does Rosa's book on resonance contain a chapter on "school as a resonance space" (Rosa 2016), but that he simultaneously published a book on "resonance pedagogy" together with educationalist Wolfgang Endres (Rosa & Endres, 2016) in which he drafts education in terms of resonance theory as "world relationship education" (see also Rosa 2016, p. 408). This approach has been further developed and discussed in several books in the German context (see e.g. recently Dammann, 2025; Hanusa, 2026). His resonance theory has also been adopted and discussed for religious education (see e.g. Leonhard, 2025).

A rediscovery of the deeper spiritual dimensions of education is particularly obvious in the German context, because the German concept of "Bildung", from its tradition and to this day, is centrally and primarily aimed at the self- and world-relationship of the student as self-educating subject. It is therefore only logical that the German, expanded version of the presented volume "Spiritualise" contains a separate section on "Bildung", in which this proximity between Bildung and spirituality is emphasized (Rowson 2018, pp. 69–73).

4. Conclusion: The Potential of the Spiritual Dimension of Education for Sustainable Development

In this chapter, I have tried to sketch the theoretical background as well as the state of discourse and research that have led to the idea to establish the Nuremberg Forum Conference on "Education for Sustainable Development – Spiritual Dimensions". It is true, there have been a number of publications already that aim at integrating such spiritual dimensions, religious and theological aspects into ESD, in the German context (e.g. Altmeyer, 2021; Bederna, 2019; 2021; Gärtner, 2020; overview: Stockinger & Ziegler, 2025) as well as in the international context (e.g. Ayres, 2019; Ezeh, 2015; Marshall, 2018; Tomlinson, 2019). However, as Simone Birkel notes, "In recent years,

the discipline of religious education has been very slow to embrace approaches to religious education for sustainable development (rESD), and still lacks a manageable framework.” (Birkel, 2024, p. 71). Also, while these approaches to relate ESD with spirituality come from religious educators, general concepts of ESD seldom take account of spiritual dimensions or links to religious education (see e.g. the systematic review by Castellanos & Queiruga-Dios, 2021).

This was the reason why the conference was intended to explore possible intersections between spirituality, sustainability and education *from both perspectives*: It wanted to promote the integration of spiritual dimensions into ESD as well as the integration of sustainability perspectives into diverse forms of religious education or instruction. Hopefully, the rich and multifaceted contributions to this volume can inspire and promote both, supported by the reflections towards a conceptual framework offered in this chapter.

References

- Adams, T. (2013). Interview Michael Sandel: This much I know. *The Guardian*, 27 April 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/apr/27/michael-sandel-this-much-i-know>
- Alexander, H. A. (2001). *Reclaiming Goodness. Education and the Spiritual Quest*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Alexander, H. A. (2015). *Reimagining Liberal Education. Affiliation and Inquiry in Democratic Schooling*. Bloomsbury.
- Allolio-Näcke, L., & Bubmann, P. (Eds.) (2022). *Spiritualität. Theologische und humanwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*. Kohlhammer.
- Altmeyer, S. (2021). Religious education for ecological sustainability: An initial reality check using the example of everyday decision-making. *Journal of Religious Education*, 69(1), 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-020-00131-5>
- Ayres, J. (2019). *Inhabitation. Ecological Religious Education*. University Press.
- Baker, C., & Miles-Watson, J. (2008). Exploring Secular Spiritual Capital: An Engagement in Religious and Secular Dialogue for a Common Future? *International Journal of Public Theology*, 2(4), 442–464. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973208X335297>
- Banerji, S., & Prasad, R. (2018). Sustainable Development 2050: Spirituality – The Missing Link. *Purshartha*, XI(2), 86–103. <https://doi.org/10.21844/pajmes.viii.14631>
- Baxter, H. (2011). Sandel on Religion in the Public Square. 91 B.U. L. Rev. 1339 (2011). <https://www.bu.edu/law/journals-archive/bulr/volume91n4/documents/BAXTER.pdf> (Zugriff am 23.09.2024).

- Bederna, K. (2019). Every day for future. Theologie und religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag.
- Bederna, K. (2021). Alles wird gut? Franziskanische Inspirationen zur Klimakrise. Echter.
- Bellehumeur, C. R., Bilodeau, C., & Kam, C. (2022). Integrating positive psychology and spirituality in the context of climate change. *Front. Psychol.*, 13, 970362. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.970362>
- Besthorn, F., & Hudson, J. (2017). The spiritual dimensions of ecosocial work in the context of global climate change. In B. R. Crisp (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Spirituality and Social Work* (pp. 338–346). Routledge.
- Birkel, S. (2024). Socio-Ecological Transformation and Transformative Religious Education. *Theo-Web. Academic Journal of Religious Education*, 23(1), 71–87. <https://doi.org/10.23770/two328>
- Boff, L. (2015). *Toward an Eco-Spirituality*. PublishDrive.
- Bomberg, E., & Hague, A. (2018). Faith-based climate action in Christian congregations: mobilisation and spiritual resources. *Local Environment*, 23(5), 582–596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2018.1449822>
- Bramadat, P., Griera, M., Burchardt, M., & Martinez-Arino (Eds.) (2021). *Urban Religious Events: Public Spirituality in Contested Spaces*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bucher, A. A. (2014). *Psychologie der Spiritualität: Handbuch* (2nd, completely revised ed.). Beltz.
- Burford, G., Hoover, E., Velasco, I., Janouskova, S., Jimenez, A, Piggot, G., Podger, D., & Harder, M. K. (2013). Bringing the “Missing Pillar” into Sustainable Development Goals: Towards Intersubjective Values-Based Indicators. *Sustainability*, 2013(5), 3035–3059. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su5073035>
- Castellanos, P. M. A., & Queiruga-Dios, A. (2021). From environmental education to education for sustainable development in higher education: a systematic review. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 23(3), 622–644. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-04-2021-0167>
- Damann, B. (2025). Resonanzpädagogik in der schulischen Praxis. Demokratiebildung aus resonanztheoretischer Perspektive. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Ezeh, M.-N. E. (2015). A Christian Approach to Education for Sustainable Development. *Journal of US-China Public Administration*, 12(5), 337–344. <https://doi.org/10.17265/1548-6591/2015.05.001>
- Filho, W. L., Salvia, A. L., Ulluwishewa, R., et al. (2022). Linking sustainability and spirituality: A preliminary assessment in pursuit of a sustainable and ethically correct world. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 380, 135091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.135091>
- Fischer, J. (2016). Kirche für die Welt oder Verweltlichung der Kirche? Anfragen an das Konzept “öffentlicher Theologie“. *Zeitzeichen* 5 / 2016.
- Forster, D. A., & Marchinkowski, G.W. (2024). The ordinary and the mystical? Exploring the intersections of Spirituality and Public Theology’. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 80(1), a9915. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9915>

- Gärtner, C. (2020). *Klima, Corona und das Christentum. Religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung in einer verwundeten Welt.* transcript.
- Geoffrion, T. C. (2023). Suffering and Spirituality in Myanmar Today: Hope amid the National Crisis. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 17(2), 210–225.
- Groß, M. (2022). Spiritualität der Sozialen Arbeit. Resonanz bei Hartmut Rosa und Sein bei Meister Eckhart als Verbundensein mit dem Anderen. Nomos.
- Grümme, B., & Pirner, M. L. (2025). Public Religious Pedagogy. In B. Grümme & M. L. Pirner (Eds.), *Innovative Approaches to Religious Education* (pp. 132–143). Kohlhammer.
- Hanusa, B. (2026). *Resonanzpädagogik.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Hollstein, B., & Oberthür, J. (Eds.) (2025). Resonanz und Kritik. Perspektiven auf eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehungen. Suhrkamp.
- Hull, F. (Ed.) (1994). *Earth & Spirit: The Spiritual Dimension of the Environmental Crisis.* Continuum.
- Ives, C., Freeth, R., & Fischer, J. (2020). Inside-out sustainability: The neglect of inner worlds. *Ambio*, 49, 208–217. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01187-w>
- de Jager Meezenbroek, E., Garssen, B., van den Berg, M., van Dierendonck, D., Visser, A., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2012). Measuring spirituality as a universal human experience: development of the spiritual attitude and involvement list (SAIL). *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology*, 30, 141–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07347332.2011.651258>
- Kirchenamt der EKD (Ed.) (2009). *Umkehr zum Leben. Nachhaltige Entwicklung im Zeichen des Klimawandels. Eine Denkschrift des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland.* Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Kläden, T. (2018). Hartmut Rosa als Gesprächspartner für die Theologie. *Pastoraltheologie*, 107, 394 – 400
- Kläden, T. & Schüssler, M. (Eds.) (2017). *Zu schnell für Gott? Theologische Kontroversen zu Beschleunigung und Resonanz.* Herder.
- Klieme, E., Avenarius, H., Blum, W., Döbrich, P. et al. (2003). *Zur Entwicklung nationaler Bildungsstandards. Eine Expertise.* BMBF.
- Lähnemann, J. (2024). *Interreligious and Peace Education in Times of Crisis. A History of Religions for Peace.* EB-Verlag.
- Langford Heron, L., & Langford Heron, B. (2004). *Public Spirituality. A Personal Workbook.* iUniverse, Inc.
- Legros, M. (2015). Michael J. Sandel: „Wir haben Angst vor der Idee des guten Lebens“. *Philosophie-Magazin Nr. 21* (April/Mai 2015). <https://www.philomag.de/artikel/michael-j-sandel-wir-haben-angst-vor-der-idee-des-guten-lebens>
- Leonhard, S. (2025). Resonance-orientated Religious Didactics. In B. Grümme & M. L. Pirner (Eds.), *Innovative Approaches to Religious Education* (pp. 207–220). Kohlhammer.
- Lindner, K., & Zimmermann, M. (Eds.) (2021). *Handbuch ethische Bildung. Religionspädagogische Fokussierungen.* UTB.
- Louth, A. (2024). *Theology and Spirituality* (4th ed.). SLG Press.
- Louw, D. J. (2012). 'Marketplace Masculinities' Within the International Public Arena of Global Media: Towards a Christian Spiritual Approach to Male

- Embodiment and 'Genital Ensoulment'. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 6(2), 159–182. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973212X634920>
- Marshall, K. (2018). Global education challenges: Exploring religious dimensions. *International Journal of Educational Development* 62, 184–191
- Meja, B. (2009). Taylor and Sandel Talk Spirituality. Discussion with Homi Bhaba looks at the modern role of spirituality in the humanities. *The Harvard Crimson*. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2009/4/1/taylor-and-sandel-talk-spirituality-the/>
- Möde, E. (2007). Theologie der Spiritualität – Spiritualität der Theologie(n). Eine fächerübergreifende Grundlagenstudie. Pustet.
- Mouw, R. J. (2005). A Spirituality for Public Life. *Theology Today*, 61, 471–484.
- Mukherjee, A. (2011). Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5(3), 380–381. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973211X581669>
- Nasr, S. H. (2000). The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis. *The Ecologist*, 30(1).
- Naurath, E. (2022). „Ich weiß zwar viel, aber die Vorbehalte bleiben.“ – Emotionen im interreligiösen Lernen. *Theo-Web. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik*, 21, Sonderheft, 151–163.
- Naurath, E. (2025). Emotion-orientated Religious Didactics. In B. Grümme & M. L. Pirner (Eds.), *Innovative Approaches to Religious Education* (pp. 193–206). Kohlhammer.
- Nullens, P. (2013). Towards a Spirituality of Public Leadership: Engaging Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 5(1), 91–113.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2003) *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- O'Connell, D. (2008). *Educating religiously toward a public spirituality* (PhD Dissertation). Boston College.
- Papst Franziskus (2015). Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care For Our Common Home. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
- Patara, S., & Nayak, P. K. (2025). Eurocentric Sustainability. In J. O. Irene, B. N. Irene, K. O. Omeihe & R. Frank (Eds.), *The Emerald Handbook of Decolonising Sustainability: A Global South Perspective* (pp. 81–109). Emerald Publishing.
- Peng-Keller, S. (2010). *Einführung in die Theologie der Spiritualität*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Pihkala, P. (2018). Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change. *Zygon. Journal of Religion & Science*, 53(2), 545–569. <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12407>
- Pirner, M. L. (2016). Human Rights, Religion, and Education. A Theoretical Framework. In M. L. Pirner, J. Lähnemann & H. Bielefeldt (eds.), *Human Rights and Religion in Educational Contexts* (pp. 11–27). Springer International Publishing.

- Pirner, M. L. (2017). Public Religious Pedagogy: Linking Public Theology, Social Theory and Educational Theory. *International Journal of Public Theology (IJPT)* 11(3), 328-350.
- Pirner, M. L. (2019). Public Religious Pedagogy – An Emerging New Paradigm? In M. L. Pirner, J. Lähnemann, W. Hausmann & S. Schwarz (Eds.), *Public Theology Perspectives on Religion and Education* (pp. 39–54). Routledge.
- Pirner, M. L. (2021). Religiöse Bildung in der Schule und der aktuelle Bildungsdiskurs. In U. Kropač & U. Riegel (Eds.), *Religionsdidaktik* (pp. 44–50). Kohlhammer.
- Pirner, M. L. (2022). Religion, Human Rights and Education in Pluralistic Societies. Re-visiting John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. In J. Marko et al. (Eds.), *Religious Diversity, State, and Law: National, Transnational and International Challenges* (pp. 267–288). Brill.
- Pirner, M. L. (2025). Human Rights-orientated Religious Pedagogy. In B. Grümme & M. L. Pirner (Eds.), *Innovative Approaches to Religious Education* (pp. 257–271). Kohlhammer.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1993). *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1999). The Idea of Public Reason Revisited. In J. Rawls, *Collected Papers* (pp. 573–615). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. (2005). *Political Liberalism. Expanded Edition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Riedenauer, M. (2023). Krise des Unverfügbaren. Zur spirituellen Relevanz von Hartmut Rosas Resonanztheorie. *Studies in Spirituality*, 32, 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.2143/SIS.32.0.3292455>
- Rosa, H. (2010). *High-Speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*. Penn State University Press.
- Rosa, H. (2016). *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*. Suhrkamp. (English: 2021. *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*. Polity).
- Rosa, H. (2018). *Unverfügbarkeit*. Wien: Residenz-Verlag. (English: 2020. *The Uncontrollability of the World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity).
- Rosa, H. (2019). “Spirituelle Abhängigkeitserklärung.“ Die Idee des Mediopassiv als Ausgangspunkt einer radikalen Transformation. In K. Dörre, H. Rosa, K. Becker, S. Bose & B. Seyd (Hrsg.), *Große Transformation? Zur Zukunft moderner Gesellschaften* (pp. 35–55). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Rosa, H. (2022). *Demokratie braucht Religion. Über ein eigentümliches Resonanzverhältnis*. München: Kösel. (English: 2024. *Democracy Needs Religion*. Polity).
- Rosa, H. & Endres, W. (2016). *Resonanzpädagogik. Wenn es im Klassenzimmer knistert*. Beltz.
- Rowson, J. (2014). *Spiritualise. Revitalising spirituality to address 21st century challenges*. RSA Action and Research Centre.
- Rowson, J. (2017). *Spiritualise. Cultivating spiritual sensibility to address 21st century challenges* (2nd ed. with changed subtitle). RSA Action and Research

- Centre. <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/spiritualise-2nd-edition-report.pdf>
- Rowson, J. (2018). *Spiritualise*. Wie spirituelle Sensibilität helfen kann, den Herausforderungen des 21. Jahrhunderts zu begegnen (3., translated and revised ed. of the English original). Progressives Zentrum.
- Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sandel, M. J. (2009). *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*. Belknap Press.
- Sandel, M. J. (2010). *Justice. What's the Right Thing to Do?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sandel, M. J. (2013). *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sandel, M. J. (2022). *Democracy's Discontent. A New Edition For Our Perilous Times*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Schaab, G. (2008). Which of These Was Neighbour?: Spiritual Dimensions of the US Immigration Question. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 2(2), 182–202. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973208X290035>
- Schäuble, Wolfgang (2016). Das Reformationsjubiläum 2017 und die Politik in Deutschland und Europa. *Pastoraltheologie*, 105(1), 44–53.
- Schüßler, M. (2025). Die Unbegreiflichkeit Gottes aushalten? Eine Zwischenbilanz zu Hartmut Rosas Resonanz. *Herder Korrespondenz*, 7/2025, p. 16–18.
- Sharp, D. N. (2021). Prickles and goo: Human rights and spirituality. *Journal of Human Rights*, 20(1), 36–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2020.1856647>
- Sihombing, H. (2021). Capitalism and the Ecological Crisis: The Spirituality of Voluntary Sacrifice. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 15(3), 329–348. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-01530003>
- Sponsel, L. E. (2012). *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*. Praeger
- Sponsel, L. E. (2014). *Spiritual Ecology*. In D. A. Leeming (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* (2nd ed.) (pp. 1718–1723). Springer.
- Stockinger, H., & Ziegler, B. (2025). Religious Education for Sustainable Development in Schools: An Overview of the Topic and Its Didactical Impulses in German-Speaking Countries. In S. Windsor & O. Franck (Eds.), *Intersections of Religion, Education, and a Sustainable World* (pp. 139–154). Springer.
- Syafaruddin, B. (2025). Ecotheology in the Perspective of Islamic Education: A Conceptual Review. *Indonesian Journal of Research and Educational Review*, 4(3), 720–731. <https://doi.org/10.51574/ijrer.v4i3.3253>
- Tarusarira, J., & Parsitau, D. S. (2022). The religio-spiritual and sacred dimension of climate-induced conflicts. In E. Chitando, E. M. Conradie & S. M. Kilonzo (Eds.), *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change*. Routledge.
- Taylor, C. (1998). Legitimationskrise? In C. Taylor, *Negative Freiheit? Zur Kritik des neuzeitlichen Individualismus* (pp. 235–294). Suhrkamp.

- Thathong, K. (2012). A Spiritual Dimension and Environmental Education: Buddhism and Environmental Crisis. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 5063–5068. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.386>
- Tomlinson, J. (2019). Ecological religious education: new possibilities for educational practice. *Journal of Religious Education*, 67, 185–202. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-019-00087-1>
- Wabel, T., Höhne, F., & Stamer, T. (Eds.) (2017). *Öffentliche Theologie zwischen Klang und Sprache. Hymnen als eine Verkörperungsform von Religion*. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.
- Windsor, S., & Franck, O. (Eds.) (2025). *Intersections of Religion, Education, and a Sustainable World*. Springer.
- World Council of Churches, WCC (2025). Ecumenical Decade of Climate Justice Action (2025–2034). Moving Together in Ecological Metanoia for Transformation. <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Ecumenical%20Decade%20Of%20Climate%20Justice%20Action%20Web.pdf>
- Zimmerling, P. (Ed.) (2017–2020), *Handbuch Evangelische Spiritualität* (3 volumes). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Keynotes and Responses

Why Spirituality Matters for Education for Sustainable Development

Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia

It is both an honour and a privilege to stand before you today to reflect on the intersection of spirituality and education in the context of global sustainability. It is widely acknowledged that our most profound challenges are intertwined with social justice, economic inequalities and political instability. Hence, we should readily accept that our solutions must traverse multiple social, economic, political and cultural dimensions. Yet the spiritual dimension remains overlooked. Change, however, is in the air.

1. From Marginal to Pivotal – Spiritual Growth as the Lever for Sustainability

A quarter of a century ago, as we entered the new millennium, any reference to spiritual development was missing from the first Millennium Development Goals. In the current 17 Sustainable Development Goals, there is little vocabulary for it. Again, if we look back, at one time the word ‘environmentalism’ assumed a fringe movement. Today, with more concrete terms like ‘climate action’, it commands our serious and urgent attention. May this forum likewise accelerate moves for the spiritual domain to be recognized more solidly as pivotal and not marginal to fostering the enduring values, sentiments and commitments that are vital for a global culture of sustainability.

2. Perspectives from the Sikh *dharam*

As we take stock and collaboratively envision a way forward, allow me to contribute perspectives as a Sikh faith practitioner whose leadership role includes developing new forms of social infrastructure and provision that integrate secular and spiritual approaches. These are based on stimulating new partnerships, policy developments and service delivery processes in education, health care and related domains.

To stimulate change, shift mindsets and secure commitments, I see four main ingredients coming into play. These include: 1) a shift in perspective and an expanding of horizons to help us see the world and ourselves in a

deeper, broader context; 2) a realization that strikes a deep chord within us, awakening values and sentiments to energise and motivate us; 3) an ability to transcend the ego and seek the welfare of all, to leave no one behind and envision shared goals, remaining dedicated, resilient, forgiving and hopeful as we navigate around obstacles; 4) a strong sense of identity, of knowing what we stand for, and the values that define us. We should likewise consider what values characterise spiritually transformative education, by examining concepts and case studies for healing rifts and conflicts to forge new pathways through peace building.

For myself, these ingredients have been illuminated by the teachings, practices and identity I grew up with, anchored in our 555-year-old Sikh *dharam* or faith. The main source of all our teachings is Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the sacred scripture that we revere as our ever-living Guru - containing 1430 *ang* or sacred pages of lyrical, spiritual wisdom. Allow me to elaborate on the significance of these teachings to our discussions.

2.1 Shifting Perspective Expanding Horizons – to see Oneness and Interconnectedness:

All of Sikh teaching can be summarized through a majestic sacred logo known as *Ik Oang-Kār*, which opens and appears throughout Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. 'Ik' is the numeral one, evoking a sacred Oneness that weaves through an infinitely interconnected and interdependent creation. So, when Sikhs speak of God, we mean this Oneness. It has an eternal resonance – *Nām* - and a creative power which gives rise to *kudrat* – to nature in all its countless forms and cycles. If we hope to achieve sustainability, we must first cultivate an awareness of this divine interconnectedness. As humans, we are part of earth's 8.4 million interconnected life species, whose sustenance God provides. Stationed in the cosmos, the whole earth is described as a *dharamsāl*, a sacred place of worship, learning and spiritual growth, and a stopover for our travelling soul.

The sacred Oneness is our true origin and true destination. Hence, life's purpose is to align ever closer to God, to reach a state of oneness with our Creator. Realising our human mortality and life's Eternal Sustainer, we are called to see our existence in the infinite context of time and space, that stretches forever beyond our own lifetime. This humbles and spurs us to live more consciously and to consider our legacy for future, distant others.

Thinking of sustainability, we acknowledge a higher power that sustains our life in the complex web of creation, a Universal Creator - who blesses nature with an awesome, self-sustaining capacity that we can all learn from.

While educators may be cautious to use the word God, faith perspectives spark a wonder, curiosity, and conviction about an underlying wisdom, intelligence, and power that keeps the world in balance.

2.2 Awakening Inner Realisations – Nurturing Transformative Values, Qualities and Sentiments:

Reflecting on teachings that awaken qualities and sentiments within us, my mind turns to our morning prayer: '*Dhaul dharam dayā kā pūt*' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *ang 3*). It speaks of the entire planet as held in balance, not only by the laws of physics, but by *dharam* – the unseen cosmic order and harmony. *Dharam* is defined as the child of compassion, held in place by the quality of contentment. This teaches us that, at the most subtle level, the universe is sustained by the Creator's own love and care.

Another core teaching, from the Mool Mantar, our root prayer, cultivates a state that is '*nirbhau, nirvair*' – beyond fear and hate. As sparks of the Divine, we must therefore seek to live in harmony with these essential characteristics - of compassion and contentment, free of animosity, vengeance or greed. By nurturing inward reverence, awe and gratitude, we stop alienating and exploiting both nature and our fellow human beings.

Yet another daily verse encourages us to see nature's life-giving elements as parental figures, who nurture, guide and sustain us: '*Pavan Gurū pānī pitā mātā dharat mahat....*' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *ang 8*):

Air is the Guru –

The carrier of wisdom's teachings,

The oxygen for our spirit.

Water is Father –

The life-giving sustainer.

Great Earth is Mother –

Nourishing and nurturing us.

Day and night are the two caregivers

Spinning between them, the whole world plays

Enacting the Divine drama.

Exposure to such teachings prompts us to consider how our attitudes and actions would be transformed by relating to nature with such loving reverence.

Another verse – ‘*So dar terā kehā so ghar kehā...*’ (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *ang* 6) portrays every element of nature vibrating with a hidden song, expressing awe and gratitude for the Infinite Creator. The water sings Divine praises. The earth sings Divine praises. Everything sings Divine praises, in a cosmic chorus that inspires us to recognise and treasure the Divine presence everywhere.

2.3 Transcending the Ego – Seeking the Well-Being of All:

Ego is a major barrier to sustainability, for it fosters an illusion of separateness, eclipsing our ability to act compassionately, responsibly and sustainably. When education is driven by the ego, it inflates arrogance and greed and leaves the mind spiritually ignorant. Hence, wisdom is not dependent on being studious or learned. Rather, wisdom fosters spiritual literacy, helping us to critically self-reflect, to morally discern, to become Creator-conscious and creation-conscious. True education helps us grow in wisdom, and not in ego.

The effect of the ego, as a barrier to the mind, is depicted through the scriptural metaphor of the bamboo tree. It grows fast and grows very tall. Yet it remains hollow, and easily sparks fires. It is also immune to the fragrance of sandalwood, that metaphorically represents a spiritual influence which – like a fragrance – inspires transformation. While the uses of bamboo are many, it provides a potent metaphor for our shallowness, arrogance and resistance to acknowledging and honouring life's sacredness.

When the mind transcends the ego, this brings reflexivity, forgiveness, renewal and optimism. As humans, we are uniquely able to reason and discern, to review and reshape our thoughts and actions, to have remorse and repentance, to seek forgiveness and learn from our errors. And so, we can learn to live with hope, faith, and optimism without succumbing to apathy and helplessness. To accept the mystery and paradox of God's existence helps us recognize that believing is seeing; we start to look beyond appearances and see possibilities for change.

To see past the ego spurs us to serve *sarbat dā bhallā*, the welfare and well-being of all – that we could loosely translate as ‘the common good’. Within this wider circle of flourishing – of others around us, of society and nature – one's own flourishing is also included and granted. Whilst the word ‘charity’ can maintain a distance between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have

nots', the principle of *sarbat dā bhallā* – whether applied to agriculture, economics, education, healthcare, or any other field, encourages us to always seek wider prosperity beyond narrow self-gain.

As humans, we build many alliances, blocks and unions for trade, for agriculture and economics. A spiritual perspective reveals our kinship beyond such alliances - as children of one God, who share a kinship with all realms of nature. This inspires us to serve the Creator through serving all people and all creation. We are blessed to live on earth as custodians of the planet: '*Is dhartī meh terī sikhāṛī*' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 374). This means exercising responsibilities as we enjoy the rights of planetary residency divinely granted to us. This resonates much with the unadopted Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, as proposed by the Interaction Council in 1997, that we would do well to revisit and learn from.

2.4 Fostering a Values and Virtues-Centred Identity

For Sikhs, our identity anchors us to the values and virtues we cherish and stand for. For those who have committed to faith practice, through initiation into the Khalsa order, their outward identity is inspired by the concept of the *sant sipāhī* or saintly warrior. This goads us to be agents for change based on fusing the saintly qualities of wisdom, love, integrity and compassion with the initiative, grit and courage of a soldier. Such principles are expressed in the wearing of the *dastār* (turban) and the five Ks.

The first of these five Ks is the maintaining of the *kes* - the long uncut hair and flowing beards that point to a special bond between nature and humans. Like an eco-warrior, we must let spiritual values empower us to wisely and lovingly safeguard our Mother Earth and the diverse web of life, known scripturally as the '8.4 million life species'. The second is the *kangha* or wooden comb, that instils an attitude of constant care and tidiness. Third is the *kirpān*, the noble sword of loving grace (*kirpā*) and dignity (*-ān*), that reminds us of our spiritual, civic, and environmental responsibilities. Like the turban, it reminds us to govern our mind and the world with wisdom and to defend against injustices and indignities. Next, the *kachhehrā* – secure undershorts – convey a strong message about self-control, to never abuse one's power and recklessly violate others. Finally, the *kara*, made of steel or iron, is worn on the wrist. It reminds us of God's eternal oneness, the circle of creation, and the need to think and act with ethics and responsibility, with a sovereign mind that is not enslaved by ego.

3. Models and Frameworks for Collaborative Engagement

Allow me now to share some helpful models and frameworks – both emanating from Sikh heritage and reflected in contemporary initiatives – that bridge divides between religions and secular standpoints to address shared goals in a spirit of solidarity and collaborative engagement.

3.1 Honouring Diversity while Strengthening a Common Human Identity through Shared Values

Gurbani, the message of the sacred teachings composed and compiled by the Sikh Gurus, includes the compositions of 30 spiritual luminaries from different faith traditions. Within this rich interfaith scripture, enlightened voices from different social classes, as well as faiths and traditions, are brought together to form a kind of inter-religious, inter-human dialogue on the values that are sacred to humanity, urging us to look beyond the labels and outward marks of our religious and cultural identities, and establish, first and foremost the values that define us. This historic model inspires me to commend all moves to establish statements, frameworks and policies to reflect on and articulate the values we must collectively identify and stand for as humans with the shared goal of global sustainable sustainability in mind.

3.2 Spiritually Transformative Education: Concepts and Case Studies

Nishkam Schools Multi-Academy Trust

In Birmingham, UK, the success to date of the Nishkam Schools Multi-Academy Trust (NSMAT) offers a model for integrating a focus on the spiritual in policy frameworks, curricula and content delivery. The collaborative work to develop and deliver this model gave simultaneous focus to national, local and global contexts.

Spiritual Development as an Educational Aim

In England, the notion that education should aim to foster ‘the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and society’ has been long enshrined in education legislation, since the 1944 Education Act. Despite minor changes in terminology, the term ‘spiritual’ has remained as a bridge across diverse religious affiliations. Hence, for us to develop a new schools trust, this acknowledgment in law was a helpful starting point.

'Learning from' Religion in Religious Education

In England's state schools, Religious Education, or RE, is a compulsory national subject. While the focus and identity of RE remains debated, it nevertheless provides a space in the curriculum to reflect on the role of religion in our personal and collective lives, to build children's capacity to reflect on life as well as build their knowledge of our diverse world. Since there is no national RE curriculum as yet, each local authority develops its own, locally agreed syllabus, through committees representing the Church of England, the multi-faith city, as well as teaching professionals and the local authority. This allows for various approaches to teaching RE across the country, as a multi-disciplinary subject involving philosophy, culture, history, spirituality, values and ethics. The aim of 'learning about' religions is joined by the aim of 'learn from' them - moving beyond information based to transformative, values-based learning.

The Birmingham Framework of 24 Spiritual and Moral Dispositions

In Birmingham, an opportunity opened for us to help to shape a new local syllabus for RE, based on an innovative framework of 24 moral and spiritual dispositions, with a clear focus on 'learning from' religious life to build pupils' self-awareness, values and attitudes and vision for life. Designed to bridge religious and secular viewpoints to cultivate values for shared flourishing, this syllabus was first launched in 2007, then revised in 2022, to comply with legal developments for RE to more inclusively support all children, from all faiths and none.

Addressing a Failed Generation of Children

Around the time we participated in the process of conceptualising this RE syllabus, I was also struck by the UNICEF report of 2006 that ranked England and the United States at the bottom of the list for child well-being in industrialized countries. Related evidence of a failed generation of children, despite so much social and technological progress, became a great spur to our educational vision building. This began with the creation of the Nishkam nursery, that later evolved into our schools trust.

Evolution of the Nishkam Passport for Values and Virtues

Since the early childhood education relates directly to the formative education of a human being, we integrated the National Early Years Foundation Stage framework for the care and education of young children with the new locally agreed RE framework of spiritual and moral

dispositions. Extending this work further, we established a network of primary and secondary schools and developed the *Nishkam Passport* of values and virtues. This was to guide not only personal development and pastoral care, but the study of different subjects across the curriculum, taking a value-centred approach across the board. Such developments shed light on possibilities to stimulate and carry through change in terms of shaping policy, transforming the experience of learning and evolving teacher training.

4. Unearthing Sikh Scriptural Teachings on Education

In our case, the development process also involved digging deep to unearth scriptural wisdom on what counts as true education. The very word 'Sikh' means a learner. We are urged to reflect on the two certain facts about our lives: our birth and our death, and then to ask - what kind of overarching vision of education should we have in between? This is related to the three cardinal questions about our existence: Where have we come from? Where will we end up? And what is the purpose of life? Such reflections help to expand our understanding of the purpose of education, as further explored in the below examples from Sikh scriptural teaching:

'Parhiā mūrakh ākhīai jis lab lobh ahankār' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *ang* 140)
Some people appear to be very learned, but conceal only greed and arrogance. By spiritual standards, such knowledgeable people would be described as fools.

'Parhe sune kiā hoī, jou sahaj na milio soī' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *ang* 655)
What use are the rituals of reading, studying and listening, if inward peace, wisdom and understanding of the Divine are not attained?

'Vidyā vīchārī ta parupkārī' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *ang* 356): To truly contemplate and grasp spiritual wisdom is to become magnanimous and altruistic in character.

'Man tū(n) jot sarūp hai, āpnā mūl pachhān' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, *ang* 440)
Oh my mind, you embody the divine flame, recognize and realize your true essence.

5. Healing Rifts and Forging New Pathways

The developments I have described give me hope that localised initiatives can act as levers for wider change, building resonance with like-minded approaches in other local, national or international contexts. UNESCO was

formed to build peace by looking beyond political and economic arrangements, to strengthen the intellectual and moral solidarity of humanity through educational, scientific and cultural means. I have long suggested that the domain of religion should join this list, allowing us to create sacred space for interhuman transformation and solidarity.

Somehow, through eras of conquest and colonialism, we have made it acceptable to exercise such a scale of violence and exploitation on nature and people in the search for profit and domination. Moreover, entrenched historical rifts have kept the spiritual and secular in separate camps. We must now creatively and purposefully realign them to usher a paradigm shift that is conducive to the world's healing and flourishing.

To sum up, let me say that we stand at the pivotal moment in history, a moment that requires us to rise above boundaries and embrace our intrinsic interconnectedness. The journey toward global sustainability is not solely about policy reform or technological advancement. It is also about transforming our hearts and minds. For this, a focus on the spiritual is indispensable. May this conviction spur us all in our efforts.

References

Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji – scripture revered by Sikhs as eternal Guru

Why Spirituality Matters for Education for Sustainable Development

Response to the Opening Lecture of Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia

Johannes Lähnemann

It is a pleasure and an honor for me to respond to Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh's opening presentation. We have known and appreciated each other for many years through our work with *Religions for Peace* – he as one of the presidents and initiator of many important activities; in particular I would like to mention the Charter for Forgiveness, which was adopted at the 2019 World Assembly in Lindau. Myself as an advisor to RfP for 40 years and Chairman of the Peace Education Standing Commission, with which we have documented many interreligious peace education projects and brought them into exchange with each other – now summarized in my new book *Interreligious and Peace Education in Times of Crisis. A History of Religions for Peace* (Lähnemann, 2024).

I would like to thank Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh very much for the substantive and personal testimony as to why spirituality is so relevant for Education for Sustainable Development. You have explained how this task can be derived from the center of your religious tradition – the Sikh religion. You have shown us the treasure that can be found in your holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, and in the teachings and work of your Gurus since Guru Nanak. You have shown that in the Guru Granth Sahib the Oneness of Creation is a leading conviction – as God himself is one. God is present as creative light in all human beings: One God – one humanity. God is in the temple as well as in the mosque. This is the fundamental message of Guru Nanak and also of the other Gurus: “Throughout their lives, the Gurus not only espoused the importance of equality, but demonstrated the importance of it being put into practice.” For Sikh believers this means to further common goals for humanity and to be active for them. As a special religious asset you explained in your 4th thesis, I quote, “We are called also to see our existence in the infinite context of time and space that stretches forever beyond our own lifetime. This humbles and spurs us to live more consciously, by recognising our mortality, and considering our legacy for future others. Thinking of sustainability, we acknowledge a higher power that sustains our life in the complex web of creation – a Universal Sustainer

who blesses nature with an awesome, self-sustaining capacity that we can all learn from. Whilst educators may be cautious to use the word God, faith perspectives spark a wonder, curiosity and conviction about an underlying wisdom, intelligence and power that keeps the world in balance.” I would also like to highlight what you are laying out in your 11th thesis: “As humans we build many alliances, blocs and unions, for trade, for agriculture and economics. A spiritual perspective encourages us to see an ever deeper connectedness, a kinship with one another as children of One God and a kinship with all realms of nature. As bloc Sikhs we are called to serve the Creator through serving creation, in a spirit of *sarbat da bhalla*, of serving the wellbeing of all and seeing a greater ‘whole’ behind the parts. To live on earth as custodians of the planet [...] means exercising responsibilities as we enjoy the rights of planetary residency divinely granted to us.”

I would like to place your comments in the context that we developed in the Peace Education Working Group at the World Assembly in Lindau 2019: The working group on Peace Education gathered with activists in the field of religious and interreligious education from 10 countries and different religious and educational contexts in America (North and South), Africa, Asia and Europe against the backdrop of the experience that in many social, cultural and religious contexts a decline of values can be found as a source of conflict, intolerance and misbehavior. Education, on the other hand, is one of the most important factors for breaking down ignorance and prejudices which are the dangerous preconditions for violent conflict. In Lindau, the main issue has been to explain the specific religious assets for peace education that can be gained out of the spiritual sources of the religions. These are values which go beyond what states and politics can regulate. They can be promoted within the religious communities and by interreligious cooperation and can also inspire public education. This was explained in reflecting fundamental convictions and fundamental values (Lähnemann, 2024, 167–168):

1. Fundamental Convictions

Religions have – each in a specific way – a conviction of the fundamental unity of mankind and of the interrelationship of all living and existing beings. Believing in God in the monotheistic religions includes the traditions of creation. This has as consequence to be thankful for creation and being responsible for it, to act in solidarity with all creatures, living apart from selfish egoism, experiencing security out of the belief in God, being critical of idolizing selfish aims, being engaged for the weak and for

an inclusive life with the handicapped. Believers are connected in consciousness for the integrity of creation.

In the tradition of non-theistic religions – for example in specific branches of Buddhism – it is the interdependence of everything living and existing, which shall lead away from all selfish world views to a comprehensive consciousness of sensitivity and responsibility.

These convictions imply a fundamental pedagogical perspective: Only if members of the rising generation have respect for their fellow human beings, feel responsibility for all creation, animate and inanimate, and are sensitive to hatred, violence and all developments which are hostile to life and society, will they be equipped for a life in community which opens up a future for our planet.

2. Fundamental Values

In the letter of 138 leading Muslim personalities to the representatives of Christianity from 2007, the “Common Word” (www.acommonword.com), it is highlighted that Islam, Judaism and Christianity have a common heritage in the double commandment “Love God and love your neighbor”. In the Bible as well as in the Qur’an this is explained in many ways for many specific situations and challenges: in the Torah for example concerning the dignity and the well-being of the stranger, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus extending to “love your enemy”, in the Qur’an referring to a society living in solidarity.

In the Buddhist tradition the spiritual “awakening” and the liberation from suffering are closely related with the ability of empathy with all that lives and exists, a readiness for ways from a concern with the self and entanglement in the self to a selflessness which makes free for an all-embracing compassion.

Love, compassion, tolerance, ability to forgive, truthfulness, hope are values which cannot be imposed by law but which are inherent in religious traditions and which are necessary for a real well being in society. They can be experienced and trained with the adolescents in religious communities.” And it would be best if they were trained in cooperation of religious communities and school.

The impulses of the World Assembly in Lindau were deepened and expanded in a newly formed International Standing Commission Strengthening Interreligious Education. In our commission we work together with educational experts of different faiths and from different countries – ranging from the Philippines over the Middle East to Europe

and North America. Each of our Zoom meetings is an adventure around the globe.

In the Zoom meetings, we have at first asked for theological and spiritual foundations which inspire and encourage us for the necessary learning processes. We have worked on a book titled “Faithful Peace: Why the Journey to build resilience is multi-religious”. It was launched in September 2022 (Hernandez & Karam, 2022). It is the outcome of the first phase of the Standing Commission.

The commission’s work is guided by a vision of positive peace which is far more than the absence of war; it includes justice, welfare and responsibility for all that lives and exists. Looking at the theological and spiritual foundations which inspire and encourage us for the necessary learning processes can be characterized as “Bird’s Eye”. The commission members share the rich and specific sources of the religious communities when asked what – from their spiritual experience – they can contribute to interreligious dialogue and learning. The key question was: “Why do we do what we do?” Most of the articles combine it with reflecting actual challenges and showing concrete examples of interreligious cooperation.

I will give the indigenous view of Pascale Frémond as an example. Pascale Frémond is an interreligious activist with an indigenous background and President of *Religions for Peace* Canada. She writes on “Indigenous Spiritualities. Theological and Spiritual Foundation of First Peoples’ Engagement in Interfaith Cooperation.” (Frémond, 2022). It is important that the traditions of indigenous spiritualities are taken seriously for the inspiration of interreligious dialogue and learning – after having been neglected for a long time. They provide support for the necessary new thinking addressing the survival crisis of our planet with their holistic view of humans and nature. Pascale Frémond presents a helpful vocabulary showing the interconnectedness of all life. She offers images which illustrate the complex and diverse ways in which the “First People’s” religions see “social and cultural customs with reference to the sacred and the supranatural.” Their conviction of the deep interconnection and sacredness of all that lives and exists should be acknowledged as a major challenge to the theologies of other religions.

It is a fundamental problem that the manifold motivations for an open interreligious encounter, for learning together and from each other and for fruitful cooperation are confronted with narrow-minded thinking and strategies in all religions. At present, as in the past, borders are erected and religions and world views of the others are devalued. It is therefore crucial to outline the principles and motivations for openness, tolerance and solidarity at the heart of the religious traditions, in their Holy Scriptures,

in spirituality, their cultural, ritual and social life – with arguments as well as with practical encounters, dialogue and cooperation. The contribution of the Commission members are convincing examples of this future-oriented thinking and acting.

References

- Frémond, P. (2022). Indigenous Spiritualities: Theological and Spiritual Foundations of First Peoples' Engagement in Interfaith Cooperation. In K. Hernandez & A. Karam (Eds.), *Faithful Peace: Why the Journey to build resilience is multi-religious* (pp. 30–32). New York: Religions for Peace International.
- Hernandez, K. & Karam, A. (Eds.) (2022). *Faithful Peace: Why the Journey to build resilience is multi-religious*. New York: Religions for Peace International.
- Lähnemann, J. (2024). *Interreligious and Peace Education in Times of Crisis. A History of Religions for Peace*. Berlin: EB Publisher.

Reimagining Education for Ecological Civilization

Mary Evelyn Tucker

1. Introduction

Creating “ecological civilization” is an idea that originated in China and is spreading beyond it. In 2018 it was enshrined in the Chinese constitution and promoted by the highest levels of government, both national and provincial. It is now discussed at Chinese universities by administrators, faculty, and students who have been encouraged to establish centers for ecological civilization. The concept is also present on the ground in ecological restoration projects and in organic farms of which thousands now exist in China (see e.g. Miller, 2016; Xue et al., 2023).

The term indicates that something broader, namely cultural values and ethics are needed in the ongoing transformation for a flourishing Earth community. This idea is being picked up in the West with discussion circles (such as “EcoCiv”, see <https://ecociv.org>). Here we illustrate why “ecological civilization” is a critical new path for education to address our current challenges.

To help create flourishing ecological civilizations as both worldview shifts and cultural and ecological practices will require many years. However, the promising news is we can see this emerging in our lifetime. The implications for educational philosophy, curriculum, and practical applications are significant.

2. What is Ecological Civilization?

This is an idea that is having a strong appeal in China because of the overreach of the Industrial Revolution in the destruction of the environment. Many individuals and groups in China are assiduously trying to find the next stage beyond rapid industrialization and unsustainable development, which has brought massive economic growth, but has also caused widespread biodiversity loss, climate upheavals, and intense pollution with public health consequences.

The assumption in China is that the industrial revolution has been attained, and millions have been lifted out of poverty. But there have been unintended consequences. Now the goal is to create a new “ecological

civilization,” one that embraces the health of both ecosystems and of people. This is based on a critique of modernity in its scientific reductionism, mechanistic materialism, and mindless consumption that is present both in China and the West.

It is becoming clear that the term “ecological civilization” indicates that something more is required in the great transformations ahead for a flourishing Earth community. For many people this implies a paradigm shift toward an ecocentric worldview, rather than an anthropocentric worldview. There are various movements and people who have contributed to this call for such a shift over the last few decades both in China and the west. This involves drawing on philosophical and religious traditions for shaping a broader environmental ethics and transformative action (see e.g. Jenkins, Tucker, & Grim, 2016; Gare, 2017).

A dynamic, ever-changing China is trying to recover traditional cultural roots amid modern economic development and environmental challenges. The Chinese are reviving their own traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism for ecological wisdom which were undermined by Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Yet they are still pursuing the relentless drive for prosperity while initiating the renewable energy transition. Clearly contradictions abound between pursuing economic growth while environmental issues continue to multiply. This is, of course, not confined to China, but is a familiar dilemma around the planet.

While ecological civilization may appear to be a top-down government sponsored initiative, this idea is beginning to have traction on many levels of Chinese society, especially in education. Its implications and its efficacy need to be explored more fully in environmental policy, law, and NGO work. It is a notion that is offered as a broad aspiration for China but with concrete practical applications. Theory and practice are seen as interwoven.

There are many definitions of ecological civilization, but the most important aspiration is: Moving from an industrial society with unlimited economic growth that is destroying land, air, and water to an ecological civilization that provides a basis for the well-being and health of both people and the planet.

This implies more than simply implementing “sustainability” or “sustainable development,” although these terms and applications are still widely referenced in China and the West. This broader aspiration for China states in their Constitution: “to promote the coordinated development of material civilization, political civilization, spiritual civilization, social civilization, and ecological civilization, and build China into a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful socialist modern power.”

3. A Paradigm Shift

This aspiration implies shifting from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric worldview, namely from a human focused to an organic, holistic worldview. More specifically for our purposes in a Chinese context, this requires a paradigm shift from a human dominating worldview to an “anthropocosmic” worldview where humans are situated within the cosmos and Earth.

Moreover, in this anthropocosmic view, humans are not independent from the world, but interdependent with the dynamic unfolding forces of nature. This is compatible with the sciences of evolution and ecology as well as with traditional Chinese thought, which fosters an organic holism and harmony of humans with nature. From this perspective of harmony rather than dominion, humans can strive to foster the health of ecosystems and of humans. There is clearly an aspirational dimension to this term, Ecological Civilization, but one that is being implemented in educational institutions across China.

4. What are the Implications for Reimagining Education for Ecological Civilization?

The humanities are needed more than ever before in an academic environment where science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) are stressed. This is true in China and in the west. We need to educate students into world religions and philosophies, which contain the values of traditions around the planet. By bringing those traditions into retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction for modern ecological and social problems we can envision a flourishing future. That is the work we have been doing with many partners in the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology – identifying the environmental and ecojustice ethics that will ground and dynamize ecological civilization. Since beginning this work three decades ago at Harvard there are now 30 graduate courses in religion and ecology in North America – 3 are PhD programs.

We need more robust study of culture, including the creative arts, literature, poetry, and music. The imagination needs to be enlivened for dreaming a future that is not just sustainable but flourishing. We can see this emerging in all the humanities because of the rising concern for the environment. Indeed, Environmental Humanities is growing rapidly across the US. For example, there are over 125 classes at Yale, many lectures, and a graduate certificate in this area.

5. Confucian Holistic Worldview and Environmental Ethics as a Basis for Ecological Civilization and Education

Historically, the influence of Confucianism has been significant across East Asia in political thought and institutions, social relationships and ritual exchange, educational philosophy and moral teaching, cultural attitudes, and historical interpretation. Now, Confucian values are being revived in China despite their destruction in the Cultural Revolution and the striking inroads of modernization and westernization. We recognize that gender perspectives in Confucianism, as in all the world's religious traditions, are constrained and contribute to limiting roles for women in society and politics.

Although we are concerned here with the potential positive contributions of Confucianism to environmental thought and education, acknowledgment is made of the inevitable gaps between theories and practices, historically and at present. We are aware that historically the record is quite mixed regarding protection of the environment in China and further research needs to be done in this area. Here we will point toward resources that a Confucian worldview holds for values toward nature and environmental ethics. However, in light of the contemporary environmental crisis, viewing Confucianism as a singular tradition is problematic because of its geographic spread, its historical development, and its varied forms, ranging from imperial state Confucianism to educational implementation, to local and familial Confucianism (see also Huang, 2016; Tucker, 2023).

Nonetheless, while clearly Confucianism has enormous historical variations, cultural particularities, and national differences, there are certain central ideas and values that have spread across East Asia from China through Korea and to Japan. These ancient values constitute key elements of the tradition that have endured despite historical changes and political upheavals. There are major resources for contemporary environmental ethics in East Asia as well as for an emerging global ethics (see also Tucker, 2023).

These include: a dynamic cosmological context or worldview for promoting harmony amidst change; the embeddedness of each person in concentric circles of relationships and ethical responsibilities; the importance of the family including past, present, and future generations; the function of a social system where loyalties to elders and to teachers are critical; the significance of education in cultivating the individual,

enriching the society, and contributing to the political order; and the role of government in establishing a political bureaucracy for ruling large numbers of people. These values will be discussed in relation to their potential contribution to a broader environmental ethics and educational philosophy.

Of singular importance is the rich cosmological worldview of Confucianism that promotes harmony with nature amidst change. This is a significant perspective for seeing nature as intrinsically valuable and for understanding the role of the human in relation to natural processes as critical. This worldview is characterized by four key elements:

- 1) an anthropocosmic rather than an anthropocentric perspective;
- 2) an organic holism of the continuity of being;
- 3) a dynamic vitalism of material force (*qi*);
- 4) a comprehensive ecological ethics embracing both humans and nature.

Let us outline these further:

1) By “anthropocosmic” we refer to the great triad of Heaven (a guiding force), Earth (nature), and humans. This idea is central to Confucian thought. This seamless interaction of these three forces contrasts markedly with the more human-centered orientation of western traditions where personal salvation in relation to a divine figure is central. It has been described by Tu Weiming as a “continuity of being.” (See Tu & Tucker, 2003/2004). Humans are seen as the mind-and-heart (*xin*) of heaven and earth and co-participants with them.

2) By “organic holism” the universe is seen as unified, interconnected, and interpenetrating. Everything interacts and affects everything else, which is why the notion of microcosm and macrocosm is so essential to Chinese cosmology, both Confucian and Daoist. How the body of humans is related to the body of Earth and the Cosmos is essential. The elaboration of the interconnectedness of reality can be seen in the correspondence of the five elements with seasons, directions, colors, and even virtues.

3) “Dynamic vitalism” refers to the basis of the underlying unity of reality that is constituted of *qi*, the material force of the universe. This creates the basis for a profound reciprocity between humans and the natural world. Material force (*qi*) as the substance of life is the basis for the continuing process of change and transformation in the universe. The ethical vitality of the individual is situated against the backdrop of the dynamic pattern of *qi* in nature. The Chinese martial arts and medical practices reflect this attempt to balance and cultivate one’s *qi* as part of maintaining one’s physical and moral health. Practicing *qigong* and *taiqi* is part of drawing in the *qi* (vital force) of the universe into one’s own body.

4) Confucian ethics in its most comprehensive form relies on a cosmological context of the entire triad of Heaven, Earth, and humans. Human actions complete this triad and are undertaken in relation to the natural world and its seasonal patterns and cosmic changes. In this context humans are biological-historical-ethical beings who live in a universe of complex correspondences and relationships. Cultivation of the land and of oneself are seen as analogous processes requiring attention, care, and constant vigilance. Virtues are described as seeds that sprout through moral practice and flower over time.

For Confucians, health meant not only reciprocity with the patterns of nature but also responsibility for the health of nature as well. It was thus critical for the government to support agriculture through irrigation systems as creating the basis for a sustainable society. Human livelihood and culture were seen as continuous with nature, as the following passage by a leading Han Confucian, Dong Zhongshu (c. 195 – 105 BCE; traditionally c. 179 – 104 BCE), indicates: “Heaven, Earth, and humans are the basis of all creatures. Heaven gives them birth, earth nourishes them, and humans bring them to completion. Heaven provides them at birth with a sense of filial and brotherly love, earth nourishes them with clothing and food, and humans complete them with rites and music. The three act together as hands and feet join to complete the body and none can be dispensed with” (de Bary, 1960, p. 162).

Within this broad cosmological pattern of Confucian thought the person is seen in relationship to others and not as an isolated individual. The Confucian tradition stresses the importance of cooperative group effort so that individual concerns are sublimated to a larger commitment to the common good. In this view, self-interest and altruism for a common cause are not mutually exclusive; responsibilities rather than rights are stressed. Such a communitarian value system may be indispensable for fostering flourishing communities.

With the Confucian emphasis on the continuity of the family there is a strong ethic of indebtedness to past generations and obligations to descendants. Within this moral framework there is the potential for evoking a sense of self-restraint and communal responsibility toward the environmental well-being of future generations. In other words, the Confucian emphasis on lineage (ensuring continuity from the ancestors to the heirs) may be raised to another ethical perspective, namely, intergenerational obligations toward maintaining a healthy environment.

The social system of Confucianism can also be expanded to place humans in relation to the biological lineage of life in the natural world. In this sense, loyalty to elders, teachers, and those who have gone before may

be broadened to include respect for the complex ecosystems and forms of life that have preceded humans. Thus, biodiversity can be valued. The total dependence of humans on other life-forms for survival and sustenance may be underscored in this scenario. “Loyalty” is thus enlarged from the human world to include the natural world itself.

Confucian education as essentially a form of moral cultivation has been viewed as a means of contributing to the betterment of the sociopolitical order. By extension, ethical restraint toward the unlimited use of the environment can be seen as adding to the social and political stability of a region as a whole. From a Confucian perspective moral suasion and education are a viable means of evoking communal changes that would promote such stability through personal choice and voluntary measures rather than simply through legislation from above.

Confucian forms of government are generally highly centralized and interventionist. Thus, they can afford to engage in long range planning with other key sectors, especially the business community. Because this long-term policymaking is not unfamiliar in East Asian societies, it is possible to include environmental issues in these kinds of centralized strategic planning. Rather than only being concerned about immediate goals or quarterly profits, such planning can assist processes of environmental preservation.

6. Conclusion: Neo-Confucian Philosopher, Zhang Zai’s, “Western Inscription”

The 12th century Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhang Zai, wrote on the west wall of his study, a brief essay that is seen as an important basis of Neo-Confucian ethics, “The Western Inscription”. This exemplifies the all-embracing dimensions of identity with Heaven and Earth, and compassion for other humans. It is one of the most inclusive texts in all Confucian thought and frequently quoted (see e.g. Theobald, 2021).

“Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.

Therefore, that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.

... The sage identifies his character with that of Heaven and Earth, and the worthy is the most outstanding person. Even those who have no brothers or

children, wives or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to.”

This inspiring text encompasses a comprehensive worldview of humans as part of a vast cosmos, emerging out of Earth’s great fecundity, and completing the triad as the mind and heart of Heaven and Earth. Within this familial cosmology of the great parents giving birth to humans, a deep humaneness can be extended to other humans and the Earth itself.

Surely this Confucian perspective is a basis of an anthropocosmic worldview for the wellbeing of future generations. Such an inclusive communitarian ethics, that has influenced millions of people in East Asia for some 2500 years, should be included in educational philosophy and curriculum as we face our present urgent social, political and environmental issues.

References

- de Bary, T. W. (Ed.) (1960). *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gare, A. (2017). *The Philosophical Foundations of Ecological Civilization A manifesto for the future*. New York: Routledge.
- Huang, Y. (2016). Confucianism. In W. Jenkins, M. E. Tucker, & J. Grim (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (pp. 52–60). New York: Routledge.
- Jenkins, W., Tucker, M. E., & Grim, J. (Eds.) (2016). *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (pp. 181–90). New York: Routledge.
- Miller, J. (2016). China. In W. Jenkins, M. E. Tucker, & J. Grim (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (pp. 181–90). New York: Routledge.
- Theobald, U. (2021). Ximing „The Western Inscription“. In *ChinaKnowledge.de. An Encyclopaedia on Chinese History and Literature*. <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/Literature/Diverse/ximing.html>
- Tucker, M. E. (2023). Confucianism as a form of immanent naturalism. In K. Bray, H. Eaton, & W. Bauman (Eds.), *Earthly Things. Immanence, New Materialisms, and Planetary Thinking* (pp. 15–30). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Xue, B., Han, B., Li, H., Gou, X., Yang, H., Thomas, H., & Stückrad, S. (2023). Understanding ecological civilization in China: From political context to science. *Ecological Civilization*, 52, 1895–1909. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-023-01897-2>
- Tucker, M. E. & Berthrong, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*. Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions and Harvard University Press.
- Tu, W., & Tucker, M. E. (Eds.). (2003/2004). *Confucian Spirituality* (2 Vols.). New York: Crossroad.

Response to Mary Evelyn Tucker’s Keynote “Ecological Civilization and Confucian Values”

Markus Vogt

First of all, thank you very much for the honor and joy of being invited to respond to Mary Evelyn's extraordinarily inspiring impulse. I deeply appreciated to read her groundbreaking writings on the discourse between religion and ecology. She has been a world-leading scientist in this field for forty years. I had the pleasure of meeting Mary Tucker and her husband John Grim in person last year at Yale. Through them, I also got to know the ecotheological writings of Thomas Berry. I learned a lot from her. My specific background is Christian social ethics and ecophilosophy. From this perspective, I would like to make ten comments on the presentation:

1) The concept of “Ecological Civilization”, deepened by Confucian values, is a *great achievement* that combines spiritual, ethical, anthropological and cosmological considerations with a politically relevant concept in an exemplary way, thus preventing the latter from becoming an empty buzzword. It’s a far-reaching vision of a “new stage of human civilization following primitive civilization, agricultural civilization, and industrial civilization (Zhang, 2023).”

2) I agree that *sustainability requires such a holistic, civilizational, ethical and cultural deepening* so that it does not appear to be too technocentric and merely geared towards an aftercare and powerless concept (Vogt, 2024, pp. 313-364). “Ecological civilization” accentuates the cultural aspect, which, for example, is neglected in the UN's *Sustainable Development Goals*. But the worldwide leading, politically binding and with a theory of transformation connected concept is that of sustainability, which should not be replaced by that of ecological civilization. To me, the term “ecological civilization” is not an alternative to that of sustainability, but rather a *complementary* enfolding.

3) The idea of ecological civilization *largely corresponds to* what Pope Francis describes in the encyclical *Laudato si'* as “*integral ecology*” (Francis, 2025) and similarly characterizes as holistic, systemic and based on a continuity of being in which humans are integrated. It would be interesting to analyze the parallels and differences between the encyclical and the concept of ecological civilization. Perhaps the Pope could adopt the term from China, but at the same time enrich it with suggestions from the treasure trove of Christian spirituality and his strong eco-social approach.

This could be an important opportunity for a fruitful interreligious dialogue. There seems to be interest in the eco-theological concept of the encyclical *Laudato si'* in China, too, even beyond the local, currently rapidly growing Catholicism (Wenzel-Teuber, 2019, pp. 20-21). A Christian *spirituality* approach (e.g. according to Franz of Assisi) could enrich the concept of ecological civilization.

4) Mary Evelyn points out that the link between ecological civilization and the promise of further economic development in President Xi Jinping's "two mountains theory" is reaching its limits; especially if economic development is interpreted as growth. *I suspect that China will continue to pursue a growth policy* due to a variety of structural growth constraints and in order to maintain social peace through full employment. We have a similar debate in Europe, for example on the concept of "green growth", as propagated by the European Union as the headline for its sustainability programs. Historically, there is no evidence that the decoupling of economic growth and resource consumption has been successful in the long term (Vogt, 2024, pp. 131-143).

5) Nevertheless, there are many areas that should grow from an ecological point of view, e.g. renewable energies or renewable raw materials for a bio-economic industry. Together with Uwe Schneidewind, I advocate the concept of "double decoupling" (Schneidewind, 2018, pp. 54-64): greater efficiency and ecological consistency through technical innovations and substitutions on the one hand, but at the same time a change in values in favor of sufficiency and a culture of moderation. But that needs a *shift in theory of economics*. Confucian values are not enough for that. A suitable regulatory framework for this would be that of the *eco-social market economy* (Radermacher, 2004), which uses the efficiency and freedom of markets, but sets a strict eco-social framework for them. This is essential for reconciling ecology and economy, and thus for political acceptance and feasibility. The concept of ecological civilization has so far lacked a differentiated theory of ecological economics.

6) I really like the quote from the Chinese constitution of 2018 which promises the coordinated development of material, political, spiritual, social and ecological civilization in order to build China into a "prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and beautiful socialist modern power."⁴ However, it seems likely that this is *constitutional rhetoric that is not taken seriously in reality*. This applies at least to the adjective "democratic", which is constitutive for my understanding of sustainability. The political system in present China is not democratic. It is possible that

⁴ See the text of Mary Tucker in this book.

democracy needs a transformation in order to implement eco-social change sufficiently quickly, but this requires a differentiated debate on the theory of freedom, responsibility and civil society. Without this dimension, the concept of ecological civilization is not acceptable worldwide. In order to be realistic, honest, truthful and transparent, *ethics needs to speak about conflicts* of aims, about dilemmas, tradeoffs and necessary decisions, and not to cover all difficulties in the real world under a promise of harmony.

7) Regarding many invocations of Confucian virtues and the distance to materialistic fixations, I am not sure how seriously they are taken in the reality of Chinese society. On a trip to China in 2016 with 50 LMU colleagues to our partner university Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, I got the impression that there are many invocations of a *revitalization of Confucian values that are rather folkloric and superficial*. Confucian ethics was and is a concept of the rulers and the Government, it overestimates the possibilities of an eco-social transformation through individual virtues and neglects regulatory aspects. If the fixation on materialistic values is really to be overcome, more is needed than appeals to virtue. However, this is not just a problem in China: this one-sided fixation on virtue ethics has characterized Catholic and much of European environmental and consumer ethics for many decades. The concept of "public spirituality" (Langford Heron & Langford Heron, 2021) in the context of education for sustainable development could help here because it includes responsibility for shaping political and economic structures.

8) Confucianism is an interesting but not a sufficient basis of ecological civilization. It also needs a revival of other traditions like Buddhism and Daoism and their translation into life in the 21st century. In my opinion that will not be successful without a connection with other eco-philosophical traditions, like that of Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin and many others (like Mary Evelyn is doing in an excellent way). I could imagine that it would be very fruitful to add some aspects of the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who seems to be quite popular in China (e.g. about "The shepherd of the being" and ethics of care (Heidegger, 1949)). If the concept of ecological civilization is to develop transformative power for a better understanding of the interaction between nature and society, of science, development and prosperity, etc., then it *needs to be linked to the rich tradition of international ecophilosophy*. Only on this basis is there a chance that it will develop the power for a civil-historically relevant reorientation. I suspect that *significant educational work* is needed here, through which Confucian worldviews can be freely appropriated, ecologically contextualized, critically penetrated, and linked to the challenges of coping with everyday social life in modern times in order to be effective.

9) The most interesting keyword for a conversation between Chinese-Confucian and Christian-European environmental ethics seems to me to be that of the “robust anthropocosmic worldview”⁵ which redefines man’s place in nature. I am thinking here of the book “Man in the Cosmos” (Max Scheler 1928), which was formative for me personally and for European philosophy in the 20th century. He is concerned with the evolutionary integration of humans into nature and you can characterize his approach also anthropocosmic. But it is an unsolvable challenge to connect that in a consistent way with the Chinese model of organic holism and dynamic vitalism of material force (energy of life *Qi*). Is “vitalism” the right word? In the European tradition vitalism, which understands life as a cosmic force of evolution in its own right and which was already used against materialism in the 19th century, is not a particularly philosophically and scientifically well-founded concept. There is a deep gap between the traditional idea of *Qi* and the modern concept of science and rationality. Also, on the level of ethical reason, the anthropocosmic worldview leads to unsolved questions: The claim to combine humanistic ethics with the concept of ecological civilization does not fit in with the simultaneous plea for an ecocentric approach, which is post-humanistic. Such philosophical, epistemological and anthropological debates must be conducted in a methodically reflective way if references to “holism”, “vitalism”, “harmony between humans and nature” and “humanism” are not to remain empty buzzwords.

10) I would like to summarize my answer to Mary Evelyn in three aspects: (1) I consider the concept of ecological civilization to be *groundbreaking* even beyond China and also for Christian ethics, spirituality and education in the Anthropocene era. (2) I propose to *deepen* the reference to Confucian ethics in the concept of ecological civilization *through other eco-philosophical* and religious traditions. (3) The purely virtue ethics approach is not sufficient for a transformation of society: this needs *in addition also a structural theory of transformation*, a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between ecology and economy and a framework like the eco-social market economy.

References

Francis. (2025). *Laudato si’*. *Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father on the Care of Home*. Vatican, No. 137-142; see also: No. 10-13.18.46.50.62.124.156-159.225.230.

⁵ See the text of Mary Tucker in this book.

- Heidegger, M. (1949). *Über den Humanismus*. Vittorio Klostermann Frankfurt a. M.
- Langford Heron, L., & Langford Heron, B. (2021). *Public spirituality. A Personal Workbook*. Lincoln.
- Radermacher, F. J. (2004). Balance oder Zerstörung: Ökosoziale Marktwirtschaft als Schlüssel zu einer weltweiten nachhaltigen Entwicklung (3rd ed.). Österreichischer Agrarverlag.
- Schneidewind, U. (2018). Die große Transformation: Eine Einführung in die Kunst des gesellschaftlichen Wandels. FISCHER Taschenbuch.
- Vogt, M. (2024). Christian Environmental Ethics. Foundations and Central Challenges. 131-143; 313-364. Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Wenzel-Teuber, K. (2019). "Everything is related": The 10th European Catholic China Colloquium in Siegburg focused on Laudato Si', technoscience, and the Church in China. *Religions & Christianity in Today's China*, 9(4), 20-21.
- Zhang, Z. (2023). Ecological civilization: A new open access journal for research on eco-civilization concerns. *Ecological Civilization*, 1(1), 10003. <https://www.doi.org/10.35534/ecolciviliz.2023.10003>

Spiritual Dimensions of Education for Sustainable Development from a Philosophy of Science Perspective

Pascal Frank

1. Introduction

Approaching the spiritual dimensions of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) from a philosophy of science perspective is complex and multifaceted, leading into uncharted conceptual territory. The term “spiritual” is particularly ambiguous, with multiple divergent definitions proposed (McCarroll et al., 2005; Cobb et al., 2012). ESD is commonly understood as a process that equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed for sustainable development (UNESCO, n.d.), but in practice, it also encompasses a wide variety of content, goals, and pedagogical approaches (e.g., Wals & Benavot, 2017; Leicht et al., 2018; Brundiers et al., 2020). Finally, applying a philosophy of science perspective introduces additional complexity, given the plurality of perspectives and questions inherent to the field. For example, what are the ontological foundations of spirituality within ESD? How can its dimensions be epistemologically understood? What normative considerations arise when integrating spirituality into ESD? Methodologically, how can spiritual dimensions be meaningfully applied in specific educational contexts?

Thus, exploring this intricate topic requests to set a few cornerstones that help us navigate this territory. In this article, I understand spirituality as an individual’s search for meaning and purpose in life, revealing itself in their subjective experience (Frankl, 2006/1946; Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006; Snyder & Lopez, 2007). Based on this definition, I will look at the so-called “inward turn” (Boda et al., 2022) within sustainability science and ESD: the growing interest in inner worlds, inner development, and inner transformation as a means to promote sustainability (Frank et al., 2024). According to this perspective, prevailing approaches to sustainability challenges are deeply rooted in an instrumental, positivist paradigm, prioritizing external manifestations of unsustainability solutions framed within socio-economic structures, governance dynamics, and technological innovation. Therefore, these perspectives arguably neglect individuals’ inner worlds as root causes of the sustainability crisis and fail to recognize

inner worlds as profound leverage points for addressing this crisis (e.g., Wamsler et al., 2021; Ives et al., 2023).

Education is considered one of the most powerful tools to promote profound changes among learners (UNESCO, n.d.). Thus, it is not surprising that concepts such as inner development, inner transformation, and a focus on intrapersonal learning outcomes have recently received growing attention within ESD (Frank, 2021; Woiwode et al., 2021; Frank et al., 2024). The emergence of the 'Inner Development Goals' (IDGs, <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org>) has significantly accelerated this evolution. Alongside this trend, there has been increasing interest in practices potentially promoting such inner change, especially mindfulness-based practices (Fischer et al., 2017; Thiermann & Sheate, 2020). Rooted in Buddhist spirituality, mindfulness practices epitomize the idea of advancing sustainable development by integrating spiritually-rooted practice and fostering inner development within ESD.

The purpose of this article is twofold: First, I examine whether the claim that certain spiritually-rooted practices contribute to sustainable development is empirically supported. Second, I investigate to what extent the described inward turn aligns with spirituality in the sense of discovering meaning and purpose through subjective experience. While I generally support the growing focus on inner worlds in sustainability research and ESD, I adopt a critical stance toward this inward turn. By analyzing trends, research, and educational initiatives in the field, I argue that the belief that spiritually-rooted practices foster sustainable development is poorly supported by evidence. More importantly, the inward turn does not introduce spiritual dimensions into ESD but largely reflects the same positivist-instrumental paradigm it aims to transcend. Specifically, it relies on quasi-objective descriptions of external unsustainability and prescribes definitive outcomes and pathways for inner change. As a result, activities related to inner change are often framed as mere 'tools' for achieving predetermined outer goals, rather than emphasizing the intrinsic value of engaging with one's inner world regardless of specific outcomes.

An alternative to this instrumental approach may lie in an ESD that systematically explores learners' subjective experiences. This approach draws on first-person phenomenology, which views lived experience as the foundation of our understanding and connection with the world (Frank et al., 2024). In this sense, ESD becomes a fundamentally spiritual pathway, inviting learners to engage deeply with their subjective experience as the unfolding of life's many facets and its meaning and purpose. On this path, unsustainability, the concept of sustainability, and ways to achieve it are not predetermined. Rather, the meaning and significance of sustainability

as a desirable future can — but need not — emerge through a profound connection with our inner selves (however that self is understood) and our lived experiences. ESD in this sense aligns with an emancipatory research (Habermas, 1968) and education paradigm (Wals, 2012), fostering inner freedom and the response-ability to make self-determined choices in an unknown world.

2. My Personal Journey Through Inner Development and Sustainability

“Lived experience is where we start from and where all must link back to.”

Francisco Varela

Since this article proposes a view of spirituality rooted in subjective experience, it seems appropriate to me to share how my own personal experience brought me to the understanding I elaborate on. Thus, I will begin with a few autobiographical notes, outlining my path toward an academic exploration of spirituality and ESD.

I grew up in what could be described as a typical German family. My parents lacked an academic background, and my upbringing carried no distinct political, spiritual, or religious orientation. Although baptized as a Protestant and later confirmed, church and religious practices played no role in our family life. Sustainability concerns were absent from family discourse, and my early environment was largely apolitical.

Yet, from a young age, I developed strong ethical and political views, increasingly engaging in actions that reflected them. Animal suffering was my first major concern. At 13, I became vegetarian after witnessing the mass culling of pigs during a swine fever outbreak, a response to humanity’s failure to manage the situation humanely. Later, learning about Karl Marx and his views on social justice heightened my awareness of socio-economic issues. By 2003, I was actively involved in political and environmental activism, participating in organizations like ATTAC and joining protests against the G8 and WTO summits, as well as nuclear transport in Gorleben, Germany. My activism peaked in the late 2000s when I founded a civic platform addressing social and ecological issues in the Eifel region. Through this platform, we organized festivals, ran information campaigns, wrote educational materials on urgent topics, and contributed to youth center initiatives.

None of these activities stemmed from conscious spiritual motivation. I attributed my activism to a sense of moral duty, believing it was both

necessary and possible to address society's many problems through knowledge, policies, and activism. I saw these issues as external, issues that had nothing to do with inner worlds and were solvable without any inner change.

In hindsight, I realize my actions were driven by a deep emotional response to suffering and injustice. This empathy and pain—not intellectual reasoning—was the true catalyst for my engagement. Though I framed it otherwise at the time, my commitment was rooted in a visceral awareness of suffering. Thus, my early dedication to sustainability and other ethical causes arose from my inner disposition, though I only recognized this years later.

There have been two important and intertwined influences that gradually shifted my understanding from the manifold global challenges as mere external problems toward something that was also manifested and could — perhaps should — be addressed from within.

First, it took an existential crisis to disrupt my earlier worldview and more strongly connect me with my embodied experience and deepest values. I came to the realization that sustainability was not some sort of external imperative or moral duty. Instead, it was the expression of my deepest appreciation of life itself that I considered worthwhile maintaining. At the same time, sustainability became more than just an external state of the planet: For me, it increasingly reflected an inner state of living beings in which they could embrace their very existence. In other words, sustainability was not merely about maintaining life, but about the possibility of experiencing life in a meaningful way. Unsurprisingly, engaging with one's inner states and processes – one's emotions, senses, bodily experiences, motivations, and so forth, became central to this perspective on sustainability. This realization led me to explore contemplative practices as a way of engaging more intentionally with my inner world. I established an intensive Yoga and meditation practice, and also became an Iyengar Yoga and Mindful Self-Compassion teacher myself. These practices became highly meaningful to me, as they offered a direct, experiential way of working with my inner states and processes, one that was very different from the mere intellectual inquiry.

The second major influence on my shifting perspective came through my academic work. As I grappled with the connections between inner states and sustainability, I began to explore these dynamics more systematically through research. One of the most striking insights came from my work on the attitude-behavior gap and the so-called "meat paradox"—the contradiction between people's professed care for animals and their continued consumption of meat (Gradidge et al., 2021). In my

research, I found that this phenomenon was first and foremost the result of affective-motivational processes (Frank, 2017). The meat paradox turned out to be representative for many sustainability-related behaviors, as other researchers also pointed out (Brosch, 2021). These insights further challenged my previous assumption that sustainability issues could be addressed purely through logic, policies, and external intervention. It became clear to me that deeper, more unconscious aspects of human experience were shaping not only individual behaviors but also collective patterns of (un)sustainability.

Yet despite research demonstrating the relevance of inner states and processes in relation to sustainability, it offered little in terms of actually engaging with emotions and inner experiences. The inner world remained largely absent from research and education, a gap I increasingly felt compelled to bridge. Drawing from my personal experience with mindfulness and related practices, I saw their integration into sustainability research and education as particularly promising. I believed mindfulness could help individuals recognize the emotional and psychological forces that foster ethical, conscious engagement with the world (e.g., Stanzus et al., 2017; Frank et al., 2019).

I soon realized I wasn't alone in this belief. Interest in mindfulness was booming both inside and outside academia, with more sustainability scholars exploring its potential (see Fischer et al., 2017; Thiermann & Sheate, 2020). Eager to contribute, I joined this rising academic movement while deepening my own practice. Yet before long, my initial hopes in mindfulness gave way to growing skepticism.

3. Bias and Naivety

"Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies."

Friedrich Nietzsche

In this section, I argue that the claim that mindfulness practice fosters sustainable development is unwarrantedly based on current evidence. In this context, mindfulness epitomizes a variety of other practices – often rooted in spiritual traditions – that aim to promote sustainable development via inner development. Essentially, three factors fed my skepticism with regard to mindfulness practice, which I will elaborate on: (1) my continuous personal experiences in this field, (2) a broader look at the use and perception of mindfulness in society, and (3) findings of my own research.

Beginning with my personal experiences, there have been numerous occasions where I began to question the quasi-automatic pathway of practicing mindfulness (including Yoga) to become a 'better', i.e. more ethical and sustainable person. My experiences with Iyengar yoga, for instance, revealed that practitioners were not necessarily more compassionate or behaved more ethically than those outside the tradition. Instead, I observed factional disputes, rigid adherence to hierarchical interpretations, and a surprising amount of gossip regarding the legitimacy of different perspectives both within and outside the practice. I experienced practitioners being insulted and disrespected in front of the class, teachers taking short-distance flights to partake in Yoga sessions, and above all, an explicated sense of superiority vis-à-vis other (spiritual) pathways, an attitude that contradicted the need for transdisciplinary research and collaboration to define steps toward the complex and uncertain quest for sustainability. This kind of disillusioning experience was by no means limited to the Iyengar Yoga community: Long-distance holiday flights, spacious housing, and diets based on imported foods was – and still is – the rule rather than the exception even among the most convinced advocates of mindfulness for sustainability in my social surroundings. This far-from-complete list of examples fed my skepticism toward the idea that practicing mindfulness would somewhat automatically result in sustainability-related action, and that a more nuanced view was necessary to explore this nexus.

My skepticism deepened as I expanded my understanding of the role mindfulness and yoga traditions played within the broader societal context. A particularly illustrative inspiration in this regard was the documentary *Kumare*, in which Vikram Gandhi, an Indian-American filmmaker and religious studies graduate, poses as a spiritual guru and amasses a following despite his constructed identity. Numerous cases of abuse and fraud in the Yoga and mindfulness industry, alongside the more or less explicit material agenda behind it, further raised my awareness for the often naively accepted claims and promises around these traditions, and sparked my motivation to more critically examine these⁶. As it turned out, other scholars had also adapted a critical stance to the rise and ubiquitous implementation of mindfulness in nearly all fields of society, spanning from

⁶ Among countless references, the reader might begin with (1) Remsky, M. (2024). *Surviving Modern Yoga: Cult Dynamics, Charismatic Leaders, and What Survivors Can Teach Us*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, (2) the documentary *Yoga, Inc.* (2007) by John Philp, (3) the German report *In den Fängen des Gurus* (2024) by Markus Thöß, (4) investigations around the German Yoga foundation *Yoga Vidya* (<https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/wdr/yoga-vidya-verein-100.html>) or (5) the various underpinned accusations against the spiritual community *Bhakti Marga*.

educational institutions, to care and health provision, to private companies and even the military, presenting mindfulness as the new panacea to improve personal well-being and performance while at the same time increasing pro-social behavior and strengthening social relations (Farias, 2019; Purser, 2019).

These influences also sharpened my view on the promises made around mindfulness practice as the missing revolutionary activity to promote a sustainability transformation (Thiermann & Sheate, 2020; Bristow et al., 2022; Wamsler et al., 2023). From 2015 to 2018, I participated in the interdisciplinary consortium project BiNKA (German acronym for *Education for Sustainable Consumption through Mindfulness Practice*). BiNKA was the first project empirically investigating the effects of an eight-week mindfulness-based intervention on people's consumer behaviors (Stanzus et al., 2017). The study followed a rigorous study design, conducting mixed-methods research on control and intervention groups. 206 participants from various backgrounds (school students, university students, employees) partook in the so-called BiNKA training.

In contrast to initial hypotheses and narratives, quantitative analyses found no significant effect of mindfulness practice on sustainable consumption behavior (Geiger et al., 2019). Qualitative research did reveal changes in pre-behavioral factors, such as attitudes and values related to sustainable consumption, along with some behavioral shifts (Frank et al., 2021). Interestingly, however, these shifts sometimes included behaviors participants themselves considered less sustainable, such as eating more meat. Participants often attributed such changes to increased self-compassion.

Rather than automatically promoting more sustainable behavior, we theorized that mindfulness practices function through mechanisms of self-confirmation. They do not prescribe a uniform ethical direction but instead amplify existing mental models. For individuals who prioritize restraint and minimalism, mindfulness may reinforce these values. Conversely, for those seeking to increase pleasurable experiences, mindfulness may encourage greater indulgence. In this sense, (at least in the short term) contemplative practices may act more as reflective mirrors than transformative interventions, reinforcing underlying predispositions rather than altering them.

In addition, the qualitative analysis revealed a more nuanced understanding of the causality between the intervention and the observed effects. Contrary to what many studies suggest, mindfulness practices do not occur in isolation. Rather, they are embedded in specific social, spatial, and temporal contexts. Interactions with teachers, peers, and institutional

structures often explain observed effects better than the formal training itself. For example, study participants explicitly mentioned that sustainability-related effects, in particular, were stimulated by conversations with fellow practitioners or by remarks from the teacher, rather than by the meditation practice itself.

These findings indicate that a more thorough methodological approach is needed to understand the effects of mindfulness practice on sustainability. However, research in this field reveals recurring methodological limitations. For example, studies highlighting positive sustainability-related effects of mindfulness interventions often attribute these effects to the mindfulness practices themselves, while overlooking the influence of informal and contextual factors (for example, Ramstetter et al., 2023).

Furthermore, many studies rely on pre-selected samples, often attracting individuals already predisposed to spiritual or environmental engagement. This point is particularly relevant given the frequent oversight of dropouts: for instance, Blanke et al. (2025) offered a mindfulness-based intervention to university students without such pre-selection. Nearly 50% of participants dropped out, suggesting that the sustainability-related effects of mindfulness may depend on participants' prior willingness to engage with both the practice and sustainability topics. Indeed, studies employing robust research designs involving randomly selected participants indicate that practicing mindfulness may even lead to less pro-environmental behavior (Houcq Corbi et al., 2024).

In sum, these arguments support my claim that the belief that mindfulness practices – epitomizing spiritually rooted practices – possess an inherent ethical trajectory leading toward sustainability is unwarranted given the current evidence. This is not to discourage experimenting with such practices in ESD, nor do I claim that practices such as mindfulness lack positive potential for practitioners. Future research might also reveal stronger effects on sustainability-related outcomes. To date, however, introducing and promoting them as a revolutionary tool for sustainability seems more like an expression of personal conviction and idealism than a serious and open inquiry into what they contribute, how they do so, and under what circumstances they might support sustainable development.

Besides this argument, I perceive a more fundamental issue with portraying spiritually informed practices as contributors to sustainability.

4. The Instrumentalization of Inner Development

"The purpose of looking deeply into your own mind is not to find a better way to dominate or control the world, but to understand that domination itself is the root of our suffering."

Alan Watts

More recently, interest in specific practices as tools for promoting sustainable development has broadened to focus on inner worlds, inner development, and inner transformations for sustainability. To achieve meaningful sustainability, it is increasingly argued that we must address deeper, inner dimensions of human experience. Transforming these inner dimensions and society's fundamental mental models is seen as the most powerful leverage point for driving the systems change needed for a more sustainable future (Woiwode et al., 2021; Ives et al., 2023). This perspective has gained traction in the Inner Development Goals (IDG) initiative, which outlines skills and capacities essential for fostering sustainable development.⁷

In principle, I consider it an important development that people's inner worlds are receiving growing attention in light of the many sustainability-related challenges humanity faces, and that technical solutions, economic measures, and changing governance dynamics are increasingly seen as insufficient to promote sustainable development. However, I also see a significant threat and shortcoming inherent in how inner development is represented, for example, in the form of IDGs and related pedagogical activities. I believe this representation risks reducing engagement with one's inner worlds to a mere means of achieving predefined external goals, rather than emphasizing and prioritizing the intrinsic — spiritual — value of exploring one's subjective experience. More specifically, it remains fundamentally rooted in an instrumental-positivist — rather than an emancipatory — science (Habermas, 1968) and education (Wals, 2011) paradigm, which paradoxically, proponents of the 'inward turn' identify as a root cause of current unsustainability (e.g., Ives et al., 2023).

On the one hand, it departs from an objective, external reality that — based on fundamentally positivist research — can be described as more or less sustainable. Equally objective is the description and measurement of the inner skills and capacities individuals need to contribute to this external shift. For example, the IDG measurement tool provides individuals with a percentage indicating their 'mastery' of the IDG, reducing inner

⁷ See <https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>

development to a set of measurable outcomes that — note the mechanistic language — leverage measurable external change. On the other hand, educational approaches often follow an instrumental logic and language, where learning activities linked to inner development are described as ‘tools’ that lead to distinct, predetermined outcomes (e.g., the Transition Makers Toolbox).

While such an instrumental approach to inner development may have its place, I fear it significantly limits a deeper exploration of our existence and thus differs from inner development as a spiritual path. This exploration, however, at least from a spiritual perspective, requires priority over instrumental approaches. As a result, it also profoundly restricts our capacity to live the lives — and imagine and create the future — we consider worthwhile. I will provide three reasons for this claim.

First, the concept of sustainability itself is inherently ambiguous and evolving, which challenges any attempt to define fixed goals or definitive pathways toward it. Sustainability is a “moving target”, shaped by diverse cultural, social, and ecological contexts, and must continuously adapt to emerging knowledge, values, and circumstances (Redclift, 2005). Thus, our quest for sustainability is always characterized by ignorance and uncertainty. As such, any meaningful engagement with sustainability asks for an ongoing process of reflecting and revising our assumptions, frameworks, and mental models, embracing the reality that what we currently understand as “(un-)sustainable” and what we deem necessary to become more sustainable may prove incomplete or even misguided in the future. Without this reflexivity, there is a risk that sustainability efforts become rigid, dogmatic, or even detrimental, rather expressing personal ideologies and one’s inability to face the unknown than contributing to a prosperous future.

Second, and directly connected to the first argument, prioritizing an instrumental pursuit of sustainability over an open exploration of our subjective experience risks functioning as a “tranquilizer” that diverts attention from deeper existential realities. Ignorance, suffering, and finitude are inherent aspects of our existence both today and in the future (Yalom, 1980). More fundamentally, life on earth is essentially fragile and temporary. It is yet another existential task of our being to make sense of the rather short visit that humankind – and life more broadly – occupies on this planet. The vision of sustainability may inadvertently conceal these deeper truths, offering a false sense of control, permanence, and stability. If we are not able to face the inescapable conditions that come along with our existence, the pursuit of sustainability risks becoming a form of denial, shielding us from the inevitable uncertainties and ultimate impermanence

of our lives and life itself. In particular, this implies a direct confrontation with the possibility that current attempts to move toward sustainability will fail. Inner development is hence not a means to promote sustainability, but a process of embracing existential challenges, including the fact that no stable or desirable future is guaranteed.

Moreover, an existential deep dive not only confronts us with external existential realities but also reveals the inner shadows, unconscious drivers, and motivations that may conflict with the vision of sustainability. When we fully engage with these inner realities, we may discover that our behaviors and desires are often shaped by deeper, less 'noble' forces: the pursuit of power and control, the fear of loss, the desire for material abundance, or the craving for comfort. These forces can subtly undermine even our most well-intentioned efforts toward sustainability, as they are rooted in aspects of ourselves that we may not fully understand or acknowledge. Engaging with these inner dimensions might reveal that the vision of sustainability, as it is often framed, is not always the most desirable or even the most authentic goal for individuals or societies. In this light, exploring the nature of our existence challenges us to confront the contradictions within ourselves and to question whether the vision of sustainability, as currently conceived, truly resonates with our deepest drivers and aspirations. By engaging with our shadows and motivations, we may uncover new possibilities for reimagining sustainability in ways that are more inclusive, authentic, and aligned with the full spectrum of human experience.

This leads me to the third reason why we should not instrumentalize inner development for the sake of a vision of sustainability: It reverses the order of how we learn to engage with our surroundings in a way that meets our inner development. The Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld (1964) claimed that "it is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses". Indeed, embodying the qualities that we find most aspiring for the planet and bringing them into our close relations is a highly difficult task, day by day. At the latest when my daughter was born, I realized how difficult it was to be the father I want to be for her, to take responsibility for my own moods and emotions again and again, to take care of my own wounds and insecurities, my aspirations and values, without projecting them on her. My fatherhood has significantly sharpened my awareness for my own 'inner construction sites' and developed my humility vis-à-vis the difficulty and complexity of solving even the seemingly smallest issues within ourselves and our closest relations. In this vein, I am increasingly astonished by the rapid rise of 'experts' who can specify the qualities that we need to move toward a

sustainable future. For the reasons already mentioned, I consider this development a rather dangerous pathway: Beginning with saving the world seems to me like trying to eradicate a virus while remaining infected with this same virus, unconsciously spreading the very affliction we seek to cure. Inner development in an emancipatory sense, in contrast, starts with the process of curing our own ‘infections’, paving the ground for outside-oriented actions that are rooted in honest relations with ourselves and embodied qualities we want to bring into the world.

5. Toward an Emancipatory Approach Toward Inner Development

"Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. But it does not appeal to our naiveté—it does not flatter us. It is an antidote to fundamentalist faiths and cosmic hubris."

Carl Sagan

In the previous sections, I argued that an instrumental understanding of inner development within sustainability science and education engages with subjective experience merely as a means to achieve quasi-objective descriptions of external (un-)sustainability. Not only is there little empirical evidence that spiritually informed practices contribute to this goal, but this approach also significantly limits a deeper exploration of our existence and engagement with spiritual questions. In turn, this profoundly restricts our capacity to live the lives — and imagine and create the future — we consider worthwhile. But how can inner development be integrated into ESD not merely as a means to a predetermined end, but as a purpose in itself?

In this section, I introduce Personal Sustainability Science (PSS) and Self-Inquiry-Based Learning (SIBL) as approaches that place the exploration of subjective experience at center stage. Rather than following an instrumental logic, both PSS and SIBL are grounded in an emancipatory paradigm (Habermas, 1968; Wals, 2011). This paradigm neither imposes predefined objectives nor relies on normative frameworks dictating how learners should develop or which sustainability outcomes they should achieve. Instead, it is committed to fostering the inner freedom essential for openly yet truthfully exploring our existence.

PSS (Frank et al., 2024) describes the systematic inquiry into the subjective experience of inner states and processes as they relate to sustainability. It constitutes a paradigm for phenomenological, first-person

research on sustainability-related topics. Rather than starting from external descriptions of (un-)sustainability, PSS is grounded in the premise that 'lived experience is where we start from and where all must link back to' (Varela, 1996, p. 334). Accordingly, PSS primarily employs (thick-) phenomenological methods to access and deepen awareness and understanding of this lived experience and its dynamics.

External descriptions of (un-)sustainability are relevant to PSS only insofar as individuals perceive them as such. Furthermore, they may prompt inner states and processes that influence actions that are motivated by such descriptions. At the same time, individual representations of (un-)sustainability can differ significantly from such descriptions or may not be relevant to decision-making. PSS does not seek to resolve these discrepancies but aims to understand their emergence and unfolding in lived experience. Moreover, PSS explicitly views sustainability as including an exclusively inner manifestation — the experienced inner quality of individuals' lived experience itself. Phenomenologically exploring this inner quality, independent of external objectives, is a core element of PSS.

SIBL describes a pedagogy that integrates, conveys, and applies PSS principles in educational contexts (Frank & Stanzus, 2019). SIBL is rooted in phenomenological education (Aoki, 2004), which assumes that knowledge is primarily derived from personal experience. Phenomenological education hence investigates consciously experienced phenomena, "without theories about their causal explanation and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions" (Aoki, 2004, p. 90). Accordingly, SIBL invites learners to inquire into their lived experience in relation to sustainability, guided by (existential) questions and topics that matter to them.

By moving through an iterative cycle of action, observation, documentation of their (sensory, affective-motivational, bodily, and cognitive) experiences, introspective training, and mutual reflection, learners systematically access and deepen their understanding of their own subjective experience. Through this process, learners cultivate what I term intrapersonal competence (Frank, 2021), i.e., the ability to consciously and self-determinedly respond to one's inner states and processes. Intrapersonal competence does not aim to produce outcomes that can 'objectively' be described as sustainable. Instead, it grants individuals the inner freedom needed to openly explore and confront life's inevitable challenges and complexities without being predominantly driven by fear, bias, ignorance, attachment, or other inner barriers of engaging with the deeper truth of our existence. I consider this inner freedom a crucial

foundation for meaningfully engaging with a future we consider worthwhile living.

In sum, an emancipatory research and education paradigm, as represented in PSS and SIBL, turns research itself into a practice of inner development. By systematically exploring our lived experience, we reconnect with fundamental questions about our existence and purpose in life and develop our response-ability to make more conscious, self-determined choices related to our inner states and processes. This response-ability is the foundation for truthfully and constructively engaging with the multiple external challenges we face and for shaping a future we consider worthwhile, based on a full acknowledgment of our being. Integrating PSS and SIBL into ESD thus provides concrete ways to introduce spiritual dimensions into sustainability-related learning.

References

- Aoki, T. T. (2004). Toward curriculum inquiry in a new key. In W. Pinar & R. L. Irwin (Eds.), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (pp. 89–110). Mahwah: Laurence Erlbaum Associates,
- Blanke, E. S., Krämer, S., Loy, L. S., & others. (2025). Beyond individual stress reduction—The Mindful Students Program benefits university students and their environment. *Mindfulness*, 16(4), 864–883. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-025-02529-4>
- Boda, C. S., O’Byrne, D., Harnesk, D., Faran, T., & Isgren, E. (2022). A collective alternative to the inward turn in environmental sustainability research. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 12(2), 291–297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-021-00738-6>
- Bristow, J., Bell, R., Wamsler, C. (2022). *Reconnection: Meeting the Climate Crisis Inside Out. Research and policy report*. The Mindfulness Initiative and LUCSUS. <http://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org/reconnection>
- Brosch, T. (2021). Affect and emotions as drivers of climate change perception and action: a review. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 42, 15–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.COBEHA.2021.02.001>
- Brundiers, K., Barth, M., Bernat, G. C., Choen, M., Diaz, L., Dripps, W., Hbaron, G., Harre, N., Jarchow, M., Losch, K., Michel, J., Mochizuki, Y., Doucette-Remington, S., Rieckmann, M., Parnell, R., Walker, P., & Zint, M. (2020). Key Competencies in Sustainability in Higher Education – Towards an Agreed-upon Reference Framework. *Sustainability Science*, 17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00838-2>
- Cobb, M. R., Puchalski, C. M., & Rumbold, B. (2012). *Oxford Textbook of Spirituality in Healthcare*. Oxford University Press.
- Farias, M. (2019). *The Buddha Pill: Can Meditation Change You?* Watkins Publishing

- Fischer, D., Stanszus, L. S., Geiger, S., Grossman, P., & Schrader, U. (2017). Mindfulness and sustainable consumption: A systematic literature review of research approaches and findings. In: *Journal of Cleaner Production* (Vol. 162, pp. 544-558). Elsevier Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.06.007>
- Frank, P. (2017). Warum wir Tiere essen (obwohl wir sie mögen). *Psychosozial*, 148(2), <https://doi.org/10.30820/0171-3434-2017-2-49>
- Frank, P. (2021). A proposal of personal competencies for sustainable consumption. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 22(6), 1225-1245. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-01-2020-0027>
- Frank, P., Fischer, D., & Wamsler, C. (2019). Mindfulness, Education, and the Sustainable Development Goals. In W. Leal Filho, A. M. Azul, L. Brandli, P.G. Özyuar, & T. Wall (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*. Quality Education. Cham, Springer, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69902-8_105-1
- Frank, P., Fischer, D., Stanszus, L., Grossman, P., & Schrader, U. (2021). Mindfulness as self-confirmation? An exploratory intervention study on potentials and limitations of mindfulness-based interventions in the context of environmental and sustainability education. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 52(6), 417-444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2021.1966352>
- Frank, P., Wagemann, J., Grund, J., et al. (2024). Directing personal sustainability science toward subjective experience: Conceptual, methodological, and normative cornerstones for a first-person inquiry into inner worlds. *Sustainability Science*, 19(2), 555-574. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01442-w>
- Frankl, V. (2006/1946). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Press.
- Geiger, S. M., Fischer, D., Schrader, U., Grossman, P., Geiger, S. M., & Fischer, D. (2019). Meditating for the planet? Effects of a mindfulness-based intervention study on sustainable consumption behaviors. *Environment and Behavior*, 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916519880897>
- Gradidge, S., Zawisza, M., Harvey, A. J., & McDermott, D. T. (2021). A Structured Literature Review of the Meat Paradox. *Social Psychological Bulletin*, 16(3), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.5953>
- Habermas, J. (1968). *Erkenntnis und Interesse*. Suhrkamp.
- Hammar skjöld, D. (1964). *Markings* (L. S. Markings, Trans.). Alfred A. Knopf.
- Houcq Corbi, Z., Koch, K., Hölzel, B., et al. (2024). Mindfulness training reduces the preference for proenvironmental outcomes. *Scientific Reports*, 14(29526). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-79137-0>
- Ives, C. D., Schöpke, N., Woiwode, C., & Wamsler, C. (2023). IMAGINE sustainability: Integrated inner-outer transformation in research, education and practice. *Sustainability Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01368-3>
- Leicht, A., Heiss, J., & Byun, W. J. (2018). *Issues and Trends in Education for Sustainable Development*. UNESCO Publishing.

- McCarroll, P., O'Connor, T. S. J., & Meakes, E. (2005). Assessing plurality in spirituality definitions. In E. Meier et al. (Eds.), *Spirituality and Health: Multidisciplinary Explorations* (pp. 44–59). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Purser, R. (2019). *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*. Repeater
- Ramstetter, L., Rupperecht, S., Mundaca, L., Osika, W., Stenfors, C. U. D., Klackl, J., & Wamsler, C. (2023). Fostering collective climate action and leadership: Insights from a pilot experiment involving mindfulness and compassion. *IScience*, 26(3), 106191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ISCI.2023.106191>
- Redclift, M. (2005). Sustainable Development (1987–2005): An Oxymoron Comes of Age. *Sustainable Development*, 13(4), 212–227.
- Remsky, M. (2024). *Surviving Modern Yoga: Cult Dynamics, Charismatic Leaders, and What Survivors Can Teach Us*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Saucier, G., & Skrzypińska, K. (2006). Spiritual but not religious? Evidence for two independent dispositions. *Journal of Personality*, 74(5), 1257–1292.
- Snyder, C. R., & Lopez, S. J. (2007). *Positive Psychology*. Sage Publications.
- Stanzus, L., Fischer, D., Böhme, T., Frank, P., Fritzsche, J., Geiger, S.M., Harfensteller, J., Grossmann, P., & Schrader, U. (2017). Education for Sustainable Consumption through Mindfulness Training: Development of a Consumption-Specific Intervention. *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability*, 19(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jtes-2017-0001>
- Thiermann, U. B., & Sheate, W. R. (2020). The Way Forward in Mindfulness and Sustainability: a Critical Review and Research Agenda. *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*, June. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41465-020-00180-6>
- UNESCO. (n.d.). Education for Sustainable Development. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development>
- Varela, F. (1996). Neurophenomenology: A methodological remedy for the hard problem. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3(4), 330–349.
- Wals, A. E. J. (2011). Learning Our Way to Sustainability. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 5(2), 177–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097340821100500208>
- Wals, A. E. J., & Benavot, A. (2017). "Can we meet the sustainability challenges? The role of education and lifelong learning." *European Journal of Education*, 52(4), 404–413.
- Wamsler, C., Osberg, G., Osika, W., Herndersson, H., & Mundaca, L. (2021). Linking internal and external transformation for sustainability and climate action: Towards a new research and policy agenda. *Global Environmental Change*, 71, 102373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102373>
- Wamsler, C., Osberg, G., Janss, J., et al. (2024). Revolutionising sustainability leadership and education: addressing the human dimension to support flourishing, culture and system transformation. **Climatic Change*, 177*(4), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03636-8>
- Woiwode, C., Schöpke, N., Bina, O., Veciana, S., Kunze, I., Parodi, O., Schweizer-Ries, P., & Wamsler, C. (2021). Inner transformation to sustainability as a deep leverage point: fostering new avenues for change through dialogue and

reflection. *Sustainability Science*, 1, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00882-y>

Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. Basic Books.

Response to Pascal Frank's Keynote on Spirituality as a Compass for ESD

Joan Hernandez-Serret

1. Introduction

Esteemed Professor Pascal Frank, Assistant Professor in "Teaching and learning for the development and unfolding of human potential for sustainability" from Wageningen University & Research. Colleagues, and audience, it is with genuine pleasure that I share my reflections on Professor Frank's compelling presentation at the Nuremberg Forum. Following the insightful introduction, I found Professor Frank's conceptualization of theology as a compass, rather than a definitive destination, to be particularly thought-provoking. This approach resonates profoundly with both theological and sociological frameworks, especially when considering the intersection of spirituality and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

Initially, Professor Frank's remarks on spirituality as a product, particularly in the context of yoga and new Oriental approaches, sparked considerable reflection. As noted by scholars (e.g., Smith, 2003), the adaptation of Eastern spiritual practices in Western contexts raises important questions about cultural appropriation and authenticity. The commodification of spirituality in contemporary society necessitates a nuanced discussion on how these practices are adapted and integrated into diverse cultural landscapes. As highlighted by Jones and Bradford (2019), the contextual adaptation of spiritual practices is crucial for their meaningful integration and relevance in different societal settings.

Professor Frank's presentation illuminated several key aspects that warrant further discussion. These include: (a) the inherent spiritual dimension of ESD and its undeniable relevance; (b) the critical challenge posed to contemporary educational practices; (c) the notable separation of education from first-person paradigms; and (d) the imperative of integrating personal inquiry alongside spiritual virtues within ESD. This offers a sense of 'connectedness' between humans and the environment, which can be helpful and forward-looking for our questions of religious Sustainable Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

2. The Spiritual Dimension of ESD: Context, Culture, and Individual Experience

Professor Frank astutely emphasized that the spiritual dimension of ESD is highly contingent upon context, culture, and individual experience. Spirituality, as argued by King (2008), is not a monolithic construct but is experienced and interpreted diversely across different cultural and individual settings. This perspective is crucial in ESD, where a universalistic approach to spirituality may prove inadequate or even inappropriate. As Palmer (1999) suggests, authentic spirituality is deeply intertwined with individual engagement with existential questions concerning meaning, purpose, and ethical action. In the Christian tradition, for instance, the concept of stewardship provides a spiritual framework for environmental ethics, positioning humans as caretakers of the Earth (Northcott, 2006). This spiritual dimension, therefore, is not merely an abstract concept but is profoundly embedded in personal experiences and contextual understandings that meaningfully connect individuals to the world. This connection, as Capra (1997) notes, underscores an ecological ontology, emphasizing the intrinsic spirituality inherent in our existence and our relationship with the environment. The spiritual dimension, therefore, invites a broader interdisciplinary dialogue on how inner transformation can reciprocally influence outer realities, prompting further exploration beyond traditional religious boundaries into the realm of personal and collective values (Wilber, 2000).

3. Critique of Contemporary Education Practices: The Imperative of Inner Development

I strongly concur with Professor Frank's critique of contemporary education practices, particularly regarding the pressing need for inner development. Sociological perspectives on education, as explored by Ballantine and Hammack (2016), often reveal a dominant positivist paradigm that prioritizes quantifiable results and standardized outcomes. This approach, while valuable in certain respects, tends to oversimplify the complexities of human experience and may inadvertently marginalize the deeper existential questions that are intrinsic to human life and motivation. Drawing upon the seminal work of Freire (1970), education should be viewed as a process of liberation, empowering students to critically engage with their own life experiences within broader societal contexts. Modern educational practices often grapple with the tension between outcome-

focused approaches and those that prioritize the learning process itself: project-based learning. As argued by Thomas (2000), project-based learning and other active pedagogies can effectively guide students through a transformative process of becoming, where self-discovery and critical reflection are integral to individual growth. However, the effectiveness of these approaches is intricately linked to the diverse influences shaping individual responses, including family dynamics, socialization within educational institutions, and religious or non-religious value systems (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Theologically, as Professor Frank mentioned, the concept of suffering is not merely an adversity to be eliminated but can be understood as a pathway toward spiritual growth (Frankl, 1984). Inner development, therefore, is not a panacea for external challenges but rather an ongoing process of transformation that embraces the inherent ambiguities and mysteries of life, guiding individuals to navigate paradoxes and complexities with greater resilience and wisdom.

4. Moving Beyond Objective Knowledge: Embracing First-Person Paradigms

Professor Frank rightly emphasized the necessity of transcending purely objective knowledge and incorporating subjective, first-person perspectives in education. This epistemological shift aligns with contemporary trends in both theology and critical social theory, which increasingly recognize the limitations of purely objectivist methodologies (Schwandt, 2007). Phenomenology and existentialism, as philosophical traditions, underscore the primacy of lived experience and subjective consciousness in understanding human existence (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). In sociology, the concept of reflexivity has gained prominence, acknowledging that researchers' own experiences and backgrounds inevitably shape their interpretations and analyses (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This recognition of reflexivity is vital in education, encouraging both educators and students to acknowledge how their experiences, emotions, and prior socialization shape their engagement with the world. In the context of ESD, this implies encouraging students and researchers to explore the "why" of sustainability, not just the "how," prompting deeper inquiries into personal values and motivations that drive engagement with sustainability challenges.

5. Integrating Personal Inquiry and Spiritual Virtues in Sustainable Education

The integration of personal inquiry and spiritual virtues, as proposed by Professor Frank, provides a robust framework for addressing the spiritual dimension in sustainable education. Personal inquiry encourages students to engage in self-reflection, fostering an exploration of their own motivations, values, and relationships with the world. This approach aligns with contemplative pedagogies which emphasize not only knowledge acquisition but also the transformation of inner consciousness (Zajonc, 2009)⁸. Spiritual virtues, such as resilience, compassion, trust, and mindfulness, as highlighted by Lovat (2010), are not merely abstract ideals but are essential tools that enable individuals to navigate the inherent uncertainties and challenges of our interconnected world. Cultivating these virtues supports individuals in dealing with external complexities and fosters a deeper connection with the self and broader existential questions of life purpose and meaning.

In conclusion, I extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Frank for a presentation that was both insightful and deeply generative. Professor Frank's approach effectively provokes critical reflection on fundamental questions related to spirituality, education, and sustainability. While the limitations of this format preclude a face-to-face dialogue, I hope this response adequately conveys my appreciation for Professor Frank's contribution and its profound resonance with my own perspectives on education for sustainable development. Professor Frank's conceptualization of theology as a compass offers a valuable direction for navigating the complexities of sustainability with wisdom, compassion, and a commitment to transformative action.

References

- Ballantine, J. H., & Hammack, P. L. (2016). *Sociology of education: A systematic analysis*. Pearson.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Doubleday.
- Capra, F. (1997). *The web of life: A new scientific understanding of living systems*. Anchor Books.

⁸ Arthur Zajonc (2009) advocated for an education that includes love and personal transformation. Zajonc describes an "epistemology of love" that fosters a deep commitment to learning.

- Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning*. Simon & Schuster.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
- Jones, A., & Bradford, L. D. (2019). Spirituality, culture and health: A systematic review of qualitative studies. *PLoS one*, 14(3), e0213831.
- King, U. (2008). Spirituality and globalization: Theory and method. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 20(2), 120-143.
- Lovat, T. (2010). Spiritual capital in action: tapping religious and spiritual resources for sustainability. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 15(2), 143-154.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge.
- Northcott, M. S. (2006). *A political theology of climate change*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Palmer, P. J. (1999). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. Jossey-Bass.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Sage publications.
- Smith, P. B. (2003). Culture and self: Beyond the individual and collective. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 34(1), 25-40.
- Thomas, J. W. (2000). A review of research on project-based learning. *The Autodesk Foundation*.
- Wilber, K. (2000). *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*. Shambhala Publications.
- Zajonc, Arthur. (2009). *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry: When Knowing Becomes Love*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books.

Indigenous Spiritual Education for a Sustainable World

Blair Stonechild

Thank you for the invitation to present, and I value the symbolic presentation of tobacco. In our tradition, proper protocol is essential in order to signal that engagement in the topic of spirituality involves much more than just intellectual discussion. I will begin the presentation by thanking the Creator for the gifts of creation, for this beautiful day, and for this opportunity to meet, even if only virtually, courtesy of the internet.

1. Promoting Cross-Cultural Understanding

It isn't often that I have the opportunity to talk to scholars in Europe on the topic of Indigenous spirituality and education. However, it is more relevant than ever for all of us, as I will explain later. I am Cree and Saulteaux from the western plains of Canada. In 1957, I was taken to an Indian residential school where I received my first 9 years of education. The schools can best be described as reformatory institutions, focusing on discipline and the perceived need to instill proper values in us. Our education was highly infused with Roman Catholic religion, a strict schedule, and punishment such as strapping or isolation when not followed. Our education was basic, as we were never expected to be very successful.

Now we know that this system was badly flawed. Children who survived the experience – at one point about 50% died – found themselves alienated from their own communities, and unwelcomed in mainstream society. This school experience left an indelible mark on me, in particular because of what is described as “spiritual abuse” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). Constant exposure to Christianity, combined with a ban on our traditional spiritual practices, left me confused. It led to a life-long desire to reconcile two very disparate ways of seeing the world. The image below of a student from my community, was widely used to illustrate transformation from savagery to civilization.

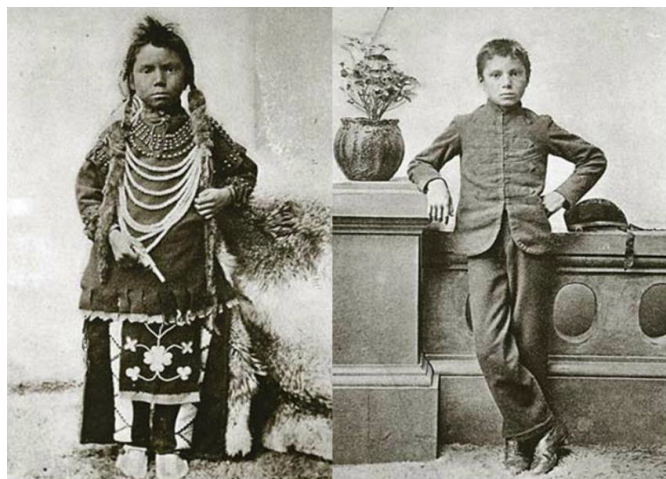


Figure 1: Thomas Moore transformed at Residential School c. 1892 (Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.)

2. Revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems

In 1969, the Canadian policy of total assimilation was in the process of being rejected. The government was forced to recognize that it had ignored its Indigenous Aboriginal and Treaty obligations. Their attempt to destroy Indigenous memory had failed. Indigenous peoples would now be able to define and control their own education. One of products of this new policy was the creation of the First Nations University of Canada in 1976 where I now teach.

I was fortunate to be hired as the first instructor at the university. That is now 48 years ago. If asked, I state that my greatest learning has not originated from university professors, but rather from the Indigenous Elders I got to know over my years there. One of those Elders, Ernest Tootoosis, said something to me that left a profound impression. He said “You know what? We Indigenous peoples used to live in the Garden of Eden, and we never abused the gifts of the Creator” (Stonechild, 2020, p. 29).

This simple statement opened my eyes to an entirely different interpretation of religion and spirituality. It challenged all of the things I had learned about Christianity. For example, the vast majority of people, when asked who the first humans were, will automatically respond, Adam and Eve. But Elder Tootoosis points out that there were Indigenous peoples, going back well before the conception of the Bible. Indigenous

people had not abused the gifts of creation, instead obeying the will of the Creator to live in harmony with and respect nature. In Indigenous tradition, establishing positive spiritual relationships with all created beings was a sacred responsibility. The result was relative plenty, prosperity, happiness and peace. In other words, they did not “Eat of the apple of the Tree of knowledge of good and evil” as described in the Old Testament book of Genesis (see Genesis 3:1–20).

The authors of Genesis had some awareness that the covenant with God that gave humanity dominion over nature could come at great cost. It would include being cast out of the Garden of Eden, not receiving of the Creator’s benevolence, needing to toil and suffer, and generally experiencing a fall from grace. Could that cautionary message have come from the wisdom of earlier generations of Indigenous peoples?

3. Reinterpreting the Past

My research on Indigenous Spirituality is covered in 3 books: *The Knowledge Seeker* (Stonechild, 2016), *Loss of Indigenous Eden* (Stonechild, 2020), and *Challenge to Civilization* (Stonechild, 2024). I explored where the roots of the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews originated. Recalling residential school, and taking a quick look at the history of the so-called “discovery” of the Americas, it was plain that the two sides viewed the world very differently. Elders tell me that they assumed that the newcomers saw things the same way as we did, and were surprised when they found out this was not the case.

I went to the library and sought out books on the rise of civilization. I looked at the history of the “Old World” and soon noticed that at one point, Indigenous cultures existed all over Europe and indeed all over the rest of the world. In fact, remnants of these groups can still be found on every continent. But one particular point stood out – and something that all of the books agreed upon: the point at which civilization arose. That point was when humanity decided to rise up and take control of nature (Hawkes, J., & Woolley, 1963, xviii). Such activity is generally associated with the development of animal husbandry, and the cultivation of lands. Then it dawned on me – civilization, with its focus on human ascendancy over nature, was a direct contradiction of Indigenous principles of being part of and having the basic responsibility of stewardship – taking care of, rather than exploiting the natural world.

The more I thought about the divergence of non-Indigenous and from Indigenous worldviews, the more I understood its implications. I realized

that the story of Genesis is not an Indigenous story, let alone one of the majority of world belief systems. The Biblical version that privileges the story of Adam and Eve portrays all cultures of the world as having committed the same Original Sin. As I researched further, I realized that the biblical story, and the Abrahamic religious traditions, were developing at the same time as civilization. Civilization represents the same ethos of human ascendancy over nature. Over the centuries one sees civilization slowly spread from the Middle East, to the Greeks, Romans, Holy Roman Empire, then to the Americas and other Indigenous areas of the world in the form of colonialism.

The impetus of civilization begins with the accumulation of wealth, then turns into aggression against, and subjugation of weaker peoples in order to maintain that ascendancy. Indigenous peoples were the perfect target for civilizations because they favored harmony and therefore were non-aggressive. Civilized peoples have come to label Indigenous peoples as savage and barbaric simply for standing up and defending their lands, something that was perfectly justifiable. One gets the impression that civilization was embraced, when in fact it generally spread slowly at the point of the sword. It took a long time for non-indigenous peoples to become the majority of world population – not until the 1820s, a mere 200 years ago.

Table 1: Growth of Non-Indigenous World Population (according to McEvedy & Jones, 1978; Durand, 1974; Maddison, 2003)

200,000 BCE	0 of 15,000	0% non-Indigenous
6,000 BCE	80,000 of 12 million	1% non-Indigenous
1492 CE	60 million of 550 million	11% non-Indigenous
1820 CE	800 million of 1.6 billion	50% non-Indigenous
2018	7.3 billion of 7.7 billion	95% non-Indigenous

The 1820s was a watershed period in world history. Transportation and military technology were exploding and enabling rapid colonization of Indigenous lands across the globe. It was also the last time that world population at approximately 1.5 billion – in balance with earth’s natural carrying capacity. Rationalism and scientism were emerging as dominant forms of thought. What was most significant to me, however, is that this is when non-Indigenous peoples became the majority of world population.

In the Americas, it took a mere 500 years for Indigenous beliefs and culture to be almost entirely displaced by cultures imported from Europe; in Africa, over the past two centuries, Indigenous beliefs and practices have declined from 90% to 10% of the population (Olupna, 2015). Indonesia, in

a little over 70 years, has been transformed from an Indigenous-majority population to the world's most populous Muslim country, since Indigenous beliefs are not recognized (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact, 2017). In the Canadian west, for example, the population was virtually all Indigenous up until about 150 years ago. To begin the telling of history just according to the rise of civilization does great harm to Indigenous insights and wisdom. It is a disservice to humanity's ability to truly understand itself. Since civilization is not a natural state of human organization, I created a new term that describes the Indigenous relationship to the world – "*ecolization*."

4. Relevance to Contemporary Society

So, what are the implications for education about spirituality? First, our modern lifestyle, which we treasure so highly, and take so much for granted, is a highly artificial way of life that relies upon rampant exploitation of earth's limited resources. In our tradition, there was one fearsome entity that was feared more than anything. It was called *wetiko* and represented the spirit of greed. We believed that *wetiko* must not be allowed to run amok, for if it does, it would totally consume, and finally destroy us. This threat was taken so seriously that if someone considered to be infected by *wetiko*, that individual could be exiled or in the extreme killed.

When newcomers came to the New World, they viewed Indigenous peoples as lazy and unambitious as we did not appear to be exploiting the natural resources. So, it was justified by the Vatican that a more worthy people could come in and take over. What they did not understand is that what was being practiced was in fact Indigenous economic policy. The Indigenous plan was to interfere as little as possible with nature, allowing it to flourish and therefore provide even greater abundance for future generations. Today, people are conditioned to be consumers whose main concern is where their next dollar will come from, whether they will have a job, and whether they can enjoy proper food, shelter or greater luxury. Meanwhile, scant attention is given to the damages of massive consumption to vegetation, wildlife, water and air, which provide the true foundations of our well-being. This is the opposite of the way Indigenous peoples behaved. They restrained their self-interests for the well-being of their natural spiritual relatives, and future generations.

One of the greatest insights that I have gained as a scholar is the realization that spirituality formed the basis of traditional thought and actions. We view spirituality as a higher form of understanding. It calls us

to act with our purest motives and in consideration of all created life, including future generations. Indeed, Indigenous spirituality is the precursor to and foundational to institutionalized religions. Today, our thinking has become highly secularized and rational. For example, the theory of evolution claims that our basic nature is animalistic, and that this is the reason for our selfishness and violence. This was never an Indigenous concept. Instead, we understand ourselves as spirit beings who have come to temporarily occupy pre-existing physical bodies. One of our tasks is to learn how to control them. It is not adequately realized that the rational mind, believing that it can pursue whatever it imagines, does so, but ignoring spiritual wisdom presents great danger to ourselves and the earth (see Stonechild, 2024, pp. 95–116).

5. Challenges to Modern Education

The huge challenge becomes how we are going to deal with the existential threats we have created, such as climate change. In terms of education, I recommend a few major things: First, that the mainstream recognize its true history and consequences of its actions. This realization can only come about, if history is reinterpreted through the lens of Indigenous experience that has long predated civilization. Secondly, we have to return to the basics that enabled Indigenous peoples to survive so capably. These include respect for all of creation, ceremonies, and the Sacred Laws of Conduct: Humility, Honesty, Courage, Generosity, Love, Respect and Wisdom (see Stonechild, 2016, pp. 84–85). Finally, we need to review and reverse the technologies that are damaging our life systems and societal well-being. This includes endless economic expansion, as well as the intractable challenge of limiting our population to a more manageable level. I do not pretend that this will in any way be easy. If civilization took centuries to evolve, so it would take centuries to unwind.

Churches and religious education have a critical role to play in order to achieve reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, their beliefs and spirituality. Many churches in Canada have started to embark down this road. The education system can re-introduce Indigenous thought into young minds. We need to return to teaching our youth how to be ethical human beings, and emphasize less the technologies that are contributing to the destruction of the planet. Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of time to bring about changes. Finally, Indigenous peoples, who have small numbers and even less political and economic clout, will need allies – non-

Indigenous individuals who understand the value of Indigenous ways and can use their influence in support.

A few final thoughts to ponder: If we are to survive as long as the simian species closest to us, we will need to thrive for another 800,000 years. What is our plan to get there? Secondly, my elder mentors explained that we travelled as spirit beings to inhabit evolving human bodies which we chose for our physical experience. It is interesting that it is estimated there are more planets in the universe than grains of sand on the earth (Mack, 2015). Can we credibly believe that our planet is the only one that fosters life and where we may have originated from? These are profound questions that also need to be considered within spiritual education.

References

- Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact. 2017. See <https://aippnet.org/>
- Chiorazzi, A. (2015, January 12). *The spirituality of Africa*. Harvard Gazette. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>
- Durand, J. (1974). *Historical Estimates of World Population*. University of Pennsylvania.
- Hawkes, J., & Woolley, L. (1963). *History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Development of Mankind* (Vol. 1). George Allen & Unwin.
- Mack, E. (2015, March 19). There may be more Earth-like planets than grains of sand on all our beaches. *CNET*. https://www.cnet.com/science/the-milky-way-is-flush-with-habitable-planets-study-says/#google_vignette
- Maddison, A. (2003). *The World Economy: Historical Estimates* (Vol. 2). OECD.
- McEvedy, C. & Jones, R. (1978). *Atlas of World Population History*. Penguin. Facts on File.
- Stonechild, B. (2016). *The knowledge seeker: Embracing: Indigenous spirituality*. University of Regina Press.
- Stonechild, B. (2020). *Loss of Indigenous Eden and the Fall of Spirituality*. University of Regina Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780889777033>
- Stonechild, B. (2024). *Challenge to civilization: Indigenous wisdom and the future*. University of Regina Press.

Indigenous Education for a Sustainable World by Blair Stonechild: A Response

Eunice Kamaara

1. Introduction

This response is grounded in the understanding that social realities are constructed as individuals interact with themselves, with transcendental other(s), with fellow humans (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1970; Rannikmäe, Holbrook & Soobard, 2020), but also with animals, plants, and with all other creation (Latour, 2000). I may have written and presented this response at the conference alone, but the ideas are not original. They are products of collaborative (re)constructions and (re)negotiations over social interactions. This explains our use of a plural personal pronoun. In the context of education, teaching and learning are “constructed, active, reflective, collaborative, inquiry-based, and evolving” (Chand, 2024, p. 274; Sen, 2000).

When Prof. Dr. Manfred L. Pirner, Chair, ordinary Professor of Religious Studies, and a member of the core organizing team of the 13th Nuremberg Forum invited us to respond to a keynote address at the forum on Indigenous perspectives by Dr. Blair Stonechild, Professor of Indigenous Studies at First Nations University of Canada, Regina, Sk., Canada, we were not sure how to respond because first, we were meeting the name for the first time, and second, our quick research online on Stonechild revealed a guru; one deeply immersed in Indigenous Studies but also widely and deeply experienced in Indigenous life, specifically, with numerous accolades to his name. We felt inadequate but anyway, we responded but not without a significant amount of sensory pleasure and honour.

2. Preliminaries

Greetings and goodwill to all, if only to acknowledge that all humanity is one complex whole. Long after he joined the ‘living dead’, Mbiti’s words, ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’ (Mbiti 1989, p. 106) continue to reverberate. We deeply thank the organizers, Nuremberg Forum 2024, for the opportunity to (un)learn on education and spirituality. We salute Stonechild for the keynote address, family and friends, teachers

and students, colleagues, and all who contributed to this response in whichever way.

In agreement with Stonechild that ‘engagement in the topic of spirituality involves much more than just intellectual discussion’ (p. 1), a brief background about this respondent suffices. This respondent grew up in exactly the kind of environment that Stonechild describes as the Indigenous way of life, but in Africa. An alienating colonial education and an equally alienating Christianity were daily experiences for her. Right from the first year of formal education, school alienated us, physically and spiritually, from our families of upbringing for long seasons: In school, speaking in her mother tongue attracted corporal punishment. Her parents, now departed (God rest their beautiful souls in eternal peace) were children of the first generation of Christians.

Ironically, our great grandparents lost their land to the Church and some died in the struggle for independence. The land on which the Church of Scotland mission station was built, (now Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Thogoto⁹ mission area, which hosts the famous Church of the Torch) is ancestral land of my maternal ancestors, mbari ya Hinga. Waiyaki wa Hinga, who was buried alive upside down in Kibwezi by colonialists in 1892, is this respondents’ great-great grandfather. He is the grandfather of my maternal grandfather Samuel Mbugua wa Regeru wa Hinga, husband to Serah Wanjiru wa Mbugua. In death, Mbugua wa Regeru and his wife Wanjiru wa Mbugua, have reclaimed their space on this land: they are buried on the grounds of the Church of Torch. We remain forever grateful for all the experiences that entail her identity and belonging, however messy.

3. A General Overview

We found Stonechild’s address well-written, authentic, informative, thought-provoking, and transformative. It is effectively presented with proper protocol, recognizing and respecting the supernatural and all gifts of creation including the Internet. He wrote: “I will begin the presentation by thanking the Creator for the gifts of creation, for this beautiful day, and for this opportunity to meet, even if only virtually, courtesy of the Internet” (p. 1 of the manuscript).

Stonechild presents a complex phenomenon simply, clearly, and in a focused way: The problem is defined, the history of the problem, and the

⁹ Thogoto is a Kikuyu version of Scotts.

way forward well-articulated. He draws from experience and is therefore contextually grounded. The introduction gives a profound personal narration of his life in a residential school, grounding his critiques of modern education with a clear and authentic base. This allows the reader to appreciate the historical and cultural contexts that inform his perspectives. Stonechild then contrasts the Indigenous way of life with the contemporary one to diagnose the problem facing humanity today before prescribing the kind of education that is required for a sustainable world and concluding. This response adopts the approach.

4. Diagnosis

Drawing from reflection of his experience learning at the feet of Elders, Stonechild observes that Indigenous spirituality considers humans a part of creation with "...the basic responsibility of stewardship – taking care of, rather than exploiting the natural world." (p.3) He highlights the words of one Elder: "You know what? We Indigenous peoples used to live in the Garden of Eden, and we never abused the gifts of the Creator." (p. 2) Stonechild innovatively re-interprets the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden. He suggests that Indigenous people lived in the Garden of Eden, while with civilization, equated to the act of eating the forbidden apple, humanity in the contemporary world has been thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Living out of the Garden of Eden is characterized by immense suffering witnessed across all creation today.

These ideas could be considered idealistic and romanticisation of the past at its best. It does not seem accurate to suggest that there was a time when human life was all bliss. Indigenous communities certainly needed to draw from the Earth even as they took care of it. They experienced pleasure and pain, hunger and plenty, peace and war, and ultimately, life and death. The concept of good and evil existed in Indigenous communities. However, the statement provokes discussions on the complexities of varying historical contexts and Indigenous cultures, which is what an effective keynote address does.

Then, according to Stonechild, came civilization, the impetus of which "begins with the accumulation of wealth, then turns into aggression against, and subjugation of weaker peoples in order to maintain that ascendancy." (p. 3) Stonechild systematically presents an insightful analysis of the historical divergence between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous views, noting that civilization directly contradicted Indigenous spirituality. This shift is marked by the emergence of rationalism and scientism as

dominant forms of thought as Indigenous people slowly became the minority of the world population, thanks to colonialism. This suggests a difference between living on the Earth and exploiting the Earth, but it does not explain where the line between the two falls. Neither does it appreciate historical realities like high population which calls for more resources and therefore effective means of living on the Earth. Wouldn't scientific and technological innovations such as contraception be considered as products of human efforts not to exploit the Earth? The dynamism and complexities of human life and therefore the contextual realities of each moment seem to be ignored.

Besides, the ideas seem to dichotomize reality including human life into good versus evil; Indigenous versus non-Indigenous/civilization; rational and scientific versus spiritual; secular versus sacred, and ultimately, in versus out of the Garden of Eden. Yet, Stonechild appreciates the Internet, perhaps the greatest technological innovation of this age.

Towards identifying the implications of this diagnosis on education, Stonechild speaks to the relationship between environment and spirituality. He metaphorically elaborates on "*wetiko*", a spirit of greed among humans which Indigenous peoples consciously worked against. *Wetiko* resonates with contemporary values of individualism and consumerism and the consequent resource exploitation, leading to the unsustainability of resources. We agree with Stonechild that deep reflection on *wetiko* would elicit clarity on how sustainability would be achieved on a day-to-day basis.

5. Solution: Going back to the Garden of Eden

Stonechild appreciates the central role of education. But it is not any education. He prescribes:

- 1) education that facilitates knowledge of the true history and consequences of its action. But what exactly is "the true history"? History is a selective process; the person who tells the story decides where to begin, what and who to include, and so on. Besides, with evolving knowledge, skills, and values, human experiences are constantly a flux- There is not one but many intersecting and flexible histories. Adichie (2009) expounds on this.

- 2) reviewing and reversing damaging technologies – We certainly would wish to review and reverse some technologies. However, we know that technologies are tools that have no moral capacity. What is damaging is how humans use the tools.

3) a return to the basics – “... respect for all of creation, ceremonies, and the Sacred Laws of Conduct: Humility, Honesty, Courage, Generosity, Love, Respect and Wisdom.” (p. 4)

This is the strength of this presentation. Character values are at the heart of human relationships with the transcendent other, with themselves, with other humans, with the Earth and all that is in it. However, like all universal principles, respect suffers from the challenge of application: how respect is interpreted, understood, and applied varies from one context to another. Perhaps summing up, spirituality in education as love, love for all creation is enough. And love is not unique to and for Indigenous people, it is a value among and for all peoples.

6. Conclusion

Stonechild’s address is systematic and convincing on how Indigenous spiritual education may be applied to address contemporary threats – education that challenges our values and practices at personal, community, national, and global levels. This may be summed up in one word, love. The big question however is: how do we promote love? How would love be integrated into various education systems across the globe? Thank you, Prof. Stonechild for the transformative keynote address.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to the organizers of the Nuremberg Forum 2024; and to my parents and grandparents, colleagues and students, and Adriano Suprine for technical support.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2009). *The danger of a single story* [TED Talk]. TEDGlobal. <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-danger-of-a-single-story-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.
- Chand, S. P. (2024). Constructivism in education: Exploring the contributions of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 12(7), 274–278. <https://doi.org/10.21275/SR23630021800>
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. Pantheon Books.
- Latour, B. (2000). The promises of constructivism. In D. Ihde & E. Selinger (Eds.), *Chasing technoscience: Matrix for materiality* (pp. 27–46). Indiana University Press.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.

- Rannikmäe, M., Holbrook, J., & Soobard, R. (2020). Social constructivism—Jerome Bruner. In B. Akpan & T. J. Kennedy (Eds.), *Science education in theory and practice*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43620-9_18
- Sen, A. (2000). *Development as freedom*. Anchor Books.

Connectedness as the Spiritual Basis of Religious Education for Sustainable Development

Elisabeth Naurath

1. 'Love Boldly Respects the Small' (Henning Luther, 2007): Magical Medicinal Plants as Spiritual Paths of Interpretation

A surprising introduction? References to botany are rather unusual in our theological discourses. This was not always the case, because, historically, the spiritual interpretation of nature was part of everyday religious life. This is shown, for example, by numerous stories and myths about the healing significance of plants, which we initially laugh at today. But at second glance, the creation of legends stands for a living awareness of nature that sought to connect heaven and earth and believed that healing could be found in the elements given by God. This offers a sense of 'connectedness' between humans and the environment, which can be helpful and forward-looking for our questions of religious Education for Sustainable Development (rESD).

1.1 Example 1: Cowslip (in German: 'Key-Flower')

If you look at a picture of a so-called 'Key-Flower', you will easily recognize the origin of the name. The outer shape is reminiscent of a bunch of keys. The botanical theory of signatures sees a correspondence between outer forms and inner values. It is not surprising that Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) already saw a healing power in this spring flower, which can dispel melancholy with the radiating power of the sun and is said to help against depression when prepared as tea or wine. The emotionally healing warmth of the yellow-orange flowers, which stand for the power of light and the sun, goes hand in hand with the robust base rosette, which is said to allude to stable basic trust as a firm root. Since the 8th century, there have been numerous Christian legends linking the 'Key-Flower' with the mother of God, Mary, because according to Christian belief, Mary opened the door to heaven for humans through the birth of Jesus: "It is certainly noticeable that our ancestors trusted these little flowers to do a lot: namely to bridge dividing boundaries and open closed doors. This opens access to

other realities and worlds, whereby the plant also offers protection during the transition. It helps with the transition from the material to the subtle” (Beiser, 2015, p. 143)¹⁰.

The thesis of my contribution, titled *Connectedness as the Spiritual Basis of Religious Education for Sustainability*, is to focus on the relational dimensions as feelings and acknowledgment of the complexity of connections and interrelationships. Differences and divisions should not be ignored. But in my opinion, there is too little awareness of the potential of what we have in common. I see the approach of sustainability education as an attempt to tackle the complexity problem of modernity in such a way that connections are identified and synergies constructed to provide catalysts for transformation at various levels at the same time. In this context, religious education for sustainable development has rarely taken into consideration the opportunity of interreligious education. I would, therefore like to emphasize this perspective and present a concrete example based on my botanical associations at the beginning.

1.2 Example 2: HERBS – Healing Plants in Religions

For the past year, I have been working in an interreligious project group of *Religions for Peace Germany* with representatives of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and ethnology in the field of Indigenous culture in Brazil on the topic of *HERBS* (2024). The acronym stands for *Healing Herbs – Earth – Religions – Education – Spirituality*. With this project, we are trying to send a clear signal for the affirmation of diversity: people of different religions and cultures want to work together to promote biodiversity in our gardens and, at the same time, invite dialog and cooperation on site.

Background: For some years now, *Gardens of Religions* have been established in many German cities based on communal interfaith commitment (e.g., in Karlsruhe, Cologne, Wuppertal, etc.). As places of relaxation and spirituality, they aim to invite interfaith encounters and, at the same time, educate people in terms of environmental ethics. In this context, medicinal herbs are usually given little consideration. This project focuses on the connection between plants and healing power as the anthropological beginning of the ‘homo religious’, who seeks healing and cures. Many sacred texts in various religions speak of medicinal plants and combine creation theology (praise and thanksgiving to God) and the

¹⁰ “Es fällt jedenfalls auf, dass unsere Vorfahren diesen Blümchen einiges zutrauten: nämlich trennende Grenzen zu überbrücken und verschlossene Türen zu öffnen. Das öffnet den Zugang in andere Wirklichkeiten und Welten, wobei die Pflanze beim Übergang gleichzeitig Schutz bietet. Sie hilft beim Übergang vom Stofflichen in das Feinstoffliche.“

mission to explore their healing power in order people in illness to alleviate their suffering (diakonia).

Historically, the roots of medicine are in herbal medicine (phytotherapy). It is therefore not surprising that medicinal herbs play an evident intercultural role in religions and the sacred texts of religions (ethnobotany). There is a clear historical link between religion and medicine, as shown, for example, by the tradition of monastery gardens (the origin of nursing in Christian monasteries). With this plant ecology project, we want to draw interreligious connections and draw attention to the connection between religious spirituality and nature-related materiality (Obholzer et al., 2016).

However, the topic of herb gardens is also highly topical given the rapidly advancing climate crisis, which is accompanied by insect and bird mortality and biodiversity loss. In this respect, this project idea is not only intended to appeal to people's enthusiasm for herbal medicine (flowering gardens) and historical-religious texts in the sense of an interreligious search for traces. We also want to provide low-threshold information and motivation – because anyone can grow herbs on their windowsill – to foster a stronger connection with nature. Additionally, we want to encourage joint door-to-door projects to bring people into dialog and cooperation via their front gardens. This project aims to serve as a transfer project: From science to society and from botany to environmental ethics and plant ethics.

Therefore, the project idea is to offer opportunities for educators, teachers, and other educational actors for interdisciplinary integrative teaching in religion and biology. Through open workshops, seminars, and school projects with excursions, we combine interreligious traditions focusing on herbal medicine, the history and tradition of monastery and herb gardens, the production of simple herbal medicines, ointments, creams, soaps, and other foods (baking herb breads, making herb butter, etc.).

This practical example stands for an interreligious implementation of sustainability and sustainability education, because it addresses different levels of education at a low-threshold level to envision sustainability goals from both an interreligious perspective (oriented towards healing) and an environmental-ethical perspective: This goes specifically for the SDGs health and well-being, education for all, sustainable cities, peace, justice, and strong institutions, and partnerships to achieve the goals.

Why is this so important?

The IPCC report's (2023) scientific data shows that a far-reaching cultural and structural change is necessary given the ecological challenges.

This can only happen with a fundamental change in values and awareness: religions and religious education have an outstanding responsibility in this regard. How can we empower individuals to lead responsible lifestyles in their societies?

2. Religious Education for Sustainable Development in the German Context: A Critical Review

Religious Education for sustainable development (rESD) refers to a specific perspective within the overall objective of ESD. It is about harnessing the potential of religious traditions and life orientations for sustainable development on an individual, social, and global level (Universität Bamberg, Lehrstuhl für Religionspädagogik, 2025).

First, I must unfortunately state that, based on my current experience in working with religious education teachers, the implementation of religion-related sustainability education has not yet arrived in practice. Worse still, there is a tendency to marginalize and ignore the subject area, even though the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has launched an *Orientation Framework for Global Development Education* within the framework of Education for Sustainable Development in 2007 – and updated it in 2016 (KMK & BMZ, 2016).

What are the reasons for this?

On the one hand, it must be criticized that for a long time, sustainability education was narrowly defined to mean environmental ethics learning. But even if we only look at this sub-area of sustainability education, it must be noted that this focus has been implemented with little relevance in theory and practice. For example, Rudolf Englert (2018) draws only a “sobering interim balance” for the topic of “creation in religious education”. It can be shown that the topic of creation is missing from many curricula and that environmental ethics are rarely taught.

As a theological background, following the well-known “Lynn White Thesis” (1967), Christianity may be seen as a fundamental cause of the ecological crisis. Keywords such as “dominium terrae” and the special position of humans are mentioned here. The Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann (2016) thus speaks of the necessity to develop a new image of man that moves “from the arrogance of world domination to cosmic humility” (p. 15). In contrast, a Trinitarian doctrine of creation refers to the inner-Trinitarian relationship with the aim of not separating the world from God, but of regarding it as permeated by the incarnation of Christ and the closeness of the Holy Spirit. Here, too, I see a theological bridge to my

thesis that connectedness should be regarded as the spiritual basis of sustainability.

Even though the Protestant Churches in Germany have shown a broad commitment to sustainable development for many years (EKD, 2009; 2021), this new approach of an eco-theological turn in Protestant theology is a development that – in my view – has received less attention and differentiation than the Catholic elaboration in connection with *Laudato si*.¹¹

It will probably come as no surprise, then, that rESD has been slow to arrive in German religious education (Bederna, 2019; 2020)¹². In her book *Everyday for Future. Theology and Religious Education for Sustainable Development* from 2019, Katrin Bederna emphasizes a “messianic approach” that not only aims to impart knowledge but also to have a transformative effect in the sense of a change of consciousness with effects on the action: “Religious ESD as transformation education in a messianic perspective is therefore about the (self-)transformation of individuals, structures and the future of all out of responsibility and a concrete hope” (Bederna, 2019, p. 238). She rightly emphasizes the importance of anchoring ESD in educational theory, which presupposes the freedom of learners – even if this may sound paradoxical and implies the need for didactic clarification: “Religious education for sustainable development does not want to turn children and young people into advocates for creation, the poor and the future. It wants them to make themselves advocates for creation, the poor, and the future” (Bederna, 2019, p. 235). It is important to note with Bederna (2019, p. 233): No one should be led anywhere but should learn to go themselves. But it is precisely this learning to go oneself that proves difficult. How can a global challenge of this magnitude be mastered with individual steps? Because of this demotivating “futility factor”, Claudia Gärtner believes that greater consideration should be given to the structural dimensions of rESD, as the determinism of individual attitudes is ultimately shaped by a broader social context.

The goal of a cultural change in the history of civilization, which should succeed in “reconciling the protection of the natural foundations of life with the realization of a good life for all” (Seitz, 2017, p. 8), is therefore also the goal of the above-mentioned *Orientation Framework for Global Development* on whose section *Education for Sustainable Development in*

¹¹ Currently, new publications are being published, such as: Laubach, Lindner & Steinberger (2024).

¹² Further publications on this topic: Bederna (2020); Bederna & Gärtner (2020); Bederna & Gärtner (2021).

Upper Secondary Schools” I have been able to work in recent years as a member of the Religion, Philosophy and Ethics subject group (KMK & BMZ, 2016).

While religious didactic designs for ESD are usually based on competence models that focus primarily on cognitive dimensions such as orientation knowledge, this approach aims to take the “mind-behavior-gap” into account by paying more attention to the emotional learning dimension: This makes an “emotionally sensitive educational practice” (Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit [BMU], 2021, p. 49) all the more important for ESD, which offers space for the “right to the future” and social-emotional learning as well as the communicative examination of feelings (Naurath, 2023).

The sense of coherence described by the Jew Anton Aaronovsky (1997) in the context of salutogenesis is closely linked to the topic of spirituality, because faith strengthens the perspective of seeing problems in a larger context. Due to the relationality to God, life finds a new orientation that “relativizes crisis events without trivializing them” (Schneider & Vogt, 2016, p. 198).

In the following, I will focus on the perspectives of the spiritual dimension, which have tended to be neglected in previous discourse and are of particular interest to the Nuremberg Forum conference 2024.

3. Connectedness as the Spiritual Basis of Religious Education for Sustainability

3.1 Spiritual Dimensions

With the buzzword of sustainability or Education for Sustainable Development, the ecological transformation process aims to take a context-related view of three dimensions: ecology (the preservation of ecosystems), economy (a functioning system to generate prosperity), and social justice. However, when focusing on these three pillars, a motivational connection is often neglected: for instance, no reference is made to underlying values. Additionally, the topics of religiosity or spirituality, which reflect an implicit value orientation related to sustainability goals, are not addressed. Yet, moving from knowledge to action requires more than just understanding—it demands a convinced and convincing attitude, a deep emotional structure, a relational dimension, and a clear value orientation. Here, as so often and in many cases, the relevance of religious education is marginalized. The Nuremberg Forum therefore rightly emphasizes the need to focus more on the spiritual dimensions of ESD.

The engaging work by the Catholic religious educator Anton Bucher in his book *Psychology of Spirituality* highlights the indefinability of the container term of “spirituality” (Bucher, 2007). Characteristics such as individuality, experience-based orientation, innovation, and the goal of integrating different religious traditions are all noted. Fundamentally, today’s youth tend to favor the concept of spirituality in the sense of faith as ‘being connected to something’. This trend, which is critical of institutions, is increasingly prevalent. For instance: The Tübingen longitudinal study *Jugend – Glaube – Religion* (Youth – Faith – Religion) (Schweitzer et al., 2018)¹³ presents valid data on the youth language phenomenon of differentiating between “religious” and “believing” in the context of vocational schools. While “religious” tends to be associated with traditional forms of religious affiliation, the term “believing” is assigned to a broader framework of interpretation – also in the direction of individual religiosities – and tends to be preferred by young people; understood broadly in a spirituality-related sense, it aligns more closely with young people’s desire for independence (Schweitzer et al., 2018):

Eisenmann et al. (2016) also underscore the diversity and complexity of the concept of spirituality, which can indeed be understood in terms of an institution-critical image of religious communities. However, both those affiliated with religions and those without religious ties share motivations for environmental and climate protection, often indicating spiritual reasons in the broadest sense.

What does this mean concerning ESD? Can the buzzword of “spirituality” generate easier acceptance and motivation?

Unfortunately, no. Spirituality does not inherently lead to a sense of connection with the world or inspire solidarity-driven action (Hasenheit, 2021). Rather, it is an open narrative that is often understood in terms of an exclusive understanding of “wellbeing”. The focus is often only on the well-being of the individual. From a theological perspective, a critical view is certainly called for when an overly arbitrary, subjectivist understanding becomes apparent. Somehow, it was “spiritual” to go forest bathing the other day—or perhaps mountain biking or enjoying my “me-time” in a bubble bath with esoteric sounds.

In contrast, spirituality in a religious sense entails an external point of reference: a relationship with God or a transcendent reason. For instance, if I emphasize in faith that I did not create myself, but owe my existence to a creative power, then relationality becomes the foundational basis of sociality. Thus, spirituality can highlight the interconnectedness between

¹³ Similar to this is the study by Ziebertz, Kalbheim & Riegel, 2003.

personal, social, and political transformation. I would like to focus on the concept of connectedness as it relates to God, fellow human beings, and the environment, which, in my view, should be central to sustainability education.

3.2 Spirituality as the Connection Between Body and Soul¹⁴

“Hope is the thing with feathers”

Emily Dickinson

In Emily Dickinson’s poem, hope is described with the metaphor of a bird. This feathered thing rests in my soul and sings a melody without words – especially in times of crisis. Every understanding of spirituality is associated with a specific idea of the soul. Usually, the term “soul” is associated with a spiritual dimension in the human being, which, as a result of the so-called Western body-soul problem, is characterized precisely by the fact that it is distinguished from the body. But the concept of the soul, drawing on the biblical image of man, always refers to the human being in his psychophysical unity – in a sense, theology therefore defines the body as an ensouled body. In both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the human being is regarded as an indivisible psychosomatic whole. There is no concept of a soul that is separate from the body at any point in time. According to the Hebrew Bible, the corporeal dimension of the soul is conceptually seen in the bodily image of the “throat” as an organ of breathing and saturation. The soul, as an expression of a person’s personality, liveliness, or life energy is determined by God through the breath of life, which is believed to have been given in the act of creation (Gen 2:4b-25) with the vital breath as being alive. Thus, a person does not possess their soul but is their soul – in the sense of being a person related to God.

I am fascinated by the biblical image of man as an earthling, because the connection to the earth (*adamah*) is seen as constitutive: we come from the earth, we go back to the earth, we are a part of the earth. Earth, in a very material sense, binds us to earthly necessities – including corporeality and our finiteness. In his ecological doctrine of creation, Jürgen Moltmann (1987) emphasizes the necessity of a cosmic spirituality based on the interconnectedness of all living beings in relation to nature.

¹⁴ See for the following also Naurath, 2000, p. 20.

However, Western history, as a history of body-soul dualism, is also characterized by thinking in dichotomies, in which the spiritual-rational has historically been valued higher than the material and pragmatic. The hostility towards the body and sexuality in such patriarchal thinking has always gone hand in hand with the devaluation of women in religions — a pattern that persists even today.

That is why it is so important to emphasize that I understand my concept of spirituality based on the biblical understanding of the soul not only in a spiritual sense but also through the wholeness of the body and soul of the person.

3.3 Spirituality as the Connection Between Thinking, Feeling, and Acting

Starting from this image of humanity, the one-sidedness of the dominance of rationality is contradicted. In his theory of civilization, sociologist Norbert Elias (1976) showed clearly that civilization is to be seen as a rationalization process, in which emotions were often evaluated negatively. Thus, fundamental determinations and driving forces of being human were marginalized. Today's neurosciences refute this one-sidedness. The so-called "emotional turn" in the sciences, which also aligns with the "body turn", has also arrived in theology, influencing a "theology of feelings" and in "emotion-oriented religious didactics" (Naurath, 2023).

If we understand the spiritual dimension as a stronger emphasis on emotional connectedness, it leads to exciting insights regarding religion-related sustainability education. In my opinion, the so-called "mind-behaviour gap" can only be closed by giving greater weight to the emotional dimension. How can a sustainability education be effective, if it focuses solely on orientational knowledge and cognitive competence development?

What does that mean in concrete terms?

We have new data from an extensive empirical study by the German Federal Environment Agency (BMU, 2020).¹⁵ The following results are evident: for many young people, the urgency and hopelessness of the climate crisis, combined with the prospect of the devastating consequences for people and the environment, place an emotional and psychological burden. This is referred to as "ecological grief". Fear, sadness, anger, and hopelessness can be consequences of confronting climate change and environmental degradation. Children and adolescents, especially in the

¹⁵ Three survey methods were combined to enable a comprehensive answer to the research questions. These include a systematic literature review, a representative online survey and qualitative interviews with young activists.

countries of the Global North, are in the position of being affected by and contributing to the climate crisis and other environmental burdens: “In this context, environment- and climate-related emotions can act in different ways: On the one hand, studies warn that young people are acutely vulnerable to psychological stress (Clemens et al., 2020); on the other hand, justified concerns and fears about climate change can foster political participation and critical thinking (Valentino et al., 2008)” (BMU, 2020).

Talking with my students, many young people react with psychosocial stress disorders, because in the face of current mega-crises the feeling of their future worsens continuously. Some get involved, a few become radicalized, many ignore or repress their concerns, and many resign and despair. I can understand all these reactions because they seem familiar to me, depending on my mood. The only thing I cannot understand is the denial of the climate crisis. What must be done?

When offering support and prevention, the ecological and societal causes of psychological stress must be considered. Precisely because climate and environment-related emotions are concomitants of real existing ecological and social conflicts, there must be no individualization of these societal problems by seeking relief of psychological stress only through personal coping strategies and support services. This stress can only be comprehensively alleviated if the actual causes are addressed – that means, if effective political and social measures to combat climate change and environmental pollution are implemented.

In terms of religious education, there can be seen

- a) a pastoral counseling dimension in addressing questions about human self-image and the concepts of a good and meaningful life.
- b) a contribution to the aforementioned change in values and awareness if we ask in a subject-oriented way how we can reach people.

One thing is clear: informing people in the sense of acquiring knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient. Our knowledge of environmental ethics is vast, but our environmental ethical actions are not. The well-worn path of moral appeals does not lead to the desired goals either – but it does increase feelings of guilt, which in turn lead to greater repression. The task of religion and religious education in the face of the climate crisis can be seen primarily as maintaining hope and promoting effective coping strategies to counteract despair and resignation.

I would like to emphasize two points in particular:

1. Making the link between religion and sustainable development visible. Empirical studies on student attitudes repeatedly show that they appear to see no link between religion and environmental or climate protection. Both a recent non-representative student survey in an 8th-grade

class in Augsburg and a small empirical study of secondary school students five years ago showed that students associate other subjects more strongly with ecological awareness than religious education.

2. It is the most fundamental task of theology to give people hope – even in hopeless situations, in the face of failure and guilt, and amid people’s inability to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. Guilt leads to repression. Fear leads to repression. None of this helps but rather reinforces the problems.

In contrast, faith in grace and mercy frees us from the oversized expectations that humanity can fix everything – even if we have caused the damage ourselves. That too would be hubris, which would lead to new hopelessness in the face of the chaos of the Anthropocene. On the contrary, it is essential to confront guilt. Only confessing guilt can bring liberation and lead to new encouragement. But this requires an attitude of humility. The human ability to form relationships has to be emphasized. From a Protestant perspective, I see humility, the confession of guilt, and the promise of grace as a connecting link between creation theology and justification theology. Only on this basis can reconciliation occur – between me and people, between me and my environment –, and co-creation. In this sense, Joanna Macey writes from a Buddhist perspective: “When we express and share our feelings, we realise that we are not isolated [...] I have come to realise that our pain about the state of the world and our love for the world are inextricably linked. These are just two sides of the same coin” (quoted from von Lüpke, 2024, p. 4).

3.4 Compassion (German: Mitgefühl)

As a central theme, we find in the Bible the image of a God who is compassionate towards people, as I elaborated in my habilitation thesis for the perspective of religious education (Naurath, 2010). The parameter of ‘compassion’ is advanced to become a theologically central term – even if, in comparison to other religions, the term is still (too) little appreciated in Christian theology.¹⁶

Ultimately, compassion can only be understood in a complementary way: it means both identity and difference, both closeness and distance – and is best described as “identity in lasting difference”, in line with Saskia Wendel’s (2002) subject theory. This definition is also appropriate for

¹⁶ However, the term is currently being developed, particularly with regard to sustainability and animal ethics implications (Domsel & Steffens, 2024; Domsel, 2025).

interconnectedness as the spiritual basis of ESD. Especially because of global threats and crises, empathic competences are needed, where one allows oneself to be touched by the suffering of others without losing oneself in the feeling of powerlessness in the face of infinite pain and compassion.

3.5 Connectedness: The Potential of Interreligious Cooperation

The potential of interreligious networks for sustainable educational initiatives lies both in their influence on the religious communities themselves and as a point of reference for interreligious, joint initiatives.

There are already numerous internationally active, interreligious networks that place the Sustainable Development Goals at the centre of their commitment, such as *Religions for Peace International*, the *International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)*, *Greenfaith International*, *Interfaith Center of Sustainable Development*, etc. Interestingly, it can currently be observed that these interreligious initiatives, which have so far been rather isolated and have received little public attention, are growing rapidly in the international context. Even though no empirically verifiable data can yet be identified in this regard, this phenomenon shows an increase in relevance for the alliance of interreligious engagement with the goal of sustainability education, climate protection, and the promotion of climate justice.

This is a driving force for hope: the urgent task is to profile the competencies of religious communities based on their theological foundations for environmental and climate protection and to make them visible for the sustainability discourse, especially concerning interreligious cooperation in a transnational context.

This is evident because the connection between environmental and social policy has been seen too little. In other words, the implementation of environmental policy goals depends crucially on the consideration of social systems. Environmental awareness research has been pointing out the necessary differentiation of environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavior for an extremely long time. Accordingly, the motive research of De Haan and Kuckartz offers an extremely complex interweaving of behavioral motives, such as personal well-being, lifestyles, cost-benefit considerations, and environmental protection motives. In their determined plea for (environmental) education, they refer to culturally conditioned “imagination, lifestyles and thinking styles as well as prejudices [...], which determine environmental awareness and behavior. However, the fact that

religious convictions, which can certainly be formative for lifestyles, also play a role here is disregarded” (De Haan & Kuckartz, 1988, p. 284). Even research in environmental psychology advises to take a closer look at the religious and ideological horizons and life plans of individuals as well as communities. As the largest transnational civil society institutions, religions offer immense potential for ecological consciousness-raising based on the creation and nature spiritualities that unite all the world’s major religions, but which have so far been given much too little public attention as a potential for the responsibility that is shared in terms of environmental ethics.

The objectives of sustainability today are to be seen in a complex context due to the urgency of the situation and the need to focus on areas of climate crisis, climate resilience, and climate justice. Each religious community is to be considered here in the horizon of its intentional description of religious education. However, special synergy effects can be expected in the interreligious cooperation of environmental-ethical educational concepts. In short, through learning together, the goal should be achieved to motivate, encourage, correct, and thus constructively and critically learn from each other.

The Erasmus Project *Facing global challenges. Environmental and Peace Education in Interreligious Cooperation for Religious Teacher Training* (2023-2026) will serve as an example of an EU-funded initiative for implementing this idea (<https://religions4ecology.org>). The common goal here is the implementation of joint environmental-ethical educational measures in the context of higher education, which focuses in particular on the training and continuing education of teachers. Religion-related teacher training is therefore chosen as a practice-oriented reference field of higher education to enable future multipliers to promote sustainable awareness in the sense of a religion-sensitive sense of responsibility in the school educational context of all grades and school types. The interdependence of climate change, climate resilience, and climate justice, therefore, plays a major role, as environmental ethics promotion at the level of awareness and action should be accompanied by formal education to establish coping structures for already existing and growing climate-related damage, and at the same time by sensitization to social structures of disadvantage (such as inclusion and migration). In this respect, this project also aims at efficiency with respect to religious and political decision-makers, which ultimately serves trans-religious and transnational peacekeeping. This is particularly important since with growing climate-related damage, an enormous increase in conflicts over dwindling resources as well as massive migration movements can be expected.

The networking of the partner organizations (from Germany, Austria, and Spain, as well as Albania) is exemplarily selected in such a way that for the European context religious profiles (especially Christian, Islamic and Buddhist currents) are connected in regionally diverse contexts and thus by addressing climate change from different concerns and at the same time different cultural, linguistic and educational contexts. Since the European perspective – especially concerning the topic of climate justice – should not be seen without the global context, an educational institution from the Southeast Asian region (Malaysia) was also integrated due to established interreligious contacts.

Crucial is the fact that the potential of sustainable education on the horizon of interreligious cooperation has so far been underdeveloped and insufficiently established in the European context in research, teaching, and knowledge transfer. Due to the urgency of the dramatically progressing climate crisis, the emphasis is especially on teacher training and further education to bring timely and effective educational impulses into practical school efforts. In this context, the cooperative synergy in joint, cross-religious projects is to be seen as particularly innovative, since inclusive educational goals in the sense of religious diversity shaping social coexistence are combined with environmental-ethical intentions that affect everyone equally, regardless of religious and cultural imprints. Especially in the interreligious promotion of a feeling of spiritual solidarity for nature/creation lies a high innovative potential, which is to become effective in cross-country contexts.

4. Conclusion: Interreligious Education for Sustainable Development

“Connectedness” is the keyword of a spirituality of relatedness to nature, the environment and our fellow human beings (Bucher, 2022). In this sense, interreligious ESD (irESD) stands for a strong unifying interest of religions that has so far been insufficiently recognised. This connection, that goes beyond dogmatic boundaries in the sense of fraternity in faith, can be of the utmost importance for the “earth history” (Moltmann) of mankind.

Metaphorically speaking: if the house is on fire, it is anachronistic to prioritize sibling disputes among the family members in the house and try to settle them before reaching for the fire extinguisher. Rather, these differences should be put aside in favor of acting together with the intention of saving ourselves and the house we share.

This spiritual connectedness can also be understood as an expression of collective intentionality. This concept by anthropologist Michael

Thomasello (2020) refers to pursuing common goals and intentions out of common interest and carrying out cooperative activities. It is a fundamental human ability that is already present in young children. When a specific “we” interest emerges, the motivational power of collective intentionality should not be underestimated. Therefore, we should urgently become aware of this great possibility of being connected and promote it: because time is running out!

References

- Antonovsky, A. (1997). *Salutogenese: Zur Entmystifizierung der Gesundheit*. dgvt-Verlag.
- Bederna, K. (2019). Every day for future: Theologie und religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Matthias-Grünewal
- Bederna, K. (2020). Die Klimakrise im Lichte der Coronakrise oder: Kann Religionsunterricht zu zukunftsfähigem Handeln motivieren? *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches FORUM. Nachhaltiges Lernen*, 28(2), 28–46. <https://oerf-journal.eu/index.php/oerf/issue/view/9/16>
- Bederna, K., & Gärtner, C. (2020). Wo bleibt Gott, wenn die Wälder brennen?: Welche Fragen die Klimakrise der akademischen Theologie aufgibt. *Herder-Korrespondenz*, 74(3), 27–29.
- Bederna, K., & Gärtner, C. (2021). Resilienz in der Klimakrise? Problemanzeige, Alternative und Bedeutung des Glaubens. *Euangel. Magazin Für Missionarische Pastoral*, 21. https://www.euangel.de/fileadmin/Downloads/Archiv/euangel_2021-1.pdf
- Beiser, R. (2015). *13 magische Heilpflanzen*. Kosmos.
- Blum, J., Fritz, M., Taigel, J., Singer-Brodowski, M., Schmitt, M., & Wanner, M. (2021). *Transformatives Lernen durch Engagement. Ein Handbuch für Kooperationsprojekte zwischen Schulen und außerschulischen Akteur*innen im Kontext von Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung*. Umweltbundesamt. <https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/en/publikationen/transformatives-lernen-durch-engagement>.
- Bucher, A. A. (2007). *Psychologie der Spiritualität: Handbuch*. Beltz.
- Bucher, A. A. (2022). *Verbundenheit. Über eines der tiefsten menschlichen Bedürfnisse*. Waxmann Verlag.
- Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit (BMU) (Ed.) (2020). *Zukunft? Jugend fragen! Umwelt, Klima, Politik, Engagement – Was junge Menschen bewegt*. https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/system/files/medien/376/publikationen/zukunft_jugend_fragen_broschuere_bf.pdf
- De Haan, G., & Kuckartz, U. (1988). *Umweltbewusstsein. Denken und Handeln in Umweltkrisen*. Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Domsel, M. M., & Steffens, M. (Eds.) (2024). *Compassion als Schlüssel für eine zukunftsfähige Bildung nachhaltiger Entwicklung?! Kohlhammer Verlag*.

- Domsel, M. M. (2025). Vom Schrei der Kreatur – Mit-Leidenschaft und Mit-Geschöpflichkeit als Impulse für eine religionspädagogische Nachhaltigkeitsethik. In Klöcker, M., Tworuschka, U., Rötting, M. (Ed.), *Handbook of Religions. Churches and other Religious Communities in Germany and German-speaking Countries*, 85, Ergänzungslieferung 2025. Westarp Science Fachverlag.
- Eisenmann, C., Klein, C., Swhajor-Biesemann, A., Drexelius, U., Keller, B., & Streib, H. (2015). Dimensions of “Spirituality”: The Semantics of Subjective Definitions. *Semantics and Psychology of Spirituality*, 125–151. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21245-6_9
- Elias, N. (1976). Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen (Vol. 2). Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Erasmus Plus Project Facing (2023). Global Challenges. Environmental and Peace Education in Interreligious Cooperation for Teacher Training. <https://religions4ecology.org>.
- Englert, R. (2018). »Schöpfung« im Religionsunterricht – eine etwas ernüchternde Zwischenbilanz. *Jahrbuch der Religionspädagogik. Schöpfung*, 34, 250–263. <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666702594.250>
- Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) (Ed.) (2009). *Umkehr zum Leben. Nachhaltige Entwicklung im Zeichen des Klimawandels*. Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) (Ed.) (2021). *Geschichten des Gelingens zur Umsetzung der Ziele für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung in Kirche und Diakonie. Auf dem Weg zur sozial-ökologischen Transformation*. Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) (Ed.) (2021). *Zukunft angesichts der ökologischen Krise? Theologie neu denken*. Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Gärtner, C. (2020). *Klima, Corona und das Christentum: religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung in einer verwundeten Welt*. transcript.
- Hasenheit, M. (2021, April 14). *Kann Spiritualität Nachhaltigkeit?* Transform. <https://transform-magazin.de/kann-spiritualitaet-nachhaltigkeit/>
- IPCC. (2023). *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023*. Ippc. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/>
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of plants*. Penguin Books.
- KMK (Kultusministerkonferenz) & BMZ (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung) (Eds.) (2016). *Orientierungsrahmen für den Lernbereich Globale Entwicklung*. Bonn: Engagement Global.
- Laubach, T., Lindner, K., & Steinberger, S. (Eds.). (2024). *Theology for Future. Die 17 Ziele der UN für nachhaltige Entwicklung theologisch reflektiert*. Herder.
- Luther, H. (2007). *Frech achtet die Liebe das Kleine. Biblische Texte in Szene setzen*. Radius.
- Moltmann, J. (1987). *Gott in der Schöpfung. Ökologische Schöpfungslehre*. Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Moltmann, J. (2016). *Hoffen und Denken*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

- Naurath, E. (2000). Seelsorge als Leibsorge. Perspektiven einer leiborientierten Krankenhausseelsorge. Kohlhammer.
- Naurath, E. (2010). Mitgefühl gegen Gewalt. Mitgefühl als Schlüssel ethischer Bildung in der Religionspädagogik (3rd ed.). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Naurath, E. (2025). Emotion-oriented religious didactics. In B. Grümme & M. L. Pirner (Eds.), *Innovative approaches to religious education* (pp 193–206). Kohlhammer.
- Obholzer, J., Barthlott, W., & Rafiqpoor, M. D. (2016). *Pflanzen der Heiligen Bücher Bibel und Koran*. Bundesamt für Naturschutz. Retrieved from <https://www.bfn.de/publikationen/bfn-schriften/bfn-schriften-448-pflanzen-der-heiligen-buecher-bibel-und-koran>
- Religions for Peace Deutschland (2024). *HERBS*. (<https://religionsforpeace-deutschland.de/aktuelles/projektgruppe-herbs/>).
- Renn, J. (2016). Unmögliche Intersubjektivität: Michael Thomasello und die Vokabulare einer Evolutionstheorie der Intentionalität. *Zeitschrift für Theoretische Soziologie*, 234–262.
- Schneider, M., & Vogt, M. (2016). Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe als Resilienzfaktoren. Theologisch-ethische Erkundungen. *MThZ*, 67, 195–208.
- Schweitzer, F., Wissner, G., Bohner, A., Nowack, R., Matthias Gronover, & Bos, R. (2018). *Jugend – Glaube – Religion. Eine Repräsentativstudie zu Jugendlichen im Religions- und Ethikunterricht*. Waxmann Verlag.
- Seitz, K. (2017). *Was bedeutet die Agenda 2030 für Nachhaltige Entwicklung für den Orientierungs-rahmen Globale Entwicklung?* Engagement Global. <https://ges.engagement-global.de/erweiterung-gymnasiale-oberstufe.html>.
- Thomasello, M. (2020). *Mensch werden. Eine Theorie der Ontogenese*. Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Universität Bamberg, Lehrstuhl für Religionspädagogik. (2025). Arbeitsgruppe „Religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung und Ökologische Theologie“ - Lehrstuhl für Evangelische Theologie mit Schwerpunkt Religionspädagogik und Didaktik des Religionsunterrichts. Uni-Bamberg.de. <https://www.uni-bamberg.de/ev-relpaed/arbeitsgruppe-religioese-bildung-fuer-nachhaltige-entwicklung-rbne/>
- von Lüpke, G. (2024). Die Zeit des großen Wandels. Gedanken von Joanna Macy. *Publik-Forum EXTRA Thema. Spiritualität und Lebenskunst*, 9.
- Wendel, S. (2002). Affektiv und inkarniert. Ansätze Deutscher Mystik als subjekttheoretische Herausforderung. Friedrich Pustet.
- White, L. (1967). The Historical Root of Our Ecologic Crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207.
- Ziebertz, H.-G., Kalbheim, B., Riegel, U., Prokopf, A. (2003). *Religiöse Signaturen heute. Ein religionspädagogischer Beitrag zur empirischen Jugendforschung*. Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

How can a Holistic Approach Be Successful? (Response to Elisabeth Naurath's Keynote)

Simone Birkel

Thank you for so many important ideas! By hearing this, my opinions can be summed up in the following question: How can a holistic approach be successful?

There was a lot of Elisabeth Naurath's keynote that I agree with and can build upon and take forward. Thank you very much. I was particularly pleased that she quoted Robin Wall Kimmerer. In her book "Braiding Sweetgrass" (Kimmerer, 2020) Kimmerer describes the mismatch between a scientific and a religious perspective. The one seems to be incompatible with the other. But the opposite is actually the case: Elisabeth Naurath's plea to overcome a one-sided approach is basically what has been recurring in the European humanities tradition since the Romantic period at the latest. Wall Kimmerer's approach of understanding biology and religion not as opposites but as complementary is therefore to be welcomed. In my opinion, other cultures, such as the Latin American tradition of "buen vivir" (Acosta, 2015), are a step further in this respect, and we can learn a lot from liberation theology. Joanna Macy's theology (Macy & Brown, 2014) with a Buddhist perspective also provides important insights here.

This brings us to mutual learning: I was amused to see that Elisabeth Naurath thinks that the ecotheological turn is better developed in Catholic theology. For a long time, I held the opposite view, namely that ecotheology was more developed in Protestant theology. However, I have since moved away from this "competitive way of thinking". I believe it is time to emphasize the common ground and shared understanding across denominations and religions.

The Catholic tradition of the bouquet of herbs on the feast of the Assumption is just as important and relevant as, for example, the rituals around the feast of Narouz or the many rituals of thanksgiving for the harvest. It is precisely through such religious practices that the connectedness that Mrs Naurath rightly calls for is practiced. I would like to add a few reflections:

1. Gratitude and Retinity

In Christian theological discussion, the terms “retinity” and “gratuity” have been introduced as principles of social ethics alongside connectedness (Birkel, 2020). Retinity, from the Latin *rete*, 'net', refers to the interconnectedness of all things and people. The principle of gratuity is the less known. It describes the fact that something is done or given for free. This attitude comes from the experience of having received something for nothing. In the context of Matthew 10:8b, gratuitousness means giving without personal gain. Everyone should have areas in their life where something is given free of charge. In education for sustainable development, the attitudes of retinity and gratuitousness offer an opportunity to bridge the gap between knowledge and action.

2. The Importance of Religious Education for Sustainable Development (rESD)

Drawing upon many years of experience I can say that there has been at least some movement in this area in recent years. When I submitted my doctoral thesis on this topic over 20 years ago (Birkel, 2002), I faced many hurdles, especially as a woman. A holistic, interdisciplinary approach was viewed with skepticism at the time. Fortunately, after more than 20 years, we are one step further and the interdenominational and interfaith rESD working group has been meeting regularly since 2020 to promote mutual learning and exchange. This is an interfaith approach characterised by specific themes. It is united by the common goal of making the world a better place for all. From the outset, there is a relationship of trust that others think in a similar way, but from different perspectives. And it is this interweaving of perspectives that characterises learning.

3. Whole Institution Approach / School of Transformation and Sustainability (STS)

The importance of a holistic approach has long been recognised in the ESD debate (Holst et al., 2024). However, this still requires a great deal of work. UNESCO's call for a holistic approach in educational institutions (UNESCO, 2014) is still a long way off, at least in universities.

Now I would like to do a little advertising for myself: Along with Eberswalde and Leuphana, the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt

(KU) is one of the few universities in Germany that consistently pursues a holistic approach (KU, n.d.). It is therefore important that sustainability is practiced in all fields of the university's activities. Not only research and teaching play important roles, but also the sustainable management of the campus. Is the food fair and regional? Is there waste separation? Are CO₂ emissions recorded and minimized? Student involvement in sustainability in the Green Office is just as important as are administrative structures: how transparent are the university's processes? How can everyone be involved in decision-making? How can exclusion be avoided? The WIA addresses these questions. In my experience, many students and lecturers are not aware of this approach.

In addition to the Whole Institution Approach, last year the KU opened the School of Transformation and Sustainability (STS) (KU, 2023). The aim of STS is to make religious education expertise more visible and better integrated into the university as a whole, and to adopt an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective. Mutual learning is possible here, for example between economists and theologians.

4. Inter- and Transdisciplinary Work at the University

While I cannot speak for everyone, I do have the impression that religious education and practical theology have long acknowledged the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation. For practical theologians, working with climate scientists and integrating their expertise is a matter of course. At conferences with climate scientists, I sometimes take the liberty of asking the other way round: what do you need from theology? Where are you not making progress on your own? Often there is no answer. And so I share Mrs Naurath's thesis that theological discussions, such as the body-soul theories, can at least be considered, if not shared, by natural scientists. A distinction must be made here between the so-called day and night sciences. The day sciences focus on what can be precisely measured and counted. They show empirical evidence, which is very important.

But the night sciences are also important. They deal with the imponderable, the not really tangible. Scientists Martin Lercher and Itai Yanai emphasize the importance of dialogue between the sciences (Yanai & Lercher, 2016), especially between the natural sciences and the humanities. The point is to stimulate new, creative processes. In this sense, theology could also serve as an inspiration for creative processes in the field of creation narratives.

5. Transformation Capacities

Take, for instance, the development of utopias or the ability to shape the future. Those who are able to imagine possible futures for different scenarios are less surprised by developments and therefore remain more capable of acting (Bremer & Kuhnhenne, 2017). The ability to act, in turn, leads to self-efficacy. And this is exactly what students need, given the pessimistic outlook for the future. Transformative learning is set in motion when students engage in the experience of the real. When they experience for themselves that familiar thought patterns and answers no longer fit current challenges and questions. When this experience is available, they will search for appropriate answers and judgements themselves. On the one hand, this requires knowledge of the system. How can we describe the current, how did something come to be the way it is? On the other hand you also need a sense of purpose like it is done in the “A Rounder Sense of Purpose (RSP)” (Vare, 2018a; Vare, 2018b). In other words, you need to know where you want to go. This is done in exchange with other actors. How do we want to make the world fit for the future? Finally, knowledge of transformation is also needed (Wolff, 2022).

How do we arrive at these new forms? Which actors need to be involved? What experiments need to be carried out? A new concept of learning at universities is also needed to help develop such knowledge.

6. A New Concept of University Learning

Our universities are generally not compatible with this new concept of learning. Again and again, I see students asking at the beginning of the semester which topic they should work on. Once they have it, they usually give an excellent lecture on it. But the rest of the time they are not in class. We have developed a spiral of transformative learning at STS, which unfortunately has not yet been published. It has to do with practicing connectedness and compassion, but also systematic knowledge and complex thinking in all areas, not just religious education. In education the STS interacts with biology, geography, social sciences and theology. Learning takes place in the areas of new thinking, new awareness and new action. This is where the inter-religiousness that Mrs Naurath mentioned comes into play. It is exciting to learn how different religions and indigenous peoples live by examining, for example, the importance of plants. Are there similarities, for example, between the monastic medicine of Hildegard von Bingen and the experience of indigenous peoples with

medicinal plants? How do I learn gratitude? And how do I learn to wait? A university garden, for example, is a good place to learn these things. Students can lend a hand and learn the value of planting, tending, letting things happen, being at the mercy of heat, drought or even floods. The aim is to bring biology, geography and theology together in education. Only in this way can connectedness become the spiritual basis of an ESD that is not only religious.

To illustrate this connection, I invite you to take part in a short exercise: I have collected walnuts from our tree at home and brought them to the conference (by reading this text you have to imagine a walnut). Look closely at it. What does it look like? Feel the surface. Squeeze the shell a little. Feel how hard it is. Smell it. There is a huge tree inside this little nut. You decide: Do you crack the nut to get to the delicious nut inside? Or do you take the nut home and plant it? If you do, and the seed sprouts, you will ideally feel this connection of the congress for many years to come. This way, the connectedness we heard about from Mrs Naurath, can become real and we can hopefully benefit from it for many years to come. Thank you!

References

- Acosta, A. (2015). *Buen vivir: Vom Recht auf ein gutes Leben*. oekom verlag.
- Birkel, S. (2002). *Zukunft wagen - ökologisch handeln: Grundlagen und Leitbilder kirchlich-ökologischer Bildung im Kontext nachhaltiger Entwicklung* [Dissertation, Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt]. Lit-Verlag.
- Birkel, S. (2020). *Nachhaltig Zukunft gestalten: Herausforderungen für kirchliche Bildungsakteur*innen*. Eúangel, 2020(1). <https://www.euangel.de/ausgabe-1-2020/nachhaltigkeit-und-schoepfungs-verantwortung/nachhaltig-zukunft-gestalten/>
- Bremer, H., & Kuhnhenne, M. (Eds.). (2017). *Utopien und Bildung*. https://www.boeckler.de/fpdf/HBS-006551/p_study_hbs_356.pdf
- Holst, J., Grund, J., & Brock, A. (2024). *Whole Institution Approach: measurable and highly effective in empowering learners and educators for sustainability*. *Sustainability Science*, 19(4), 1359–1376. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-024-01506-5>
- Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. (2023). *Wissen für den Wandel: KU gründet neue School of Transformation and Sustainability*. <https://www.ku.de/news/wissen-fuer-den-wandel-ku-gruendet-neue-school-of-transformation-and-sustainability>
- Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (n.d.). *Nachhaltigkeit an der KU*. <https://www.ku.de/unileben/nachhaltige-ku>
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2020). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Penguin.

- Macy, J., & Brown, M. Y. (2014). *Coming back to life: The Guide to the Work that Reconnects*. New Society Publishers.
- UNESCO. (2014). *UNESCO Roadmap for Implementing the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (ED-2014/WS/34)*. Retrieved March 9, 2025, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230514.locale=en>
- Vare, P. (2018). *A Rounder Sense of Purpose: developing and assessing competences for educators of sustainable development*. *Form@re - Open Journal Per La Formazione in Rete*, 18(2), 164-173. <https://doi.org/10.13128/formare-23712>
- Vare, P., Millican, R. & de Vries, G. (2018). *A Rounder Sense of Purpose: Towards a pedagogy for transformation*. In P. Bamber (Ed.), *Research in Action Special Issue (4)*, 18-23. TEESNet / Liverpool Hope University.
- Wolff, LA. (2022). Transformative Learning. In: Idowu, S., Schmidpeter, R., Capaldi, N., Zu, L., Del Baldo, M., Abreu, R. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Sustainable Management*. Springer, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02006-4_1135-1
- Yanai, I., & Lercher, M. (2016). *The Society of Genes*. Harvard University Press.

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

Lack of Sustainability Leadership Education in the Catholic Clerical and Religious Formation Systems: A Missed Opportunity for “the Care for our Common Home”

Jerin Jacob

1. Introduction

As you can perceive from the very title of the topic what I am going to discuss pertains to the field of education for sustainability and the formation of Catholic clerics and consecrated persons. Before beginning, I must tell you that my presentation is not based on research that is completed, but research which is just in its starting stages. I am a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven, but it was only in this month I began this journey. Hence, what I present is mostly based on a background study that I undertook to prepare my PhD project and the proposals that I have arrived at from that. More informed findings and conclusions are yet to evolve as my research progresses.

As for methodology, in preparing this paper, I have relied on traditional literature review; and the three areas that I have focused on in this study are 1) priestly and religious formation within the Catholic Church, 2) sustainability leadership training, and 3) connecting with context of India. So, first, let me give a brief discussion on sustainability leadership training before linking it with the priestly and religious training.

2. Sustainability Leadership Training

The concept of systems leadership might be familiar to some of you. The task of systems leadership can be understood as “building a culture in which systems approaches can flourish” (Systems Leadership Guide, 2023), that is, approaching the system as a whole rather than dealing with it in parts. Sustainability leadership is also a systems leadership model where a wholistic view is promoted by an integrated working of the three traditional pillars of sustainability, namely, society, economy and environment (Eustachio, Caldana, & Leal Filho, 2023, p. 3). Today, sustainability leadership is more urgently needed than ever in every realm of life for achieving and maintaining socio-economic well-being while also

protecting natural resources (Rimanoczy & Ritz, 2021, p. 4; Eustachio, Caldana, & Leal Filho, 2023, p. 1; Wiengarten, Lo, & Lam, 2017, p. 477; Leal Filho et al., 2020, p. 3). Pointing to the relevance of proper leadership in achieving the goals of sustainability, at least from the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20 in 2012, one can identify that governance is also projected as a fourth pillar of sustainability (Jacob, 2024).

Now, as one looks into the literature of sustainability leadership, a search in databases like Web of Science, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Sociological Abstracts, Scopus, and KU Leuven Limo reveals that sustainable leadership literature primarily centres around 'management' and 'management education.' That is why the literature on sustainability leadership training in management education becomes vital when reflecting on educating priests and consecrated persons for sustainability. Other efforts, such as the SDG Academy (<https://sdgacademy.org>) initiated by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, also promote sustainability leadership (Librizzi, Parkes, & Simaens, 2023, pp. 193–94).

Sustainability leadership education had already gained ground in the curricula and practices of European management schools at least by 2014 (Adomßent et al., 2014, p. 5). However, testimonials suggest that efforts often face confusion, lack of reception, and non-supportive behaviours (Jamali & Samara, 2020, p. 5; Amaeshi, Muthuri, & Ogbechie, 2019, p. 3; Narula, Zutshi, and Seth, 2018, p. 70). Even with that, efforts from several universities have effectively resulted in positive shifts in students' and staff's attitudes and behaviour (Librizzi & Parkes, 2020, p. 19; Adomßent et al., 2014, p. 1). Continued efforts have successfully raised an awareness that management education should consider environmental, economic and social aspects together to be called a responsible one (Stough et al. 2022, p. 133).

Weybrecht observes that responsible management education can create not only sustainable business leaders but also global sustainable leaders, as the business leaders also act as societal leaders in the contemporary world (Weybrecht, 2017, p. 92). Recent studies have pointed out that leadership education for sustainability must focus not only on cognitive aspects of learning but also on the affective and behavioural elements and readiness for 'systemic change activism' (Buckley et al., 2023, p. 54; Moratis & Melissen, 2022, p. 216; Rimanoczy & Ivanova, 2022, p. 326; Parkes et al., 2020, p. 2). Moreover, students' willingness to engage in multidisciplinary learning becomes an essential factor in the effectiveness of leadership education for sustainability (LeBlanc & Odegard, 2023, p. 107; Moratis & Melissen, 2022, pp. 216–18). However, LeBlanc and Odegard also point out

that while leadership training for SDGs clearly requires interdisciplinary efforts, there are aspects particular to each discipline, depending on its context and related nuances (LeBlanc & Odegard, 2023, p. 107).

Now, as one looks for a model for leadership education in the management education scenario one comes across the UN-PRME. One significant initiative for incorporating sustainability into management curricula is the adoption of United Nations Principles for Responsible Management (UN-PRME) (Morsing, 2022, pp. 8–10). It was during the UN Global Compact leaders’ summit in 2007 that the PRME got launched. Leading accreditation bodies, such as EQUIS, AMBA, and AACSB, have made the reception of these principles a criterion for management schools’ accreditation (Amaeshi, Muthuri, & Ogbechie, 2019, pp. 2–3). The website of UN-PRME describes itself as follows: “PRME engages business and management schools to ensure they provide future leaders with the skills needed to balance economic, environmental, and social goals, while drawing attention to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and aligning academic institutions with the work of the UN Global Compact.” (Principles for Responsible Management Education, 2024). The UN-PRME is the most widely accepted sustainability leadership education framework, with 800 plus management schools as their signatories (Morsing, 2022, pp. 3–4; *Principles for Responsible Management Education*, 2024). Taking these aspects into account, this research would suggest UN-PRME as a probable model for education for sustainability among the ecclesiastical leaders. Now let us look a bit more into the priestly and religious formation in the Catholic Church.

3. Priestly and Religious Formation in the Catholic Church

Catholic Church takes seriously, the formation of its personnel, especially, the priests and consecrated people (Note: I would use the term ‘religious’ to mean ‘the consecrated people’). An example for Church’s enthusiasm for formation can be found in a statement from the document *Starting Afresh from Christ* (SAC), “We must be very generous in dedicating our time and best energies to formation.” (SAC 2002, art. 18). Regarding the ultimate aim of formation, *Vita Consecrata* (VC), an apostolic exhortation, states: “Since the very purpose of consecrated life is conformity to the Lord Jesus in his total self-giving, this must also be the principal objective of formation.” (VC 1996, art. 65). One of the most important documents written on the priestly formation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV), identifies four areas of thrust in the

priestly formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral (PDV 1992, art. 42). *Vita Consecrata*, while speaking about the formation of religious, speaks of “human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation”. In these areas of thrust, it is interesting to wonder where the concern for sustainability comes. Probably, in the area of pastoral dimension.

Now, it is important to see how far the magisterium on formation have connected itself with the sustainability discussions that were prevalent in the scholarly circles at least from the publication of *Limits to Growth* in 1972. It may be interesting to note here that environmental concerns started to appear in the papal documents as early as 1971. Pope Paul VI stated in 1971, in the Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (OA),

“Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace - pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity - but the human framework is no longer under man’s control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family.” (OA 1971)

The famous phrase “ecological conversion” is attributed to Pope John Paul II as he used this phrase in his address at a General Audience in 2001. Later, Pope Benedict XVI was even acclaimed as the ‘green Pope’. Even though Pope Benedict spoke of the dual responsibilities toward ‘human ecology’ and ‘environmental ecology,’ it is Pope Francis who started pressing on the systemic change required (Puggioni, 2017, p. 29). With the encyclical *Laudato Si’* (LS) by Pope Francis in 2015, the Catholic Church foregrounded “the care for our common home” (LS 2015). It can be noted, however, that the Catholic Church’s documents on formation of priests and religious has not yet followed suit.

Laudato Si’ and the latest Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties — *Veritatis Gaudium* (VG) — identifies the lack of “leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations” (LS 2015, art. 53; VG 2017, art. 3). But when it comes concretely to practicalities on the formation of priests and religious, who are often the leaders within the ecclesiastical system, the related documents have not given sufficient attention to develop a fitting formation system. Official church documents that link clerical and religious formation to the issue of sustainability are almost non-existent. The document on priestly formation, titled “the Gift of Priestly Vocation” (GPV) released by the Vatican in 2016 discusses minimally the need to include the aspect of care

for our common home in the curricula (GPV 2016, art. 172). But I would say, the discussion is very brief. In my opinion, to bring about real and concrete changes, a more detailed assessment and incorporation is necessary. The spirit of *Laudato Si’* can be seen reflected also in the introduction to the 2017 document *Veritatis Gaudium* where Pope Francis states,

“today we are not only living in a time of changes but are experiencing a true epochal shift, marked by a wide-ranging “anthropological” and “environmental crisis”. Indeed, we daily see “signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation; these are evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises”. In a word, this calls for “changing the models of global development” and “redefining our notion of progress”. Yet “the problem is that we still lack the culture necessary to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths.” (VG 2017)

However, as the document proceeds with its practical instructions and guidelines, there is hardly any effort towards incorporating a sustainability culture.

Acknowledgement of limits to growth is seen even in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of 1992 (VG 1992, art. 6), but this realisation is not reflected in the later part of that document when it discusses the identity and formation of priests. Priestly and religious identity is traditionally tied to their relationship with the Trinitarian God, the Church, and people (GPV 2016, art. 30–34; PDV 1992, art. 11–18; Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 1990, art. 7), often sidelining any reference to the non-human world and environment. Searching through the Church related online resources, I have identified at least 22 documents that deal directly with priestly or religious formation, released by the Vatican after the second Vatican Council. Among these only two, which I have discussed above, are released after *Laudato Si’*’s publication. I am yet to study these 22 documents in detail. However, based on my initial review, the impression I have is, sustainability leadership education is yet to emerge within the formation system of the Catholic Church.

4. Connecting to the Context of India

Now, I would like to discuss the relevance of incorporating sustainability leadership education into the priestly and religious formation system. For explaining this, I would like to take the context of India as an example. It is important to remember that Church-run institutions, often headed and managed by priests and religious, play a significant role in India. Here, I

would like to give some data from the resources that I could access. Although Christians amount only to 2.4% of the total Indian population (Salazar, 2021), the 2023 ranking of the government-run National Institute of Ranking Framework has almost 30 Christian colleges (most of which are Catholic) among the best 100 university colleges in India ('MoE, National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF)', 2023). Catholics run almost 23,490 educational institutions and 9898 charitable institutions all over India (Anuario Pontificio, 2023). Among these are the 5,450 Catholic healthcare institutions in the country, outnumbered only by government-run centres ('Catholic Health Care in India', 2010); next to these are the hundreds or thousands of Catholic-run social service centres. All these institutions point to the enormous social impact of Christian institutions in India. The absence of sustainability in the training of their leaders and in the practical-theological discussions about priestly and religious formation is, therefore, a missed opportunity for the Catholic Church to contribute to a more sustainable future in India. It is, therefore, also imperative that the practical-theological study of priestly and religious formation considers recent developments in the scholarship on how to train leaders for sustainability.

5. Conclusion and Proposal

In short, we have found two things: 1) a model for sustainability leadership training in the UNPRME and 2) a hiatus within the priestly and religious formation system. Accordingly, for my further research I would like to adopt and test the feasibility of applying the UN-PRME in priestly and religious formation, especially linking it to the context of India. This comes with challenges, however. While the UN-PRME deals with institutionalised formal educational programmes, clerical and religious formation occurs in formal and informal settings. Often, different dioceses and religious congregations arrange their formation programmes separately. Even within the same diocese or religious congregation, the various batches of candidates are formed at different formation houses. Hence, there may often be only a few candidates and only one formator per formation house. Moreover, the programmes are often informally organised. Because of all these reasons, to make a study concrete and feasible, it is more apt to reflect on how the elements of UN-PRME can inspire formators training programmes than directly linking them to the formation programmes themselves. Like the HR managers responsible for selecting and training new employees, formators play a crucial role in selecting and training

candidates in religious formation. Hence, linking the UN-PRME elements with the formators training programmes makes sense. In India, formators get trained at institutes such as Vinayasadhana, Danahalaya, National Vocation Service Centre, Adhyatma Vidya Peetham, and Institute Mater Dei. Thus, as I conclude this review, I hope to undertake the task of investigating the possibilities and challenges of taking inspiration from the one of the most popular sustainability leadership education networks, the UN-PRME, for the formators training programmes offered in the above-mentioned institutes. It is hoped that the research will not only find the feasibility of linking the UN-PRME with the formators training programme but also initiate a theological discussion in which sustainability leadership becomes a key principle that guides the formation and identity of priests and religious. On the other hand, finally, it is also a hope that as one tries to connect the UN-PRME with the religious and clerical formation system which has centuries of history, this will have something in turn to contribute to the UN-PRME as well.

References

- Adomßent, M., Fischer, D., Godemann, J., Herzig, C., Otte, I., Rieckmann, M., & Timm, J. (2014). Emerging areas in research on higher education for sustainable development – management education, sustainable consumption and perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 62, 1–7.
- Amaeshi, K., Muthuri, J. N., & Ogbechie, C. (2019). *Incorporating sustainability in management education: An interdisciplinary approach* (1st edition.). Springer International Publishing.
- Annuario Pontificio. (2023). Libreria ed. Vaticana.
- Buckley, J. B., Michel, J. O., Zint, M., Smedick, W., & Rice, E. M. (2023). A framework for graduate leadership education for sustainability guided by the SDGs. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2023(179), 43–57.
- Catholic Health Care in India. (2010). CNEWA. <https://cnewa.org/catholic-health-care-in-india/>
- Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. (2002). *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_20020614_ripartire-da-cristo_en.html
- Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. (1990). *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_02021990_directives-on-formation_en.html

- Congregation for the Clergy. (2016). *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*. <https://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/documenti/ratio-2026/Ratio-EN-2017-01-03.pdf>
- Eustachio, J. H. P. P., Caldana, A. C. F., & Leal Filho, W. (2023). Sustainability leadership: Conceptual foundations and research landscape. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 415, 137761. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.137761>
- Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si'*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
- Francis (2017). *Veritatis Gaudium*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html
- Jacob, J. (2024). A background history of the sustainable development goals. *Sustainable Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.3317>
- Jamali, D., & Samara, G. (2020). Non-Western responsible management education: a critical view and directions for the future. In D. Moosmayer, O. Laasch, C. Parkes, & K. Brown (Eds.), *The sage handbook of responsible management learning and education* (pp. 42–54). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- John Paul II. (1992). *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html
- John Paul II. (1996). *Vita Consecrata*. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html
- Leal Filho, W., Eustachio, J. H. P. P., Caldana, A. C. F., Will, M., Lange Salvia, A., Rampasso, I. S., Anholon, R., Platje, J., & Kovaleva, M. (2020). Sustainability leadership in higher education institutions: An overview of challenges. *Sustainability*, 12(9), 3761. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12093761>
- LeBlanc, J., & Odegard, S. (2023). Leadership education as democracy-in-action: In pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2023(179), 97–110.
- Librizzi, F., & Parkes, C. (2020). The United Nations-backed principles for responsible management education (PRME): A principles-based global engagement platform for higher education institutions to advance the sustainable development goals (SDGs). In D. Moosmayer, O. Laasch, C. Parkes, & K. Brown (Eds.), *The sage handbook of responsible management learning and education* (pp. 8–27). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Librizzi, F., Parkes, C., & Simaens, A. (2023). Advancing responsible management education (RME) and education for sustainable development (ESD) through online resources. In C. Hauser & W. Amann (Eds.), *The Future of Responsible Management Education* (pp. 193–221). Springer International Publishing.
- MoE, National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF). (2023). <https://www.nirfindia.org/2023/CollegeRanking.html>
- Moratis, L., & Melissen, F. (2022). Bolstering responsible management education through the sustainable development goals: Three perspectives. *Management Learning*, 53(2), 212–222.

- Morsing, M. (2022). PRME – Principles for responsible management education. In M. Morsing (Ed.), *Responsible management education: The PRME global movement* (pp. 3–12). Routledge.
- Narula, S. A., Zutshi, A., & Seth, R. (2018). Integrating responsible education principles into a conventional system: The case study of TERI School of Advanced Studies, India. In E. Christopher (Ed.), *Meeting expectations in management education* (pp. 65–71). Springer International Publishing.
- Principles for Responsible Management Education. (2024). UNPRME. <https://www.unprme.org/>
- Puggioni, R. (2017). Pope Francis and degrowth: A possible dialogue for a post-capitalist alternative. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 11(1), 7–35.
- Rimanoczy, I., & Ivanova, E. (2022). PRME working group on sustainability mindset: Creating change leaders through transformative learning. In M. Morsing (Ed.), *Responsible management education: The PRME global movement* (pp. 313–330). Routledge.
- Rimanoczy, I., & Ritz, A. A. (2021). Introduction. In A. A. Ritz & I. Rimanoczy (Eds.), *Sustainability mindset and transformative leadership* (pp. 1–5). Springer International Publishing.
- Salazar, A. M. (2021, July 12). 8 key findings about Christians in India. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/12/8-key-findings-about-christians-in-india/>
- Stough, T., Ceulemans, K., Craps, M., Van Liedekerke, L., & Cappuyns, V. (2022). To shift a paradigm or not: Worldviews at play in responsible management education literature. *Journal of Management Development*, 41(3), 133–146.
- Systems Leadership Guide: How to Be a Systems Leader. (2023). GOV.UK. Retrieved 1 March 2025, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systems-leadership-guide-for-civil-servants/systems-leadership-guide-how-to-be-a-systems-leader>
- Weybrecht, G. (2017). From challenge to opportunity – Management education’s crucial role in sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals – An overview and framework. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 15(2), 84–92.
- Wiengarten, F., Lo, C. K. Y., & Lam, J. Y. K. (2017). How does sustainability leadership affect firm performance? The choices associated with appointing a chief officer of corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 140(3), 477–493.

Care Less Pedagogy instead of Conservation of Creation

Spiritual and Intellectual Challenges of Contemporary Ecocriticism and how this Might Revive Religious Education.

Simon Wiesgickl

Talking with students, we can realize an interesting development. While nature on the one hand is seen as more and more important by young learners and they show an increasing awareness of ecological problems and how they might be solved, we can notice, that connection to nature and personal experiences are shrinking at the same time. The alienation from nature goes hand in hand with a declining knowledge of natural interrelations and a diminishing understanding of how to deal with nature (Lienau, 2025, pp. 14-22). What scientists like to call *nature deficit disorder* is also a problem for religious education. In my paper, I will argue that current approaches to spiritual education only serve to further intensify this issue. With their emphasis on responsibility and their support of human agency alone, they reinforce the nature-culture gap (Haraway, 2008; Latour, 2014; von Stuckrad, 2024, pp. 21-28). Approaches from the field of ecocriticism (Dürbeck/Stobbe, 2015) offer playful alternatives that instead emphasize a connection with the world around us and could also be attractive for religious education. We would just have to let go some of our darlings.

1. Introduction: Ecological Thought in Contemporary Curricula, it's Hidden Agendas and Unnoticed Problems

For my paper, I did a small investigation of some curricula.¹⁷ I concentrated on the competency formulations in Bavaria where I have been teaching for several years. In primary school, there is a very playful and creative way for students to explore the web of life and how they form part of it. Students are asked to “perceive the world in all its beauty and vulnerability and

¹⁷ The curricula can be consulted via <https://www.lehrplanplus.bayern.de> [17.02.25].

express their own thoughts and feelings about it in creative forms”, or “discover how much of creation is interrelated and how each individual is integrated into it”.¹⁸

When they grow older, things are getting more serious and complicated. In class 5, students are asked “to explain possible contradictions between the statements of the First Article of Faith and painful events in the world; they deal with the fact that some tensions cannot be easily resolved.” There is a strong ethical and cognitive turn in relating to God’s creation, as students are also asked to “explain how belief in God the Creator can give us hope and discuss the consequences for how we treat ourselves and others.”¹⁹ In 8th standard, the students should relate to what can be called “the great separation” and traditions of European naturalism. Hence, they are asked “to provide information about the context and background of the biblical creation texts and describe the relationship between scientific knowledge and creation narratives as testimonies of faith” or should “justify responsible behavior for people and the environment based on God’s mission and show by example how it can be implemented.”²⁰

At this point, I don’t want to go into detail but just highlight some basic trends and findings. Within religious studies, an evolutionary model of the origin of religions, as was common in the 19th century, has been viewed critically for a long time. However, if we look at the learning paths that are laid out within the curriculum in this area of creation under scrutiny, the sequence (primary religions, polytheism, monotheism) is reminiscent of such models. There is also the suspicion that indigenous epistemologies and ontology, and thus alternative approaches to Western rationality and religion, are taught primarily in the lower grades, thereby reifying the prejudice of indigenous spirituality as a kind of primary religion on which Christian religious foundations are built (cf. Cox, 2013). Besides, one could ask whether biblical accounts are more and more limited to certain ethical readings, as students are growing older, while different worldviews and alternatives to western epistemological settings are not discussed sufficiently. The referred sections do buy in into a language of what the

¹⁸ Curriculum for Protestant RE at Bavarian Primary Schools, Year 1, Unit 3, from <https://www.lehrplanplus.bayern.de/fachlehrplan/grundschule/1/evangelische-religionslehre>

¹⁹ Curriculum for Protestant RE at Bavarian Secondary Schools, Year 1, Unit 4, from <https://www.lehrplanplus.bayern.de/fachlehrplan/gymnasium/5/evangelische-religionslehre>

²⁰ Curriculum for Protestant RE at Bavarian Secondary Schools, Year 4, Unit 2, <https://www.lehrplanplus.bayern.de/fachlehrplan/mittelschule/8/evangelische-religionslehre/mittlere-reife-klasse>

Indigenous scholar and activist Kyle Powys Whyte has labelled “crisis epistemology” (Whyte, 2021). If we try to understand human-nature connectedness as a broad analytical concept with different types of nature connection (cf. Ives et. al., 2018, p. 1391), we see, that cognitive and philosophical venues are preferred over emotional, experiential and material learning sites. That’s exactly, where Ecocriticism might be an important game changer for spiritual education and sustainability.

2. On Ecocriticism and Being Ecological

Ecocriticism is a relatively new approach in cultural and social studies. Writers and scholars explore the various possibilities for relating to the world around us and develop new ways of connecting with the Earth and non-human actors. For cultural scholar Timothy Clark, ecocriticism can be seen as political mode of analysis (Clark, 2019, p. 3) within the long tradition of giving voice to non-human actors within literature. Pioneers like Aldo Leopold have advanced the link between the question of human justice and the fight against environmental destruction. It can be seen as one of the core beliefs of ecocriticism that society’s basic values must be reconsidered towards more ecological ways of living. Art and literature can be vital in that work to overcome deeply inherited modes of thinking, reading and experiencing the world (Clark, 2019, pp. 14–15).

The US-American philosopher and writer Timothy Morton has been an influential and challenging voice among contemporary ecocriticism. In view of the many well-meaning publications and pronouncements on the dangers of human-made climate change, he writes: “throwing out factoids and statistics in information dump mode is making ecological experience, ecological politics and ecological philosophy utterly impossible.” (Morton, 2018, p. 23). But anyone who feels like turning to the other side and thinks that every engagement with nature must be expressed in poetics and *nature writing* is also mistaken. In one of his first books, Morton subjects the concept of ‘nature’, which also appears in many reflections on ecological education and spirituality in connection with the key term of ‘creation’, to fundamental criticism. As a trained literary scholar, Morton examines the concept of ‘nature’ and the ideas associated with it. He covers the period from the Romantic era to today’s art forms and social discourses. His central argument is directed against the idea of aesthetic immediacy as a counter-model to a technologized and alienated world:

“Simply lauding location in the abstract or in the aesthetic, however-praising a localist poetics, for example, just because it is localist, or

proclaiming a 'small is beautiful' aestheticized ethics-is in greater measure part of the problem than part of the solution. Our notions of place are retroactive fantasy constructs determined precisely by the corrosive effects of modernity. Place was not lost, though we posit it as something we have lost." (Morton, 2009, p. 11)

Our ideas of the preservation of creation and environmental protection carry this feeling of forlornness. They are an outcry against the feeling that we have become estranged from the natural foundations of life and our environment. However, in the formulation of these ideas and the solutions we develop, we prolong the fundamental problem of alienation. Nature is presented as an unreachable counterpart to humans. If we instead want to take the insights of deep ecology seriously, we will have to drop, according to Morton's thesis, the concept of 'nature' and the aesthetic distance between us, things and other living beings. In a later book, Morton develops this idea even further. Do we not have to overcome our previous mode of imparting knowledge and talking about ecology if we really want to take seriously the insight that we are already in the age of mass extinction? How do we deal with the fact that more and more facts and insights are available, yet our actual actions seem to correspond to them less and less? His solution sounds challenging and radical: instead of using increasingly apocalyptic tones to call for more awareness and responsibility, he pleads for a '*care-less approach*'. Could it be that we already have all the answers and insights? That it is not about ushering in a new ecological era by appealing to individuals with ever new facts and growing zeal, but that, on the contrary, we might want to realize that we are already ecological. Not in the sense that we act ecologically and fulfill our responsibility toward creation. Rather, in the sense that we as humans are integrated into ecological cycles and are dependent on non-human actors and the biosphere. That we as humans are embedded in a network of life that we do not dominate and control, nor can we even describe it adequately. But that it consists of the most diverse persons and individuals, human and more-than-human with graduated powers of action and interaction, which we can only approach gradually? (Morton, 2018, pp. 30-32; cf. Latour, 2014)

Morton's approach is not to completely abandon 'responsibility'. Instead, he correctly notes that the mode of control that has led us into climate catastrophe cannot be the solution. More of the same, just a bit more ecological, will not help us. He does not completely abandon the concept of responsibility but shifts its meaning in the direction of a "playful care" (Morton, 2018, p. 100). I think that Protestant religious education

might learn a lot here and draw important inspiration on why we are already ecological.

3. Exploring Inter-Connectedness and How to Teach the Change

Even if many of the adherents of ecocriticism are skeptical about religion and see their main source of inspiration in art and literature, I would now like to draw some lines on religious pedagogy. In his latest book, the religious scholar Kocku von Stuckrad (2024) makes an impressive case for taking a closer look at non-human life forms and our numerous connections with them. Instead of perpetuating stories of separation and division between nature and culture (Descola, 2013), he argues for a new paradigm. From the arts, we could learn to empathize with networks of non-human knowledge and to imagine new narratives about our connection to the earth. The learning spaces in schools can then e.g. introduce the knowledge of plants and - religiously speaking - possibilities for interacting with God's good creation. A basic competency would be to learn how to build, nurture and develop good relationships in a network of mutuality and kinship beyond the human (von Stuckrad, 2024, pp. 220–226).

But how can we escape from this panic mode and develop new conceptual ideas that engage more sensually and caringly with the notion of responsibility? The particular emphasis on kinship with animals and the non-human world is found in many indigenous conceptions. Kyle Whyte, for example, contrasts the frequently observed epistemologies of crisis with an epistemology of coordination (Whyte, 2021, pp. 60–61). This is based on the diverse networks of relationships and relies on the observation, perception and realization of our interconnectedness with other living beings. What makes Indigenous people unique, is not a cultural technique, rather, it is a capacity to renew important kin relations in ways that support coordination in response to change (Goeman, 2009). This is where religious education comes into play.

Religious education teachers have already set out and are actively seeking new epidemic conditions for religious education beyond hegemonic reason. Stories and initiatives from the Global South and indigenous worldviews can be important inspirations for such thinking. In particular, the field of care benefits from an intensified exchange and a joint reconceptualization of pedagogical foundations (cf. Winkler & Carroll, 2021). Furthermore, the area of transformative learning, e.g. the active

learning of new ways of acting and thinking and the unlearning of destructive habits, can take place in religious education. The critical reflections of ecocriticism are helpful in this regard, in that when dealing with new forms and contents, our entrenched patterns are not merely repeated and given an exotic touch.²¹

In view of the material from the curricula examined at the beginning, we can conclude that it is not that far off. In the first grades, there is already a lot that should be included in a possible new conceptualization aimed at a changed perception and awareness in contact with nature. If we reconsider competency goals like “perceive the world in all its beauty and vulnerability and express their own thoughts and feelings about it in creative forms”, or “discover how much of creation is interrelated and how each individual is integrated into it”, we might find everything we need already in place. What should be expected of religious educators, then, is to further train these basic skills and to work on them in a variety of ways, instead of (re-)telling master stories of human agency and responsibility. This can be done in a variety of ways, ranging from receptivity, empathy, mindfulness to design or contemplation. The playful and exploratory nature of these processes should never be neglected. In recent years, a variety of new forms have emerged in education and spirituality in the churches and beyond. Some of these have adopted strong forms and traditions from around the world in a syncretistic way, while others have brought new life to forgotten rituals from their own history (cf. Lienau, 2025, pp. 174–216). To perceive these and to apply them to the specific learning environment of religious education in schools does not promise an easy and effortless process. But it does promise one, that can lead to new experiences, thought patterns and decision-making abilities.

²¹ One could ask critically, if not the application of the mutual learning endeavor is falling short of the formulated goal, if one reads for example: “As part of general education, religious education has an important task in terms of transformative learning by critically discussing social and global developments and enabling an examination of questions of value and meaning from the sources of the religions. Religious education can thus open up a space in which anxieties and hopes, questions and doubts, insights and visions can be shared, but also fundamental questions can be addressed to the Christian faith: What narratives of God, of humankind and of creation can help to reshape the present in such a way that a good future for all life is possible?” (Winkler & Carroll, 2021, p. 57) Is it not quite the same kind of crisis epistemology, one might wish to overcome?

References

- Clark, T. (2019). *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cox., J. L. (2013). Reflecting Critically on Indigenous Religion. In J.L. Cox (Ed.), *Critical Reflections on Indigenous Religions* (pp. 3–19). Routledge.
- Descola, P. (2013). *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago University Press.
- Dürbeck, G. & Stobbe, U. (2015). *Ecocriticism. Eine Einführung*. Böhlau Studien Bücher.
- Goeman, M. (2009). Notes toward a Native Feminism's Spatial Practice. *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, (pp. 169–87). <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/wic.0.0040>
- Haraway, D. J. (2008). *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Ives, C. D. et. al (2018). Reconnecting with nature for sustainability. *Sustainability Science*, 13, (pp. 1389–97), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0542-9>
- Latour, B. (2014). Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene. *New Literary History* 45(1), 1–18. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0003>
- Lienau, D. (2025). *Geerdet glauben. Christliche Naturspiritualität*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press.
- Morton, T. (2018). *All Art is Ecological*. Penguin Books.
- Morton, T. (2018). *Being Ecological*. Penguin Books.
- Von Stuckrad, K. (2024). *Nach der Ausbeutung. Wie unser Verhältnis zur Erde gelingen kann*. Europa Verlag.
- Whyte, K. (2021). Against Crisis Epistemology. In. A. Moreton-Robinson, L. Tuhiwai-Smith, C. Andersen & S. Larkin (Eds.), *Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (pp. 52–64). Routledge.
- Winkler, K., & Carroll, S. (2021). Solastalgia and Hope: Theological and Postcolonial Perspectives from Europe and the Pacific Responding to the Ecological Crisis in (Religious) Education. *Religionspädagogische Beiträge. Journal for Religion in Education*, 44(2), 49–60. <https://doi.org/10.20377/rpb-150>

Spiritual Dimensions of Leadership for Education for Sustainable Development

Simone Birkel & Ulrich Müller

1. Introduction

In its current program “ESD for 2023”, UNESCO advocates for the transformation of learning and training environments. The “Whole Institution Approach to ESD” (WIA) emphasizes that learning institutions themselves need to be transformed in a way that learning content and its pedagogies are supported by the learning environment (UNESCO, 2020, p. 28).

The transformation of an educational organization and the implementation of ESD within the whole institution is a leadership responsibility. It needs the will, the initiative, and the support of the leader.

The social and environmental challenges that organizations are currently facing call for new leadership models and methods. In such models, spirituality and ethics play an important role (Fry & Egel, 2021). Staff and students ask and observe closely whether the values, expressed in the mission statement, are practiced (Assländer, 2016). Leaders can provide information about the meaningfulness of their actions (Broadhurst, 2021, p.15–16) and can set an example of sustainable development.

This article reports on leadership for SD/ESD and inquires what Leadership Development can learn from Religious Pedagogy about teaching spirituality. We reflect on how spirituality can be included in programs that prepare educational leaders and explore relevant opportunities with regard to two examples.

2. Leadership for Education for Sustainable Development

“It’s not only a question of skills, the right attitude towards sustainability is pivotal”

A principal, participant in a leadership for ESD study

2.1 Leadership in Schools

School effectiveness research, to take one educational field as an example, has produced an abundance of evidence that principals are decisive for the performance of a school (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). But despite the importance of the leaders of educational institutions, their role in ESD has rarely been investigated. Only a few studies have explored the implementation of ESD and how it relates to school organization. Those who did, highlight the importance of the principal (e.g., Mogren & Gericke, 2017; Müller et al., 2021). Based on these results, one can assume that leaders exert a significant influence on ESD in other educational institutions, too.

Sustainability is a leadership issue. When an educational institution aims at integrating sustainability and ESD, the head of the institution must support the endeavor wholeheartedly and credibly foster a sustainability-oriented organizational culture through various strategic actions:

- Developing a shared vision for ESD and sustainability within the community.
- Facilitating a participatory organizational development process that actively involves teaching staff, learners, and stakeholders.
- Embedding sustainability into daily operations and decision-making.
- Supporting staff in integrating ESD into their teaching practices.
- Offering learners opportunities to launch their own initiatives and empowering them to lead sustainability projects.
- Demonstrating authentic and committed leadership, ensuring that sustainability efforts are both credible and consistently supported (Müller et al., 2020).

By embracing these responsibilities, educational leaders can transform organizations into learning environments where sustainability is a core guiding principle, rather than a peripheral or temporary initiative.

2.2 Insights from Sustainability-Oriented Leadership in Other Sectors

While research on ESD leadership in educational organizations is still emerging, other fields—such as business and corporate management—have developed well-established leadership models that support sustainability. Concepts such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, and values-based leadership emphasize long-term responsibility, ethical

decision-making, and stakeholder engagement. These models offer valuable insights that can inform and enhance leadership strategies for ESD.

According to Fry & Egel (2021), sustainability-oriented leadership is characterized by a shift toward learning organizations, where continuous adaptation and collective learning drive sustainable transformation. Leaders in this framework act as dedicated change agents, fostering an organizational culture based on ethical values and a spiritual way of being—one that is interconnected, inclusive, relational, and mindful.

A key element of sustainability leadership is the co-creation of a shared vision and purpose in collaboration with stakeholders, ensuring that sustainability is deeply embedded in the institution's core strategy. Rather than focusing solely on financial performance, sustainability leadership emphasizes the triple bottom line, balancing economic, social, and environmental outcomes (Fry & Egel, 2021, p. 5). This approach aligns well with ESD in educational organizations, where leadership must move beyond traditional administrative roles to actively shape a culture of sustainability that benefits both the institution and the broader community.

3. Preparing Leaders for ESD – Two Examples

Given the importance of leaders in implementing ESD, ESD topics should be included in leadership development programs. Below, we introduce two examples of such programs and will explore how the spiritual dimension might be integrated.

Ludwigsburg University of Education (Pädagogische Hochschule Ludwigsburg) offers two Master's programs in Educational Leadership and Management, both designed to prepare professionals for leadership roles in diverse educational contexts.

The M.A. Bildungsmanagement (Educational Leadership), a two-year, in-service graduate program (90 ECTS credits), equips participants with the skills to take on leadership positions in schools, adult education, and corporate training. The program fosters a learning culture that emphasizes self-organization and experience-based education. It follows a blended learning approach, combining online and in-person instruction to accommodate working professionals (Pädagogische Hochschule, n.d., a).

The M.A. International Education Management (INEMA), offered as a joint degree by Ludwigsburg University of Education (Germany) and Helwan University (Egypt), provides an international perspective on

educational leadership, with a particular focus on development cooperation (Pädagogische Hochschule, n.d., b).

As sustainability topics gain increasing importance in the organizations where program participants work, program directors have developed an optional module on *Leadership for ESD*, which has already been integrated into the German-language program (M.A. Bildungsmanagement) and will be implemented in the INEMA program soon.

Module Overview

The module explores the critical role of educational leaders in fostering sustainability within educational institutions. Participants will:

- Develop a deep understanding of ESD and its significance in education.
- Learn how to implement the WIA to sustainability.
- Explore strategies for integrating ESD into leadership and management.
- Gain skills in facilitating participatory organizational development, engaging teachers, students, and other stakeholders.
- Analyze case studies and best practices from both local and international perspectives.

The Module aims at helping participants to develop the leadership competencies needed to drive sustainable change within their institutions, ensuring alignment with global educational and environmental priorities.

The module is offered in an asynchronous online format and includes a wide range of informational components, (e.g., online texts, scientific articles, videos). It also provides various work suggestions from which participants can choose. Participants can obtain certification for the module by passing a portfolio examination, consisting of a selection of work proposals agreed upon with the responsible lecturer.

Against the background of the aforementioned approaches of sustainability-oriented leadership that are based on ethical values and a spiritual way of being, it is now considered to also include spiritual dimensions in the module.

How can spiritual dimensions be integrated into this module? To answer this question, in the next section we will now explore what religious pedagogy can contribute to spirituality and how it can be learned.

4. Spiritual Dimensions

What can ESD-leadership learn from religious pedagogy? First of all, there is a need for a short definition of both domains. Religiosity is defined as the adherence to a set of beliefs and practices ascribed to an organized religious institution. Spirituality can be seen as a multifaceted concept that encompasses a range of questions concerning the meaning, purpose, and sense of life, as well as the nature of connectivity with others, nature, the divine, the search for the transcendent, values and so on. It may or may not include religious beliefs (Fuentes, 2018). From the current literature on social-ecological transformation research, three relevant areas can currently be identified that are suitable for the theological-religious education discourse. They can be understood as coordinates within which an approach to transformative religious education can be discussed from a social science and theological perspective. Here are three main lines of spiritual dimensions:

Transformation as revolution

When we talk about revolution here, we are not referring to an overthrow in the sense of a violent seizure of power, but rather to a fundamental change of perspective. Publications calling for a new way of thinking can currently be found in a wide range of disciplines, such as the invitation from transformation researcher and economist Maja Göpel in her book “Unsere Welt neu denken” (“Re-thinking Our World”, Göpel, 2020). In philosophy, Eva von Redecker has presented a “revolution for life” against the backdrop of new forms of protest (von Redecker, 2020). In it, she describes what is already being done to enable a successful life. And she takes a radical step when she calls for a “socialization of goods” (von Redecker, 2020, p. 260; emphasis in original): Instead of domination, exploitation and destruction, she advocates the “saving” of life (von Redecker, 2020, pp. 159–193), the “regeneration” of labor (von Redecker, 2020, pp. 194–234) and the “sharing” of goods (von Redecker, 2020, pp. 235–262). It is no wonder that the theologian and philosopher Jürgen Manemann (2021) with his plea “Revolutionary Christianity” is often cited as a source.

Referring to the explosive power of our own theological tradition, it quickly becomes clear from the oldest Gospel that the Jesus movement demanded a reversal of conventional thought patterns very early on. Translating Mark 1:14 as “Think anew and trust the good news” (Büchel-Sladkovic, 2021), then this seems astonishingly topical. In the current debate about new formats for shaping transformation, forms of living in

solidarity such as solidarity-based agriculture or alternative economic practices play an important role. The idea of a solidarity-based way of life, in which wealth is shared so that everyone can live well, is not foreign to Christians. Sabine Bieberstein points out that this is particularly well documented in the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (Bieberstein, 2021; Bieberstein, 2022). In terms of church history, the arc can be drawn further to the poverty movement in the Middle Ages, which currently culminates in Pope Francis' integral ecology. The cultural dimension is an important lever in the direction of socio-ecological transformation, which is why the transformation discourse is also characterized by a recourse to the tried and tested.

Recourse to the Tried and Tested

The big questions of life are no longer discussed in churches or theological debates, but in literature, film, pop culture and new cultural formats such as poetry slams (Birkel, 2018). The invention of new narratives, i.e., meaningful stories, often takes place based on ancient biblical texts. Traditional theological questions are taken up in the context of sustainability. The narrative of the change from caterpillar to butterfly, for example, also has a long Christian tradition. This is impressively visible in the Regensburg Diocesan Museum. During the restoration of a heavily weathered Gothic wooden cross, a green cord was noticed at the back of the crucified man's head. When it was pulled, a cavity opened in the back of the figure's head. Inside was a leather pouch containing a colorful butterfly, a fire-gilded enamel work made of silver. An unknown artist depicted the crucifixion of Jesus on the wings of the butterfly. The butterfly emphasizes that death is not the end; new life emerges from death. In the truest sense of the word, the crucified man had his resurrection "in mind" (Renzikowski, 2017).

In transformation research, the expert group "World Economy and Social Ethics" of the World Church Commission of the German Bishops' Conference criticizes the fact that the cultural, and therefore often also religiously based, conditions of change are often not taken into account (Commission of the World Church of the German Bishops' Conference, 2021, p. 12–13). In the search for religious educational settings that take up the longings and hopes of people in today's world, it is legitimate, if not necessary, to fall back on proven (faith) traditions (Knapp, 2015). However, the call for and recourse to traditions must not take place uncritically. It needs to be adapted to the conditions of the present to avoid fundamentalist narrowmindedness. Rudolf Englert points out that a living

tradition is not a “fund of eternal truths”, but rather an “instrument for producing appropriate reactions to the situation” (Englert, 2005, p. 69). And Englert continues: “Tradition provides a grammar for generating ever new readings of the world” (Englert, 2005, p. 69). Established church educational centers have already embarked on the path towards a socio-ecological transformation. Monasteries, church education institutions and other ecclesiastical institutions are relying on tried and tested methods and are steering the continuous process of improvement in the socio-ecological area through the standards of the European environmental management and auditing system EMAS or EMAS+. What also characterizes these places is a holistic approach, which is a decisive catalyst for the socio-ecological transformation of institutions and is developed here as the third coordinate of transformative religious education.

Freedom and Appreciation as Conditions for Successful Transformation

One of the most fundamental aspects of Jesus’ message is the free and equal dignity of all people. Biblical scholars never tire of referring to the Pauline tradition of the diverse charisms of all. Thomas Söding describes the Letter to the Galatians in particular as “the Magna Charta of the Christian doctrine of freedom” (Söding, 2015). From a humanities perspective, concepts of freedom also play a decisive role. Referring to the need for revolutionary change, Eva von Redecker is following the tradition of Hannah Arendt. Hannah Arendt's definition of freedom is a concrete and socially inviting one: “This public freedom is a tangible worldly reality, created by men to enjoy together in public – to be seen, heard, known, and remembered by others. And this kind of freedom demands equality, it is possible only amongst peers.” (Arendt, 2018, p. 11). For Hannah Arendt, freedom becomes visible in a public, jointly created reality. The purpose of living together is to enjoy it together and to encourage, strengthen or, if necessary, correct each other. It describes life in a public space in which it is possible for everyone to live without violence and without fear of danger. Numerous social church examples show that the fear of being harmed is not unfounded.

Particularly vulnerable groups include children and young people, women, people of color, people with disabilities, refugees, non-heterosexual people and people in ethnic or religious minorities. The aim here is to establish a theology of freedom. The dogmatist Gunda Werner calls for such a theology, following Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. According to Werner, a theology of freedom is creative, performative and critical (Werner, 2021). The important thing is to act without fear. This is

what Michael Böhnke calls for in the biblical tradition of parrhesia, namely frankness: “Those who speak frankly are those who reveal their attitude and stance and do not suppress or conceal them for fear of sanctions” (Böhnke, 2022). The biblical “fear not” therefore means not to be afraid of anything or anyone. Courage often makes us vulnerable. Religious education aimed at socio-ecological transformation focuses on the wounds of the human and interpersonal world. Corine Pelluchon, an important thinker in the transformation movement, published a German translation of “Ethics of Appreciation” (Pelluchon, 2019). Its subtitle is, “Virtues for an uncertain world.” A virtue of appreciation recognizes the intrinsic value of others or the world around us and at the same time is aware of the intrinsic value of oneself. It recognizes one’s own vulnerability, fragility and inadequacy, as well as that of fellow human beings and the world around us. The other thus becomes part of one’s own mood (Pelluchon, 2021). There are many indications that the virtue of mutual appreciation can still be developed, especially in everyday education. Educators and teachers often complain that their work is rarely valued. In the various political systems where this appreciation is shown, trusting cooperation can take place with the involvement of all resources (Eichler, Jeschke & Alt, 2023).

Based on the points formulated above, the following spiritual attitudes would be desirable for ESD-Leaders:

- Sensibility for the unavailable.
- Gratitude – Gratitude for the undeserved.
- Retinity – Everything is connected.
- Solidarity – Helping each other.
- Rituality – Celebrating life (music, dance).
- Value and dignity for all – people, other living beings, inanimate nature.

5. How can we Teach it?

The spiritual dimensions of ESD cannot simply be passed on to learners as a learning package, nor can they be taught in frontal teaching. In transformative learning settings, a spiral shape has established itself in various areas as a suitable symbol for the complex teaching-learning areas. Macy and Johnstone (2024) assume that gratitude is at the beginning of transformative action. The second step is an appreciation of pain. In an ideal world where individuals are the architects of their own happiness, there is limited space for the unique, painful experiences of individual students. However, it is only by facing up to the pain that we can perceive

things anew (third step). By seeing with new eyes, we can move on and commit ourselves to a different future. In the School of Transformation and Sustainability at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KU) in Germany there is an adaptation of this spiral of transformative learning to rethink how to teach or learn transformation.

First, we have to recognize what is and we have to accept it, even if it is ambivalent (perception competence). We must interpret from different perspectives for example, natural science or humanistic science (competence of interpretation), we have to look at the ethical side (ethical competence), we have to expand our personal and social skills to develop a sense of community. This new view of the world leads to a new way of thinking. To achieve this, we must discard things or ideas that are no longer viable (competence of exnovation). A systemic view of things (systemic thinking) makes it possible to look at possible futures (anticipation). A positive view of the future leads to new actions. New knowledge must be sought (innovation competence) and tried out (design competence). This also includes redefining responsibilities (competence in governance).

In addition, the methodological spectrum also needs to be expanded. A transdisciplinary approach is needed to supplement academic learning with spiritual practices. While academic learning currently takes place in formal learning settings in university rooms through the study of documents, excursions, discussions and reports, spiritual practices are characterized, for example, by meditation, gratitude exercises, immersion in nature, the performance of rituals including singing and chanting, and spiritual places of power.

The following table shows examples of spiritual practices to be included in a holistically oriented teaching-learning process.

Table 1: Examples of spiritual practices for holistic teaching

Academic Learning	Practising Spirituality
Documents	Meditation
Excursions	Gratitude diary
Green Campus	Immersing in nature
Discussions	Rituals
Reports	Singing and chanting
University learning locations	Pilgrimage to places of power

6. Conclusion

Due to the asynchronous online format the possibilities to include the mentioned methods in the module are somewhat limited. Nevertheless, there is a wide range of options from which we will choose a selection and describe them in the following.

6.1 Academic Learning

Documents. To lay a theoretical foundation, journal articles can be included, e.g.: Fry & Egel (2021). The article reviews current approaches to leadership for sustainability. Drawing from spiritual and being-centered leadership theories, it offers a model of Global Leadership for Sustainability that incorporates spiritual dimensions.

Excursions/Videos. Since the module is taught only online, real live excursions are not possible. But it is possible to include videos that show and report on examples of organizations that include spiritual perspectives into their work and have a sustainable profile, e.g., the story of SEKEM, an Egyptian initiative that integrates sustainable agriculture, social development, and ethical business practices to promote holistic development and biodynamic farming. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu12a_bo448

Students may be encouraged to explore the websites of such organizations to further dive into their practices.

6.2 Practicing Spirituality

Here are some suggestions for spiritual practices which students can try out as part of their program (formulated in a way that directly addresses students):

“Gratitude Diary: Gratitude is an essential spiritual disposition, and gratitude journals have been proven to enhance mood after just two weeks (Gander et al., 2013). Unlike diaries, gratitude journals focus exclusively on positive experiences. To incorporate this exercise into your routine, record three positive things, or events every evening. Pair this with a morning reflection on what you’re anticipating for the day. At the end of the month or year, bundle the notes and draw a summary.”

“Immersion in nature: Many activities that can help you connect with nature and your surroundings. One easy activity is to listen to the different sounds around you with your eyes closed. Spending five minutes a day

listening to a park, meadow or forest can help you relax after a stressful work or study day.”

“*Practice new rituals*: Rituals can help you create order and structure in a chaotic world. Monasteries are good examples. They have very strict daily routines to help people manage their lives. You can incorporate some of those routines into your own life in a less strict way. You may add elements to your daily routine depending on what's going on in your life: start your day by writing what you are looking forward to and what you are grateful for. During your lunch break, you spend time enjoying nature. And at night, reflect on your day by writing down what went well. It's important to choose a few routines that you can commit to fully, and not to overwhelm yourself with too many” (PH Ludwigsburg n.d. c).

References

- Arendt, H. (2018). *The freedom to be free. From thinking without a banister*. (A vintage Shorts Selections. An Ebook Short). Penguin Random House.
- Assländer, F. (2016). Spiritualität und Führung. In C. von Au (Hrsg.), *Wirksame und nachhaltige Führungsansätze: Leadership und Angewandte Psychologie* (S. 75-92). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-11956-0_4
- Bieberstein, S. (2021). Armut und Reichtum. In J. Lanckau (Ed.), *Biblisches Arbeitsbuch für Soziale Arbeit und Diakonie* (pp. 153-157). Narr Francke Attempto.
- Bieberstein, S. (2022). *Solidarisch leben – aber wie?* URL: <https://glaubenssache-online.ch/2022/01/27/solidarisch-leben-aber-wie/> [Accessed: 13/02/2024].
- Birkel, S. (2018). *Spoken words. Poetry Slam in der Jugendpastoral* (Benediktbeurer Beiträge zur Jugendpastoral, 9). Don Bosco.
- Böhnke, M. (2022, 03 February). *Es braucht mehr freimütige Rede in der Kirche*. <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/32984-es-braucht-mehr-freimuetime-rede-in-der-kirche> [Accessed: 13/02/2024].
- Broadhurst, S. J. (2021). *Spirituality in the Workplace: A Tool for Relations, Sustainability and Growth in Turbulent and Interconnected Markets* (1. Aufl.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003017691>
- del Carmen Fuentes, L. (2018). La Religiosidad y la Espiritualidad. ¿Son conceptos teóricos independientes?. *Revista de psicología*, 14(28), 109-119.
- Eichler, L., Jeschke, H. & Alt, J. (2023). Die letzte Generation – das sind wir alle. Wenn die Welt in Flammen steht, hilft es nicht, den Feualarm auszustellen. bene!.
- Englert, R. (2005). Auf einmal gar nicht mehr von gestern. Überlegungen zum religionspädagogischen Gebrauch von Tradition. In M. Bahr, U. Kropač & M. Schambeck (Eds.), *Subjektwerdung und religiöses Lernen. Für eine Religionspädagogik, die den Menschen ernst nimm* y (pp. 64-77). Kösel.

- Fry, L. W., & Egel, E. (2021). Global Leadership for Sustainability. *Sustainability*, 13(11), 6360. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116360>
- Gander, F., Proyer, R.T., Ruch, W. et al. (2013). Strength-Based Positive Interventions: Further Evidence for Their Potential in Enhancing Well-Being and Alleviating Depression. *J Happiness Stud*, 14, 1241–59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-012-9380-0>
- German Bishops' Conference Commission on International (Ed.) (2021). *How socio-ecological transformation can succeed* (Research results of a study by the 'Global Economy and Social Ethics' expert panel 22). Butzon Bercker. https://www.dbkshop.de/media/files_public/fb797b4e6dc212e7e5a30440c48-0eb27/DBK_1522001.pdf
- Göpel, M. (2020). *Unsere Welt neu denken. Eine Einladung*. Ullstein Book Publishers.
- Knapp, M. (2015). Innovation durch Tradition? Fundamentaltheologische Überlegungen zur Erneuerung von Glaube und Kirche. In W. Damberg & M. Sellmann (Eds.), *Die Theologie und „das Neue“*. Perspektiven zum kreativen Zusammenhang von Innovation und Tradition (pp. 218–235). Herder.
- Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2008). Linking leadership to student learning: The contributions of leader efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 496–528.
- Manemann, J. (2021). Revolutionäres Christentum. Ein Plädoyer. transcript.
- Mogren, A., & Gericke, N. (2017). ESD implementation at the school organization level, part 1- investigating the quality criteria guiding school leaders' work at recognized ESD schools. *Environmental Education Research*, 23(7), 972–992.
- Müller, U., Lude, A., & Hancock, D. (2020). Leading Schools towards Sustainability. Fields of Action and Management Strategies for Principals. *Sustainability*, 12(7), 3031. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12073031>
- Müller, U./ Hancock, D./Stricker, T./Wang, C. (2021): Implementing ESD in Schools: Perspectives of Principals in Germany, Macau, and the USA. *Sustainability*, 13(17), 9823. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13179823>
- Pädagogische Hochschule (o.J. a). *Masterstudiengang Bildungsmanagement*. <https://www.ph-ludwigsburg.de/fakultaet-1/institut-fuer-bildungsmanagement/abteilung-bildungsmanagement/masterstudiengang-bildungsmanagement>
- Pädagogische Hochschule (o.J. b). *Master's Program International Education Management*. <https://www.ph-ludwigsburg.de/fakultaet-1/institut-fuer-bildungsmanagement/international-educational-leadership-and-management/masters-program-international-education-management>
- Pädagogische Hochschule (o.J. c). *Module Leadership for Education for Sustainable Development*. <https://move.ph-ludwigsburg.de/course/view.php?id=387>
- Pelluchon, C. (2019). Ethik der Wertschätzung. Tugenden für eine ungewisse Welt. wbg Academic.
- Pelluchon, C. (2021, 30 November). *Ökologie, Universalismus, Demokratie. Wie wir die Aufklärung neu denken können*. [Video]. YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1FtrSY250A> [Accessed: 13/02/2024].

- Renzikowski, C. (2017). *Ostern verleiht Flügel. Ein Schmetterling aus dem Mittelalter verkündet die Auferstehung.* <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/ein-schmetterling-aus-dem-mittelalter-verkuendet-die-resurrection> [accessed: 13/02/2024].
- Söding, T. (2015). *Zur Freiheit berufen. Zugänge zum Galaterbrief.* https://www.kath.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/imperia/md/content/nt/oekumenischebibelwoche_muenster2015/zur_freiheit_berufen_bibelwoche_m__nster_2015.pdf [Accessed: 13/02/2024].
- UNESCO. (2020). Education for Sustainable Development: a roadmap. ESD 2030 – Towards achieving the SDG. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802.locale=en>
- Von Redecker, E., (2020). Revolution für das Leben. Philosophie der neuen Protestformen. FISCHER Taschenbuch.
- Werner, G. (2021). Judith Butler und die Theologie der Freiheit. transcript.2

Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Shared Perspectives on a Love-Centred Approach to Moulding Responsible Young Adults in Kenya

Eunice Kamaara²², Eric R. Masese & Claire Medard

1. Introduction

An unprecedented global crisis, characterized by the complex entwinement of climate change, diseases, poverty, and moral disorientation affects contemporary societies (Pfenning-Butterworth, 2024). Higher Education (HE) remains key in disentangling this complexity by building intercultural competence and resilience. Yet, HE suffers from rigid compartmentalization of disciplines and prioritization of technical proficiencies over moral and social relevance. This is contrary to the overarching spirit of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which emphasize mutual partnerships. In Africa, this disconnect is felt acutely where traditional systems of moral and cultural education have been eroded and universities have not prioritized them as key ingredients for sustainable solutions to development crises.

We argue for a “love-centred” approach which integrates teaching, research, and service in ways that humanize knowledge and respond to community needs. We use the case of the African Character Initiation Program (ACIP), which is coordinated by volunteer interdisciplinary faculty members at Moi University, to show how HE can meaningfully engage local communities to promote holistic health and development. A love-centered approach is associated with positive values like kindness, generosity, care, compassion, and honesty, among others, and is positively related to holistic health and well-being. Love is mysterious because it is both biological and spiritual. While spiritual/religious and philosophical perspectives associate love with transcendental forces, there are biological definitions of love, for example, Esch and Stefano (2005) define love as a neurobiological phenomenon. Love therefore signifies compassionate engagement and responsibility towards others even in the context of HE where it refers to mainstreaming care, integrity, and relational ethics into all activities of teaching and learning, research, and service. ACIP

²² The corresponding author may be reached at ekamaara@gmail.com

exemplifies this by bringing together university faculty from various disciplines such as bio-physical health, humanities, and social sciences to voluntarily mentor adolescents on life skills, reproductive health, spirituality, and community responsibility independent of donor funding.

For over 70 years, the World Health Organization (WHO) has defined health as not merely the absence of (dis)ease but complete physical, mental, social wellbeing. In 1984, WHO approved the fourth dimension of health, spiritual health, though it did not revise its definition of health (Manuila, 1991) and, soon after developed a wellbeing-assessment tool, WHOQOL: Spirituality, 'Religiousness and Personal Beliefs' (Grad, 2002). Yet, it is only in the last few years that the concept of holistic health has gained currency but the practice of holistic health is yet to pick. Holistic health considers the interconnectedness of the mind, body, and spirit and in turn their interconnectedness with the entire environment within which the individual human person lives, towards prevention of (dis)ease and promotion of the wellbeing of all through integration of various therapies and practices (Kou, 2023, p. 451). According to Dharmshaktu (2018) wellbeing is associated with self-preserved health, awareness, and practice of good health behaviour, social connectedness, and productivity. Nyongesa et al. (2019, p. 214) advocate for a psycho-bio-social approach incorporating African spiritualities. ACIP's model deeply resonates with this approach in blending African cultural values, Christian ethics, and contemporary health education into a cohesive framework.

In Kenya, the transition from childhood to adulthood, "maturing", is historically marked by structured rites of passage. These include initiation ceremonies such as male circumcision which symbolizes a young person's entrance into responsible adulthood by imparting communal values, self-discipline, and gendered responsibilities. Here, maturing is not merely a biological process but a deeply social and spiritual journey. However, colonization, rapid urbanization, and Christianization disrupted traditional initiation practices, dismantling culturally grounded frameworks for guiding youth into adulthood and contributing to a persistent moral and health crisis (Kamaara, 2005). Come the 1990s and 2000s the HIV/AIDS epidemic intensified this crisis. Youth sexual activity, framed as a moral failing, resulted in widespread stigma, fear, and confusion (Masese, 2011). Public health campaigns prioritized abstinence, overlooking the broader social and cultural determinants of health. This HIV moralization and consequent policing of youth behaviour fostered a culture of silence around sexuality, leaving many adolescents ill-informed and unsupported. It also deepened intergenerational mistrust; youth felt judged rather than guided.

The intersection of moral panic with weakened traditional systems catalysed ACIP to reimagine rites of passage as a platform for empowerment and not control. While preserving the symbolic significance of transition to adulthood through voluntary medicalized male circumcision, ACIP's educational program focuses on life skills, gender equality, moral integrity, and responsible use of technology and social media. For girls, the outlawing of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has left a cultural vacuum where guidance and empowerment are not institutionalized. ACIP addresses this gap by integrating girls in its mentorship and holistic development training alongside their male counterparts through a love-centered approach.

To illustrate this, we start with the history of ACIP. Thereafter, we reflect on ACIP activities between 2021 and 2024.

2. ACIP's Evolution

In the early 1990s at the emergence of HIV/AIDS, a group of female lecturers²³ in the School of Social Cultural and Development Studies (SSCDS) now the School of Arts and Social Sciences (SASS), were concerned with female students' reproductive health on campus. The lecturers conducted small-scale studies establishing a high prevalence of sexual activity and mobility. This behaviour was manifested in pregnancies, abortions, Sexually Transmitted Infections including HIV/AIDS, and stress. For many, these would be manifested barely a year after joining campus; students joining the University from High School found the environment socially challenging to navigate without relevant knowledge, skills, and values. Without any resources but care and compassion, the lecturers chose to intervene. They organized Ladies To Ladies Talks (LTLTs) where they informally shared with female students some of the social, economic, and academic challenges that university students face on campus without the supervision of teachers and away from the watchful eyes of their parents. While hundreds of students would benefit from the talks, the great majority were already deeply immersed in unhealthy campus social life. The lecturers concluded that young people needed knowledge and life skills well before entering university for prevention rather than intervention. The initiative then spread to working with early adolescents

²³ Pamela Abuya, Eunice Kamaara, Joyce Nyairo, and Mary Wahome. The group later grew to include Emily Choge and the late Professor Naomi Shitemi (RIP) who brought valuable diversity to the team.

through visits to secondary schools. Thankfully, more lecturers joined in volunteering to work with early adolescents in schools.

As happens often in life, other powers were at play in favour of the initiative – when some of the lecturers sold the idea of school visits to the executive committee of the Association of African Women in Research and Development (AAWORD), - the lecturers were members- the school visits program was replicated throughout Kenya, partially supported by AAWORD under a Ford Foundation grant. AAWORD members volunteered their time and energy while the project grant took care of all other expenses associated with the visits. Data emerging from working with girls in secondary schools indicated the importance of mentoring younger girls at early adolescence for greater impact. A significant number of those in secondary schools were already sexually active. So the lectures shifted from high school to visiting girls in upper primary school.

In 1997, one of the lecturers won a World Bank grant to study how to promote adolescent sexual/reproductive health programs in Kenya. This study affirmed that adolescents lacked relevant knowledge, skills, and values to navigate through adolescence successfully. The following year, she enrolled for a doctorate in religious studies. Her doctoral research, completed in 2003, would respond to gaps that emerged from the World Bank-funded project.

The doctoral study titled, *Gender, Youth Sexuality, HIV/AIDS and the Role of the Church*, concurred with results from earlier engagements on youth maturation: adolescents are a neglected lot. Marginalization of traditional beliefs and practices on account of modernization and Christianization of Africa does not offer anything to maintain valuable aspects of indigenous culture including initiation from childhood to adulthood. As a result, many adolescents today rely on uncoordinated and often conflicting information on health and development. For sex education, while 90% and 60% of all youth interviewed indicated that they would prefer to get sex education from parents and religious leaders, only 15% and 12%, respectively, actually got sex education from parents and religious leaders, the two most preferred sources (Kamaara, 2005, p. 74). The study recommended that churches fill this cultural void by reconstructing initiation rites.

In 2004, the lecturers pooled their resources and ideas to implement the recommendations of the doctoral study on Gender, Youth Sexuality, and HIV/AIDS. They founded the African Christian Initiation Programme (ACIP) as an extension program of Moi University housed by the Department of Philosophy, Religion and Theology but, collaboratively implemented by Moi University lecturers across disciplines. Designed as a

local community-based, community participatory, and community-funded initiative ACIP systematically integrates African values with Christian values, to provide a process of transition from childhood to adulthood for boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 15. This holistic health and assets-based approach covers broad areas of life-skills, critical for adolescent holistic health development. These areas evolve through time and space but character values remain central in facilitating young people to exploit their assets.

In 2006, ACIP partnered with Strategies for Hope Trust, a UK-based organization, for the production and distribution of two publications: *My Life Starting Now*, which provides adults with information and practical skills to conduct workshops for adolescents, and *ACIP Jewels*, a pocket-friendly capacity-building booklet on adolescent health. The two publications have been instrumental in upscaling and replicating ACIP. *My Life Starting Now*, an open access resource, is used in various countries in Africa and in Nepal, Asia. In Zambia and Malawi, it has been translated into Chichewa, one of the local languages. Over the years, ACIP attracted non-Christian members of the local communities (from Islam and Indigenous African religions) thereby challenging the programme to be inclusive. This led to a change of focus from African Christian values to human values in general. Consequently, ACIP changed the meaning of the letter C from Christian to Character. True to its foundational vision, ACIP is now truly inclusive.

On ACIP's tenth anniversary (2014), ACIP founders were curious to know whether the programme had had any impact and therefore whether it was worth continuing. A workshop to reflect on the journey only led to realization that there wasn't any robust evidence of ACIP's work. Much of what was available was anecdotal. ACIP team decided to conduct a stakeholder-engaged assessment of the African Character Initiation Programme. They conceptualized and co-designed the assessment. In December 2015, Moi University was funded by Templeton World Charity Foundation (TWCF) to implement this proposal.²⁴ The central research question was: Is ACIP effective in supporting empowerment of adolescents for transition from childhood to responsible adulthood? Findings suggested that ACIP had long-lasting impact in promoting character values and moulding adolescents into responsible young adults. The results were

²⁴ The key researchers under this grant were Prof. Eunice Kamaara (Director), Dr. Joyce Nyairo (Co-Director), Prof. Emily Choge (Researcher), Prof. Mary Wahome (Researcher), and Pamela Abuya (Researcher). The Templeton World Charity Foundation (TWCF) awarded a generous research grant to find ways to upscale the initiative.

so inspiring that the ACIP team developed a revised programme to adopt what were identified by the assessment as best practices. In 2019, ACIP was recognized by the World Health Organization as a Top 30 Innovation in Africa in Social Health.

3. ACIP Activities 2021–2024

This section focuses on three recent initiatives for holistic health. The first one is ACIP's response to COVID-19, the second is part of a public health initiative to fight deaths during circumcision, and the third is on promotion of environmental responsibility in ACIP's regular activities.

3.1 ACIP's Response to COVID-19

COVID-19 exposed and deepened existing socio-economic inequalities in Kenya, particularly in urban informal settlements. While the government promoted a unified public health response, the lived realities of vulnerable populations, especially adolescents, revealed a stark divide in access to basic health and preventive resources. With schools closed, adolescents in informal settlements faced heightened risks including sexual violence and drug abuse. In mid-2020, ACIP responded by co-designing and co-implementing community participatory action research in Kijiji (PARK), one of the informal settlements in Eldoret. Kijiji was purposively selected because of its accessibility (even with lockdowns and curfews) to many of the ACIP alumni who would spearhead the project. The project mobilized community stakeholders, adolescents, and ACIP alumni to assess and meet the needs of vulnerable adolescents. Findings revealed that the impact of COVID-19 on adolescents in Kijiji was distinctly gendered: girls reported being overburdened with domestic responsibilities and exposed to increased risks of sexual and physical abuse, while boys expressed frustration over idleness and being coerced into criminal activities such as drug distribution. When asked about their most pressing needs, girls identified access to sanitary pads, in the context of a dire economic situation, whereas boys requested recreational opportunities, specifically a ball and play space.

ACIP responded by providing sanitary products and tried to create a safe play area for boys though finding this space didn't work. Although the project achieved its immediate objectives which stopped with the reopening of schools, sustained implementation was constrained by the limited capacity of ACIP volunteers, ultimately resulting in the deferment of long-term plans to adopt Kijiji as a model for adolescent urban resilience. The PARK

project nevertheless demonstrated how love-centered participatory model could build resilience in times of crisis.

3.2 ACIP's Influence of Evidence-Based Public Policy and Practice

Initiation rites in African societies are dynamic and continually evolving, shaped by persistent tensions between traditional ethnic identities, national belonging, and modern influences. The legacies of colonialism, urbanization, and the widespread adoption of Western and Christian values have disrupted indigenous systems for guiding youth into adulthood. Without coherent cultural frameworks, many adolescents now navigate transitions with confusion, vulnerability, and exposure to high-risk behaviours, including substance abuse, sexual violence, and mental health issues. This cultural vacuum has been exacerbated by the *commercialization of initiation rites* and the *absence of trained, credible mentors*, especially in male circumcision.

Unregulated individuals and groups have exploited the rising demand for cultural initiation often prioritizing profit over safety. This has led to a surge in mismanaged procedures, resulting in preventable fatalities and long-term morbidities. In 2023, ACIP expressed concern over increasing mortalities and morbidities of boys following circumcision. Using results from their small-scale studies on why the deaths happen and how they may be controlled, ACIP generated a draft policy for the Uasin Gishu (UG) County Government. They approached, engaged, and advocated with the County Government to adopt the policy. Come 2024 the number of mortalities and morbidities were so high that they could no longer be ignored. The UG County Department of Medical Services in collaboration with the National Syndemic Disease Control Council (NSDCC) approached ACIP to support them in intervening. The collaborative effort involved mapping stakeholders, profiling practitioners, designing a culturally grounded initiation curriculum, and developing a draft policy. These efforts were supported through a profile of circumcision practitioners and spaces. twelve community public meetings “*barazas*”, stakeholder workshops involving all National Government Administrative Officers (NGAOs), and advocacy for broader regulatory frameworks across six sub counties (Soy, Turbo, Ainabkoi Kapseret, Kesses, Moiben) of Uasin Gishu county. This led to a refined draft policy and a training curriculum.

This partnership not only reinforces the importance of culturally sensitive approaches but also highlights the role of universities in generating actionable policy and research uptake. The approach illustrates

the potential of co-creating ethical and practical models that address societal gaps left by weakened traditional systems.

3.3 Environment Engagement and Social Responsibility

One of the often-overlooked issues is the ecological crisis and its intersection with social inequality in undermining holistic health. ACIP's experience through initiatives like PARK demonstrates how environmental neglect and socio-economic vulnerability exacerbate each other. Adolescents in informal settlements often suffer from a lack of clean water, unsafe sanitation, and unmanaged waste which reflects systematic environmental injustice. At the heart of these challenges lies a broader failure to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility for the environment. Water collection and treatment in urban Kenya, for example, remain deeply politicized and underfunded. Those in informal settlements are rarely included in policy.

A module on environmental responsibility was added to the ACIP training for youth in 2022. Social inequalities and the concept of man-made equity were introduced before environmental custodianship could be discussed. Garbage collection and recycling is one of the teaching/learning activities highlighting gender issues. For example, women and children are generally expected to clean up after others and social status often prevent selected people from performing everyday acts of cleaning-up. The case of discrimination against street children who are involved in garbage collection and recycling is also highlighted. The purpose of the module is to encourage all to feel equally responsible of environmental issues, driven by a love centred approach.

4. Conclusion

ACIP has dynamically succeeded in creating a forum where issues, which are neither ordinarily discussed with the youth, nor considered as a field for public intervention, are tabled and debated. From the core value of maturity, a key representation associated with becoming an adult in Kenya, ACIP continues to nurture a wide sense of responsibility, rethinking maturing and moral crisis in Kenya from a love-centred approach.

References

Dharmshaktu, N. S. (2018). Holistic Health and Wellbeing: How to Achieve it. *International Journal of Preventive, Curative & Community Medicine*, 4(2), 1-3.

- Esch, T., & Stefano, G. B. (2005). The Neurobiology of Love. *Neuro Endocrinology Letters*, 26(3), 175–92.
- Grad, F. P. (2002). The Preamble of the Constitution of the World Health Organization. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 80(12), 981–984.
- Kamaara, E. (2005). Gender, Youth Sexuality and HIV/AIDS: A Kenyan Experience, Eldoret. Gaba Publications.
- Kou, Z. (2023). Holistic Medicine: A Comprehensive Approach to Health and Well-being. *Alternative Integrative Medicine*, 12, 451.
- Manuila, A. (Ed.) (1991). The Spiritual Dimension. In WHO, EMRO (Eds.), *Partner in Health in the Eastern Mediterranean 1949-1989* (pp. 77–84). Alexandria, Egypt.
- Masese (2011). *Social Construction of HIV/AIDS Prevention Strategies among Abagusii Youths in Kenya*. Unpublished PhD thesis in Anthropology, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, France.
- Nyongesa, P., Kamaara, E., Ayanga, H. O., Mothaly, J., Akim, S. P., Ivy, S., & Lemons J. (2019). Integrating Spiritual Care into Maternity Care at a University Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret, Kenya: Challenges, Lessons and Way Forward. *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*, 7(2), 168–215.
- Pfenning-Butterworth, A., Buckley, L. B., Drake, J. M., Farner, J. E., Farrell, M. J., Gehman, A.-L. M., Mordecai, E. A., Stephens, P. R., Gittleman, J. L., & Davies, T. J. (2024). Interconnecting global threats: Climate change, biodiversity loss, and infectious diseases. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 8(4), e270–e283. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(24\)00021-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(24)00021-4)

Compassion as a Key to Education for Sustainable Development – Mission and Advancement of a Theological Concept

Maike Maria Domsel

1. Introduction

1.1 The Shift in Christian Values and the Rise of Sustainability

In recent decades, the decline of once predominant Christian values in European societies has paved the way for the emergence and coexistence of diverse worldviews. Amidst this diversity, one value is gaining consensus across sectors and ideologies: commitment to sustainable living. Today, sustainability is at the forefront of global discussions, shaping policy debates and the ethical dimensions of everyday life. The emphasis on sustainability reflects a collective acknowledgment of the urgent need to address environmental degradation, social justice, and intergenerational equity (Andree & Domsel, 2022; Birkel, 2019).

Defining shared values beyond sustainability is challenging in schools, which mirror broader societal diversity. Students bring ethical frameworks shaped by their religious, cultural, and personal backgrounds. To foster an inclusive approach to values education, schools must strike a balance between the need for common ground in sustainability and the richness of students' perspectives.

This contribution argues that compassion, as both a theological and ethical concept, forms a crucial foundation for Education for Sustainable Development, addressing both ecological and social justice. Rooted in Christian traditions, particularly within the framework of human dignity and solidarity, compassion transcends religious boundaries, resonating with a wide range of cultural and ethical traditions. Its potential lies in fostering ethical responsibility, social cohesion, and a more profound commitment to sustainability (Naurath, 2010). The essay examines the practical applications of compassion, highlighting its transformative impact on shaping sustainable practices, fostering empathy in educational settings, and promoting a comprehensive understanding of human flourishing that encompasses both ecological and social dimensions of sustainability. Building on this, the contribution emphasizes that integrating compassion into Education for Sustainable Development

strengthens the dialogue on how theological and ethical frameworks can shape educational approaches grounded in environmental sustainability, equity, and humanistic values (Andree & Domsel, 2022).

1.2 Relevance of Compassion in the Context of Sustainable Development and Education

In the face of future crises and challenges, it is crucial to emphasize the concept of compassion, a term initially coined by Johann Baptist Metz as empathic sympathy within a theology of memory and solidarity with the suffering. While Metz's understanding of compassion is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition (Metz, 2000), the broader notion has moved beyond its theological origins and resonates with a wide variety of audiences. Compassion, as a pre-theological and non-ideological concept, is embedded in various religious and secular traditions. E.g., in Buddhism, *karuṇā* emphasizes the cultivation of empathy to alleviate suffering; in Islam, *rahma* reflects both mercy and compassion, seen as divine qualities extended to humanity and as a moral obligation towards others (Barstow 2024; Khorchide 2012). Additionally, secular concepts of solidarity highlight compassion as a fundamental human value, fostering social cohesion and mutual care. These parallels reveal that compassion, though shaped by specific contexts, carries a universal ethical appeal. It may therefore serve as a shared foundation to connect people of faith, spiritual seekers, and non-religious individuals alike. In the context of Education for Sustainable Development, this universal ethical foundation can help foster a sense of shared responsibility and motivate learners to act in ways that promote ecological balance, social equity, and human dignity. Especially in educational contexts, this bridging potential supports communication and mutual understanding across cultural and worldview differences. This aspect is particularly relevant within school leadership, where fostering communication and mutual understanding represents a key objective.

As education increasingly emphasizes a more holistic, subject-focused approach alongside traditional performance-based elements, the development of key competencies has become essential for individuals to navigate and thrive in a world marked by crises and complexity, ultimately fostering a sustainable and positive future for both individuals and communities. While sustainability and compassion are integral to personal development, practical applications in education, e.g., cultivating empathy toward the environment, help bridge theory and action. Religious educators, in particular, hold a unique position in this transformation. Their engagement with existential questions, spiritual reflections, and the

promotion of a hopeful vision for the future positions them as important role models who guide students toward understanding their responsibility in shaping a sustainable world.

The theological concept of compassion plays a critical role in social learning and is rooted in biblical traditions such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) and Christ’s call to love one’s neighbor (Mt 22:39). These scriptural foundations shape Christian ethics, particularly the ethic of love, and highlight the transformative power of compassion in educational contexts. However, compassion is also a central value across many other religious and philosophical traditions, such as the above-mentioned Buddhist concept of *karuṇā* and the Islamic value of *rahmah*, both of which emphasize care for others and social responsibility. Compassion, therefore, intersects meaningfully with global initiatives such as the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), transcending specific religious frameworks and aligning with the shared values of humanity. These goals, which aim to address pressing international challenges, align with the values of compassion and care for others. In this context, compassion plays a vital role in motivating individuals to take action toward environmental sustainability, social equity, and the well-being of marginalized communities, all of which are central to the SDGs. This leads to an important question: Can the evolving concept of compassion contribute to achieving the 17 SDGs? Or could it even serve as a foundational principle for these global objectives (Domsel & Steffens, 2024, pp. 11–20)? This contribution aims to explore the relationship between Education for Sustainable Development and compassion, offering a deeper understanding of Metz’s original concept by adapting it to contemporary challenges and the spirit of the age. Compassion aligns with the SDGs – especially Goal 4: Quality Education and Goal 13: Climate Action – by fostering both moral responsibility and a deeper commitment to environmental sustainability.

2. Contextual Background

2.1 The Emergence of Diverse Worldviews and the Challenge of Establishing Common Values in European Societies

Over the past few decades, sustainable living – framed as a necessary response to pressing ecological and social crises – has evolved into a widely embraced foundational value (Leal Filho & Azul, 2021). In postmodern societies, where traditional Christian values have increasingly lost their normative force, the urgency to establish universally recognized ethical

principles is growing. While the growing plurality of worldviews poses significant challenges, the idea of sustainability transcends cultural boundaries and offers a unifying framework for collective action. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all worldviews – particularly certain right-wing political movements – accept sustainability as a necessary or urgent concern. The ongoing search for shared ethical ground may thus be seen as a form of postmodern ethics: a communal attempt to respond to the urgent crises of our time.

2.2 The Crucial Role of Sustainability as a Guiding Principle

Sustainability has become a guiding principle in addressing global challenges, emphasizing ethical responsibility and compassion. Despite the continuing ambiguity surrounding the term and its diverse values and norms, sustainability enjoys broad societal acceptance as a normative ideal. Sustainability, as commonly understood, refers to the ability to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. It is not only an environmental concept but a social, economic, and moral framework that addresses long-term human well-being, social justice, and the responsible stewardship of resources. When Greta Thunberg, in her address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, urged political and economic leaders to “act as if the house was on fire. Because it is” (Thunberg, 2019), few would dispute the underlying assertion that environmental and climate protection are fundamental prerequisites for sustainable living and essential priorities for the future. Similarly, when Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato si’ – On Care for Our Common Home* (2015), calls for a comprehensive reflection on humanity’s relationship with the world, creation, and God from a socio-ecological and catastrophic perspective, he advocates for a paradigm shift – one that aligns with eco-theological principles and emphasizes sustainability as a moral imperative. His influence, leading to his recognition as the ‘Green Pope’ by environmental advocates, underscores the need for an intersection between sustainability and religious thought (Altmeyer & Stockinger, 2019, p. 167).

This raises critical questions regarding the spiritual dimensions of sustainability. Is this pursuit, particularly in the light of humanity’s crisis, inherently spiritual – not in a theological or ideological sense, but in a transcendent, existential way that addresses the deeper human need for meaning, connection, and purpose? Spirituality, then, can be seen as the human capacity to seek meaning, solidarity, and purpose, especially in times of existential uncertainty, encompassing both individual and

collective aspects of human life and action in the world. In moments of crisis (Domsel, 2024), when established norms and familiar patterns of life are disrupted by threatening realities (Roebben, 2020, pp. 28, 71-73), does humanity not find itself in greater need of spiritual frameworks – frameworks that allow individuals and communities to make sense of their world and future in a manner that transcends mere survival or materialism? (Schambeck, 2023) Within this context, the focus of this paper is more precisely defined. The task is to explore whether the concept of compassion – adapted to address the challenges of the present moment – can serve as a fundamental key to sustainable living and education. In doing so, we look to Christian traditions that call for a just, compassionate, solidaristic, peaceful, and responsible existence, framing sustainability as not only an environmental necessity but also a moral and spiritual obligation.

3. Compassion as a Theological and Social Concept

3.1 From Metz to Contemporary Applications

The paradigm of compassion has left a profound imprint on contemporary theology, reshaping how empathy and solidarity are understood within both theological discourse and society at large. This paradigm has not only altered theological perspectives on the role of the church within society but also has enriched theological scholarship by positing that the suffering of the oppressed serves as a manifestation of God's presence in the world.

Rooted in an empathetic monotheism and a theology sensitive to God's suffering, Metz emphasizes that Jesus' ministry was primarily concerned with alleviating suffering rather than addressing sin, particularly to those marginalized by society, as reflected in the moral injunctions of Leviticus 19. For Metz, compassion is not a passive form of empathy, but an active engagement in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable. His theological emphasis on suffering as a source of empathy and understanding has led to a reevaluation of these aspects within Christian theology, highlighting compassion and solidarity as central moral imperatives.

According to Metz, compassion compels us “to the frontlines of political, social, and cultural conflicts in today's world,” (Metz, 2000, pp. 13–14, translation by the author) where the recognition and articulation of others' suffering are deemed essential for peacebuilding and new forms of social solidarity. This approach calls for the dismantling of prejudices and the challenging of distorted images of others, striving within educational contexts to foster an “engaged humanity” (Kuld, 2016, translation by the author) that refuses to accept suffering with indifference.

Metz's conception of compassion also sharply contrasts with the problematic notion of pity, which often perpetuates an unequal dynamic – a “stance of the strong toward the weak.” (Kuld, 2016, translation by the author). Compassion, by contrast, seeks equality and mutual communication, aiming for an as-equal-as-possible relationship between individuals. This fundamental distinction positions compassion as a powerful force for societal transformation, one that fosters inclusivity and a commitment to the well-being of all.

In contemporary contexts, the paradigm of compassion continues to inspire new theological and social justice frameworks. It has given rise to approaches addressing not only the ethical dimensions of human relationships but also the urgent issues of environmental ethics and interreligious cooperation. Initially, however, these initiatives were not explicitly concerned with global challenges such as climate change. Rather, they focused on cultivating a culture of compassion in society and promoting harmonious, positive social interactions. Through such efforts, empathy and compassion were to be strengthened as core societal values, encouraging a sense of responsibility both toward oneself and others.

The ‘Compassion Project’, initiated by Lothar Kuld in the 1990s within the educational sector, exemplifies this approach. Often referred to as a ‘social internship’, this initiative is not merely a career-oriented internship opportunity. Rather, it aims to cultivate compassion and empathy by immersing students in settings such as hospitals, nursing homes, and care facilities, where they directly engage with individuals in need of care. This form of experiential learning, while akin to the secular concept of service learning, distinguishes itself through its explicit anthropological and often spiritual orientation. Unlike service learning, which primarily integrates community service with academic instruction and reflection, the Compassion Project emphasizes relational presence and affective resonance. It invites students into a formative process of encountering vulnerability – not merely as an educational exercise, but as a potentially existential transformation. In this regard, the initiative does not only aim at civic engagement or skill development but seeks to nurture a capacity for compassionate attention as a virtue in its own right.

Such initiatives underscore the broader significance of compassion, not only as an abstract theological principle but as a tangible force for societal transformation and human flourishing (Weissbrod, Kuhn & Hirsch, 1994).

3.2 Sustainability as a Hallmark of (Post)-Modernity

Emerging as a defining theme in contemporary politics, economics, and society, sustainability is founded on the principle that present-day actions must ensure a livable future for generations to come. Today, sustainability is understood not only in ecological terms but also in social and economic dimensions (Leal Filho & Azul, 2021).

The modern conceptualization of sustainability traces its origins to the Brundtland Commission, which in 1987 published the influential report *Our Common Future*. The commission defined sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (WCED, 1987, translation by the author) This definition encapsulates ecological, social, and economic considerations while emphasizing the necessity of long-term perspectives (WCED, 1992).

In political discourse, sustainability has become a guiding principle for societal and economic development. The United Nations further solidified this approach with the adoption of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development in 2015, which set 17 sustainability goals, including the protection of the environment, the eradication of poverty and hunger, and the enhancement of educational opportunities. Achieving these goals requires interdisciplinary collaboration and a broad societal consensus on the principles of sustainable development.

However, the integration of sustainability into various sectors of society presents significant challenges. Sustainable development necessitates a fundamental shift in thinking and behavior at both the individual and collective levels. The concept of sustainability underscores the importance of adopting long-term perspectives and recognizing the interconnectedness of ecological, social, and economic systems. This holistic approach demands that we acknowledge the complexity and interdependence between humanity and the natural world (United Nations, 2015).

4. The Contribution of Religious Education (RE) to Sustainable Development and the Concept of Compassion

RE makes a distinctive contribution to compassionate Education for Sustainable Development by linking ethical reflection with action-based learning and by drawing on religious interpretive resources. While remaining open to dialogue with secular approaches, it uniquely sensitizes students to religious worldviews and values, offering a framework to engage

with global challenges from a perspective grounded in meaning, responsibility, and human dignity. Compassion can be integrated into curricula through projects like the mentioned ‘Compassion Project’, which already encourages social engagement and could be further expanded to connect social justice more explicitly with environmental responsibility in the context of community-driven sustainability initiatives. Integrating an empathetic and compassionate spirituality into educational frameworks can offer concrete guidance for humanity’s future, bridging the gap between believers, spiritual seekers, and non-religious individuals alike. In this context, compassion is not merely an ethical attitude but a theologically grounded virtue rooted in the Christian understanding of agape – a self-giving, other-oriented love that transcends utility and reciprocity. As such, it holds transformative potential, especially within educational leadership, where shifting from performance-driven models to person-centered approaches aligns closely with both the theological imperative of love and the pedagogical aim of personal development.

RE and its educators are uniquely positioned to address existential questions and to explore spiritual-religious interpretations of compassion as a response to human vulnerability. This involves not only cognitive engagement but also the cultivation of an inner attitude shaped by theological reflection. For instance, compassion projects – such as intergenerational dialogue initiatives, school-based care groups, or community service learning with theological framing – provide students with opportunities to embody compassion in relational, reflective, and action-oriented ways. These projects become sites of theological learning when they invite participants to interpret their actions in light of biblical narratives, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan, and theological concepts like *imago Dei*, the idea that humans are created in the image of God, reflecting divine qualities such as compassion and love. While Compassion Projects often focus on caring for others, such as assisting the elderly or supporting people with disabilities, they could also address political dimensions, such as advocating for fair wages for care workers or the inclusion of disabled children in public education. However, this broader approach remains largely a desideratum, often overlooked in many initiatives. In RE, compassion extends beyond personal acts of kindness to include social justice and activism, rooted in theological principles of justice and equality.

Theologically informed compassion thus becomes a form of lived spirituality that resonates with broader societal goals, including those of the SDGs. By integrating such projects into educational practice, RE does not simply support personal development but also contributes to social

transformation. Compassion, framed theologically, fosters awareness of interdependence, nurtures solidarity, and inspires sustainable patterns of living. In this way, RE becomes a vital pedagogical and spiritual catalyst for equipping future generations to navigate the ethical and ecological complexities of a rapidly changing world (Andree & Domsel, 2022, pp. 113–114).

5. Conclusion: Connecting Compassion and Sustainability

In conclusion, the relationship between compassion and sustainability is integral to fostering a socially just and ecologically viable future. Both concepts aim to bring about positive change, addressing the most pressing challenges of our time. Compassion, emphasizing empathy and solidarity, intersects with but does not replace concepts such as justice and responsibility. While compassion fosters an emotional and relational commitment to sustainable living, justice demands structural changes, and responsibility emphasizes the duty to act. The interplay between these ethical principles fosters a holistic understanding of sustainability. Similarly, it encompasses ecological, economic, and social dimensions, highlighting the need for long-term, interconnected solutions.

The postmodern era challenges us to rethink our approach to sustainability, urging us to incorporate spiritual and ethical values into our understanding. By embracing a more holistic view, one that intertwines compassion with sustainability, we can cultivate a vision for the future that not only meets the needs of the present but also ensures the well-being of future generations. Ultimately, compassion and sustainability offer a pathway toward a more equitable, responsible, and harmonious world (Birkel, 2019, pp. 178–180).

References

- Andree, M., & Domsel, M. M. (2022). Die Paradigmen der Compassion und Freiheit als Bindeglieder zwischen Theologie und Ethik? Möglichkeiten spiritueller reflexiver Praxis im schulischen Kontext. *ÖRF*, 30(1), pp. 110–127.
- Altmeyer, S., & Stockinger, H. (2019). Ökologisches Lernen IST religiöses Lernen. *KATBL*, 144(3), pp. 165–167.
- Barstow, G. (2024). The Difficult Virtue of Vegetarianism in Tibetan Buddhism. In A. S. Gross, D. Aftandilian & B. R. Ambros (Eds.), *Animals and Religion* (pp. 159–163). London: Routledge.
- Birkel, S. (2019). Warum wir dran sind: Lernen für ein zukunftsfähiges Leben. *KATBL*, 144(3), pp. 177–181.

- Domsel, M. M. (2024). Krisendiskurse in bildungswissenschaftlichen, psychologischen und soziologischen Zeitschriften von 2020 bis 2023 – eine Literatursichtung aus religionspädagogischer Perspektive. *Theo-Web. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik*, 23(1), pp. 23–39.
- Domsel, M. M., & Steffens, M. (Eds.). (2024). *Compassion als Schlüssel für eine zukunftsfähige Bildung nachhaltiger Entwicklung?! Auftrag und Weiterentwicklung eines theologischen Prinzips*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Khorchide, M. (2012). *Islam ist Barmherzigkeit. Grundzüge einer modernen Religion*. Freiburg: Herder.
- Kuld, L. (2016). Compassion. In *Das wissenschaftlich-religionspädagogische Lexikon im Internet (WiReLex)* <https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Compassion.100124>
- Leal Filho, W., & Azul, A. M. (Eds.). (2021). *Handbook of sustainability science and research*. Cham: Springer.
- Metz, J. B. (2000). Compassion: Toward a global program of Christianity in the age of religious and cultural pluralism. In J. B. Metz, L. Kuld, & A. Weisbrod (Eds.), *Compassion: The global program of Christianity. Learning social responsibility* (pp. 9–20). Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder.
- Metz, J. B. (2000). Compassion. Zu einem Weltprogramm des Christentums im Zeitalter des Pluralismus der Religionen und Kulturen. In J. B. Metz, L. Kuld, & A. Weisbrod (Eds.), *Compassion. Weltprogramm des Christentums. Soziale Verantwortung lernen* (pp. 9–20). Freiburg: Herder.
- Naurath, E. (2010). Mit Gefühl gegen Gewalt. Mitgefühl als Schlüssel ethischer Bildung in der Religionspädagogik. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Pope Francis (2015). *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*. Vatican Press.
- Roebben, B. (2020). *Volharden in de broosheid: Spiritualiteit in tijden van corona*. Antwerpen: Halewijn.
- Schambeck, M. (2023). Was Religion und Theologie in Krisenzeiten zu bieten haben – religionssoziologische, sozialpsychologische und religionspädagogische Überlegungen. In M. Schambeck & W. Verburg (Eds.), *Wie Religion für Krisen taugt. Zum Beitrag religiöser Bildung in Krisenzeiten* (pp. 84–93). Göttingen: V&R.
- Thunberg, G. (2019, January 25). Speech in Davos. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7dVF9xylaw>
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations.
- Weissbrod, A., Kuhn, F., & Hirsch, F. (1994). Compassion: Ein Praxis- und Unterrichtsprojekt sozialen Lernens. Menschsein für andere. *Engagement. Zeitschrift für Erziehung und Schule*, 1994(2-3), pp. 268–307.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). (1987). *Our common future* (p. 8). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WCED Agenda 21: Programme of Action for Sustainable Development. (1992). United Nations.

Empirical Studies

Protestant Religious Education Teachers' attitudes towards Sustainability. Findings from a Qualitative-Empirical Study

Jennifer Jakob

1. Introduction

The concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) encompasses all areas of education, including religious education (RE). But what does that mean for RE and, in particular, for its teachers? What do they think about sustainability? How do they integrate sustainability into their teaching and daily lives?

This paper presents a study conducted among Protestant RE teachers in Austria between 2020 to 2023 (Jakob, 2024). In a first step the research objectives and questions will be described, followed by an outline of the methodological approach. Next, it provides an overview of the discourse on sustainability in the context of RE. The core of the paper is a discussion of the study's key findings. The aim is to offer insights into Protestant RE teachers' attitudes towards sustainability and how they engage with it in their professional and personal lives.

1.1 Research Objectives and Questions

The aim of the study is to broaden the perspective of religious education on the topic of sustainability by exploring the role of religious education in relation to sustainability and Education for Sustainable Development from the viewpoint of RE teachers.

Two main research questions are guiding the study:

- What are the attitudes of Protestant RE teachers at compulsory schools in Austria towards sustainability?
- How do they perceive their role as RE teachers in relation to Education for Sustainable Development?

1.2 Methodological Approach

To answer the research questions, individual interviews were conducted. The interview guide was developed based on the theoretical foundations outlined in Chapter 2. Additionally, group interviews were held to explore initial associations with sustainability and to understand what RE teachers

think of when they hear the term. The insights gained from these discussions helped shape the final interview guide.

A total of 16 Protestant RE teachers from Austrian compulsory schools participated in individual interviews. The RE teachers are teaching in various types of schools, mainly in primary school, but also in secondary school. They live and work in urban areas like Vienna, but also in rural regions.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analysed with the help of qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2015). The analysis revealed five main categories. These are:

- Personal approaches and descriptions
- Observations in everyday school life
- Sustainability as a topic in RE classes
- Function of RE teachers and of RE classes
- Reflection on opportunities and challenges

Key findings from these main categories will be discussed in Chapter 3.

2. Discourse in Religious Education

The discourse about sustainability and ESD in RE was leading the study and the development of the interview guide. Three main approaches shall be mentioned at this point and linked to the results.

With her work on didactics of religious education for sustainable development, Bederna (2019) is anchoring ESD in the RE discourse. She describes religious ESD as transformation education from a messianic perspective (Bederna, 2019, p. 235). Therefore, at the core of religious ESD are participation and personal creative possibilities. Bederna (2019) develops 10 didactic principles of religious ESD. There are several thematic overlaps between these principles and the results of the study. For example, religious ESD that is action-oriented, future-oriented and creation-oriented was mentioned by the RE teachers surveyed. However, the focus of the study is on the attitudes of RE teacher and not on the concrete implementation in RE classes. There were no explicit questions about the didactic of the RE teachers in the interviews.

Gärtner (2020) combines political theology and religious ESD. By doing so, it gets obvious that the perception of complexity and interdisciplinary creates areas of tension. When comparing the findings of this study with these areas of tension, only a few points of overlap can be identified. One explicit overlap emerges in the tension between socially preformed individual and the development of a mature subject (Gärtner, 2020). The

RE teachers surveyed aim to contribute to this development by fostering a critical mindset. They acknowledge the diverse needs of their pupils and therefore focus on small and manageable steps to help them navigate this tension.

Spahn-Skrotzky (2021) asks how RE does position itself in view of current crises and challenges. She strongly proposes to reflect the effects of the personal lifestyle on people and planet. By doing so the mind-behavior gap becomes visible. That means, we know how to be and how to live sustainable, but we do not act in that way. According to Spahn-Skrotzky (2021) a mindful attitude can be helpful to relate what you have learned to your own behavior. Interestingly, a connection between mindfulness and sustainability is mentioned by some of the RE teachers surveyed. To them this connection is self-evident. But also, reflection of the personal lifestyle is an important issue to the RE teachers surveyed.

3. Key Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents and discusses key findings from the study, but not along the five main categories that have been found and have been mentioned above but summarizing key issues from these main categories.

3.1 Complexity of the Sustainability Concept

First, it can be stated that the results of the study reflect the diversity of topics covered in the concept of sustainability. The RE teachers surveyed have different approaches to the concept of sustainability and bring in various topics related to it. Overall, the ecological dimension of sustainability is most prominent, which means most of the topics mentioned are related to the ecological dimension of sustainability.

Another central issue connected to sustainability is the future that is highlighted by all the RE teachers surveyed. They talk about their own future, but also about the future of coming generations. This aligns with the definition of sustainable development of the Brundtland-Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which emphasizes the responsibility of present generations towards those to come.

The RE teachers surveyed also stress the complexity of the concept of sustainability. They argue how important networking and interdisciplinary collaboration in schools is, when working on sustainability issues with their pupils.

It is interesting to notice that none of the RE teachers surveyed mentioned the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). There was no question about these concepts in the interviews, but nearly all of them highlighted the complexity of sustainability.

3.2 Responsibility and Mission

Most of the RE teachers surveyed cite their own faith as a key reference point for their commitment to sustainability. They mainly argue that everyone shares a responsibility for creation. One of the teachers put it simply: “We are all responsible for this.” This highlights the issue of responsibility that is frequently mentioned in the interviews. The RE teachers see themselves as responsible and view it as their mission to promote sustainability, according to their duty to care for creation. Responsibility is also a central issue among Australian Catholic RE teachers (Lavery, 2015). This raises the question of whether responsibility is a specific approach to sustainability among RE teachers or whether it is a broader perspective shared by teachers in general.

3.3 Reflective Approach to Sustainability

The RE teachers surveyed take a reflective approach to sustainability, which becomes evident when they talk about their engagement with their own lifestyle. For example, they consider ways to make their own mobility more sustainable or how to build a house in an environmentally friendly manner. In doing so they demonstrate a realistic perspective on sustainability issues. They talk about implementing sustainability in small steps and not coming up with unrealistic ideas. One RE teacher sums it up as follows: „I can't save the world either, but I can start to change things step by step.”

Another key aspect for the RE teachers surveyed is, that they want to be authentic as a role model. Which means that they admit their unsustainable behaviour and do not try to hide it from their pupils or colleagues. They argue that it is not realistic being 100% sustainable all the time. And they recognise that pupils quickly notice when their teachers are not being genuine.

3.4 Creation and Relationship

As previously mentioned, the RE teachers surveyed justify their commitment to sustainability through theological reasoning, particularly by emphasizing their responsibility for creation.

Some of the RE teachers surveyed associate creation with nature and environmental protection. This carries the risk of narrowing the understanding of creation (Hunze, 2018). But no clear trend could be identified in this regard.

Creation has another essential aspect according to the RE teachers surveyed. It emphasizes relationship on multiple levels: between people, between people and God and between people and the world around them. In this sense, creation is fundamentally about relationships.

The importance of relationships is particularly evident in RE classes. Relationship building is therefore an important issue to the RE teachers surveyed. Especially in Protestant RE classes there are usually small groups of pupils where the RE teachers know everyone and has time to talk and listen to every single child. This creates a unique learning atmosphere for the whole group and an open space for discussion. Therefore, it is possible to work on the important questions of the pupils, also on questions of sustainability and unsustainability. In those small groups pupils feel the safe space to ask all the questions that are important to them.

3.5 Power, Lack of Power and Guilt

It is interesting to see how the RE teachers surveyed deal with power, lack of power and guilt in relation to sustainable or unsustainable behavior and actions.

As most of them are teaching at several schools and just a few lessons per week at one school they are asking about their own influence in schools. They say that they are spending far too less time at one school to really be able to make a difference. In that regard RE teachers feel a lack of power.

One of the RE teachers surveyed talked in the interview about the teachers' room in one of her schools, where she observed how the teachers are not able to separate the waste properly. And she felt a lack of power in this situation and said: "If we don't manage it, how are the children supposed to manage it?" With that question she refers to the exemplary effect of teachers for their pupils.

What is also difficult for the RE teachers surveyed is the lack of transparency in questions of sustainability because of various complex connections. That can make them feel powerless. One of the RE teachers surveyed describes in the interview how disappointed and powerless she feels when she is not able to really understand if something is sustainable or if it is green washing.

But the RE teachers have power over their own actions to make sustainable choices. Regarding RE classes they state that they can decided

on priorities within the curriculum. If sustainability is a major issue to them, they can really focus on those topics in the curriculum that are connected to sustainability.

Asked about their emotions and feelings towards sustainability the RE teachers surveyed emphasized ambivalent feelings. This is connected to success and failure. When they feel powerful over their own actions they have positive feelings, but negative feelings when they feel lack of power.

What is important to the RE teachers surveyed is that they want to be authentic in their behavior and therefore admit unsustainable actions and choices. Or in other words: they want to admit their guilt if they feel it.

3.6 Opportunities and Obstacles for RE Classes

Finally, according to the RE teachers surveyed there are some opportunities and obstacles for RE classes in relation so sustainability.

Obstacles are mainly seen in little influence that RE teachers have at particular schools because they usually are teaching at many different schools. Many of the RE teachers surveyed emphasized this issue. And associated with that the RE teachers have to travel to different schools at one day which means they often have to go by car because in rural areas there is no adequate public transport network. That means they cannot choose a sustainable way of traveling between schools.

Despite this the RE teachers surveyed recognize several opportunities related to RE classes and sustainability. A main opportunity lies in the strong focus on relationships within RE classes. This allows RE teachers to incorporate the students' environment and respond to their individual questions about sustainability and unsustainability.

The other main opportunity that RE teachers see is that they can model and communicate responsibility by setting an example. The RE teachers surveyed strive to be authentic role models for their pupils, demonstrating responsibility in their own actions. By doing so they aim to instill a sense of responsibility for people, planet and creation.

4. Summary and Conclusion

The study shows that Protestant RE teachers in Austria actively engage with sustainability issues. They grasp the complexity of sustainability, reflect on their own actions and approach the topic with authenticity. Rather than promoting unrealistic ideas, they acknowledge their own shortcoming. However, it is important to note that the RE teachers surveyed may represent a particular sample with limited critical perspectives on

sustainability. It would be valuable to explore the views of RE teachers who take a more critical stance on sustainability.

In summary, it can be stated that there is a connection between sustainability issues and Protestant RE. The connection is implicit and explicit, in teaching content and in the behavior of RE teachers. The RE teachers surveyed perceive this connection as self-evident. They recognize that systemic change cannot happen overnight but instead approach sustainability step by step, gradually working towards a more sustainable future.

References

- Bederna, K. (2019). Every day for future: Theologie und religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Matthias Grünewald Verlag.
- Gärtner, C. (2020). Klima, Corona und das Christentum: Religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung in einer verwundeten Welt. Religionswissenschaft. transcript.
- Hunze, G. (2018). *Schöpfung* (Mirijam Zimmermann und Heike Lindner im Wissenschaftlich-Religionspädagogisches Lexikon, Ed.). Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft. <https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Schpfung.100284>
- Jakob, J. (2024). Nun sag', wie hast du's mit der Nachhaltigkeit? Eine qualitativ-empirische Studie zu Einstellungen evangelischer Religionslehrer:innen. V&R unipress, Universitätsverlag Osnabrück.
- Lavery S. (2015). Religious Educator: Championing the Concept of Sustainable Living. In M.T. Buchanan & A.-M. Gellel (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools* (pp. 115-129). Springer International Publishing.
- Mayring, P. (2015). Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken (12th rev. ed.). Beltz Verlag.
- Spahn-Skrotzki, G. (2021). *Klimakrise, externalisierender Lebensstil und Religionspädagogik* (1st ed.). klinkhardt forschung. Verlag Julius Klinkhardt.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our common future*. <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>.

South African and Swedish Children on the Human Being, Sustainability and the Future

Karin Sporre

To the question: ‘Do you think that what you do matters, that you can influence what happens in the world?’ a South African girl responded:

Well, what I do doesn’t really matter, ‘cause like I am just a small child. ... like I will be doing ... I do some things, but no one knows of it.

After a moment of hesitation she continued:

Well, there is one thing that influence, I influence. I am an actress, so like I do plays. I use mic:s when I am acting in the [name] Theatre. (SA, school 1, student no. 5).

In this book chapter you will meet this girl and 40 more children, 10 to 12 years old, from South Africa and Sweden. They shared their views about human beings, sustainability and the future in an interview study 2019. Here I will focus on some aspects of these interviews.

1. The Interview Study and its Background

For the interviews four schools in each country were chosen representing varying socio-economic conditions. Five, in one case six, students in each class participated in individual interviews that lasted 17 to 41 minutes. The children were interviewed in the language of instruction of their schools, i.e. in English or Swedish. I audiotaped the interviews and I transcribed them in full. Regarding research ethics, relevant permission had been granted in both countries, as well as written informed consent from the parents or care-givers, and oral consent from the children at the start of the interviews.

So far I have done analyses of varying kinds, searched for theoretical frameworks, and written a few articles based on the interviews (Sporre, 2021; Sporre & Osbeck, 2022; Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka & Osbeck, 2022; Borg & Sporre, 2023; Sporre, 2025; Sporre, forthcoming). To finalize the reporting of the project, a book with a complete report of the interview study is underway.

Children, Sustainability and Hope (the CSH-project) has been the working title of the research project.²⁵ It draws on two initial inspirational sources: a conference in South Africa in 2015 and a Swedish research tradition dating back to the 1970s.

1.1 The Conference in South Africa and the Swedish Research Tradition

In March 2015 a conference in honor of Prof. Dr. Denise Ackermann, a South African feminist theologian, was held at the University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa. As invited speakers we had been asked to address the theme 'Surprised Anew by the Mystery of Hope'. But how could a connection be established between educational research and hope?

An article by the Swedish researcher Maria Ojala (2012) provided a necessary link. Ojala had studied children's and adolescents' psychological attitudes to climate change and found them to express both worry and hope. But, the mere fact of asking them reminded of a Swedish research tradition from the 1970s. Then research in children's existential issues [in Swedish: *Livsfrågor*] started. A Swedish pedagogue and researcher, Sven Hartman, became the leading figure in that development (see e.g. Hartman, 1986a; 1986b; Hartman & Torstensson-Ed, 2007).

Characteristic for this research tradition and its gradually developing methodology was an interest in ethical and existential concerns of children. In fairly large numbers, children aged 6 to 12 years were asked, during school time to write down answers to questions such as:

This is Jessica. Right now she feels so good about life. She feels really happy but still nothing special has happened, it is just an ordinary day. Jessica feels like this – why do you think?

Or another question:

Sometimes it happens that you think about things that you cannot really figure out. This is Andrew. He is just now thinking about something he has been thinking about before, and which he would really like to know more about. What does Andrew think about?

Through the way questions as these, and others, were constructed, space opened up for the children to choose what to address in response to the questionnaires.

²⁵ The project was funded by Umeå School of Education 2020-2023 with Karin Sporre as the sole researcher. Website: <https://www.umu.se/en/research/projects/children-sustainability-and-hope>

1.2 An Interview Guide – with a Specific Start

Inspired by this kind of questions, an interview guide was developed for the CSH project – but with a new start. In 2018, Cape Town, with 4 million people, was on the verge of facing a total draught due to climate changes and being completely without fresh water. The campaign ‘Every drop counts’ was launched, and the disaster was prevented. In the same year, the summer in Sweden was an extremely dry one with scarcity of water locally and a few large-scale forest fires.

Given this background, schools in South Africa and Sweden were selected in communities that had water restrictions. In this way the interviews got a common start pointing. The first question to the children was whether they were aware that there had been a shortage of water? Next came the concrete question, what had they done in their family to save water? And, following up, why is it important that we save water? Thereafter followed four questions, including the two examples above. Next, for a change, the children were asked to respond in writing to two sets of questions about the human being, and justice. Finally, after the writing part, the interviews concluded with three new questions about sustainability and the future. Responses to these last questions are in focus in this chapter.

1.3 Two Parallel Studies

The CSH-interview study took place at the same time as a larger research project *The Child and Curriculum. Existential Questions and Educational Responses (The C&C project)*.²⁶ In Sweden in 2019-2020, we made comparative studies to older ones from the 1970s, late 1980s and early 2000s. In 11 school classes with more than 200 children we repeated questions from the earlier studies (Osbeck et al., 2024). We also included interviews with Swedish teachers (Kärnebro, 2023; Osbeck, Lilja & Fancourt, 2025) as well as studies on Scandinavian and German curricula regarding the role of students’ existential questions in them (Sporre, 2022; 2023). However, in this chapter the CSH-project is in focus.

²⁶ The project was funded by the Swedish Research Council, 2019-2024 (Dnr 2018-03435). The researchers were: Prof. Dr. Christina Osbeck, Dr. Katarina Kärnebro, Dr. Annika Lilja, Prof. Dr. Mette Buchardt, and Prof. Dr. Karin Sporre. Website: <https://www.umu.se/en/research/projects/the-child-and-curriculum.-existential-questions-and-educational-responses>

1.4 A Theoretical Framework

How then to interpret an interview study with children on their ethical and existential concerns? What value can be ascribed to their voices when it comes to concerns such as sustainability and climate change? Regarding hope? The human being?

In *Ethics in Light of Childhood* John Wall (2010) philosophically argues for a view on human existence seen through the lenses of childhood. Underlining interdependence and vulnerability as foundational human conditions, Wall argues for leaving the dichotomy between children and grown-ups behind. Through his argument children's agency is put on par with that of other humans and the power-laden asymmetry between children and grown-ups is challenged. Looking next at the inclusion of children and young people as global citizens, the need for 'empowered inclusion' is a further contribution by Josefsson & Wall (2020).

Focusing on the role of narratives in the work by Wall (2010) and Mark B. Tappan (1991; 2010) we argued in an article (Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka & Osbeck, 2022) for the need to see children's moral agency as a form of 'moral authorship', by pointing to the creativity that comes out of their existential interpretations of their lives, and that being something school needs to open up space for (see also Sporre, 2021; 2022; Osbeck et al., 2024).

2. The Theme of the Nuremburg Forum & This Chapter

The Nuremburg Forum 2024 had the theme *Education for Sustainable Development – Spiritual Dimensions?* However, this chapter is not a didactic study on ESD but rather explores *how* children 10 to 12 years old express their existential and ethical concerns, thus reflecting values and virtues related to sustainability and the future (see Sporre, forthcoming).

Furthermore, regarding 'spiritual dimensions', in the CSH-project matters of religious or other worldview convictions were not explicitly asked about. But, through the children's responses to the questions regarding the future the answers indicate whether hope is involved. Consequently, the two major research questions dealt with in this paper are: How do the children express their existential concerns? And, what are the similarities and differences between the South African and Swedish children?

3. On Human Beings

To summarise the results of the interviews – and this also applies to the C&C project – it is clear that children take in and reflect on what is going on around them. The following similarities can be observed between the South African and Swedish children: A concern for human beings to be equally treated irrespective of sex/gender or skin colour. This they regard to be an ‘ought’ but note that it is not always the case.

Their texts also reflect

- A right to live a good life, including rights for this also to animals and nature, and see need for this beyond war and poverty.

Another similarity is how they view

- School and education, as a resource to meet the future of all, but also their own.

Addressing the differences that come through in the interviews:

- The South African children seem to be more immersed in a community of relationships. They mention parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers.

It can also be noted that:

- Swedish children express more of a global outlook, being more knowledgeable about other countries, the world. They also seem to be more individualistic.

An open question from these observations could be, whether the South African children can be said to express an ethic of care, and the Swedish children more of an ethic of justice.

4. On Sustainability and Hope

4.1. Sustainability

Moving on to matters of sustainability. As indicated at the start of this chapter, one question posed to the students was, if they thought that what they do matters, that they can influence what happens in the world. A Swedish child responded:

R: Mm, I think so. [I: mm] Because I’ve seen someone, I do not know where I saw it, but maybe it was on a commercial or something. Then there were three or one person who said there was a lot of rubbish in the sea and so he started picking up and asking a lot of others, and eventually it became a big club around it, in, I do not know, maybe the world [I: Mm] who went and picked up rubbish in the sea and from the ground and so on. [I: Mm] So

absolutely. [I: Absolutely]. (Sw. school no. 3, student no. 1) [Author's translation].

So, exemplary action might start a movement.

The children were also asked: "What do you think that we human beings need to know to make the world more sustainable?". In the words of a South African child:

R: They should start with themselves and pass it on to other people, starting with respect, caring and being helpful. And, if they start with that and they do it to one person it will start spreading and the whole world will be filled with love. (SA. school no. 1, student no. 4).

What a vision of social sustainability! To the same question of what needs to be known a Swedish child answered:

R: Not to go by car at all. Find another way. Not fly either but ... it emits too much exhaust, carbon dioxide. [I: Mm]. The atmosphere, sort of, breaks up. [I: Yes] until ... [I: No?]. It is possible to go by bike but if you plan to go further, maybe it does not really work. (Sw. school no. 2, student no. 1) [Author's translation].

What is needed and what would work in our societies is definitely complicated and also a political matter.

4.2 Hope and Worry?

The question of how the children view both the present and the future draws attention to the degrees of hope and worry in the responses (cf. Ojala, 2012). One of the Swedish children expressed considerable worry about the future. In response to the question of whether one can influence what happens in the world she thoughtfully gave three alternative approaches – to climate agency:

R: It depends on how much one does. If one would do, sort of, very much like [inventing] such machines that suck out all, bad atmosphere, yes then I could make a lot of difference. But if I sort of, go around and, yes, plant seeds, then I think I do a little. I do not think I do very much then. And if I go and demolish cars then I do not think I do much at all. [I: No. So, one influences whatever one does?] R: Mmm. (Sw. school no. 3, student no. 3) [Author's translation].

Throughout her interview this girl put hope in inventions and technology to be used for crucial solutions of climate problems. At the same time, she was very anxious when looking ahead, mentioning the need to have a lot of plants around herself as a grown-up – to be able to breathe.

Anxiety was present in another way with one of the South African girls who was asked what a girl who had found a spot of her own where she could be alone²⁷, might be thinking of:

R: She is thinking of [pause] [I: Of something?] R: [silence] [I: When you are on your own what do you think of?] R: I think that someone might come, and take me and go away with me. [I: So, you don't want to be on your own?] R: No. [I: No. You want to be together with people?] R: Yes. [I: Yeah. Mmm. So, being on your own makes you fearful?] R: Mm. [I: Yes. And maybe that is the same for Patricia as well...]. (SA. school no. 2, student no. 6).

Here there is an existential anxiety directly connected to the present-day-situation. Could it be said to exemplify a powerlessness that blocks possibilities for hope and for transcending the present into the future?

4.3 Sustainability – In Summary

It was interesting to note that both among the South African and Swedish students the word 'sustainability' [Sw. *hållbarhet*] was difficult to explain, but the matters were well-known. The children shared:

- an awareness of the importance of water for survival and the risks of scarcity – a concern expressed stronger among the South African children.
- knowledge of how plastic is detrimental to fish. Among South African children this was more clearly connected to fish as food, an important part in the food chain.
- a strong concern for the care of animals, and the importance of not littering but picking up rubbish.

As to differences between the Swedish and South African children it is noticeable that:

- only Swedish children brought up means of transportation and pollution of air via petrol-driven cars compared to electric ones.
- South African children expressed more of communal understandings of life e.g. regarding the need to save water.

As illustrated by the examples provided, students articulate both hope and worry.

²⁷ The question in the interview guide was: "Sometimes one can feel one wants to be on one's own. This is Patricia. She has found a spot of her own to be able to think for herself. What is it that Patricia is thinking of? Well, she thinks that ...?"

5. Towards the Future – and Hope?

The last question of the interviews pertained to sustainable development and the relationship between how we live now and how things might become well in the future, and what might be important for children to know as grown-ups.

In responding the children addressed both personal and common aspects of the future. Personal dreams, professional and other, but also the importance of school for contributing knowledge were among the answers. The answers also demonstrate how children are existentially concerned and assume ethical responsibility, they express 'moral authorship' (Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka & Osbeck, 2022). Most of them have the capacity to envisage their future selves. They do this in a variety of roles and situations: as adults, as professionals, as parents, as political citizens, and as politicians. It is evident that these responses are indicative of hope.

References

- Borg, F. & Sporre, K. (2023). Children's empowered inclusion in early childhood education for sustainability. In S. L. DeZutter (Ed.), *International perspectives on educating for democracy in early childhood: recognizing young children as citizens* (pp. 260–78). Routledge.
- Hartman, S. G. (1986a). *Barns tankar om livet* [Children's thoughts about life]. Natur och Kultur.
- Hartman, S. G. (1986b). *Children's philosophy of life*.J Stockholm Institute of Education.
- Hartman, S. G. & Torstenson-Ed, T. (2007). *Barns tankar om livet*. [Children's thoughts about life]. Natur och kultur.
- Josefsson, J. & Wall, J. (2020). Empowered inclusion: theorizing global justice for children and youth. *Globalizations*, 17(6), 1043–60.
- Kärnebro, K. (2023). Teaching RE – for what purpose? A discourse analysis of teachers' talk about their RE teaching in relation to the children's existential questions and concerns. *Nordidactica* (4), 158–78.
- Ojala, M. (2012). Regulating worry, promoting hope: How do children, adolescents, and young adults cope with climate change? *International Journal of Environmental & Science Education*, 7(4), 537–61.
- Osbeck, C., Kärnebro, K., Lilja, A. & Sporre, K. (2024). Children's existential questions and worldviews. Possible RE responses to performance anxiety and an increasing risk of exclusion. *Journal of Religious Education*, 72, 51–72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-023-00219-8>
- Osbeck, C., Lilja, A. & Fancourt, N. (2025). RE teachers' ways of balancing children's existential concerns and the curriculum: mirrored through established RE approaches. *Journal of Religious Education*. 73, 37–56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-024-00249-w>

- Sporre, K. (2021). Young people – citizens in times of climate change? A childist approach to human responsibility. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 77(3, a6783), 1-8. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6783>
- Sporre, K. (2022). Children's existential questions – recognized in Scandinavian curricula, or not? *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(3), 367-83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.1962982>
- Sporre, K. (2023). Varying curricular responses to children's existential questions in RE syllabi from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Bavaria and Berlin-Brandenburg. *Journal of Religious Education*, 71, 167-87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-023-00203-2>
- Sporre, K. (2026). 'Others' as moral teachers – South African and Swedish children on virtues and values. In G. Gelardini, K. Fuglseth, & P. J. Bekken, (Eds.), *Virtues et Humanitas. Bridging Virtues and Values of Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Paideia*. Waxmann.
- Sporre, K. (forthcoming). *Sustainability, justice and the future – south African & Swedish children's existential and ethical concerns*. African Minds, Cape Town.
- Sporre, K. & Osbeck, C. (2022). Responding to the voices of children. *NORRAG, NSI 07* (Special Issue: Education in times of climate change), 96-99.
- Sporre, K., Lotz-Sisitka, H. & Osbeck, C. (2022). Taking the moral authorship of children and youth seriously in times of the Anthropocene. *Ethics and Education*, 17(1), 101-16.
- Tappan, M. B. (1991). Narrative, authorship, and the development of moral authority. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 54, 5-25.
- Tappan, M. B. (2010). Telling Moral Stories: From Agency to Authorship. *Human Development*, 53, 81-86.
- Wall, J. (2010). *Ethics in Light of Childhood*. Georgetown University Press.

Religious and Worldview Education as an Existential Resource in Grieving More-Than-Human

Saila Poulter, Emma Kurenlahti, Arniika Kuusisto, Lasse Lipponen

1. Introduction

The ecological crisis at hand shapes the living conditions of children in all corners of the world and forces them to face many uncomfortable facts of human vulnerability and death (Lysgaard, Bengtsson & Laugesen, 2019). These facts cannot be hidden from children, as they are very detective to events and discussions in their social and natural environment, and process these through play and exploring the world (Pursi, Lipponen, Poulter & Kurenlahti, 2024). However, children are often left alone in facing the emotional load caused by the loss of nonhuman life.

There is an emerging body of research on ecological changes that can evoke various types of emotions, including ecological grief (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Pihkala 2025). The literature on existential psychology and philosophy related to grief discusses death, loss and grieving as something that confronts us with the question of what it means to be a human (Sköld & Brinkmann, 2022). Therefore, it is vital to consider ecological crisis not only as a matter of ecology but one concerning our deepest beliefs, values and worldviews grounding our existence and spirituality. Grieving the loss of not only humans but also the more-than-human dimension of life is a particular ethical momentum of our time, challenging the educators of supporting ways of being at a loss and sustaining hope and resilience under big existential threats.

Living amidst these existential threats is characterized by McBrien (2016) as the Necrocene, or the era of death, which denotes a historical period of extinction perpetuated and driven by capitalism. This death-inducing era refers not only to human-induced species extinction or other forms of ecological disaster, but also to the extinguishing of social structures, values, cultures, languages, and peoples in the pursuit of profit for a few within the capitalist system. That is why we need to ask how such an existential threat, and the overall ecological crisis, may cause hopelessness and grief in children's lives, as their relatedness to the

material and spiritual world can be shattered by this necrotic process of extinction.

In this chapter, we will discuss grief of more-than-human from existential and worldview perspectives. With more-than-human we refer to all material living beings, but also the possibility of transcendence (Plumwood, 2012). We understand human beings as existential creatures interpreting the deep questions of being always from the particular historical and cultural contexts, which is why we engage with the notion of grief that understands grief as a human experience that is interactively constructed and culturally mediated normative practice (Pursi et al., 2024). With the help of the concept of existential resilience, we will briefly examine religious and worldview education as a particular context and resource in addressing the questions of sustainable life, death and spirituality. Additionally, we conclude that education in religious and worldview perspectives can foster a deeper understanding of how to navigate grief and loss in the context of the Necrocene.

2. Grieving Concerns the Questions of our Existence

As discussed in the grief literature (e.g. Sköld & Brinkmann, 2022) the loss of a loved one can have significant consequences for one's existential positioning. Death, loss and grief are particular existential interruptions (Poulter, Lipponen & Pursi, 2025), which might "teach" how we become who we are through our relationships with others who one day will no longer be there (Sköld, 2023). We note that such an existential interruption can also relate to losses of non-human life that may seem intangible and less visible than human losses (Pihkala, 2025). When facing the fact that someone or something no longer exists, I can come to an understanding that I do still exist (Brinkmann, 2018). Children encounter the questions of existence for instance when they see the forest used as a playground being cut down or when they find a dead bird run over by a car. As the conceptual and empirical grief studies show, community and rituals can play a significant role in supporting bereavement around human loss (Brinkmann, 2019; Klass, 2022). However, there are also meaning-related aspects to an individual's resilience to be noted when discussing grieving the loss of more-than-human.

The concept of existential resilience describes the sufficient competence to live with 'questions of existence' during the ecological crisis (Pihkala, 2020), to which an individual's sense of meaning in life and construction of worldview (Segesvärd, Launonen, Kangas, Gearon & Kuusisto, 2025) and

finding one's place in the world and relatedness and connectedness to others (Pardon, Uusitalo, Lavanti, Launonen & Kuusisto) are also relevant. Importantly, we do not understand resilience merely as an individual asset but rather see resilience as a communal and cultural, even societal (e.g. preparedness and national policies during the pandemic) resource for a child. Thus, we highlight the importance of the early childhood education community (e.g., Raivio, Skaremyr & Kuusisto, 2022), family, worldview traditions, and nature in resourcing and supporting the child's existential resilience. This relates to a sense of meaning in life, and the questions of being and mortality. Existential resilience refers to the interdependency and entanglement of personal, collective and planetary wellbeing since the concept sees individuals as part of the larger human and ecological community (Lund University, 2024). Awareness of such relatedness of all forms of life links existential resilience to the concept of spirituality (Hay & Nay, 1998). In the context of the Necrocene, this sense of relatedness should be examined collectively through the lens of grief and loss within educational settings.

When discussing children's grief in an era of death, we need to look at the species extinction from multiple angles of ideological, social, historical, cultural and political reasons, which shape the 'right' and 'wrong' ways of expressing, interpreting, and narrating the experiences of loss and grief (Brinkmann, 2019; Kofod, 2017). Grief is never an isolated emotion, which is why grief should always be understood as a part of a wider cultural-historical practices and children's sense-making processes in which individual grief is always intertwined (Pursi et al., 2024). This intersubjective nature of grief relates also to the spiritual dimension of grief. Living in the Necrocene, our relatedness with more-than-human becomes a question of life and death in a sense that these questions are fundamentally existential and need to be engaged with children. Next, we will discuss the role of education related to religions and worldviews in embracing the existential matters entangled in ecological loss. We will reflect these matters from the Finnish educational context.

3. Religious and Worldview Education in Building Existential Resources

“Access to collective spiritual imagination and experience that is inherited and elaborated over generations rather than individually chosen and developed is always richer - - .” (Plumwood, 2012, p. 229)

Recently, interesting transformative ideas have been presented about the worldview connection to ecological crisis as they are part and parcel of the cultural, social and spiritual reality around ecological circumstances (Pihkala, 2023; Poulter, Kurenlahti, Kuusisto & Lipponen, 2025; Rissanen, Aarnio-Linnavuori & Mansikka-aho, 2024). Grief concerning the loss of human and more-than-human life provokes existential concern that is closely connected to teachings, narratives, norms, beliefs and values linked to religious and worldview traditions. Pursi et al. (2024) demonstrate how children can benefit from cultural sources related to religious narratives and spiritual ideas in their sense-making in grief. In encountering mass extinction and losses in the secularized and culturally diverse context, worldview traditions can provide children with meaningful support, and help children to make sense of their personal worldviews, which may support them in dealing with grief in social contexts with contradictory belief systems.

In Necrocene, institutional education has a moral responsibility to support children's abilities for facing emotional and existential anxiety. In this chapter, we consider the support of children's existential resilience to be a fundamental task. Engaging with the questions of mortality, purpose of life and relatedness with the more-than-human is mostly operated at religious and worldview education classes at school. Religious traditions have always fostered these questions in their narratives, teachings and practices, and in the current educational settings permeated by superdiversity (Vertovec, 2019), these resources are introduced to the pupils as plural opportunities for finding hope, purpose and meaning.

The core aim of the Finnish religious and worldview education - offered in different forms for alternate age groups - is to provide pupils with sources for building and evaluating their own identity and worldview. According to the current National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNAE, 2014), teaching also aims to support pupils' growth to exist in the world in a sustainable way. The content areas of both religious education and its alternative secular ethics (for more about the Finnish religious education model, see Poulter, Kuusisto, Malama & Kallioniemi, 2017) for the grades 1 to 2 (ages 7 and 8), state that in religious education "the teaching examines life issues related to human birth and death, as well as respect for life". The key content includes "the pupil's own actions and their consequences, responsibility for other people, the environment and nature, empathy, human dignity and individuality". (p. 135.) Respectively, in secular ethics the aim is to "explore different forms of life on Earth while reflecting on the limitations of life", to "explore the pupil's own immediate environment and

examine the impact of their own choices and actions on it”, and to “look for meaningful experiences related to nature”. (p. 140.)

With slightly older pupils (grades 3 to 6, ages 9 to 13) the key content in religious education includes “*human dignity, respect for life and the care of nature*”. The curriculum holds that the focus is “*on the student's own choices and the values that underpin their actions, as well as global responsibility*”. A good life is considered to require “*life skills, self-awareness and holistic well-being*”. (p. 248.) In secular ethics, the pupils “*explore different concepts of nature, the future of nature and humans, and sustainable development*”. The pupils also “*practice analyzing and justifying our own views in relation to the worldview and a sustainable future*”. (p. 255.)

With the oldest pupils in compulsory basic education in Finland (grades 7 to 9, ages 13 to 16), the teaching in religious education “*will address current and societal ethical issues such as ecosocial education, participation and influence in communities and society, and religions in building social and world peace*” (p. 405). In secular ethics, the pupils are to “*learn about different understandings of the relationship between humans and nature, e.g. humanistic, utilitarian, mystical and nature-centered*”. In the class, pupils will “*explore the possibilities for a sustainable future for nature and society, as well as issues related to environmental ethics, such as animal rights*”. The aim is to “*consider how we can act responsibly for a sustainable future*”. (pp. 412-413.)

Interestingly, death and grief are not very explicitly featured in the Finnish curriculum, but the finiteness and vulnerability of human and nonhuman life is used to justify the human responsibility of all forms of life. The way we understand these curricular aims such as “respect of life”, “limitations of life”, “care of nature”, and “life questions” relate to deep questions of being, belonging and identity, which can raise a variety of emotions such as grief: how should I live so that my choices would not cause harm to other living beings? Where do I belong on the planet Earth? How does ecological loss affect my identity and future?

The limitations and loss of life also touches the social and cultural aspects of life: Who is the one I relate by being with? Who can I share my thoughts with? How does the loss affect my community? Looking at the curricular content description above, these issues are of fundamental importance in religious and worldview education. These curricular content areas in religious and worldview education are also related to transformative pedagogical approaches such as empathy, compassion, kindness, and mindfulness - things that are considered as important aspects of finding sustainable ways of living (Ramstetter, Rupprecht,

Mundaca, Osika, Stenfors, Klackl & Wamsler, 2023; Wamsler, Simon, Ducros, & Osberg, 2024).

4. Conclusion

As Stanescu (2012) argues, we face an ethical imperative in this era of death to mourn all lives, encompassing both human and, particularly, nonhuman beings. It is problematic if the emotional distress caused by ecological degradation remains private, which is why grief should be shared more with others and expressed in public settings (Varutti, 2024). Recognizing shared loss, death, and sorrow within educational contexts can create opportunities for collective and visible mourning as we confront the wave of death surrounding us together with children. We believe that expanding our collective and ritualistic expressions of grief for the more-than-human can be a vital means of fostering existential resilience during this ecological crisis. Secondly, the acknowledgment of our own responsibility in the crises is another important aspect from the perspective of moral education. Thirdly, the contemplative approaches can support the development of a pupil's empathy, the search for purpose in life, and finding hope in the era of death.

We see the ecological crisis as a crisis touching upon our entire social and existential belonging to the earth. We argue that supporting children's existential resilience means moving away from death-denying culture and belittling the loss of more-than-human. Awareness of the relatedness of all forms of life connects us to explore the spiritual dimension and sacredness of life (Val Plumwood, 2012). At the level of educational practice and in religious and worldview education in particular, we could perhaps better recognize the importance of the communal elements of children's social practices, such as a shared sense-making in grief, and dealing with the questions of purpose of life, truth, hope, love, and belonging (Pursi et al, 2024; Sagberg & Røen, 2011). To appreciate grief as a kind of educational question concerning the question of how one will exist with loss, one is given an opportunity of 'being taught by' loss (Biesta, 2022; Sköld, 2023; Poulter et al.). Understood as an existential challenge, grieving can pose us with completely new questions about existing in the world after loss.

References

- Brinkmann, S. (2019). A society of sorrow: The constitution of society through grief. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 20(2), 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2018.1521339>
- Cunsolo, A., & Ellis, N. R. (2018). Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change related loss. *Nature Climate Change*, 8(4), 275–281.
- FNAE (The Finnish National Agency for Education). 2014. *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education*. Publications 2016:5. Helsinki: Finnish National Agency of Education.
- Hay, D., & Nye, R. (1998). *The spirit of the child*. London: Fount Paperbacks, HarperCollins Publishers.
- Lund University. <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/research-and-innovation/thematic-collaboration-initiatives/existential-resilience>
- Lysgaard, J. A., Bengtsson, S., & Laugesen, M. H. (2019). *Dark pedagogy: Education, horror and the anthropocene*. Springer International Publishing AG.
- McBrien, J. (2016). Accumulating extinction: Planetary catastrophism in the necrocene. In J. W. Moore (Ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism* (pp. 116–137). Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Pihkala, P. (2025). Ecological Grief, Religious Coping, and Spiritual Crises : Exploring Eco-Spiritual Grief. *Pastoral Psychology*. 74, 69–96. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-024-01158-3>
- Plumwood, V. (2012). *The eye of the crocodile*. ANU Press.
- Poulter, S., Kuusisto, A., Malama, M., & Kallioniemi, A. (2017). Examining Religious Education in Finland from a Human Rights Perspective. In A. Sjöborg, & H.-G. Ziebertz (Eds.), *Religion, Education and Human Rights: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives* (pp. 49–61). Springer International Publishing AG. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54069-6_4
- Poulter, S., Lipponen, L., & Pursi, A. (2025). Grief as an Existential Interruption: Adults Narrating Their Childhood Grief. *Culture & Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X251372483>
- Poulter, S., Kurenlahti, E. A., Kuusisto, A., & Lipponen, L. (2025). In S. Altmeyer, B. Grümme, H. Kohler-Spiegel, E. Naurath, B. Schröder & F. Schweitzer (eds.) *Im Mittelpunkt: Kinder*. (pp. 232–241). *Jahrbuch der Religionspädagogik*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Pursi A, Lipponen L., Poulter, S. and Kurenlahti, E. (2024). Emotional Configurations of Grief: Narratives from Childhood. *Culture & Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X241242408>
- Raivio, M., Skaremyr, E., & Kuusisto, A. (2022). Caring for Worldviews in Early Childhood Education: Theoretical and Analytical Tool for Socially Sustainable Communities of Care. *Sustainability*, 14(7), 3815. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14073815>
- Ramstetter, L., Rupperecht, S., Mundaca, L., Osika, W., Stenfors, C. U. D., Klackl, J., & Wamsler, C. (2023). Fostering collective climate action and leadership:

- Insights from a pilot experiment involving mindfulness and compassion. *iScience*, 26(3), Article 106191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2023.106191>
- Ratcliffe, M. & Richardson, L. (2023). Grief over Non-Death Losses: A Phenomenological Perspective. *Passion: Journal of the European Philosophical Society for the Study of Emotions*, 1(1), pp. 50–67. <https://doi:10.59123/passion.viii.12287>
- Rissanen, I., Aarnio-Linnanvuori, E., & Mansikka-aho, A. (2024). Worldview Transformation in and through Education: Mapping the Nexus of Climate Education and Worldview Education. In L. Gearon, A. Kuusisto, S. Poulter, A. Toom, & M. Ubani (Eds.), *Religion and Worldviews in Education: The New Watershed* (pp. 194-206). Routledge Research in Religion and Education. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003265696-17>
- Segersvärd, R., Launonen, L., Kangas, J., Gearon, L.F. & Kuusisto, A. (2025). Developing existential resilience in the lives of young children. In M. Ubani (Ed.) *Religion, learning, literacy. Theories and concepts for 21st century public education*. Palgrave.
- Sköld, A. (2023). A social ontology of grief. *Theory & Psychology*, 33(1): 24-41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543221128231>
- Sköld, A. & Brinkmann, S. (2022). The oughtness of grief: ontological, cultural and existential perspectives. In A., Koster and E. H. Kofod (eds.) *Cultural, Existential and Phenomenological Dimension of Grief Experience*. Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 162-174.
- Stanescu J. (2012). Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals. *Hypatia*. 27:567–582.
- Vallgård, K., Alexander, K., & Olsen, S. (2015). Emotions and the global politics of childhood. In S. Olsen (Eds.), *Childhood, youth and emotions in modern history: National, colonial and global perspectives* (pp. 12–34). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Wamsler, C., Simon, L., Ducros, G., & Osberg, G. (2024). Transformative Climate Resilience Education for Children and Youth: From Climate Anxiety to Resilience, Creativity and Regeneration, Literature review conducted for the ERASMUS+ Project 2023-1-SE01-KA220-SCH-000158705. Lund University.
- Varutti, M. (2024). Claiming ecological grief: Why are we not mourning (more and more publicly) for ecological destruction? *Ambio* 53, 552–564. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-023-01962-w>
- Zilliagus, H., & Wolff, L.-A. (2021). Climate Change and Worldview Transformation in Finnish Education Policy. In G. W. Noblit (Ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Education*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1676>

What Is Taught about Climate Change? – The Biblical Motives of Stewardship and Dominion within the US-Evangelical Climate Debate

Phillip Angelina

1. The Larger Political Debate

The topic of climate change and US-evangelicalism cannot be examined without considering the broader social and cultural contexts that shape the debate. We cannot assume that the debate over climate change within evangelical groups is purely theological and biblical. They are intertwined with the political debates being held nationwide (Pally, 2022, p. 3). Although a majority of US-Americans do support the prioritizing of renewable energy sources, only one in four republicans “consider climate change a significant threat” (Tyson et al., 2023). So, when we talk about the climate change debate in US-evangelicalism, it needs to be stressed that this is one part of a larger debate that is happening within the country.

This paper examines the two biblical narratives which are being used within US-evangelicalism to address the topic of climate change. First, evangelicalism is going to be defined, so that the importance of Special Purpose Groups (SPGs) can be highlighted. Afterwards, the narratives of *stewardship* or *creation care* on the one hand, and *dominion* on the other will be examined. As a conclusion, the application of these narratives in SPGs will be illustrated.

2. What Constitutes Evangelicalism?

Even though evangelicals are lumped together as one denominational entity, this is misleading. “Evangelicalism is certainly not a denomination in the usual sense of an organized religious structure. It is, however, a denomination in the sense of a name by which a religious grouping is denominated” (Marsden, 1986, p. viii). To better understand what is meant by evangelicalism, we will orient ourselves around the Bebbington Quadrilateral: *conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism*. “There are the four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the

Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism” (Bebbington, 1989, pp. 2–3). Historically, evangelicals have distinguished themselves from mainline churches by showing greater interest in building a personal relationship with Jesus (Pally, 2022, p. 8). It is not just the quadrilateral that define evangelicals, they are also bound together by their shared experience, even though no religious leader has succeeded in uniting evangelical movements into a single denomination (Marsden, 1991, pp. 4–6). Evangelicalism as a movement emerged within the Anglo-American context of the early 18th century and always had an ambivalent relationship with the broader culture it engaged with (Noll, 2011, pp. 21–23). The evangelical identity grew out of a Christian culture in which individuals differentiated “their faith and commitment from the nominal forms of Christian adherence” (Stanley, 2013, pp. 11–12) It is a Protestant movement for which the Bible is its main authority and which is anti-statist, revivalistic and critical of organized religion (Noll, 2011, pp. 24–28). Despite the differences within the evangelical movements, they do share various aspects, e.g., worship songs, missionary styles, prayer rituals, and the study of the Bible. All denominations that have grown out of the evangelical movement see themselves as rooted in scripture (Marsden, 1986, p. x). A vital aspect is that, because of these similarities, interdenominational work, schools, and missions can be formed easily (Marsden, 1986, p. xii).

3. Restructuring of American Religion

As Wuthnow points out, the changes in American society during the 1960s and 1970s have led to the “Restructuring of American Religion”. In his analysis, it is as follows: before the “cultural revolution”, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement, American religion, which consisted mainly of Protestantism, except in the coastal region, had divisions within these broad descriptors, mainly between denominations. Even though there were similarities and, to a certain degree, cooperation among religious denominations, there was also strife and competition among them (Wuthnow, 1989a). “In saying that American religion has undergone a restructuring I mean to suggest that it has to some extent been remolded by the force of changes in the larger society” (Wuthnow, 1989a, p. 5).

Wuthnow pinpoints this shift within American society and religion through the expansion of the central government, the expansion of education, and the urbanization of the country (Wuthnow, 1989a, 60–89).

“Or put differently, as the population becomes more educated, denominational boundaries seem to become less effective in keeping people loyal to only a single denomination” (Wuthnow, 1989a, pp. 90). Another factor that accelerated change was Supreme Court Rulings, next to the prominent example of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, the court’s decision on *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the exclusion of mandatory prayers in public schools, which was met with strong disagreement from the evangelical denominations (Wuthnow, 1989b, pp. 55–57). These societal changes led to a significant shift within the denominations, which, in turn, affected society (Wuthnow, 1989, pp. 60–99). For Wuthnow, all the mentioned developments led to a significant shift: the division within American denominations does not run along denominational lines, but rather within denominations, within the liberal and conservative forces in one denomination (Wuthnow, 1989b, p. 178).

Special Purpose Groups (SPG) played a major role in this shift. Special Purpose Groups raise political and societal awareness and promote certain topics within churches. One of the most known SPG in the US is “The New Christian Right” (Bruce, 1988). Wuthnow points out that these groups are not bound by church or denominational lines; rather, people from all sorts of denominations are welcome. “In short, special purpose groups have not only increased in prominence relative to denominations but have also become more distinctly separate from denominations in origins and sponsorship” (Wuthnow, 1989a, p. 113). SPGs serve as a revitalizing force within US religion and encourage members to participate politically alongside their faith. SPGs, like for instance the moral majority, could connect many people and were an outlet for their frustration (Bruce, 1988, pp. 23). Wuthnow’s framework for distinguishing between liberals and conservatives shows that a broader discussion is underway within white Christianity.

4. Lynn White and the Evangelical Answer

In 1967, Lynn White argued that Western Christianity was responsible for the ecological crisis because of its theology of man’s dominion over the earth (White, 1967, pp. 1205–1207). Francis A. Schaeffer’s *Pollution and the Death of Man* (originally published 1970) responds to White’s accusation. Schaeffer managed this by combining two ideas that were to become the main frameworks for opposing views: stewardship and dominion (Zaleha, 2018, p. 76; Gautier, 2024, p. 79). This work used to be authoritative within

the evangelical discussion on climate change until the mid-1990s (Zaleha, 2018, pp. 74-77).

For Schaeffer, creation has value in itself because God created it and treats it with integrity (Schaeffer, 2011, pp. 45-57). Human beings are, on the one hand, part of creation, but on the other hand, they are “unique in the creation” (Schaeffer, 2011, p. 49). He interprets Romans 8 and Romans 6 and states that through sin man was separated from God, from other humans, and from creation, so that through Christ healing in all these areas can become a reality (Schaeffer, 2011, pp. 63-66). Schaeffer concludes: “On the basis of the fact that there is going to be total redemption in the future, not only of man but of all creation, the Christian who believes the Bible, should be the man who— with God’s help and in the power of the Holy Spirit — is treating nature now in the direction of the way nature will be then. It will not now be perfect, but there should be something substantial or we have missed our calling” (Schaeffer, 2011, p. 68). For Schaeffer, God has given man dominion over nature; he cites Genesis 1:28, but his understanding of dominion is one of stewardship (Schaeffer, 2011, p. 69). Sin has led to a wrong way of exercising dominion, and treating creation rightly means “treating the thing as having value in itself, exercising dominion without being destructive” (Schaeffer, 2011, p. 72). His whole argumentative structure is very close to a classical evangelical “trademark” – oriented around a certain biblical text. For Schaeffer, man has dominion, but not to tyrannically exploit the earth, but to care for the earth as a steward, because redemption is for all of creation (Schaeffer, 2011, pp. 45-74). The influence of this argument can be seen in the first publication of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) *For the Health of the Nation* in which they declared similarly to Schaeffer’s argument: “We are not the owners of creation but its stewards summoned by god to ‘watch over and care for it’” (Pally, 2011, Kindle edition, 77%). There was a campaign called “What Would Jesus Drive?” at the beginning of the 21. Century that showed: environmental protection was a topic on which liberal and conservative evangelicals could agree (Warner & Jiang, 2019). This is also reflected in the big political arena. For instance, Republicans and Democrats did advocate for environmental protection together (*The Alliance for Climate Protection*, n. d.). Yet, there is a debate within evangelicalism on climate change. This is demonstrated on the organizational level by the fact that more and more conservative voices came together to oppose the NAE’s work.

Wilkinson shows in her study *Between God and Green* that climate change is seen as a battleground (Wilkinson, 2012). “At a deeper level, however, the debate is emblematic of broader contests between the moderate and conservative wings of evangelicalism; the more extended

forces of economics, politics, and ethics are ultimately at work” (Wilkinson, 2012, p. 66). This divide on the topic of climate change can be seen as a dissemination of Schaeffer’s argument, where on the one side the focus is on stewardship and creation care and on the other side dominion. It can also be seen as a conformation of Wuthnow’s argument that the division within, in this case, evangelicalism, is not between denominations but between liberal and conservative forces within denominations.

5. SPGs and Their Arguments

Before a brief overview on how the Special Purpose Groups (SPG), such as *Young Evangelicals for Climate Action* (YECA, n. d.) and the *Cornwall Alliance – For the Stewardship of Creation* (n. d.), present the topic of climate change, an explanation of the concepts of stewardship, creation care, and dominion must be given. Calvin B. DeWitt, a prominent voice within evangelicals who promote creation care, wrote extensively on stewardship and creation care along with Loren Wilkinson and participated in the founding of the *Evangelical Environmental Network* (EEN) (Wilkinson, 2012, pp. 16–21). For him, creation-care theology has to be biblically sound and applicable in practice (DeWitt, 2006, pp. 569–574). His teaching on climate change is rooted in the framework of creation, sin, resurrection, and restoration. DeWitt’s argument starts with God as the creator and provider of all of creation (DeWitt, 1993, pp. 134–137; see also DeWitt 1989, 1994, 1998). A vital biblical motive for DeWitt is found in Psalm 24:1, which states that the earth and every creature, including humans, is the Lord’s (DeWitt, 1994, p. 50). Through sin, God and all of creation were separated. The atonement through Jesus Christ is not just for humankind but also for all of creation. Creation is being restored, and humans shall participate in the restoration (DeWitt, 1993, pp. 138–143). For DeWitt, the separation that sin brought to the earth is so strong that it leads Christians to neglect and degrade the environment, to neglect stewardship, and to read dominion as dominance (DeWitt, 1993, pp. 139–147). For this reason, awareness needs to occur within the Christian community so that creation can be appreciated and responsible stewardship can be lived before God (DeWitt, 1993, p. 147). “Environmental responsibility lies at the center of Christian faith and life, requiring every person who professes Christ to be faithful in their care and keeping of the creation” (DeWitt, 1991, p. 115).

E. Calvin Beisner, spokesperson for the *Cornwall Alliance* and a staunch opponent of the works of Calvin DeWitt and the EEN, sparked backlash

against creation care theology and climate change advocates (Wilkinson, 2012, pp. 65–67). The evangelical environmentalists, as Beisner calls advocates of the EEN, do take the topic of ecology seriously whilst staying faithful to fundamental evangelical doctrine, which is something he commends (Beisner, 1997, pp. 9–10 and 23–26). He does, however, disagree on three key issues. First, whilst Beisner agrees and affirms Psalm 24:1, he points to Psalm 115:16, in which God gives the earth to man (Beisner, 1997, pp. 11–12). For Beisner, this provides a new understanding of stewardship. “Human stewardship of the earth takes place in a context of subordinate ownership” (Beisner, 1997, p. 11). His second main critique lies in the biblical context in which stewardship is given to man. In the biblical story of creation, Genesis 1–3, stewardship of the garden is given. For Beisner, after Adam’s sin, God cursed the wilderness, and man had to subdue the earth to turn it into a garden. He concludes that human beings must shape nature for their benefit (Beisner, 1997, pp. 12–14). His third disagreement is that most evangelical environmentalists put caring for nature over caring for human life. For Beisner, this changes the God given order in which human life is supposed to flourish (Beisner 1997, pp. 14–18). He does not deny that humans have to care for creation, yet this is truly fulfilled through dominion (Beisner, 2010, 22–24).

The idea of stewardship being fulfilled through dominion is illustrated, for instance, on the *Cornwall Alliance* website. Here it is emphasized that biblical stewardship means through dominion “enhancing Earth’s fruitfulness, beauty, and safety for the glory of God and the benefit of others” (Cornwall Alliance – For The Stewardship Of Creation, n. d.). The idea of dominion is also emphasized in *Resisting the Green Dragon*, a book written by David Walniss (2014) which was accompanied by a teaching series released on DVD. In this publication, environmentalism is seen as a new religion (Walniss, 2014, pp. 37–38). The *Cornwall Alliance* does not deny climate change in general, yet they seem to understand dominion as the way to steward the earth.

More in line with Calvin DeWitt’s argument, networks like the EEN or YECA, which grew out of the EEN Youth network, aim to offer a practical approach to creation care. The YECA states in their mission statement: “Young Evangelicals for Climate Action exists to equip, empower, and catalyze young Christians to love God and love our neighbors through bold, wholehearted, and faithful climate action in our church and community in order to create a more just, equitable, and loving world” (Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, n. d.). Creation care is seen as a key message from Christianity. For them, it is a form of worship. They offer a Bible study on the topic of “climate action” in which Bible passages ranging

from Genesis to Revelation are discussed (Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, Bible Study, n. d.). An overview of the website's resources emphasizes climate science and theology, evangelicalism and the climate movement, environmental justice and decolonization, worship, and admirable activists and organizations (Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, Recourses, n. d.). There is an emphasis on man's participation in God's restoration of creation.

For the topic of sustainability, the dispute among US evangelicals can serve as an example that the spiritual dimension matters. In this controversy, arguments for or against certain forms of climate protection are rooted in biblical narratives. The language that is being used matters, yet as Veldmann in his study on climate skepticism finds: "In academic terms, the most important is the extent to which the environmental attitudes of the subset of evangelicals I examined were shaped not simply by doctrine, but by history, identity, and community" (Veldmann, 2019, p. 215).

In conclusion it can be said that theological doctrine plays a role, even if it is not the only factor in evangelicals' attitudes toward climate change. The argumentative structure of these narratives needs to be examined in more detail – because the language of the Bible and biblical narratives have an influence on education on the topic of sustainability.

References

- Bebbington, D. (1989). *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s*. Unwin Hyman.
- Beisner, E. C. (1997). *Where garden meets wilderness: Evangelical entry into the environmental debate*. Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.
- Beisner, E. C. (2010). Environmental Stewardship in the Judeo-Christian Tradition: Biblical Foundations and Historical Development. In T. P. Sheahen & M. Postiglione (Eds.), *Environmental stewardship in the Judeo-Christian tradition: Implications for Christian living in the 21st century: Proceedings of the ITEST Conference, October, 2009* (pp. 21–44). ITEST Faith/Science Press.
- Bruce, S. (1988). *The rise and fall of the new Christian right: conservative Protestant politics in America, 1978-1988*. Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press.
- Cornwall Alliance – For The Stewardship Of Creation (n.d.). Website. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from <https://cornwallalliance.org/>
- DeWitt, C. B. (1989). Christian Stewardship. *The Trumpeter*, 6(4), 170–171. <https://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/download/764/1>

- DeWitt, C. B. (Ed.). (1991). *The environment and the Christian: What does the New Testament say about the environment?* Baker Book House.
- DeWitt, C. B. (1993). God's Love for the World and Creation's Environmental Challenge to Evangelical Christianity. *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 17(2), 134-149.
- DeWitt, C. B. (1994). *Earth-wise: A biblical response to environmental issues*. CRC Publ.
- DeWitt, C. B., Baer, R. A., Derr, T. S., Ehlers, V. J., Skillen, J. W., & Lugo, L. E. (1998). *Caring for creation: Responsible stewardship of God's handiwork*. Baker Books.
- DeWitt, C. B. (2006). *The Scientist and the Shepherd*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195178722.003.0025>
- Gautier, D. (2025). Keine Pflanzen im Gottesdienst. Beobachtungen zur antiökologischen Position der religiösen Rechten in den USA. In H.-U. Probst, H.-U., Gautier, D., Ritter, K., & Jacobs, C. (Eds.), *Topoi und Netzwerke der Religiösen Rechten: Verbindende Feindbilder zwischen extremer Rechter und Christentum* (pp. 77-96). transcript Verlag.
- Marsden, G. (1986). The evangelical Denomination. In *Evangelicalism and modern America: Papers of a conference held at the Billy Graham center at Wheaton college in April 1983* (S. vii-xix). W. B. Eerdmans.
- Marsden, G. M. (1991). *Understanding fundamentalism and evangelicalism*. Eerdmans.
- Noll, M. A. (2010). What is "Evangelical"? In G. R. McDermott (Hrsg.), *The Oxford handbook of evangelical theology* (S. 19-32). Oxford Univ. Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195369441.001.0001>
- Pally, M. (2011). *The new evangelicals: Expanding the vision of the common good*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. – Kindle Edition
- Pally, M. (2022). *White Evangelicals and Right-Wing Populism: How Did We Get Here?* (1. Aufl.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003229452>
- Schaeffer, F. A., & Middelmann, U. W. (2011). *Pollution and the death of man*. Crossway.
- The Alliance for Climate Protection (n.d.). Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich Commercial on *Climate Change*. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qi6n_-wB154
- Tyson, A., Funk, C., & Kennedy, B. (2023, August 9). *What the data says about Americans' views of climate change*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/09/what-the-data-says-about-americans-views-of-climate-change/>
- Veldman, R. G. (2019). *The gospel of climate skepticism: Why evangelical Christians oppose action on climate change*. University of California Press.
- Wanliss, J. (with Beisner, E. C. & Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation). (2014). *Resisting the green dragon: Dominion, not death*.
- Warner, G., & Jiang, J. (2019, July 24). What Would Jesus Drive? *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/18/743118522/what-would-jesus-drive>
- Wilkinson, K. K. (2012). *Between God and green: How evangelicals are cultivating a middle ground on climate change*. Oxford University Press.

- White, L. (1967). The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), 1203–1207. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>
- Wuthnow, R. (1989a). *The restructuring of American religion: Society and faith since World War II* (1. paperback printing). Princeton University Press.
- Wuthnow, R. (1989b). *The struggle for America's soul: Evangelicals, liberals, and secularism*. W.B. Eerdmans.
- Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. (n.d.). *Resources*. Retrieved November 20, 2025, from <https://yecaction.org/resources/resources.html>
- Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. (n.d.). *Bible Study: Resources (Old): Young Evangelicals for Climate Action*. Retrieved November 27, 2025, from <https://yecaction.org/resources-old/bible-study.html>. File: https://yecaction.org/file_download/inline/e9c68022-3732-4c4e-a7fd-4d566e89693e
- Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. (n.d.). *Young Evangelicals for Climate Action*. Retrieved November 20, 2025, from <https://yecaction.org/>
- Zaleha, B. D. (2018). *A Tale of Two Christianities: The Religiopolitical Clash Over Climate Change Within America's Dominant Religion* [Doctor of Philosophy, University of California]. https://www.academia.edu/37825298/Dissertation-_A_Tale_of_Two_Christianities_the_Religiopolitical_Clash_Over_Climate_Change_Within_Americas_Dominant_Religion

On the Connection Between Spirituality and Sustainability of Highly Religious Christians. Findings from the Study *Faith.Climate.Hope*.

Anna-Lena Moselewski

This paper analyzes the extent to which spirituality and sustainability are related among highly religious Christians and what insights can be gained from this for education for sustainable development in church, youth work, and schools. Particular attention will be paid to attitudes, actual behavior, and the link between these and theology. The newly published study *Glaube.Klima.Hoffnung*. (Faix et al., 2024) by the YMCA University of Applied Sciences, which provides empirical results on this topic, serves as a starting point.

1. Sample and Methods of the Study

The study surveyed 2,561 Christians in Switzerland and Germany about their attitudes and behaviors regarding social justice and ecological sustainability, with a focus on the theological and spiritual dimensions. A total of 1,574 people from Germany, 782 from German-speaking Switzerland, and 205 from French-speaking Switzerland aged 14 and over were surveyed. In the following, this article refers explicitly to the German sample of the study. In Germany, 57.8% of respondents stated that they were female, 41.6% male, and 0.6% diverse. The research question aimed to investigate the influence of theology, faith (especially lived faith practice), and spirituality on the attitudes and behavior of the respondents.

The German sample of the study consisted of 73.5% highly religious Christians, whose classification was based on Huber's centrality scale (Huber & Huber, 2012). This validated and established measurement method from the sociology of religion distinguishes between non-religious, religious, and highly religious people (El-Menouar, 2023, p. 51). "A person is considered highly religious when religiosity is at the centre of their life and is a factor that strongly influences all other areas and aspects of their life" (Faix et al, 2024, p. 40). "[A] categorization of the individual as 'highly religious' (...) express[es] that religious constructs are clearly present in a personal religious construct system. Consequently, we should assume that they are highly relevant psychologically for that individual's religious

experience and behavior and that they exert an influence on non-religious constructs (...)" (Huber & Huber, 2012, p. 721). The Bertelsmann Stiftung's *Religion Monitor* survey from 2023 shows that 51% of the German population is considered religious and 11% highly religious. In the mainstream churches, 15% of all Catholic and 10% of all Protestant members are highly religious, while in the free churches, the figure is more than three-quarters (El-Menouar, 2023, p. 52).

The church membership distribution of the sample shows that 56.0% belong to the Protestant church and 5.3% to the Catholic church. 31.4% stated that they are members of a free church, 12.1% are part of the YMCA, and 8.6% are members of a regional church community. It is relevant to note here that high religiosity in the Protestant context is not to be equated with evangelicalism, pietism, or even fundamentalism. Although there is in all likelihood a high proportion of highly religious people among the groups mentioned (analogous to the above-mentioned group from free churches), the study results clearly show that a range of Protestant piety was included. Overall, it should be noted that the sample of our study is special due to its focus on religious and highly religious Christians.

In order to classify them well from a sociological point of view, the study also surveyed the affiliations to the Sinus-Milieus (Faix et al., 2024, p. 82-89)²⁸. In collaboration with the Sinus Institute, the respondents were assigned to the new meta-Sinus milieus, whereby the milieu location corresponded to the internal forecasts, as highly religious Christians, in particular, are not evenly distributed across all milieus. Nevertheless, an over- and under-representation compared to the representative Sinus-Germany milieus is striking. As with any empirical quantitative study, the access routes and the analysis of the target group are very decisive for the composition of the sample. This can be easily classified and explained using the three milieus that were not reached by the study: Precarious milieu, Consumer-Hedonist milieu, and the Neo-Ecological milieu. What all three have in common is that they are not religious or churchgoing milieus but tend to react critically or not at all to Christian faith and the church. It is, therefore, obvious that they do not belong to the target group of the study and were, therefore, reached to a small extent or not at all. On the other hand, those close to the church and those critically attached to the church are overrepresented, as suggested by Sinus' own classification according to faith types. It is, therefore, significant that the milieu positioning makes it clear that the entire breadth of classic church milieus (Conservative-

²⁸ See: <https://www.sinus-institut.de/>

Bourgeois milieu and Post-material milieu) and not just those people who are already interested in the topic of sustainability were reached.

2. Insights into Key Study Results

The study results show that among highly religious Christians, there is very clear support for the promotion of social justice and environmental sustainability. The average agreement with the importance of social justice is 91.1%, which is very high. Social justice behavior is also important to 83.0% in their self-assessment. It can be seen here that the overall level of agreement is very high, but that there is still a small gap between attitudes and actual behavior. This discrepancy is already known in science under the terms of “knowledge-actions-gap” or “mind-behavior-gap”. It is interesting that this is also evident in other study results. For example, we asked whether the respondents saw unsustainable behavior as a sin. This was affirmed by 45.6%. However, when it comes to their own behavior, only 30.0% say that they have ever asked God for forgiveness for unsustainable behavior. In the context of the theological justification for social justice, 92% of the German respondents also agree somewhat or completely that their Christian faith encourages them to work for social justice. When asked whether social justice is already a central concern in the Christian faith, whether it should become even more so or not, 38.2% agree that it is already a central concern. Just over half, i.e., 54.1%, agree that social justice should become a stronger concern than it is today, and 6.0% even disagree. As to their actual behavior, 73.2% stated that they discussed global poverty and inequality with family or friends in 2022. Agreement is slightly higher when it comes to not buying certain products. However, it is clear to see here that approval drops significantly when it comes to engagement with a public impact. Only 12.4% have written about social injustice publicly, and 12.5% have taken part in a demonstration, for example. This shows that the behavior mainly relates to the private sphere.

In the context of ecological sustainability, 79.6% tend to or fully agree that they feel deeply connected to nature, and 89.7% of the Christians surveyed tend to or fully agree that nature is worth protecting because it was created by God. With regard to the church, 91.4% of the German respondents also tend to or fully agree that the church should be committed to sustainability because it has a mission to protect the earth. When asked whether sustainability is already a central concern in the Christian faith, whether it should become even more so or not, the figures, compared to the same question concerning social justice, change slightly.

22.1% agree that sustainability is already a central concern. However, almost two-thirds, 64.0%, would like to see sustainability become more important, which is apparently higher than for social justice. In addition, the percentage of those who do not see sustainability as a central concern of the Christian faith is also slightly higher at 10.2%.

All in all, these high figures are interesting, because they show that the topics of social justice and ecological sustainability play an important role for almost all respondents and have arrived at the center of Christian life, or the desire for a stronger treatment of the topics is expressed. Another set of topics that played a central role in our study and is also very important for ESD are the SDGs. When asked about the awareness of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 28% of the German respondents and 35% of the Swiss respondents (German speaking) agreed that they had heard of them but could not explain them, and 30% (German respondents) and 23% (German speaking Swiss respondents) that they could explain them to others. In contrast, a representative study in Switzerland (Borofsky, Büttner & Günther, 2022), which was used as a comparative study for “Glaube.Klima.Hoffnung.” shows that only 14% of Swiss people could explain the SDGs to others. This shows that not only the importance of the topics is high, but also that the knowledge of Christians, using the SDGs as an example, is higher than that of the Swiss population as a whole. This shows that in this particular example, the SDGs are better known in a Christian context than in society in general. In addition, all respondents agree that Goal 4 “Education for all” is the most important for them. This also greatly encourages continuing to promote and expand ESD and to interpret it theologically.

3. Evaluation of the Hypotheses

In addition to the descriptive results, the evaluation of the hypotheses revealed two important findings in particular: Believers who find a theological justification for their commitment act more sustainably. It was also found that those who not only find a theological justification but also integrate the topics of sustainability and justice into their lived faith and spirituality act more sustainably and, above all, are more socially committed to socio-ecological transformation.

3.1 Christian Spirituality as a Resonance Space for a More Sustainable Life

Accordingly, the theological justification and integration of socio-ecological issues into faith practice and spirituality are crucial in order to motivate Christians to adopt more socially just and sustainable behavior. It is, therefore, not surprising that in recent years there has also been an increasing theological discussion on the subject of transformative spirituality as an orientation for people in change processes. Knowledge on its own is not enough for a comprehensive change in values and culture, as required for socio-ecological transformation. Rather, it requires emotions, habits, and sustainable everyday practice. Here too, the church tradition and Christian ethics have a great treasure, as they appeal to both the heart and the mind in many of their traditions. In this context, Timothy Stacey notes that faith communities need to bring in their big treasure of rituals, myths, and traditions, on an optional basis, which are often missing from the otherwise secular discourse, because of their huge transformational strength (Stacey, 2024).

3.2 Christian Rituals, Myths and Traditions as an Underestimated Value for ESD and Climate Education

Specifically, and first of all, these could be *rituals* of listening, in line with Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory (Rosa, 2022). In Christian contexts and spirituality practice, rituals of listening could be silence, prayer, meditation, fasting, or atonement/forgiveness for guilt. Ritualized moments or exercises that make people receptive to the creation around them, practices that enable them to relate to the world in a new way, that allow them to *stop* in the double sense of the German word "auf-hören" that Rosa refers to. It offers at least two meanings. First of all, it means ceasing in the sense of stopping or interrupting. Rosa argues that humans need moments of interruption in their daily lives. "On the other hand, the word 'auf-hören' means [...] listening up, listen to the outside, let myself be called and reached by something else, by another voice that says something different from what is on my to-do list and what can be expected anyway and consists, so to speak, in functional exchange" (Rosa, 2022, p. 27; translation by the author). And it is precisely in these moments of stopping that resonance arises: I let myself be reached by something else, something new begins. For a sustainable lifestyle, people need these resonance moments of listening to God and his creation. From a Christian perspective, there are many rituals that can be mentioned here: for example, attendance at church services, which encourages people to break away from being

constantly available for a certain period of time. Also, there is prayer or forms of silence, which Christians practice both personally and in community, that help focusing and engaging with something or somebody else. In the school context, rooms of silence, school pastoral care or school services could also be named here, which enable spaces of “listening” to allow students to reconnect with what surrounds them.

And in doing so, secondly, *myths* – we would perhaps reframe them as biblical stories and narratives – are important because they tell of the basic trust and hope in God, the conviction of an eschatological hope for a renewed world, they answer existential questions like “what exists?” and “why are we here?” Those narratives and myths give people a vision for a life in abundance (John 10:10b). And thirdly, *traditions* such as the church year, rhythms that have been lived for centuries, the celebration of the Sabbath and the interruption of the everyday, feasts such as Thanksgiving are a very helpful component from the Christian spirituality practice that can help people to establish a more just and sustainable everyday life. In everyday school life, these could be, for example, church services, activities or celebrations related to the church year or special occasions, which are ideally already an established part of the school year.

A discussion about transformative spirituality and practicing creation spirituality in the church, youth work, and, above all, in Christian educational work, such as in schools and universities, can help to win over Christians for socio-ecological commitment, promote resilience, and support the necessary social change.

But not only that, it is also an important asset and a unique selling point of Christian climate engagement for secular contexts. It is important to strengthen people within this urgent and complex change so that they are willing and able to participate in the long term. And Christian spirituality holds a rich treasure for this: rituals, myths, and traditions. It takes courage to try out these forms/practices and to understand ESD in the sense of a transformative understanding of education as a “competence-oriented design of teaching as a holistic practice with head, hand, and heart – knowing, acting, and being” (Bellina et al., 2020, p. 28; compare: Singer-Brodowski, 2016) and thus also to overcome unsustainable understandings of education.

ESD and climate education are holistic: hands, heart, head. They promote emotional touch, inner strength, as well as rethinking processes and critical reflection. It is not about adding knowledge but about learning to reinterpret one’s own perspectives on meaning (Singer-Brodowski, 2016b, p. 138). Transformative education as an aspiration for sustainable ESD also promotes sustainable practices and skills as well as ethical and

emotional engagement with social challenges. In addition to fundamental and human rights, for example, biblical and theological standards and the large fund of Christian creation spirituality in rituals, myths, and traditions can also guide action.

References

- Bellina, L., Tegeler, M.K., Müller-Christ, G., & Potthast, T. (2020). *Bildung für Nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE) in der Hochschullehre (Betaversion). BMBF-Projekt „Nachhaltigkeit an Hochschulen: entwickeln – vernetzen – berichten (HOCHN)“*. Bremen und Tübingen, <https://www.hochn.uni-hamburg.de/-downloads/handlungsfelder/lehre/hochn-leitfaden-lehre-2020-neu.pdf>.
- Borofsky, Y., Büttner, N., & Günther, I. (2022). Swiss Panel Global Cooperation. ETH Zurich, https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/nadel-dam/documents/Swiss_Panel_StatAnnex_221207_weighted_gend_age_lang_polit.pdf.
- El-Menouar, Y. (2023). Die Bedeutung von Religion in Zeiten multipler Krisen. In: C. Hillenbrand, D. Pollack, & Y. El-Menouar (Eds.): *Religion als Ressource der Krisenbewältigung? Analysen am Beispiel der Coronapandemie* (pp. 50–64). <https://www.bertelsmannstiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/religion-als-ressource-der-krisenbewaeltigung>.
- Faix, T., Moselewski, A-L., & Dietrich, R. (2024). *Glaube.Klima.Hoffnung. Forschungsbericht der Ge-Na Studie: Was Christ:innen über soziale Gerechtigkeit und ökologische Nachhaltigkeit denken*. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11072127, <https://ge-na-studie.net/downloadbericht/>.
- Huber, S., & Huber, O. W. (2012). The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS). *Religions*, 3(3), 710–724. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3030710>.
- Rosa, H. (2022). *Demokratie braucht Religion*. Kösel.
- Singer-Brodowski, M. (2016). Transformative Bildung durch transformatives Lernen: Zur Notwendigkeit der erziehungswissenschaftlichen Fundierung einer neuen Idee. *ZEP: Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik*, 39(1). pp. 13–17.
- Singer-Brodowski, M. (2016b). Transformatives Lernen als neue Theorie-Perspektive in der BNE: Die Kernidee transformativen Lernens und seine Bedeutung für informelles Lernen. In: *Umweltdachverband GmbH (Ed.). Jahrbuch Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung – Im Wandel*. (pp. 130–139). Forum Umweltbildung im Umweltdachverband.
- Stacey, T. (2024). Religious repertoires of sustainability: Why religion is central to sustainability transitions, whatever you believe. In: *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 50, 100821.

Practical Approaches and Experiences

Education for Sustainable Development: The Krishna Valley Model

Zoltan Hosszu & Istvan Tasi

In today's world, discussions about sustainability are abundant, yet practical examples demonstrating its real-life application remain scarce. Krishna Valley, located in Hungary, stands out as a living model of sustainable living rooted in spiritual principles. Established in 1993 by the Hungarian Society for Krishna Consciousness (MKTHK), Krishna Valley has evolved into one of Europe's largest self-sustaining communities, spanning approximately 320 hectares and housing nearly 150 resident devotees, with an additional 300 community members residing nearby. Annually, the valley attracts over 30,000 tourists and pilgrims, offering them an opportunity to experience a lifestyle that harmoniously blends spirituality with ecological responsibility (Krishna.hu, 2024).

The primary aim of Krishna Valley was not sustainability per se but to create an environment conducive to living according to Vedic principles. This focus on "simple living and high thinking" has naturally led to significant achievements in areas such as regenerative agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and water management. Notably, the community has planted several hundred thousand trees, increasing the number of bird species from 25 to 111, and maintains an ecological footprint, which is significantly lower than the national average and within sustainable limits (EcoValley.hu, 2009).

Beyond its operational success, Krishna Valley has garnered substantial academic interest. Over the past three decades, researchers from various disciplines—including sociology, education, botany, water management, soil science, and biodiversity—have conducted studies resulting in more than 80 theses and publications. The community actively collaborates with ten universities and scientific institutions, providing valuable case studies and data that inform global sustainability discussions.

This paper explores Krishna Valley's unique approach to sustainability through education. Internally, it examines how the Sri Prahlada Gurukula school integrates spiritual values with practical skills. Externally, it highlights the valley's outreach programs, which offer hands-on workshops for visitors and students. The overarching goal is to demonstrate that an alternative, sustainable lifestyle is attainable through the right mindset and practices.

1. Krishna Valley Overview

Krishna Valley began as an ambitious vision in 1993, aiming to transform barren land into a thriving ecosystem and self-sustaining community. Over three decades, it has flourished, showcasing how spiritual principles can guide ecological resilience.

1.1 Spiritual Background

Krishna Valley is a farm community of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The members of the community practice the ancient Indian Vaishnava religion, following its Bengali branch. Their scriptures are the Vedic scriptures, of which the Bhagavad-gita and the Srimad Bhagavatam play a prominent role for them. Their moral principles of the community include non-violence and the resulting vegetarian diet, truthfulness, moderation and purity. The devotees participate in spiritual programs every morning, which include communal singing, mantra meditation with the repetition of the Hare Krishna mantra, and listening to scripture lectures.

1.2 Transformation and Biodiversity

One of the most remarkable aspects of Krishna Valley's development is its impact on biodiversity. Initially established on previously barren lands, the area is now rich in grasslands, with weeping willows and shrubs along the stream banks providing shelter to various bird species. To date, 111 species have been observed in the valley (Back to Godhead, 2010). Additionally, the community has planted over 450,000 trees, contributing to improved soil health, local climate conditions, and overall ecosystem stability.

1.3 Sustainability in Practice

While Krishna Valley is not entirely self-sufficient, it embodies numerous aspects of sustainability. A key study on its ecological footprint indicates that residents consume resources at approximately 1.47 hectares per capita, which is less than half the Hungarian national average, positioning it as a model for low-impact living (EcoValley.hu, 2009). The community's infrastructure is designed to minimize dependence on external resources through various means:

- **Energy:** Utilization of renewable energy sources, including solar power.

- **Food:** Production of the majority of vegetables, fruits, and grains on-site using regenerative agriculture techniques.
- **Water Management:** Implementation of an advanced reed-bed sewage treatment system that purifies wastewater naturally without chemical intervention.

These measures contribute to Krishna Valley's resilience in the face of global environmental challenges.

1.4 A Model for Sustainable Living

Krishna Valley's success transcends theoretical models; it serves as a practical example of how an eco-conscious community can thrive without compromising quality of life. Its scalable and adaptable model offers valuable insights for other religious, rural, or urban sustainability initiatives.

2. Internal Education

2.1 Sri Prahlada Gurukula: A Holistic Learning Model

Education is central to Krishna Valley's mission, ensuring that sustainability and spiritual values are passed down to future generations. The Sri Prahlada Gurukula, an accredited kindergarten, elementary, and high school, provides an integrated curriculum that combines standard Hungarian education with spiritual teachings and hands-on learning experiences (SriPrahlada.hu, 2024).

2.2 Experiential and Practical Learning

Krishna Valley's educational approach emphasizes learning by doing. Instead of relying solely on theoretical knowledge, students engage in practical activities such as:

- **Sustainable farming:** Growing food using regenerative agricultural techniques.
- **Animal care:** Practicing non-violent animal husbandry.
- **Handicrafts:** Learning traditional Vedic arts, including block printing and textile dyeing with plant-based colors.

Additionally, students are introduced to self-sufficient practices, such as preparing their own food, making natural dyes, and learning the principles of holistic well-being. This kind of experiential education fosters resilience,

adaptability, and creativity, qualities that are increasingly valuable in today's rapidly changing world.

2.3 Career Exploration and Vedic Arts

Another unique feature of the school is its career exploration program. From grade five onward, students experiment with up to 30 different occupations, helping them understand their interests and develop real-world skills. The exposure to various disciplines—including permaculture, herbal medicine, animal husbandry, natural construction, and even traditional music and arts—ensures that students graduate with both practical and theoretical knowledge, preparing them for self-sufficiency or further academic pursuits.

The school also incorporates the 64 Vedic Arts, which include leadership training, performing arts, culinary skills, and craftsmanship. These activities not only serve to enhance creativity but also help develop a strong sense of responsibility, teamwork, and discipline.

3. External Education: Workshops and Public Engagement

Krishna Valley extends its educational mission beyond its own community by offering a diverse array of workshops and public programs focused on sustainability. These initiatives cover topics such as organic gardening, water management, regenerative agriculture, self-sufficiency practices, eco-friendly construction, and ethical consumerism. Participants range from local farmers and sustainability enthusiasts to university students and researchers. The courses integrate hands-on experience with theoretical knowledge, allowing attendees to apply what they learn immediately in real-world settings (Eco Valley Foundation, 2019).

One notable workshop is the mud house building course, which attracts international university students and professors specializing in landscape development and management. Under the guidance of experts in sustainable construction, participants engage in building small dwellings using earthbag techniques. This practical experience not only imparts valuable skills but also fosters a deeper understanding of sustainable living practices (ISKCON News, 2011).

In addition to workshops, Krishna Valley actively disseminates knowledge through guided tours and seminars. Annually, the community welcomes over 25,000 visitors, offering structured educational tours that delve into the ecological footprint of the valley, the significance of

biodiversity, and practical applications of sustainability. These tours serve as effective educational tools, influencing individuals and groups beyond the immediate community (Krishna Valley, 2024).

The community also hosts an annual fair, drawing over 6,000 attendees each year. This event showcases Krishna Valley's natural and spiritual lifestyle, featuring workshops, cultural performances, and demonstrations of sustainable practices. The fair provides an immersive experience, allowing visitors to engage directly with the community's way of life (ISKCON News, 2011).

Through these comprehensive external education efforts, Krishna Valley not only shares its sustainable practices but also inspires and empowers others to adopt environmentally conscious lifestyles. The integration of practical learning, community outreach, and structured education ensures that knowledge transfer extends beyond the valley, fostering sustainability awareness on a larger scale (Eco Valley Foundation, 2019).

4. Academic Collaborations: University Partnerships and Research

Krishna Valley maintains robust partnerships with ten universities and research institutions, facilitating student internships, research projects, and academic conferences. One of the most active collaborations is with Bhaktivedanta College in Budapest, a state-accredited institution offering bachelor's and master's programs in Vaisnava theology and yoga education. The college's sustainability specialization includes a two-week immersive program at Krishna Valley, allowing students to engage firsthand in organic farming, eco-friendly construction, and sustainable community management. This hands-on experience equips students with practical skills and insights into sustainable living practices (Bhaktivedanta College, 2024).

Beyond Bhaktivedanta College, Krishna Valley collaborates with several other academic institutions. Szent István University, known for its expertise in agricultural and environmental sciences, partners with Krishna Valley to conduct soil research and water conservation studies. These collaborative efforts aim to develop innovative techniques for sustainable agriculture and efficient water use, contributing to environmental preservation.

Similarly, Pannon University engages in joint projects with Krishna Valley, particularly in the area of biodiversity assessments. Researchers from the university work closely with the community to monitor and

analyze the diverse ecosystems within Krishna Valley. This partnership enhances academic understanding of biodiversity in sustainable communities and supports Krishna Valley in implementing effective conservation strategies.

The Hungarian Academy of Sciences also collaborates with Krishna Valley, focusing on interdisciplinary research that bridges traditional knowledge and modern science. This partnership has led to studies exploring the integration of spirituality and sustainability, examining how Krishna Valley's faith-based practices influence and enhance ecological initiatives. Such research provides a holistic perspective on sustainable living, emphasizing the role of spiritual values in environmental stewardship.

These academic collaborations have positioned Krishna Valley as an active research site for environmental science and sustainability studies. The community has been the subject of numerous research papers and theses, covering topics such as ecological footprint analysis, the role of spirituality in sustainability, and alternative agricultural models. These studies offer valuable data that contribute to the global academic discourse on sustainability, demonstrating how integrated approaches can lead to successful, self-sustaining communities (Tasi, 2022).

Through these partnerships, Krishna Valley not only advances its own sustainable practices but also serves as a living laboratory for scholars and practitioners worldwide. The exchange of knowledge and resources fosters innovation and inspires the adoption of sustainable models in diverse contexts, highlighting the impact of collaborative efforts in promoting environmental sustainability (Eco Valley Foundation, 2019).

5. Impact and Future Directions

5.1 Long-Term Sustainability and Influence

Over the past three decades, Krishna Valley has transcended its role as a mere community, emerging as a beacon of sustainable living that garners attention from academics, policymakers, and ecological organizations worldwide. Established in 1993 on a 280-hectare expanse in western Hungary, the valley has transformed from a simple cornfield into a thriving example of self-sufficiency and ecological harmony (Farkas, 2021).

A cornerstone of Krishna Valley's philosophy is its commitment to a lifestyle that minimizes environmental impact while enhancing quality of life. The community's ecological footprint stands at approximately 1.47 hectares per person, significantly lower than Hungary's national average of

3.7 hectares per person. This remarkable achievement underscores the viability of sustainable living practices in reducing environmental degradation (Eco Valley.hu, 2009).

The influence of Krishna Valley extends beyond its borders through active engagement in academic research and policy discussions. The community has been the subject of numerous studies exploring topics such as ecological footprint analysis, the integration of spirituality in sustainability efforts, and innovative agricultural models. These scholarly works contribute valuable data to the global discourse on sustainability, positioning Krishna Valley as a model for environmentally conscious living (Farkas, 2021).

5.2 Scalability and Replication

In response to the growing global demand for sustainable living models, Krishna Valley's approach is being considered for replication in various religious and secular communities. The community has initiated dialogues with Christian monastic orders and Buddhist communities, aiming to share knowledge and assist in implementing similar self-sustaining projects. These collaborative efforts highlight the adaptability of Krishna Valley's principles across diverse cultural and spiritual contexts.

The scalability of Krishna Valley's model is further evidenced by its active participation in international sustainability networks. As a member of the Global Ecovillage Network of Europe, the community collaborates with like-minded organizations to promote sustainable development practices. Additionally, the Eco Valley Foundation, associated with Krishna Valley, holds observer status in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, facilitating the exchange of best practices on a global platform (Idealist, 2020).

5.3 Future Research and Expansion

Looking ahead, Krishna Valley is poised to expand its research collaborations, particularly in areas such as regenerative agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and water management. The community plans to establish new partnerships with universities and research institutions to enhance the scientific foundation of its sustainability efforts. These collaborations aim to develop innovative solutions that address contemporary environmental challenges while staying true to the community's core values.

Moreover, Krishna Valley is committed to educational outreach, seeking to disseminate its findings and practices to a broader audience. Through

workshops, seminars, and publications, the community aspires to inspire and equip other entities to adopt sustainable practices. This proactive approach ensures that the lessons learned within Krishna Valley can serve as a catalyst for broader environmental stewardship and sustainable development initiatives (Eco Valley Foundation, 2019).

6. Conclusion

6.1 Spirituality as the Foundation of Sustainability

Krishna Valley exemplifies how a spiritually based community can achieve remarkable sustainability results. Its success is not solely due to ecological efforts but is fundamentally rooted in the spiritual principles guiding its members' daily lives. The understanding that nature is sacred and should be protected is at the heart of all community activities, reinforcing the idea that sustainability is not just about conservation but also about harmonious coexistence with the environment (Srimad Bhagavatam 7.11.8, Vedabase.io, 2024).

6.2 The Role of Scientific Research and Education

Education plays a crucial role in Krishna Valley's sustainability model. The integration of traditional wisdom with modern scientific research has been pivotal in shaping an approach that is both practical and replicable. The findings from biodiversity studies, ecological footprint assessments, and water management research have contributed to academic discourse on sustainability while providing tangible examples of how communities can thrive without over-exploiting natural resources (Bhaktivedanta College, 2024).

6.3 A Scalable Model for Global Sustainability

The sustainability model developed in Krishna Valley is not confined to this single location; it has global potential. Discussions with Christian monastic orders, Buddhist communities, and ecological organizations are already underway to explore ways to adapt and implement similar models in diverse cultural and geographical settings. With proper adaptation, the principles of self-sufficiency, sustainable agriculture, and community-driven education can serve as blueprints for new eco-villages and sustainable communities worldwide (Eco Valley Foundation, 2019).

6.4 A Call to Action: Implementing Sustainability in Everyday Life

As the global environmental crisis deepens, it is no longer sufficient to merely discuss sustainability—we must act upon it. Krishna Valley serves as a powerful example that sustainability is not just a theory but a viable and thriving way of life. By drawing inspiration from its model, individuals, institutions, and policymakers can begin to implement sustainable practices in their own lives and communities. As stated in *Limits to Growth* (Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972):

“We have reached the limits of physical growth. Science must recognize that internal growth is necessary for the survival of humanity.”

Krishna Valley provides a real-world application of this principle, proving that sustainability is not only an ecological necessity but also a spiritual imperative. By fostering collaboration, education, and scientific research, Krishna Valley stands as an inspiration and guide for future sustainability initiatives. The call to action is clear: communities worldwide must integrate sustainability into their core values and daily practices to secure a better future for generations to come.

References

- Back to Godhead (2010). *Kṛṣṇa Valley: A transcendental eco-village community*. Retrieved from <https://www.backtogodhead.in/krsna-valley-a-transcendental-eco-village-community>
- Bhaktivedanta College (2024). *Official website*. www.bhf.hu; <https://uni-bhakti.hu>; Sustainability Office: <https://www.bhf.hu/fenntarthatosagi-iroda>
- EcoValley.hu. (2009). *Short questions, short answers about Krishna Valley*. Retrieved from <https://ecovalley.hu/short-questions-short-answers-about-krisna-valley>
- Eco Valley Foundation (2019). *Learn – Volunteer – Support*. <https://ecovalley.hu>; <https://okovolgy.hu>; www.facebook.com/okovolgy.
- Farkas, J. (2021). Eco Valley or New Vraja Dhama? Competing Emic Interpretations of a Krishna-devotee Settlement in Hungary. *Religions*, 12(8), 622. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080622>
- Idealist (2020). *Krishna Valley/Eco Valley*. Retrieved from <https://www.idealists.org/en/nonprofit/b8080b4150464958b2a303eaedc6ce44-krishna-valleyeco-valley-somogyvamos>
- ISKCON News (2011). *Krishna Valley visitors learn sustainability and mud house building*. <https://iskconnews.org>

- Krishna.hu (2024). *Folk crafts, tasty dishes & eco-party at Krishna Valley Búcsú Festival*. Retrieved from <https://krisna.hu/2024/folk-crafts-tasty-dishes-a-great-eco-party-this-year-at-the-krishna-valley-bucusu-village-festival>
- Krishna Valley (2024). *Indian cultural center and ecological farm*. <https://www.krishnavalley.com>
- Meadows, D. H., Randers, J., & Behrens, W. W. (1972). *The limits to growth*. Universe Books.
- SriPrahlada.hu (2024). *Sri Prahlada Gurukula: Eco-school*. Retrieved from <https://sriprahlada.hu>
- Tasi, I. (2022). *Researchers on our religion: theses, studies on Krishna consciousness*. <https://krisna.hu/2022/kutatok-a-vallasunkrol-szakdolgozatok-tanulmanyok-a-krisna-tudatrol>
- Vedabase.io (2024). *Srimad Bhagavatam 7.11.8, 7.5.23-24*. <https://vedabase.io/en/library/sb/7>

Spirituality, Justice and Sustainability: Lessons from the Summer School 2024 at *Mission EineWelt*.

How Global Church Partnerships and Faith-Based Practices Enrich Education for Sustainable Development

Sung Kim & Christian Pfliegel

1. Introduction

As our world faces unprecedented ecological crises that are directly connected to social injustices, the need for transformative education has never been more urgent. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) seeks to empower individuals and communities to shape a just and livable future. Alongside political, economic, and technical considerations, the spiritual dimension has recently drawn some attention: “Speakers at the Faith Pavilion made it clear that spiritual values and wisdom can help overcome the dominant linear growth, extractive paradigm which operates at the expense of the well-being of nature, humans, and animals.”²⁹

The 2024 Summer School at *Mission EineWelt* in Neuendettelsau on “Climate Justice” offered a rare opportunity to explore how global church partnerships can contribute to a spiritually grounded understanding of sustainability and justice.

The Summer School brought together participants from predominantly Lutheran backgrounds, as well as Methodists and Anglicans from different continents, and focused on 'climate justice' in its educational efforts. Beyond conventional learning formats, it combined academic discussions, creative media projects, shared worship, and digital dialogue spaces. In this way, it demonstrated how spirituality—expressed through music, prayer, storytelling, and rituals—serves as a subtle yet powerful force, fostering solidarity, hope, and resilience and commitment to change.

This article reflects on the experience of the Summer School 2024, highlighting the interplay between spirituality, justice, and sustainability. It examines how faith-based international education initiatives can enrich

²⁹ <https://www.partner-religion-development.org/cop28-spirituality-and-faith-showed-they-could-be-a-beacon-of-hope/>

ESD by rooting action in a deeper sense of meaning, community, and responsibility.

2. Global Church Partnerships as Foundations for ESD

For *Mission EineWelt*, global church partnerships are not just organizational networks but living communities shaped by mutual learning, shared faith, and joint responsibility for global challenges.³⁰ In this context, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) acquires a relational and spiritual dimension: it is about walking together, listening to diverse voices, and building a collective vision of justice and sustainability.

The Summer School has been held for over 30 years in Neuendettelsau. It has always been understood as an ecumenical and intercultural meeting to learn together and to share perspectives from different parts of the Protestant faith world.

As shown on the map, the emphasis is on the Global South.³¹ Usually, one or two participants are invited per church. From the beginning, efforts were made to increase the number of female and younger participants.

The topic of this year's Summer School was "climate justice." This marked a departure from previous themes, which often focused on topics like "Lutheran identity," "interreligious dialogue," or "peace-building." In 2023, climate justice was chosen as the focus for *Mission EineWelt*³², and consequently, the 2024 Summer School was aligned with this theme.

The "Creation not for sale" campaign, initiated by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), offers a clear ethical position: Creation is not for sale. It calls for a new, solidarity-based approach to the world and its resources – on an equal footing.

It expresses in biblical language what is currently being discussed in political, social, and scientific debates as planetary boundaries: creation is a gift, not a commodity. From a theological perspective, this means that humans' relation to creation is to be understood in terms of responsibility and stewardship (Gen 2:15). This perspective is both a critique of a utilitarian understanding of nature and a call for transformative change.

Ecumenical partnership work in particular shows how unevenly the burdens of climate change are distributed. While countries in the Global South—like many LWF partner churches—are already suffering massively

³⁰ <https://mission-einewelt.de/wie-wir-arbeiten/leitsaetze/>

³¹ <https://mission-einewelt.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Header-Partnerschaften.jpg>

³² https://mission-einewelt.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024_Themenheft_Klimagerechtigkeit.pdf

from the consequences, significant emissions and resource consumption originate in the Global North. The 2024 Summer School of *Mission EineWelt* in Neuendettelsau focused on this connection: it sees itself as a place of learning where people talk not about but with partners—theologically, practically, and liturgically.

The motto “walking side by side” underscores a postcolonial understanding of partnership. It is not about development aid handouts, but about shared responsibility and mutual learning processes. Churches as civil society actors in Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, and Brazil demonstrate creative resistance practices and spiritual resources in the fight against environmental destruction.

The goal was to explore “climate justice” from different angles and to discuss how churches could take action. The focus wasn’t on a top-down view of science, policy, or economics. Rather, it centered on the various human perspectives on climate justice and, by extension, on what it means to care for creation. This is where spirituality becomes essential.

Bringing together participants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe to engage with the urgent theme of climate justice, their different cultural backgrounds, languages, and church traditions provided a rich foundation for exploring how spirituality can foster sustainable action beyond political or economic considerations alone.

The proposed goal was “a deeper understanding of the political, economic, and ethical aspects of climate change, aiming at responsible church action based on justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.”

The global church community plays a unique role in advancing climate justice. Not necessarily as another political actor, but as a space—like many faith communities—where hope is nurtured and holistic, universal goals are embraced. In this regard, churches and other faith organizations can become places where spirituality meets sustainability. The main goal of the Summer School 2024 was to create a forum to listen to each other on the subject of climate justice, learn about innovative approaches to teaching it, and motivate one another to contribute to global change starting from personal and regional contexts.

The background of our team's preparation was the ecumenical process of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, as stated by the World Council of Churches³³ and the Lutheran World Federation³⁴.

Three aspects of justice were particularly emphasized in preparing the Summer School:³⁵

Participatory justice: We invited one or two participants per church regardless of church size. For example, the Evangelical Church of Tanzania has 8 million members, while some Lutheran churches in Central America number only in the thousands. Our interpretation of participatory justice emphasized cross-cultural mutual exchange rather than numerical representation.

Testimonial justice: Who gets to speak? The role of language is often underestimated. We addressed this by enabling Latin American participants to speak in Spanish and Portuguese with translation. This also allowed people with indigenous backgrounds to participate, even if they were not fluent in English, the *lingua franca*.

Hermeneutical justice: How do we engage with the frameworks that shape our understanding of justice, creation, and goodness? This question is vital. To avoid excluding differing experiences, we made a special effort to avoid dominant conceptual frameworks.

3. The Digital Media Experiment: Creativity, Participation, and Reflection

Building on these principles, the Summer School introduced a digital media experiment to creatively engage participants with the theme of 'climate justice.'

Rather than relying on lengthy lectures that could widen the gap between participants with varying academic backgrounds, we encouraged collaborative methods. Small, diverse international groups were formed,

³³<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/hist-e.html>: „Over the years, an emerging conviction that justice, peace and creation are bound together has found expression in such World Council of Churches' study and action programmes as the Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society (JPSS), the conciliar process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) and, most recently, the Theology of Life (TOL) programme.“

³⁴ <https://lutheranworld.org/what-we-do/justice-and-peace/climate-justice>

³⁵ Miranda Fricker writes in her book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*: “[T]he injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization.” Miranda Fricker, 2007, p. 158.

allowing participants to decide which experiences to include in representing the Summer School.

Among other tasks, each group produced a short video. The format was open-ended; we provided some technical and procedural guidelines, but content and style were up to the participants.

We highlight three videos³⁶ that illustrate key themes:

Environmental Responsibility – "Garbage in the River". One group created a simulation showing how garbage in rivers harms the environment, metaphorically illustrating damage to creation.

While the group clearly enjoyed the process, they tackled an essential question: how can pollution be stopped? The project connected directly to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to water and environmental protection.

The video, recorded in Wittenberg, drew attention. Bystanders observed the recording of Black participants pulling garbage from a bin marked with a "hazard" sign. The scene drew interest, especially in Eastern Germany, where such an international crew filming in public stands out.

Solidarity and Community – "Sitting in Front of the Church". This video took a more personal approach, contrasting social inequalities: people cleaning up vs. those littering; high earners vs. minimum wage workers; the well-fed vs. the hungry. The seemingly simple answer came when everyone gathered in front of the church stood up and began to pray, declaring, "Together we can work towards climate justice."

Climate Inequality – "Singapore". This video unintentionally highlighted global climate inequality. It began by addressing issues like poverty and drought, then shifted to footage from a Singaporean promotional video showcasing Dutch-engineered solutions to rising sea levels. This raised an important question: what could participants from Papua New Guinea take away from such high-tech examples?

These creative exercises revealed the richness of diverse perspectives and the difficulty of framing discussions in terms of climate justice rather than simply climate change. They also showed that engaging with sustainability through collaborative and artistic methods can provoke deep, personal reflection—a key aspect of Education for Sustainable Development.

However, the process also reflected global disparities:

³⁶ Link to the videos:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlog4_ord2LfmF8WcWDDHPZmMATxZjMuM

- Differences in perception between participants from "poor" vs. "rich" countries.
- A tendency toward simplistic narratives such as "if we only shared better, the world would be better," without addressing structural roots of injustice.
- Overreliance on technical solutions not accessible to all.

4. Findings: Spirituality as the Hidden Current

The video exercises and group reflections offered insights into creative learning around climate justice. Participants naturally embraced their cultural diversity, expressed themselves freely, and connected their projects to personal experiences. Still, it was challenging to consistently frame their engagement in terms of climate justice instead of the more generic concept of climate change. Simplistic answers—more solidarity and better tech—remained tempting.

Shifting from traditional lecturing to participant-led content creation proved a valuable exercise in hermeneutical humility. Most participants felt they had both listened deeply and shared their own views. Yet, some also suggested it might have helped to begin with a shared definition of climate justice—highlighting the tension between participatory learning and conceptual clarity.

The Summer School not only encouraged creativity and participation but also illuminated the role of spirituality in climate justice education. Shared moments of prayer and song didn't change the academic content, but they brought emotional and communal depth. They fostered hope, confidence, and solidarity—reminding us that the challenge is not just scientific or political, but moral and spiritual: caring for God's creation.

While visiting the Luther Garden, participants learned about the 500 trees planted to mark 500 years of the Reformation, each representing a different church. The trees were said to be communicating—their roots and branches intertwined.

In a powerful ritual, all participants stood in a circle, touching feet with neighbors and placing arms on each other's shoulders: they embodied the trees—rooted individually but connected as a community.

As another highlight of the Summer School, we presented a song together at the Festival of the World-Wide Church. As it turned out, the song "How Great Thou Art" was a globally recognized hymn that resonated with the different language groups. We sang it in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Swahili, while holding up signs that read, "Let's take care

of God's creation." At the same time, we displayed a large image of a tree, strong and fruitful, with animals playing in its branches.

It was quite a task to convey the spirit of the Summer School in such a short moment to a larger audience, but some essential elements were beautifully expressed: the solidarity, the diversity of voices, and the unity of our intentions.

This enabled participants from varied cultural and social backgrounds to find shared ethical ground and to practice what might be called hermeneutical justice: the willingness to hear, value, and integrate diverse voices in the pursuit of a more just and sustainable world.

In the face of overwhelming realities—rising seas, melting glaciers, vanishing species—spirituality offers something unique. It connects us to a higher purpose and to one another. It sustains hope where facts may breed despair, and empowers collective action when the challenges seem too vast for individuals alone.

References

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

How to Deal with a ‘Pressure to Act’ Facing Ecological Issues when Teaching?

Michael Holzwieser

1. A ‘Pressure to Act’

The ‘Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’ (IPCC) of the UN reported the consequences of a 1.5-degree Celsius global warming (IPCC, 2022). It seems that this level had already been reached in Europe in 2024, much earlier than expected (World Meteorological Organization, 2025). The dramatical development of the climate crisis stresses the need for rapid changes. Draught and climate change as well as energy with its fossil production of climate gases, shortage of good drinking water and many other issues cry out for a quick global transformation. In the year 2015, the UN put up 17 goals for a sustainable development (THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development, 2025). There is little time left for reaching them until 2030. This all urges a “pressure to act”.

Some students, especially young people seeing themselves as the last generation, know about the little time to transform the society and economy to sustainable ones (Bederna, 2019, pp. 34–39). Is there still enough time and space for educational processes? In the panel discussion of the Nuremberg Forum, a representant of ‘Fridays for Future’ stated that it is not too late for education. Quality education, as claimed in SDG 4, is needed (THE 17 GOALS | *Sustainable Development*, 2025). On the other hand, there is also a ‘pressure to act’.

Socially, economically and ecologically aware teachers teach Education of Sustainable Development (ESD) which is a strategy of Sustainable Development (SD) (Bederna, 2020, p. 1). Pedagogues know very well that pressure has never been a good pedagogical companion. They ask questions of motivation for young people to turn from knowing to acting. How to deal with the dilemma of a ‘pressure to act’ on the one hand and educational processes on the other? After 1.) deepening the background of this dilemma, 2.) the workshop held on this question during the Nuremberg Forum 2024 will be presented and discussed. The focus here is on school teaching, ESD as a constructivist pedagogy and a possible impact based on a monotheist theology of creation and its spirituality.

2. Education for Sustainable Development

The question of what can be done is addressed in an unspoken goal, that a good sustainable development (SD) with an adequate ESD is needed. The UN claims a “Quality Education” in the SDG 4 and defines it well for our topic under point 7 “Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship”: Education is needed to change the social, ecological and economic life and society (Globalgoals, 2025). Unfortunately, the term SD lacks a clear and common understanding (Vogt, 2013, pp. 110–112); it can be defined here as a political concept of the UN. It was mentioned first by the Brundtland Report in 1987 (WCED – World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This political and social ethical approach (Vogt, 2013; Bederna & Vogt, 2018, pp. 8–9) provides the background of our question: How can we transform our economy, society and our live-styles so that there will be resources left for the developing world and for the future generations (Budde & Blasse, 2023, p. 6)? ESD is part of this transformation, and the lack of reaching these goals increases the mentioned ‘pressure to act’.

At schools, ESD is often taught with concrete topics like food waste or mobility and then methods are presented that can help to reduce CO₂ exhaust. The educational processes concentrate on fostering competences, especially future-oriented competences (Bormann & de Haan, 2008). They aim at solving problems in the future which today do not exist. Vale and Scott call this emphasis on acting competences the “ESD 2” (Vare & Scott, 2007, p. 191). But then, the big questions are often ignored, and reflections of world view, attitude and culture are often neglected. But it makes a difference whether to e.g. mainly stress the transformation of mobility to an electric one, which in fact is a needed step towards SD, or to reflect the lifestyle of individual mobility and its orientation on own cars, even used for short ways. However, for many teachers at schools it seems to be too difficult to ask the big questions of world views and values. Are they too big, too deep? Are they too philosophical? But it is crucial for the pedagogy of ESD to put an emphasis on world views and its global and intergenerational consequences. This is ESD 1 (Vare & Scott, 2007, p. 191).

In the following, constructivist approaches will be pointed out as an adequate way for a quality education of ESD. Two concepts will be presented to provide impulses for quality ESD teaching: a pioneer concept of ESD, the Green Pedagogy (GP) with its emphasis of content and value reflection processes, and the constructivist Christian pedagogy with its strength of religious criteria of value education processes. Then, the

question will be raised if the two concepts can adequately address the pressure to act or not.

3. Constructivist Didactics

Here, constructivist didactics follows the social constructivism of Kersten Reich who has worked out that learning processes happen as own constructions of the learners and not by instructions of the teachers (Reich, 2005). The strength of constructivist didactics lies in the personal and emotional relevance for the learners. This is a pedagogical shift from input to the output of the learners. The process- and system-orientation of the didactical settings fit very well for the transformations of society and economy that are needed for SD. Learners detect constructions, question them and change them to new, more sustainable ones.

The University College of Agrarian and Environmental Pedagogy in Vienna, Austria, adjusted ESD to their circumstances. The pedagogical studies of the students turned around nature that on the one hand can be protected and on the other hand used economically. Sometimes tensions in world views come up, for example when students of Agrarian Pedagogy own cattle farms and start to discuss highly emotional with vegan students studying SD. This was one of the reasons to create an own ESD didactical concept: the Green Pedagogy (GP) (Fox & Wogowitsch, 2021). As a constructivist concept GP stresses the individual's experience and relevance for the learners. GP learned from a dialogue with the constructivist didactics of pedagogy of religion, that the learner's pre-competence needs to be acknowledged (Holzwieser, 2020, p. 113). GP as an early concept of ESD developed teaching-learning settings that combine sustainable topics (like water use) with a value reflection.

Constructivist Pedagogy of Religion (CPR) (Mendl, 2015) points out that the instructions of the teacher help that the teaching and learning process follows criteria of knowledge and competences. For value education, CPR brings in its competencies to not 'moralize' (Mendl, 2024, pp. 127–130). GP and CPR both stress the important processes of individuals. Subject orientation is essential,³⁷ content orientation and reflection of value constructions as well.

³⁷ Hans Mendl recently discussed how the subject orientation is questioned by cultural developments after COVID-time, war against Ukraine and the urgencies of SD. He asked whether there should not be an additional emphasis on social and ethical dimensions of the pedagogical principle of autonomy (Mendl, 2023, p. 61).

To the discussion of the question of how to deal with a ‘pressure to act’, constructivist didactics contributes by stressing reflection and new construction of sustainable behavior. It helps build up a sustainable attitude. On the other hand, constructivist didactics face two issues. Firstly, teaching and learning processes need time – which contradicts the described pressure to act. Secondly, constructivist didactics is intended to accept the output of the teaching and learning process – even an output against SD. The question of ‘How to deal with the pressure to act?’ does not find a satisfying answer in constructivist didactics. Something more seems to be needed.

4. Values of Religions – A Case Study for the Workshop

The hypothesis of the workshop was to add a value oriented educational process of religious content and spirituality and to demonstrate the relevance for ESD and the own life in a case study. It is about the Christian theology of creation. ‘Creation’ is a theological statement about a creator, God, which is not part of the created creations, like the earth, human beings and animals, all organic and non-organic beings. Human beings are stewards of the creator who administrate the earth after the rules of the creator (Welker, 1999). This urges consequences in the behavior of human beings. They are not the rulers. Concepts of creation theology connect the so-called Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The theology of creation inspires a spirituality of creation with certain values. These should be elaborated by the participants of the workshop. Maybe they would be able to relate to the spirituality of creation that Pope Francis mentioned in his Encyclical “Laudato si’” (Franziskus & Florin, 2015, no. 221–222): Theologically, there is an awareness that every creation has a God-given own worth and reflects a part of God’s being. A conversion to this attitude is necessary. Some biblical impulses of spirituality are that ‘less is more’ and life is more than own possessions or consumption. There is a search for a deeper fulfilment. Happiness can be found in the small things. An attitude of gratefulness can grow for what is given and for the opportunities of life.

5. Workshop

5.1 Process of the Workshop

The questions for the workshop were: 1.) Which values of responsibility for creation can have an impact on the values of ESD teaching? 2.) Which impact can a spirituality of responsibility for creation have on the 'pressure to act'? Two small groups were formed for social exchange. One group for question 1 and one for question 2. The questions were noted on an online pinboard (*padlet*), and the answers of the group discussions were written on the padlet.

After a short presentation of the results, the participants were invited to ask the other group questions in order to get a better understanding of their notes. A few issues came up: What is understood by the term "spirituality"? It was asked why just a specific Christian view of spirituality was elaborated in one group. The group members answered that they talked about their religious tradition and practice. In the Christian faith the term "spirituality" can be understood as the personal relationship to the Holy Spirit. In the discussion all participants agreed on the importance that all spiritualities, religious and non-religious, should be included in the discussion. It was also elaborated on how important it was to discover whether the talk is about the same thing, when using the term 'spirituality'. One group pointed out that for them spirituality had to do with trust, with connection to the spirit (in a Christian meaning) and to connect to other people and find solutions together. It is about interconnectedness, with human beings and with nature.

Finally, the workshop pointed out that a spirituality of creation would encourage better ways of dealing with the 'pressure to act', if, as group 2 worked it out, it is based on an understanding of interconnectedness. Interconnectedness with the world and earth, with, in the Christian understanding, the Holy Spirit, and, interreligiously speaking, with transcendence and a higher entity. It teaches us that people need to search for solutions together, as a community and by cross-cultural dialogues. This common search and the attitude to feel connected with others, the earth and with transcendence takes away the pressure of finding solutions alone and the pressure of taking more responsibility than one person can deal with. It also showed how personal the question of spirituality can be. In a dialogue one can learn from the other and widen one's own horizon. For further investigations it can be proved that dialogue opens a way to get in touch with one's own mental and motivational resources. The

respectfulness of the dialogue might be transferred to respectfulness towards people and nature, as an attitude of interconnectedness.

It seems to be notable that in the workshop discussion the necessity to clarify the understanding of spirituality was stressed. Some participants urged to bring in this point for the discussion of the text of the Memorandum of the Nuremberg Forum 2024 (Nuremberg Forum, 2024). In the later discussion of the text of the Memorandum, the input of the workshop was accommodated and the term “spirituality” was defined.

5.2 Constructivist Didactics, ESD and Religion

In the workshop a few principles of a constructivist didactic were applied.

1. Example orientation and situation centeredness: A concrete case was chosen: theology of creation in teaching ESD. Even though ‘theology of creation’ was taken as an overview, not specified to one of the monotheistic religions, it obviously helped as a basis of collaboration. The participants of the workshop found the brief case information concrete enough to elaborate or share values of a theology of creation to shape a spirituality of creation with major aspects like thankfulness to the givenness of the earth, interconnectedness and others more. Personal relevance was given.

2. Participation: The discussions took place in small groups of a few participants. The output was elaborated well in the small group.

3. Social group methods and e-learning methods: The structures for the discussion were shaped so that everyone was regarded as equal, everyone had the same rights to talk, agree and disagree. For bigger groups, communication rules would have to be set up in a communicative process or by a pre-prepared handout. E-learning methods were useful for collaboration. By a shared link everyone read the texts, wrote notes and saved outputs for later use. It was helpful for the dialogue and exchange with participants of different religions by providing structures.

4. Reflections: After the group work and discussion, the learning outcomes and, on a meta level, the process of learning together were reflected. For constructivist didactics this is an important step. It is to build up skills for solving future problems. For value teaching-learning processes it seems an essential and crucial point. The learners themselves acquire competencies for constructing present value systems, then analyze and probably change it in a group process and construct a renewed, new or widened value system.

5. New construction: Religion and spirituality do not just fulfill the ESD principle of interdisciplinary approaches. It is an impulse to the process of reconstruction – construction – deconstruction (Reich, 2005, p. 7) of the

learners to learn that religion can be part of the solution of ecological issues (Köhren, 2024). In this way, the 'pressure to act' can be positively influenced by finding new resources in religious values. New solutions emerge from a dialogue among religions, and personal and religious values have an impact on motivations to act.

6. Outlook

In the year 2024, the mark of 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warmth has already been reached. It shows how urgent education processes are. There are also positive news. The IPCC pointed out the prospect in their reports that it will be possible to reduce the global heating if mankind reacts consequently. The case study in the workshop made it clear: With a constructivist ESD, a corresponding pedagogy of religion and the impact of value education, with a theology of creation and its spirituality the 'pressure to act' can be transformed into a 'motivation to act' – if religious and spiritual dimensions are involved in the education processes!

References

- Bederna, K. (2019). Every day for future: Theologie und religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (2. Auflage 2020). Matthias Grünewald Verlag.
- Bederna, K. (2020). Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. *WiReLex*. https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Bildung_fr_nachhaltige_Entwicklung.200572
- Bederna, K., & Vogt, M. (2018). Art. Ökologische Ethik. *WiReLex*. https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.kologische_Ethik.200340
- Bormann, I., & de Haan, G. (Ed.). (2008). Kompetenzen der Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Operationalisierung, Messung, Rahmenbedingungen, Befunde. Springer.
- Budde, J., & Blasse, N. (2023). Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung zwischen Programmatik und Praxis. *Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik*, 46 (2), S. 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.25656/01:27080>
- Fox, A., & Wogowitsch, C. (2021). Green Pedagogy: Using Confrontation and Provocation to Promote Sustainability Skills. In M. Jose Hernández-Serrano (Ed.), *Teacher Education in the 21st Century: Emerging Skills for a Changing World*. IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.96432>
- Franziskus, & Florin, C. (2015). Enzyklika Laudato si': Über die Sorge für das gemeinsame Haus: die Umwelt-Enzyklika mit Einführung und Themenschlüssel (3. Auflage). Katholisches Bibelwerk.
- Globalgoals. (2025, March 31). *Goal 4: Quality education – The Global Goals*. <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/>

- THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development. (2025, March 29). <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
- Holzwieser, M. (2020). Grüne Pädagogik und konstruktivistische Religionspädagogik. Ein Vergleich zweier konstruktivistischer pädagogischer Konzepte. *Österr. Religionspädagogisches Forum*, 28(2), 100–116. <https://doi.org/10.25364/10.28:2020.2.7>
- IPCC. (2022). *Global Warming of 1.5°C*. Cambridge University Press. https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/SR15_Full_Report_LR.pdf <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009157940>
- Köhrensen, J. (2024). Religion. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.17879/sun-2024-5659> (*Soziologie und Nachhaltigkeit*, 2024: SuN Blog Beiträge 2024).
- Mendl, H. (2015). Konstruktivistischer_Religionsunterricht. *WiReLex*. https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Konstruktivistischer_Religionsunterricht.100021
- Mendl, H. (2023). Subjektorientierung unter Druck. *Religionspädagogische Beiträge*, 46(1), 53–64. <https://doi.org/10.20377/rpb-270>
- Mendl, H. (2024). Werte haben ihren Preis. In B. Kopp, S. Schieder-Niewierra & A. Tabbert (Eds.), *Wertebildung im Lehramtsstudium. Beiträge aus Wissenschaft, Forschung und Schulpraxis* (pp. 125–135). FAU University Press.
- Nuremberg Forum. (2024). *Memorandum of the Nuremberg Forum*. RUPRE. <https://www.evrel.phil.fau.de/nuernberger-forum/nuremberg-forum-2024/nuremberg-memorandum/>
- Reich, K. (2005). Konstruktivistische Didaktik: Beispiele für eine veränderte Unterrichtspraxis. *Schulmagazin*, 5–8.
- Vare, P., & Scott, W. (2007). Learning for a Change. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 1, 191–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097340820700100209>
- Vogt, M. (2013). *Prinzip Nachhaltigkeit: Ein Entwurf aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive* (3. Auflage). Hochschulschriften zur Nachhaltigkeit: Vol. 39. Oekom.
- WCED – World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>
- Welker, M. (1999). *Creation and reality*. Fortress Press.
- World Meteorological Organization. (2025). *State of the Global Climate 2024*. <https://wmo.int/publication-series/state-of-global-climate-2024>

Fostering Global Learning in Religious Education – the reliGlobal Approach

Jens Palkowitsch-Kühl & Bianca Kappelhoff

1. Introduction

Global learning and religious education must be thought about together. This is the firm belief of the reliGlobal group, an expert unit composed of five specialists in the field of religious education. reliGlobal is a joint project by five German institutes of religious education that collaborate within the ALPIKA group (consisting of the Directors of the Pedagogical Institutes in the Protestant Churches in Germany)³⁸ and is funded by *Bread for the World* (the globally active development and relief agency of the Protestant Churches in Germany).³⁹

The project can be understood as an initiative resulting from the observation of current developments and needs identified in the field of religious pedagogy. During the last decade, global learning has increasingly emerged from its supposed shadowy existence in religious pedagogy as a result of the United Nations initiative to promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (United Nations, 2015; see e.g. Bederna, 2020a; Bederna, 2020b; Bederna & Gärtner, 2023; Breit, 2024; Gärtner, 2020; Henningsen, 2022; Mendl, 2019; Schimmel & Straßner, 2023; Simojoki, 2021; Spahn-Skrotzki, 2022; Tacke, 2024; Ziegler, 2021). As early as 2001, Simojoki pointed out didactic consequences for the design of religious education (RE) processes, showing 10 years later that the implications of this “are already available in overall drafts (Simojoki, 2012) and overview contributions (Simojoki, 2018).” (Simojoki, 2021, p. 7). It should also be noted in particular that religious education for sustainable development (rESD) is currently being presented as a conceptualisation of RE didactics (Bederna, 2021).

Schimmel and Straßner (2023) examine specifically the content areas of (Catholic) religious education and point out fields in the “context of ethical topics” (Schimmel & Straßner 2023, p. 250) (e.g. making decisions: good and evil) that deal with global topics (e.g. justice for children in the world), genuinely theological topics (e.g. responsibility for creation – doing what is possible? justice for children in the world), genuinely ethical topics (e.g.

³⁸ <https://alpika.de/>

³⁹ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/>

responsibility for creation – doing what is possible!?), anthropological topics (e.g. human beings as image of God – justice and human dignity) and historical topics (e.g. religious role models) (Schimmel & Straßner 2023, pp. 250–251). Overall, they come to the conclusion that “sustainability topics and ESD concerns can be easily linked to ‘classical’ topics of religious education. Often, a refocusing or exemplification of elementary experiences, approaches and truths must be undertaken, as is necessary in the sense of a student-centered, present- and future-orientated approach of religious education anyway.” (Schimmel & Straßner, 2023, p. 252; authors’ translation). Generally, they argue that “[w]hen developing future curricula, care should be taken to identify and emphasise possible aspects of religious education for sustainable development within ‘classical’ thematic contexts”. (Schimmel & Straßner, 2023, p. 252; authors’ translation). The *Orientation Framework for Global Development Education* (KMK & BMZ, 2016; authors’ translation), which also contains thematic references for religious education, also offers a possible set of tools.

Based on this theoretical perspective – the long-standing tradition of global learning on the one hand and the newly emerging religious education for sustainable development on the other – the reliGlobal specialist unit develops practical teaching units for Protestant religious education.

In this article, we would first like to explain what exactly reliGlobal’s approach is, what methods we use and how we distribute our educational content. In more detail, we will use the OER-licensed unit “climate justice” as an example of our approach to global learning. Finally, we invite everyone to work together on global learning topics.

2. The reliGlobal Approach

With the approach of global learning in religious education, the reliGlobal specialised team provides teachers with materials and concepts to deal with *global challenges* in a multidimensional perspective – with explicit recourse to the religious dimension.

In doing so, the specialist unit agrees with Scheunpflug’s definition of global learning, which sees itself “as a pedagogical reaction to the fact of the development of a global society, as a reaction to the changed learning requirements in the course of globalisation” (Scheunpflug, 2001, p. 87; authors’ translation). Globalisation brings international interdependencies into play. The challenges of these interdependencies should not only be considered in religious education, but learners should also take a stand on

the basis of their own religious education experiences. In order to be able to recognise, understand, evaluate and act on these worldwide connections in the course of globalisation, it is necessary to be aware of one's own standpoint, one's own interests and to reflect on one's own perspective in the mirror of others.

In the following, methodological and didactic decisions as well as the method of distribution that make up the core of the reliGlobal approach are presented.

2.1 reliGlobal Methods & Didactics

reliGlobal develops teaching units that usually cover one topic over the course of several lessons. The concept of the units is based on three key steps: recognise, apprehend and act:

- **Recognise:** This step is about recognising global challenges – a process of becoming aware (“I perceive it”). This awareness is often linked to biblical references and reflected against the background of experiences that are related to God.
- **Apprehend:** This is followed by an in-depth examination of the topic from a global perspective. The learners deal with the diverse interrelationships and develop their own ability to judge (“I understand the connections”).
- **Act:** Based on these findings, the next step is implementation. The learners consider what action-orientated consequences result from this and develop concrete measures.

The reliGlobal approach is thus characterised by action-oriented theory and is based on a holistic view of the world and people (Asbrand & Scheunpflug, 2014, p. 405; Ziegler, 2021, p. 157). This makes it clear that local actions are always embedded in global contexts and influence them and vice versa (see Ziegler, 2021, p. 157).

In its work, reliGlobal is strongly oriented towards decolonial theory, which aims to make visible the perspectives of those who were and are often regarded as not modern, not civilised or not emancipated within the framework of a prevailing Eurocentric worldview (Knobloch, 2019, p. 16).

The following questions are of particular importance to the specialised team when designing the project and developing the units and materials:

- How can we decolonise our thinking?
- How can voices from the Global South be actively included?

- How do we enable both a connection to the reality of life of the learners and a change of perspective for the learners?
- What quality criteria (e.g. religious didactic principles) do we use to design our materials?

2.2 reliGlobal Distribution & Didactics

Teachers should be able to integrate the OER-licensed materials developed in the reliGlobal project directly into their lessons. These educational resources are therefore designed in such a way that they can be adapted flexibly, in line with individual requirements and in a legally compliant manner. This is ensured by the machine-readable integration of the corresponding CC licences. A central focus of the project is on the openness of the educational resources created so that they can be used sustainably. In this context, the didactics of the resources are not only considered at the material level, but are understood as part of an open educational approach – the Open Educational Practices (OEP). These focus on openness, collaboration and active co-design (Ehlers, 2011). The reliGlobal project aims to encourage teachers to flexibly adapt the units, materials and didactic concepts provided. Instead of creating “disposable items”, the materials are to be further developed individually and used sustainably. reliGlobal provides an internet platform for this purpose, which enables simple and barrier-free reuse. Selected material will also be made available in languages other than German. The site follows the approach of peer-to-peer learning, which enables teachers to generate high-quality resources co-constructively.

As participation is a central aspect of this, the platform provides opportunities for participation through interactive functions:

- Feedback forms for the teaching units
- Rating functions and comment fields for the materials
- The option to share your own versions or changes directly

These functions promote co-creation in which teachers and other educational stakeholders actively contribute to the further development of the materials. This strengthens the peer-to-peer learning approach and enables the co-constructive generation of high-quality educational resources.

Those involved in religious education work benefit threefold: they acquire new knowledge, receive valuable feedback and pass it on at the same time. This creates a lively knowledge community that further

develops global learning in religious education. This sustainable co-creation process contributes to the quality of educational resources in the long term and enables individualised access to education.

3. Deep Dive: Climate Justice

By the example of the OER licensed teaching material on *climate justice* we will demonstrate how this approach comes alive in the RE classroom.⁴⁰

The teaching unit for upper secondary level was developed in collaboration with *RE for Climate* (German: “reli fürs klima”), a regional German project to integrate climate justice questions in religious education. It integrates materials from *Bread for the world* on the topic of climate change and climate justice that originated in that project. In general, in the units, we try to make references to the SDGs, partly in order to be compatible with the (r)ESD discourse and to clarify the context for teachers. In this unit, this is SDG13:

“Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” (United Nations, 2015). Climate change affects every country on every continent today. It has negative impacts on national economies and the life of every individual. Weather phenomena are changing, sometimes dramatically, sea levels are rising, droughts and floods are occurring all over the world, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. The people most affected are those in the Global South who are themselves least responsible for human-made climate change.

This topic is dealt with along the didactical framework of the above defined three steps “Recognise – Apprehend – Act”:

1. Recognise: “Let justice flow like waters, and righteousness like a never-failing stream” – biblical approach with reference to Amos 5:24.
2. Apprehend: Elaboration of the global perspective on climate change, the realisation of climate justice and the effects on the Global South and the Global North.
3. Act: Application of the results of the development of the biblical and global perspective to the students’ own lives, in their own school practice and in the local context.

⁴⁰ <https://religlobal.org/unit/climate-justice/>

At least 6×45 minutes teaching time is estimated for the teaching unit. All three parts of the unit can also be carried out in much greater depth and with more time and effort.

Step 1: Recognise

The first step is to understand the topic of justice and righteousness from a biblical perspective and link it to current social challenges. The starting point is the verse from Amos 5:24, which the students first analyse individually using individual words. They then look at the entire text and discuss it in the classroom. In particular, the dynamics of the expression "roll down" are analysed, giving rise to the idea of powerful, unstoppable justice. This leads to a reflection on the social situations in which justice is not experienced as a powerful, flowing stream, but rather as a drying up or even dried up river.

This discussion is deepened by other prophetic texts, in particular the vision of the water in the temple from Ezekiel 47. The students primarily deal with the symbolism of water by visualising the Bible text – be it through a sketch, a vision board or a drawing. In addition, they create a word cloud with associations to the term "water". In the joint evaluation, these terms are organised into three categories: Water as a *life-giving* element, water as an *ambivalent* symbol between life and threat and water as a *life-threatening* force.

On this basis, the pupils then discuss the role that water plays in their own lives and in their perception of global realities. Topics such as droughts, floods, rising sea levels and the increasing salinisation of drinking water sources are collected and recorded. This creates a link between the biblical ideas of justice and the current challenges of climate change, which helps students to recognise that climate justice is a central issue of social and ethical responsibility.

Step 2: Apprehend

In the second step, the global perspective in particular comes into play. The students explore the effects of climate change keeping the focus on the element of water. Examples include the island states of Tuvalu and Kiribati which are at risk of disappearing due to rising sea levels in the Pacific, Bangladesh which is threatened by flooding and salinisation of fresh water, the Ahr Valley in Germany where a flood disaster caused devastating damage in 2021, and Ethiopia where droughts repeatedly threaten people's livelihoods.

The students work individually on the tasks for one of these examples (think). They then exchange ideas with the other students who have worked on the same topic (pair). Results are compared, corrected and supplemented. Afterwards, four groups (of approximately the same size) are formed. In each one, there is one representative from each working group, so that the results from each country example can be presented and discussed one by one (share).

The results of working out the effects of climate change on water-related issues worldwide lead to a class discussion on possible measures to prevent or to deal with these consequences of climate change. The following key questions can facilitate the class discussion:

- Consider and describe international measures that could be taken to support the island states of Tuvalu and Kiribati, or the countries of Bangladesh and Ethiopia, in the fight against climate change.
- Consider and describe international measures that could be taken to help countries rebuild after extreme weather events (e.g. in the Ahr valley in Germany).
- Discuss the role of industrialised countries in implementing these measures and their responsibility.

In the further course of the lesson, the students learn about the Paris Climate Agreement (2015) and the decisions made there. For this, students watch two short videos on the Paris Climate Agreement and the issue of climate justice. After reading an information text, the three main objectives of the Paris Climate Agreement are then discussed in class.

The students formulate a definition of the term “climate justice” and present it in class for discussion.

Now, one of the examples from the beginning of step 2 – the effects of climate change in Bangladesh – is taken up again and deepened by analysing the lawsuit filed by lawyer Yi Yi Prue before the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe in Germany. To do this, the students first inform themselves once again about the effects of climate change in Bangladesh with regard to ecological, economic and social consequences. They then look at the climate lawsuit from the perspective of climate justice by discussing the consequences of the successful lawsuit for life in Germany (as an example for the Global North) and Bangladesh (as an example for the Global South).

The students use a worksheet to explore the concept of the “handprint”, which focuses on collective action that can lead to changes in political and social general conditions, so that sustainable action becomes easier, evident, cheaper or even the norm. Using material from *Bread for the World*⁴¹, the difference to the ecological footprint is elaborated (individual versus structure-changing commitment).

The students have acquired or deepened the following skills at this stage of the lesson:

- Using materials from *Bread for the World*, the students learn about the problematic situation in Bangladesh, which is particularly affected by climate change.
- They will take a critical look at the climate lawsuit brought before the Federal Constitutional Court by Bangladeshi lawyer Yi Yi Prue.
- They learn about the concept of the “handprint” as an alternative to the well-known “ecological footprint” and the differences between the two concepts and are able to evaluate these.

Step 3: Act

The insights gained in the first two steps are incorporated into a *simulation game* or *role play* in which the students develop concrete options for action to strengthen climate justice in schools, churches and society. The focus remains on the topic of water.

In the *simulation game*, the students independently develop goals and measures for saving water in everyday school life. In small groups, they first research problems associated with flooding and climate change as well as preventive measures and opportunities for improvement – both at a local and global level.

Alternatively, they can simulate a local council meeting in a *role play* in which they represent different positions on the use of church properties. The setting revolves around a new development area and challenges between addressing land sealing and housing shortages. They discuss the tension between social and climate-related justice, formulate draft resolutions and vote on them. This strengthens the students’ ability to debate climate justice and encourages them to reflect on their own horizons for action.

⁴¹ <https://www.brot-fuer-die-welt.de/downloads/global-lernen-handabdruck/>

4. Learning

When organising the workshop at the Nuremberg Forum 2024, a focus was placed on co-creation in line with the reliGlobal approach in order to contribute to the further development of the materials. The feedback from the participants once again made the members of the specialist unit aware of the emotional level of the topics. This is in line with the recent ESD research described by Schimmel & Straßner (2023, p. 249; with reference to Brundiars, Barth, Cebrian, Cohen, Diaz et al., 2021) which shows “that dealing constructively with negative feelings (e.g. powerlessness, anger, frustration, fears) is a challenge to be taken seriously in ESD.” (Schimmel & Straßner, 2023, p. 249; authors’ translation). In particular, it is challenging to deal with the strokes of fate of the people described in the second step, who not only lose close relatives, friends and their homes in connection with environmental disasters, but whose entire livelihoods have been destroyed by the masses of water or who will always have to live in front of this threatening backdrop. Drawing on Krahn (2022), they therefore suggest that “religious education in particular [...] can offer space for addressing such experiences” (Schimmel & Straßner, 2023, p. 249; authors’ translation). In future teaching units, we would therefore like to give space to this dimension in which religion can offer a perspective of hope and a promise of salvation.

5. Call for Action

When developing the units and materials, reliGlobal favours open and participatory collaboration (Mößle & Pirker, 2024). All interested parties are invited to actively participate: Via a freely accessible chat room (after registration), a discourse space is created in which topics can be identified and priorities defined together. Here, participants can network, exchange ideas and contribute specifically to the development of individual units. In this way, we promote collaborative work and regard the design of educational resources as a collaborated process.

References

Asbrand, B. & Scheunpflug, A. (2014). Globales Lernen. In W. Sander (Ed.), *Handbuch politische Bildung*, (pp. 401–412). Wochenschau-Verlag.

- Bederna, K. (2020a). Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. *WiReLex*. https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Bildung_fr_nachhaltige_Entwicklung.200572
- Bederna, K. (2020b). *Every day for future*. Theologie und religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. De Gruyter.
- Bederna, K. (2021). Didaktik religiöser Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. In U. Kropač & U. Riegel (Eds.), *Handbuch Religionsdidaktik* (pp. 325–331). Kohlhammer.
- Ehlers, U.-D. (2011). Extending the Territory. From Open Educational Resources to Open Educational Practices. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 15(2), 1–10.
- Gärtner, C. (2020). *Klima, Corona und das Christentum*. Religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung in einer verwundeten Welt. Transcript.
- Henningsen, J. (2022). *Repräsentationen des Globalen Südens im evangelischen Religionsbuch*. Eine Thematische Diskursanalyse vor dem Horizont postkolonialer Theorien. Brill Schöningh.
- Kultusministerkonferenz (KMK) & Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung. (BMZ) (2016). *Orientierungsrahmen für den Lernbereich Globale Entwicklung im Rahmen einer Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung* (2nd ed.). Engagement Global – Service für Entwicklungsinitiativen. Cornelsen.
- Krahn, A. (2022). Angst vor der Klimakrise und der Umgang mit dieser. Die (neueste) Einstellung von Kindern und Jugendlichen zum Klimawandel. *RUheute*, 50(1), 34–39.
- Knobloch, P. (2019). Global Citizenship Education und die Herausforderung epistemischer Dekolonialisierung. *Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik*, 42(4), 12–18.
- Mendl, H. (2019). Weltverantwortung. Politisch und global lernen im Religionsunterricht. *Österreichisches Religionspädagogisches Forum*, 27(1), 57–72.
- Mößle, L. & Pirker, V. (2024). Open Educational Practices als Wissenstransfer: Welche Potenziale hat die Religionspädagogik auf dem Weg ins „open“? *TheoWeb. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik*, 23(2), 159–170.
- Scheunpflug, A. (2012). Globales Lernen und religiöse Bildung. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie*, 64(3), 221–230.
- Schimmel, A. & Straßner, V. (2023). Mehr Nachhaltigkeitsbildung im Religionsunterricht: klassische Themen neu kontextualisieren. In T. Gojny, S. Schwarz & U. Witten (Eds.), *Wie kommt der Religionsunterricht zu seinen Inhalten? Erkundungen zwischen Fridays for Future, Abraham und Sühneopfertheologie* (pp. 247–254). Transcript.
- Simojoki H. (2018). *Globales Lernen*, In: *WiReLex. Wissenschaftlich-Religionspädagogisches Lexikon im Internet*. https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Globales_Lernen.200378.
- Simojoki, H. (2012). Globalisierte Religion. Ausgangspunkte, Maßstäbe und Perspektiven religiöser Bildung in der Weltgesellschaft. Mohr Siebeck.

- Simojoki, H. (2021). Religiöse Bildung als Dimension Globalen Lernens. ZEP: Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik, 44(1), 4–9.
- Spahn-Skrotzki, G. (2022). Klimakrise, externalisierender Lebensstil und Religionspädagogik. Klinkhardt Forschung.
- Tacke, L. (2024). Ungleichheiten als Thema religiöser Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung. Perspektiven auf das SDG 10 im Horizont des Subjektbegriffs religiöser Bildungsprozesse. *Religionspädagogische Beiträge*, 47(3), 21–33.
- United Nations. (2015). *The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
- Ziegler, B. (2021). Globale Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit im Religionsunterricht. Überlegungen zum Umgang mit weltweiten Leitbildern. *Religionspädagogische Beiträge*, 44(2), 144–155.

A Critique of the Competence Model and of the Morality Laid out in Religious Education, and How We Can Get Over It

Annika Krahn & Axel Siegemund

1. Introduction

In recent years, the discourse on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been marked by a justified concern about tendencies toward subjectification, particularly when responsibility for sustainability is shifted primarily onto the individual. As Weber (2005) has pointed out, ESD becomes instrumentalised when the political responsibility for sustainable development is delegated to pupils or consumers, with an exclusive emphasis on individual action. This danger of instrumentalisation is especially evident in the competence model applied not only but also to religious education in schools. Here, students are expected to develop competencies in knowledge, methods, judgement, and action (in German: Sachkompetenz, Methodenkompetenz, Urteilskompetenz und Handlungskompetenz). While these categories are pedagogically significant, their operationalisation often reduces education to a framework of measurable skills. Education becomes the mere application of environmental ethical rules.

The following contribution seeks to challenge this development. We argue that the competence model risks narrowing the purpose of education to quantifiable outcomes while overlooking the cultivation of moral qualities and deeper ethical reflection. In particular, we will first of all analyse the critique of the competence model in the context of religious education, secondly examine the moralising tendencies embedded in school materials, and thirdly point to alternative perspectives within ethics and religious education that open up more hopeful approaches. Drawing on Michael Roth's concept of narrative ethics, we argue for an understanding of education that moves beyond measurable competences and instead fosters compassion as a central pedagogical category. By doing so, we aim to highlight the need for a broader conception of education that is attentive to the moral and existential dimensions of sustainable development.

2. Criticism of the Competence Model

We consider the relationship between the self-design of young people and normative implications of the climate discourse. Young people in school are supposed to achieve certain skills, which can be evaluated from a general perspective. However, the measurability of actions - in contrast to the measurement of natural events - can only be achieved, if it results in certain behavioural patterns. Teachers certainly always have the option of individually shaping the requirements that are introduced into lessons. However, we would like to point out the tendency of turning towards fixed competencies to focus on rule-based behaviour (Anselm, 2022, pp. 115-118).

ESD neglects the technological structure of our today's thinking. If technology is seen as a threat to our autonomy and accelerator of secularization, then ESD can be used to emphasize nature-based concepts. But in this way, nature will be regarded as the last reserve of the religious-spiritual sphere at all. Is it really the aim of environmental education to lead to an ideal image of "nature" rather than to reflect the nature-culture-nexus?

3. Critique of Moralizing Tendencies

Empirical findings indicate that teachers show a strong interest in addressing sustainability issues in the classroom (Hörsch et al., 2023) and that many are deeply engaged in connecting their teaching to global and societal concerns (Taube, 2022). This commitment reflects the high pedagogical value attached to ESD in contemporary schooling. Yet the way sustainability is currently realised in schools, especially in subjects predisposed to ESD (Grund & Brock, 2020), often takes place in a rather depoliticised manner. The focus tends to rest on individual behavioural changes – waste separation, energy-saving habits (Grundmann, 2017; Weselek, 2022), or responsible consumption (Ideland & Malmberg, 2015) – which are more manageable in everyday classroom practice. While these emphases can undoubtedly foster ecological awareness and concrete habits, they risk trivialising the broader complexity of sustainability debates. According to Weselek, critical perspectives on power relations and structures of domination frequently remain underexplored, with the result that complex issues are reduced to more comprehensible and uncontroversial "practices of moral behavioural demands" (Weselek & Wohnig, 2021, p. 8; translation by the authors).

This finding does not negate the pedagogical dedication of teachers but points to a structural difficulty inherent in the competence model. Core curricula (i.e. Kernlehrpläne), such as those in North-Rhine-Westphalia, mandate that pupils should acquire “Handlungskompetenz” – the ability to act (Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2019). In practice, however, the demand to empower students to act often translates into strongly individualised appeals. Teaching materials provide numerous examples. Here are just two of them: The *Misereor* material on climate justice, for instance, frames guiding questions in ways that direct attention towards individual agency in addressing global warming (Peters, 2022, pp. 26–28). Similarly, more recent resources encourage students to calculate their personal carbon footprint (Paeßens & Woppowa, 2023, p. 40). While such exercises aim to raise awareness of personal responsibility, they also replicate the logic of BP’s CO₂ calculator introduced in 2004, which effectively shifted the focus from systemic corporate emissions to the choices of individual consumers (Strauch, 2022). As Weber (2005) cautions, ESD is instrumentalised when the political responsibility for sustainable development is transferred solely to the student or the consumer. The focus is placed exclusively on the individual’s capacity to act, which essentially means that responsibility is transferred only to the pupil, thereby obscuring structural and political dimensions of sustainability. This reductionist approach can contribute to psychological strain among young learners who are increasingly confronted with complex global crises. As Weber notes, contemporary children already experience anxiety regarding global challenges, yet they are frequently still called upon to make individual contributions (Weber, 2023). Such an overemphasis on personal action risks fostering feelings of helplessness rather than cultivating critical agency and collective engagement.

From a Foucauldian perspective, these examples illustrate the dynamic of *omnes et singulatim* (Foucault, 2019, p. 192): all pupils are addressed collectively, while at the same time each individual is singled out and rendered accountable through measurable practices. The process contributes to subject formation, whereby pupils are constituted as moral subjects through constant exercises of self-assessment, adaptation, and fitting in (Wiede, 2022).

Against this background, the moralising stance of a so-called “moral apostle” analysed by Michael Roth (2017) becomes highly relevant for understanding the risks of contemporary ESD. The “moral apostle” represents an abuse of morality, insofar as moral justifications are articulated from an asymmetrical and patronising perspective (Roth, 2017, p. 110). Narrative ethics, by contrast, resists such asymmetry by situating

moral reflection within concrete life-stories and by emphasising the perspectival character of faith. In this way, it fosters processes of identification with the ethical challenges faced by others and opens a hermeneutical space in which moral ambivalences can be acknowledged rather than prematurely resolved. This orientation closely resonates with Johann Baptist Metz's category of compassion, which he understands not merely as an ethical imperative but as a socially integrative praxis (Metz, 1996, pp. 3–6).

By enabling the recognition of the other's vulnerability within narrative contexts, Roth's narrative ethics provides the pedagogical ground on which compassion can be exercised as an interpretive and solidaristic response. Thus, the convergence of narrative ethics and compassion delineates an alternative horizon for religious education that avoids the pitfalls of instrumental moralisation. In the context of ESD, this perspective suggests a way to counterbalance the tendencies towards individualisation and moralisation by foregrounding relationality, dialogical engagement, and the lived complexity of ethical decision-making, and to – last but not least – reorient religious education for sustainable development towards more relational and ethically reflective practices.

4. The Spiritual Significance of Ritualized Sustainability Rhetoric in ESD

4.1. Reality-Oriented Perception

If the focus is not on (semi-)professional skills but on moral qualities, then we need to understand that these qualities are also not innate characteristics, but individual capabilities of a person. Thus, they are learned. Education must therefore be able to bridge the gap between taking responsibility and conflicting interests (Siegemund, 2024). But apart from the teaching of competences morality cannot be accomplished through lessons. A moral lesson learned is nothing that one has heard and understood, but it rather is a livable option of life style. A moral attitude towards nature will not grow by the study of the names of plants and fauna, but through the event of naturalness. A moral apostle would strengthen intellectual insights such as grasping ecological knowledge, understanding of the services of ecosystems to humans, or the dependency from and the inaccessibility of natural laws. But understanding here does not mean to grasp facts, rather than experiences.

Thus, sustainability is about creating a bond with other entities. Since solidarity with the wholeness of nature and all people is neither a realistic

nor practicable option, we need to speak about symbolizing one's own being-in-the-world. ESD is therefore a task of religious education that cannot be dissolved into moral studies or ethics, because the focus needs to be on the perception of the world. *Perception*, at its core, is not only the process through which an individual becomes aware of, interprets, and understands sensory information from the environment. It entails also organizing and giving meaning to raw data, influenced by prior experiences, expectations, and context. Thus, perception is not a one-way-road, but a network of expressions, impressions and sense-making. According to *William James*, perception is not just a passive reception of information but an *active, interpretive, and functional process* rooted in human experience and action (James 1890, ch. XIX). For James, perception is fundamentally tied to the needs and goals of the perceiver. It isn't about mirroring reality *as it is*, rather, it's about engaging with the world in a way that allows for effective action. With regard to ESD, one should add, that perception is part of our adaptive interaction with the environment starting from birth. What we perceive is shaped by what we are doing, what is done with us and what we are trying to accomplish.

Giving meaning to environmental data is always contextual and experiential. According to *James*, the meaning of a perception lies in the practical consequences it entails – in what difference it makes in our experience. But this difference results from the way in which we were educated to stand in front of the experienced. This means, our perception of nature and environment is neither neutral nor objective. It is loaded with significance that emerges from our habits, language, and religious background. Thus, our perceptions are part of a continuous process of inquiry and confirmation. We never perceive the world in a final way; instead, we form beliefs that are subject to change as we gain more experiences.

If we follow this way, *and especially the idea that we never perceive the world in a final or absolute way*, and instead continually revise our beliefs based on experience, then our interventions in the world are *experimental, provisional, and context-dependent at the same time*. We can neither destroy the whole of our environment nor can we create an ideal environment. This is why theology qualifies this environment as creation. Manipulating nature is not about achieving a *perfect final state*, because *our environmental knowledge is always evolving*. What seems to be like a good solution today may have unforeseen consequences tomorrow. Having this in mind has consequences for example for the use of technologies in energy production or genetic engineering:

1. The fact that the nuclear phase-out in Germany makes us one of the most CO₂-intensive countries is a consequence that only a minority had imagined 10 years ago. But here we can see that ESD is not just an individual (moral) matter, but a collective task. With every extension and intensification of coal-fired power generation, we need to remind ourselves that our own ESD needs to be further developed.

2. Also, any act of genetic manipulation of natural entities should not be seen as final, but as *a step in an ongoing process of learning and adapting*. According to James, *practical truth is tested through the evaluation of consequences*. The truth of an idea lies in its practical outcomes. With genetic engineering, the “truth” of a modification isn’t just in the lab result; it’s in how that change plays out over time. This is why field trials are not an optional but a necessary form of research, they lead us ecologically, socially and morally to new findings. If the results are harmful or unjust, the belief and practice must be revised.

Therefore, if ESD is grounded in perception and practical belief, we need to adjust our belief to the practical outcome of trials, not the other way around. From a theoretical perspective, *fallibilism is the key*. *We accept that humans are fallible*. We don’t act from certainty, but from *best available understanding*. And therefore, the manipulation of nature should proceed with caution, openness to revision, and responsiveness to new data and values. ESD in this perspective, is nothing else than learning how to handle data and values and combine both. Only in this way we can assure, that the spiritual significance of sustainability rhetoric will make ESD an integral part of future education. We integrate (pure) environmental data and human-centered personalities so that the data may lead us to living options rather than to unavoidable constraints.

Today, spiritual concepts are often separated from engineering and sciences. But we cannot separate the different aspects in our practical life. The Engineer Rudolf Högger from ETH Zurich says:

“Madagascan women and men are always divided. With one foot, they stand in the world of work, in the project [...]. Their other foot is turned towards nature, the rice fields, the fish; there, the family and, above all, the ancestors set the tone; there are no time constraints. We never really gain clarity about this other world. But development will not be sustainable if we do not truly respect both sides of reality.” (Högger, 1993, p. 93; translation by the authors).

In the past, we have regarded technology and arts as two cultures, but in fact, both are related to the same world. We therefore need to spiritualize our handling of data and to ground the spirit in natural scientific realities

and engineering data. The prototype of such a double-sided perception is the Good Samaritan: when he saw the man who fell among thieves, he was moved with compassion (Luke 10:33). We can assume, the Good Samaritan was educated in religion as well as ethics. Thus, he had a special way to perceive his environment. On the other hand, he did not describe a theory of compassion first and then searched for an example to adjust this. His compassion is not an action-limiting identification with the other (so that one cannot help, because he is caught by the theory of compassion), but it is an activating participation of the destiny of the other. The active power of getting in touch with others was caused by the understanding that one's personal destiny is individually, but not singular.

We can understand such a consciousness for the interconnections between people and the world as a biblical spirit. Therefore, ethical skills are still necessary, but the decisive factor for a successful ESD is the biblical spirit in which we are to act with the given data. What follows from the distinction between the study and the experience of environmental relationships? The most important thing is that we should not marginalize alternative concepts of knowledge, but search for syntheses. Especially we need to realize that there are other accesses to nature than spirituality and religion or physics, chemistry and biology. And we should not play them off against each other. Our task is also not to leave these types of knowledge unconnected next to each other. Rather, we need to think about the interconnectedness of these conceptions. Unavoidable constraints are technocratic; the abundance of possibilities is biblical.

4.2 Critical Epistemology

As spiritual concepts used in ESD are already existing, we do not need to invent them. But we need to reinvent the use of these concepts to make them perception-oriented and with relevance to environmental data. How can we combine spirituality and epistemology?

Many people understand the indigenous concept of *Buen Vivir* in Latin America or the African concept of *Ubuntu* as a spiritual lifestyle. But the sociologist Bonaventura de Sousa Santos sees *Buen Vivir* rather as an epistemology of the South that we can use as a supplement to the concepts of natural sciences and as a question to notions of progress and growth. In this way, *Buen Vivir* is not just about the ethical questions of the way to happiness, but also an epistemological one. *Buen Vivir* asks what we can know about the world and it therefore combines ethical, philosophical and anthropological and scientific remarks. The outcome of such a

combination is a transformed ecology – or better: the outcome is transformed ecologies of coexistence and knowledge including science.

In Europe, years ago, Bruno Latour wrote about the “Parliament of Things” (Latour, 2024; translation by the authors) – such as lakes, rivers, plants, and animals. This idea became a tool for global climate protection in the past. Nowadays, we witness that environmental questions step back behind other political and social issues. With Sousa Santos we do not need to criticize this as a step backwards. We can rather emphasize that indigenous knowledge together with today’s social issues and global political questions should not be played off against our notions of sustainability. Ecuador achieved the historic milestone that it officially recognized and made legally enforceable the rights of Mother Nature in 2008. Later the “return to Mother Earth” became a global movement of indigenous theology in the first decade of the 21st century. On the other hand, we discovered the meaning of freedom and human rights for people outside Europe. Today we need to link these concepts to enable pluralistic justice. An ecology of knowledges, which includes non-scientific forms of knowledge as well as sciences, does not imply the discrediting of the other. It merely entails a counter-hegemonic usage. By *counter-hegemonic*, Sousa Santos means reducing or eliminating any oppression, domination, or discrimination. The exclusion and destruction of knowledge systems that do not fit into a special epistemological canon is referred to by de Sousa Santos as *epistemicide* (de Sousa Santos, 2015). He speaks about the Christian-colonial hegemony, but structurally this saying bears to any kind of hegemonic conception. We need to ask now how the Christian concept of ESD is to be referred to this critical understanding of epistemological hegemony.

Religious ESD often grounds environmental ethics in religious doctrines or sacred texts, mainly referring to creation theology. These texts are meaningful for believers, but they may lack universal applicability in pluralistic or secular societies. The most common way to respond to this definition is to downgrade the concept of creation. Creation becomes similar or nearly equal to nature or environment. In this way, the manipulation of nature often is characterized as destruction of creation. But theologically, creation is the work of God, co-creation the co-work of humans. If we understand our environment as part of the *creatio continua* and in this way as a co-working-space of humans and God, then our interventions may change the surface of creation, but they cannot destroy it. However, once we differentiate between the theological meaning of both creation and nature any ritualized condemnation of human manipulation of nature would become difficult. The equation of both allows us to

religiously over-idealize nature and brand any change of nature as its destruction. This shows how a clear theological concept – here the conception of creation – protects one from questionable decisions regarding technological innovation. Thus, the moral framework of a doctrine or a sacred text must not be bound to our everyday understanding of it. Especially when people outside the faith tradition may not find its imperative compelling, we have to ask whether the religious imperative is really a religious one. Otherwise, ESD risks preaching to the secular choir in a religious attitude rather than fostering an ethical basis for sustainability that transcends belief systems. With regard to creation, we should consider that this religious concept has also a secular meaning that is different from the meaning of nature. In the modern world, unavailability and inviolability are attributes of constructed safe spaces that combine natural and artificial aspects, a national park, for example. Thus, untouchability is an attribute of constructed transcendence.

Sacredness allows us to leave nature as it is, if this promotes the relationship between humans and nature as a whole. In this way, creation can become a special perspective on nature as a source of data that we can use, but not produce.

In the case of scientific trials, it is right to say, that every trial is grounded in self-understandings that we simply accept, but without which we could not come to any insight. *Through the creative power of constructed transcendence, environmental ethics can become experimental because it focuses not on nature but on the nature-culture process. To do this, however, we must recognize that we can never know in advance how this process will turn out.*

So, under a perception-oriented perspective that makes use of different forms of knowledge, ESD becomes less of a *declaration* and more of a *conversation* between humans, nature, and the unknown – a continuous negotiation rather than a final solution. This may help us to prevent that ESD will fall into a kind of moral instrumentalism where care for the Earth is justified primarily because it aligns with divine commands or serves human stewardship as outlined in scripture. Neither the anthropocentric framing, in which nature is valued mainly for its utility to humanity or its role in fulfilling divine purposes, nor a pure biocentric position, where humans with their will to manipulate have to step back, will help us to develop an ecological ethics that recognizes intrinsic values in non-human life and ecosystems. Moreover, ESD shall encourage passive moral attitudes. Our

environmental responsibility must not be an obedience to the divine (creation: do not touch!), but rather a product of critical reasoning, discourse, and scientific understanding (creation: make it untouched!). In this way, ESD shall stifle moral autonomy and data competence, encourage the development of interdisciplinary ethical reasoning and thus tackle complex environmental problems. Finally, while many ESD programs promote compassion and interdependence, they should also show how compassion is interwoven with economy (because capital makes compassion affordable), ecology (because it makes us see the suffering in the natural environment), and technology (because it is a means to reduce suffering). Otherwise, ESD risks depoliticizing sustainability and placing the moral burden on individuals' spirituality rather than addressing systemic forces driving ecological degradation. ESD can inspire meaningful action and personal reflection, if its morality is not limited by its spiritual grounding, but is fully engaged with the scientific and engineering dimensions of sustainability ethics.

5. Conclusions and Outlook

This article has critically examined the competence model within religious education for sustainable development (rESD) and its tendency toward instrumentalisation and moralisation. We have argued that when political responsibility for sustainability is displaced onto pupils and consumers (Weber, 2005), education risks becoming narrowed to measurable competences and prescriptive behavioural norms. While knowledge, methodological skills, judgement, and action are important educational aims, the operationalisation of these competences often reinforces individualised accountability and subjectivation rather than fostering deeper ethical reflection.

The critique of moralisation has shown that teaching materials frequently address sustainability in depoliticised ways, focusing on personal consumption, waste separation, or energy-saving behaviours, thereby trivialising the complexity of sustainability discourses (Weselek & Wohnig, 2021). Exercises such as calculating personal carbon footprints reproduce a logic of individualisation that mirrors corporate strategies of responsibility-shifting. From a Foucauldian perspective, these practices illustrate mechanisms of subject formation, in which pupils are simultaneously addressed collectively and held accountable individually. Against this backdrop, Michael Roth's critique of the "moral apostle" (2017) and his proposal of narrative ethics point to the potential of compassion

(Metz, 1996) as an alternative pedagogical category that avoids asymmetry and enables more relational, dialogical, and reflective engagements with sustainability.

In addition, we have highlighted the spiritual significance of ritualised sustainability rhetoric, showing that perception, experience, and symbolisation are essential dimensions of religious-pedagogical approaches to ESD. As William James argued, perception is always active, interpretive, and situated; thus, sustainability education must be understood as an ongoing process of inquiry, adaptation, and revision rather than the transmission of fixed moral judgments or scientific truths. This opens space for integrating different epistemologies – scientific, spiritual, and indigenous (cf. de Sousa Santos; Latour) – into a pluralistic ecology of knowledge that resists epistemological hegemony and fosters more inclusive forms of ethical reasoning.

Looking ahead, the task of religious education for sustainable development is not to abandon competences, but to reframe them considering compassion, critical reflection, and systemic responsibility (Krahn, 2024). Only this will allow us to build resilient relations to the non-human environment (Siegemund, 2024). The German spillover effects on the SDGs on a global scale for example illustrate that a solely national or individual perspective is inadequate (Fuller & Bermont-Diaz, 2024); what is required is a systemic ethics of responsibility that situates local practices within global interdependencies. Religious education can contribute to this broader horizon by cultivating compassion as both a spiritual and social resource for solidarity.

Finally, the biblical and theological tradition itself offers resources for such a reorientation. After Easter, the Spirit is given to the community, empowering, dwelling, and distributing gifts among all (Acts 2; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 12). This “democratisation“ of the Spirit (Frey, 2015, p. 136) underscores that sustainable education cannot be reduced to the morality of individuals but must aim at a shared ethos of responsibility and cohesion. The outlook for religious ESD thus lies in moving beyond the narrow confines of measurable competences towards a pedagogical practice that integrates knowledge, perception, and compassion, enabling young people to act not merely as compliant subjects but as responsible and responsive members of a global community.

References

- Anselm, R. (2022). Gebildete Freiheit. Pädagogisches Handeln in der Schule aus der Perspektive der evangelischen Ethik. In C. Berndt, T. Häcker & M. Walm (Eds.), *Ethik in pädagogischen Beziehungen* (pp. 111–120). Verlag Julius Klinkhardt.
- Brundiers, K., Barth, M., Cebrián, G., Cohen, M., Diaz, L., Doucette-Remington, S., Dripps, W., Habron, G., Harré, N., Jarchow, M., Losch, K., Michel, J., Mochizuki, Y., Rieckmann, M., Parnell, R., Walker, P., & Zint, M. (2021). Key Competencies in Sustainability in Higher Education – Toward an Agreed-Upon Reference Framework. *Sustainability Science* 16(1), 13–29.
- Foucault, M. (2019). Über den Willen zum Wissen. Vorlesungen am Collège de France 1970/71. Suhrkamp.
- Frey, J. (2015). Vom Windbrausen zum Geist Christi und zur trinitarischen Person. Stationen einer Geschichte des Heiligen Geistes im Neuen Testament (JBTh 16, 2nd ed.) (pp. 121–153). Neukirchener.
- Fuller, G., & Bermont-Diaz L. (2024). International Spillover Effects and Germany: An analysis of Germany's performance on spillovers and the policy options to manage them. SDSN. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.17990.89922>.
- Gärtner, C. (2020). Klima, Corona und das Christentum. Religiöse Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung in einer verwundeten Welt. Transcript.
- Grund, A., & Brock, J. (2020). Education for Sustainable Development in Germany: Not Just Desired but Also Effective for Transformative Action. *Sustainability*, 12(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12072838>.
- Grundmann, D. (2017). *Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung in Schulen verankern. Handlungsfelder, Strategien und Rahmenbedingungen der Schulentwicklung*. Springer VS.
- Högger, R. (1993). *Wasserschlange und Sonnenvogel. Die andere Seite der Entwicklungshilfe*. Waldgut.
- Hörsch, C., Scharenberg, K., Waltner, E.-M., & Rieß, W. (2023). Wie gelingt Bildung für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung in der Schule? Eine empirische Studie zur Entwicklung von Nachhaltigkeitskompetenzen und zur Rolle der Lehrkraft. *Die Deutsche Schule (DDS)* 2, 105–116.
- Ideland, M., & Malmberg, C. (2015). Governing 'eco-certified children' through pastoral power: critical perspectives on education for sustainable development. *Environmental Education Research* 21(2), 173–182.
- James, W. (1890). *The principles of psychology*. Macmillan.
- Krahn, A. (2024). Den Fähigkeiten gerecht werden – Compassion als Instrument zur Förderung von Klimagerechtigkeit im schulischen Umfeld. In M. Domsel, & Maurice Steffens (Eds.), *Compassion als Schlüssel für eine zukunftsfähige Bildung nachhaltiger Entwicklung?! Auftrag und Weiterentwicklung eines theologischen Prinzips* (pp. 197–210). Kohlhammer.
- Latour, B. (2024). *Das Parlament der Dinge* (6nd ed.). Suhrkamp.

- Metz, J. B. (1996). Im Eingedenken fremden Leids. Zu einer Basiskategorie christlicher Gottesrede. In J. B. Metz, J. Reikerstorfer & J. Werbick (Eds.), *Gottesrede* (Fundamentaltheologische Studien Vol. 1) (pp. 3–20). Lit Verlag.
- Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen. (2019). *Kernlehrplan für die Sekundarstufe I Gymnasium in Nordrhein-Westfalen*. https://www.schulentwicklung.nrw.de/lehrplaene/lehrplan/201/g9_er_klp_%203414_2019_06_23.pdf.
- Paeßens, J., & Woppowa, J. (Eds.) (2023). *Religion unterrichten 4/2: Umweltethik*. Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.
- Peters, C. (2022). Klimakrise und Gerechtigkeit. Materialsammlung für den Unterricht. Misereor.
- Roth, M. (2017). Warum wir Moralapostel nicht mögen und das Moralisieren verabscheuen. Zur Lebensferne der Ethik (Theologische Interventionen 1). Kohlhammer.
- Siegemund, A. (2024). Die Kultur des Klimawandels im Religionsunterricht: Was heißt Beziehung zum Nichtmenschlichen? *Theo-Web*, 23(1), 191–206. <https://doi.org/10.23770/two335>.
- De Sousa Santos, B. (2015). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge.
- Strauch, V. (2022, May 31). Wie BP den CO₂-Fußabdruck als PR-Trick verwendet. *NeueZeit.at*. <https://neuezeit.at/co2-fussabdruck-bp-geschichte/>
- Taube, D. (2022). Globalität lehren. Eine empirische Studie zu den handlungsleitenden Orientierungen von Lehrkräften im Umgang mit der sozialen Komplexität weltgesellschaftlicher Themen. Waxmann. <https://doi.org/10.31244/zep.2022.03.04>.
- Weber, B. (2005). “Acting as a moral human being – Neglecting economic studies”. Situation, Concepts and Challenges of Economic Studies at German Primary Schools, *Journal of Social Science Education* 4(1), 113–132.
- Weber, B. (2023). Globales Lernen und Nachhaltige Entwicklung als Herausforderung für den Sachunterricht: Zwischen Verantwortungszumutung und Überwältigung? In D. Schmeinck, K. Michalik & T. Goll (Eds.), *Herausforderungen und Zukunftsperspektiven für den Sachunterricht. Probleme und Perspektiven des Sachunterrichts* (Vol. 33) (pp. 82–92). Verlag Julius Klinkhardt.
- Weselek, J., & Wohnig, A. (2021). Befähigung zu gesellschaftlicher und politischer Verantwortungsübernahme als Teil Globalen Lernens – was heißt hier Neutralität? *Zeitschrift für internationale Bildungsforschung und Entwicklungspädagogik*, 44(2), 4–10.
- Weselek, J. (2022). Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung zwischen politischer Erwartung und schulischer Praxis. Eine bildungs- und umweltsoziologische Analyse. Springer VS.
- Wiede, W. (2022). Subjektivierung. *WiReLex*. <https://www.die-bibel.de/resources/wirelex/9-politische-und-rechtliche-dimensionen-religioeser-bildung/subjektivierung>.

Conclusion

The Nuremberg Memorandum for Integrating Spiritual Dimensions into Education for Sustainable Development.

Adopted by the participants of the 13th international, interdisciplinary and interreligious Nuremberg Forum Conference, 2 Oct 2024

<http://nuremberg-forum.org>

Being aware that the present global environmental, economic and social crises are so dramatic that in-depth transformations of individual and collective mind-sets merit deeper exploration,

Considering that overcoming the mind-behavior gap is the central current challenge of any effort to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD),

Convinced that in this situation, within the framework of human rights and the SDGs, all cultural sources available that could facilitate the necessary transformations and stimulate corresponding motivations should be appreciated,

we advocate the integration of spiritual dimensions, sources, methods and practices into ESD.

A. Clarifications

A1. How do we Understand ‘Education for Sustainable Development’?

While acknowledging the complexity of and different views on the concept of ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ (ESD), it is understood here as education that encourages and supports persons to acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and ability to reach the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁴² This means that ESD stimulates a holistic and integral view on sustainable development and furthers a drastic change in our worldviews.

⁴² In line with UNESCO’s description of ESD, as provided on <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education> and <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education/need-know?hub=72522>

In short, ESD facilitates the transformation from the ‘egosystem’ to the ‘ecosystem’. This is where spirituality comes in: as crucial support for personal change and development, and as connection between the personal, societal, and systematic levels of transformation that are required to achieve the SDGs.

A2. What do we Mean by ‘Spiritual Dimensions’?

We understand the concept of spirituality as a wide and open concept that embraces intra-religious spirituality, inter-religious spirituality and non-religious, secular spirituality. We see its core in the common quest for the purpose in life and for a good life for all, which has its meaning and right in itself but also has political, economic, and social implications. It is about seeking an understanding of what it is to be human along the basic relationships to oneself, to others, to nature and – if believed in – to God or transcendent realities. In this understanding, spirituality is not just a private issue, but has a public, a political dimension as our fundamental assumptions about life shape and are shaped by the culture, religion and society which we live in.

In pluralistic societies, people tend to have a certain “fear of the idea of the good life” (Michael Sandel). They are inclined to think that beyond the framework of human rights and democratic principles the ideas of humanity and what makes a good life are mainly heterogeneous and a source of conflicts. This often also goes for schools. However, the idea of spirituality indicates that, on the one hand, it may be worthwhile to explore a possible “overlapping consensus” (John Rawls) – in the sense of a common core outlined above. On the other hand, it may also be beneficial to listen to each other’s differing perspectives and experiences and to be open to learn and receive inspiration from one another.

Spirituality in our understanding is a holistic concept, which is one reason for its attractiveness and its educational potential. Spirituality implies a cognitive aspect (e.g. thinking about humanity and the meaning of life as well as about the ambivalent history of Western civilization in the light of religious belief), an emotional aspect (e.g. experiences of being touched by encounters with nature or by the injustices of globalization effects) and a pragmatic aspect (e.g. practices such as rituals, exercises, meditation or mindfulness techniques, contemplation, but also political prayer sessions, protest marches and demonstrations).

A3. Why do we Think Spiritual Dimensions are Important for ESD?

We agree with those scientific, philosophical, psychological, sociological and theological analyses that demonstrate the necessity to address a deeper or meta-level underlying the ecological crises, namely the basic anthropological views and the corresponding routines and habits of affluent industrialized societies. Some authors have explicitly presented this as the insight that the ecological crisis has a “spiritual dimension”.

The typically modern (western) way of defining a good life within the dynamics of increase (acceleration, growth, perfection) has been critically confronted with the differing conception of a good life in indigenous cultures or in certain religious and spiritual communities. Such analyses can be supported by happiness research, which shows that ‘more and more’, ‘faster and faster’, ‘richer and richer’ does not necessarily make people happier. By contrast, some spiritual traditions – from various religious and cultural backgrounds – convey the experience that a simple, modest, slowed-down life that is mindful and close to nature can be more fulfilling. Promoting such experiences and insights among young people seems more promising for ESD than incessant moral demands (you should consume less, produce less waste, use your car less, etc.) and more promising than to focus exclusively on conveying more scientific knowledge (as important as this is).

Also, spiritual perspectives and practices can motivate people to get politically involved – as has been proved in past and present. For many activists and politicians, their spiritual beliefs and practices are resources for their engagement. Concepts such as “Deep Ecology” or “Spiritual Ecology” try to bring spiritual perspectives together with scientific research and political action. And religious communities as well as theologians and ethicists from various religions have made valuable contributions to a better understanding of the global challenges and have actively engaged in addressing them.

However, there have been and still are problematic forms of spirituality that exclusively focus on the inner well-being of the individual or the own in-group and thus lead to disengagement from sustainability-related matters and from promoting the common good. Therefore, in our view, the integration of spiritual dimensions into ESD requires a differentiated, critical and self-critical inquiry into the topic.

B. Suggestions

B1. The exploration of spiritual dimensions should be integrated into concepts of ESD on both the analytical and the interventional level.

The analyses offered to learners of all ages should integrate deep and fundamental questions of anthropological, existential and worldview nature that also promote a critical assessment of the modern way of living in affluent consumption-oriented societies. Possible solutions to the eco-crises as offered and discussed in pedagogical interventions should include the exploration of spiritual dimensions and elements that enhance holistic and inclusive forms education. They should thus promote people's self-empowerment, collective practices as well as social and political engagement.

B2. Spiritual dimensions should be introduced into ESD as complementing, converging and critically interacting with scientific knowledge.

For instance, acquiring scientific knowledge about the value of forests and an experiential, meditative encounter with a forest as God's beautiful creation should complement each other. At the same time, the expectation that the ecological crises will be solved by scientific knowledge and progress alone, will have to be critically questioned.

B3. Spiritual dimensions of ESD should be integrated in all school subjects, although they can find special consideration in school subjects like Religious Education (RE), Ethics, or Worldview Education.

ESD needs to be more substantially anchored in the school curricula, in teacher education and training as well as in school textbooks and teaching materials. In all these areas the spiritual dimension of ESD outlined above should be taken into account. Interdisciplinary collaboration between the school subjects seems especially promising, in particular between RE (or similar religion-related subjects) and other subjects.

B4. ESD should be more substantially integrated into concepts and practice of Religious Education (or similar religion-related subjects) at schools.

This task implies endeavors at the academic level, at the level of religious communities and at the level of school practice. Theoretical concepts that have already been developed should be exchanged and discussed internationally, interdisciplinary, interreligiously, transreligiously, and with teachers as the experts of school practice. In particular, high-quality and open educational resources are needed to enhance ESD in the context of RE.

B5. All endeavors to interlink ESD and spirituality should take account of the rich diversities of spiritualities in the plural of regional cultures, religions, and worldviews.

In this way, the plural local, regional, national or cultural contexts of sustainability challenges as well as spiritual traditions, languages and practices should be explored and brought into communication.

B6. Empirical research and inquiry-based learning about the effects and outcomes of integrating diverse spiritual perspectives, elements and practices into ESD settings as well as integrating ESD elements into RE (or similar religion-related subjects) should be conducted and promoted.

Such empirical research and inquiry-based learning is necessary to test existing concepts, develop new approaches and thus to find out about the best ways of integrating spiritual dimensions into ESD and ESD elements into RE (or similar religion-related subjects). Beyond, as a basis for educational endeavors, more empirical research is needed on the factual role of spirituality for people's or communities' engagement in sustainable development.

Attachment

Action Points and Possible Main Actors.

Action Points	Actors	Reference to Memorandum Text
Incorporate Spiritual Dimensions into ESD Frameworks	Governments, Educational Institutions, Religious / Spiritual Communities	B1, B2
Facilitate Interdisciplinary Collaboration for Holistic Sustainability Education	Governments, Educational Institutions, Researchers, Religious / Spiritual Communities / Interreligious Agents and Associations	B3
Develop and Implement New Curricula and Pedagogical Approaches	Governments, Curriculum Developers, Educational Institutions, Religious / Spiritual Communities / Interreligious Agents and Associations	B1, B3
Promote Experiential Learning that Integrates Spiritual Practices	Educational Institutions, Teachers, Governments, Religious / Spiritual Communities / Interreligious Agents and Associations	B2
Encourage Political and Civic Engagement through Spiritual Perspectives	Governments, Civil Society, Religious / Spiritual Communities / Interreligious Agents and Associations, Teachers	B3

The Nuremberg Memorandum for Integrating Spiritual Dimensions into Education for Sustainable Development.

Fund and Promote Research on Spirituality's Role in Sustainability	Researchers, Governments, Academic Institutions, Religious / Spiritual Communities / Interreligious Agents and Associations, Funding Institutions	B5
Create and Distribute High-Quality Open Educational Resources on Spirituality and ESD	Governments, Educational Resource Developers, Schools, Religious / Spiritual Communities / Interreligious Agents and Associations, Teachers	B4, B5
Launch Public Awareness Campaigns on Spiritual Ecology	Governments, Media, Civil Society, Religious / Spiritual Communities / Interreligious Agents and Associations, Researchers	B1, B2

Complementary Perspectives

A Plea for Multi-Religious Civil Accountability

Azza Karam

The rich presentations and discussions during the 2024 Nuremburg Forum provided yet another series of blessings of knowledge about values, education, the environment, science, human dignity, diverse religions, analysis of and advice about human coexistence, and so much more. Once again, the Forum's organizers and members from many countries, together, created a space where heart, mind, and spirit coalesce – and engage.

“Moral appeals alone are not good enough”, Professor Manfred Pirner noted. Both he and Professor Johannes Lähnemann have long maintained not only that religions and spirituality matter, but each of them has informed schools of thought which illustrate how looking at sources of traditions, and their long-term reach, together, especially through education, provides guidance to the challenges we are facing at present.

“I just can't stand by and do nothing” was a clear refrain that was voiced by one of the younger activist participants. The statement resonates powerfully across generations at this very moment. Our common planetary political, economic, cultural, scientific, even physiological existence, all appear to be undergoing dramatic shifts. In these times of multiple challenges, the ideological polarisations between individuals, groups, and nations appear – and feel – particularly nuanced.

All the more reason why Prof. Kamaara, Dr. Medard, and Dr. Masese's presentations were at once provocative and enlightening. The challenges our world, and ourselves, are facing, they explain, have a great deal to do with the fact that our approaches – to sustainable development, to education, to policy making, to foreign affairs, and more – are not holistic. Rather, we have divided, separated, and compartmentalised.

They deepened the organising professors' and other keynote speakers' wisdom, in maintaining that spiritual perspectives, thinking and awareness are much needed. They maintained that much of current SDG thinking, and the majority of our educational realities, neglect spiritual awareness. The knowledge imparted to many generations for many years, remains largely disconnected from social, cultural and spiritual needs. This gap, they argue, is also visible between higher education outcomes and sustainable education needs.

What they argue for, which I profoundly agree with, is a refocus on love-centered approaches which are based on relationships – between humans, plants, animals, and non-living things. Humanity needs to integrate love in

service to one another, thereby deepening a spirituality which connects and interconnects.

This form of loving service to others – especially to fellow humans different from us, and to conditions and situations and living things very different from our ways of thinking, is what my spirituality and faith – Islam – teaches. One of my favourite quotes to illustrate this, is from Ibn ‘Arabī, an Andalusian Muslim scholar [1165–1240], mystic, poet, and philosopher, who was extremely influential within Islamic thought. In *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* Ibn Arabi’s mystical and universal approach to spirituality is captured through this poem:

“My heart has become capable of every form:
It is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols, and the Ka’ba of the pilgrim,
And the tablets of the Torah, and the book of the Quran.
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take,
That is my religion and my faith.” (Ibn al-Arabi, 1911)

Ibn Al-Arabi affirmed the transcendent unity of religions. A kind of unity which is based upon several forms of esoteric and transcendent similarities upon which all kinds of beliefs, even non-belief, are anchored. It is crucial to bear in mind that the term “transcendent unity of religions” is not only possessed by perennial philosophers. The Sufis, led by Ibn al-Arabi, several centuries before the modern era, echoed the content of the terminology that we call in Arabic *wahdat al-adyan* (the unity of religions).

And yet...

It was not so long ago, that “noblesse oblige”, “la mission civilisatrice” and “white man’s burden” were being articulated as pretexts for territorial takeover and the oppression and subordination of people, land, and dignity. The colonial missions (mandates, protectorates, etc.) created a fundamental imbalance in the power of man over (others’) resources, and the power of some (men) over others, and a continuing legacy of interference in others’ affairs ostensibly to help (hence presumably the reference to sovereignty in the above statement), and usually – and here is part of the vexing reality – at the behest of nationals who ask for the “assistance”.

And it is still the case, that the very ideologies of supremacy of one people over another, including of one race and/or one sex or one religion over another, the refusal to be held accountable to centuries of discrimination now part of the DNA of almost all institutions; the

insistence on subjugation of nature to man; and the perpetuation of misogyny – all continue to define our present broken world.

But wait, today we have an awareness among esteemed politicians, academics, and several governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental institutions, that *religion matters*. Indeed, that in various forms of ‘engagement’ with (usually specific and selective) religious institutions, religious NGOs, and/or religious leaders, good things come about. Salvation may be imminent. “Faith for [insert the wording here]” or “religion and [insert appropriate term here] is the new formula for overcoming most difficulties, from vaccine hesitancy to gender discrimination, from electoral gerrymandering to racism, and everything in between.

And why not? After all, religious institutions (churches, mosques, temples, etc.) actually are the original development and humanitarian actors, and are still critical service providers in countries where governments are increasingly struggling to serve basic needs of many of their populations. The very first schools and hospitals known to societies all around the world originated in and through religious bodies. Today, Catholic Churches alone manage significant public health infrastructures from North America to Sub-Saharan Africa. *Caritas Internationalis*, for instance, is one of the largest (Catholic) humanitarian and development NGOs in the world. If we begin to look at other religiously inspired NGOs, we will find a significant number of them delivering much needed refuge and support to the largest refugee and displaced populations ever recorded in human history, as well as health, education, sanitation, nutrition and humanitarian relief services, to hundreds of millions, in all corners of the world.

Certainly, faith actors have much to offer, beyond being first responders, they are the oldest social service (development) providers known to humankind. They are also the strongest behavioural change agents (and moral gatekeepers) in the world. And even as they feel the restrictions of pandemic lockdowns, the influence of their respective pulpits – and the demand for them in hard times – remain hard to rival. Nevertheless, religious institutions, religious leaders and religious NGOs are as territorial about their reach, their visibility, their resources, and their “unique added value” as any other actor in contemporary civil society and political arena.

Furthermore, “Islamic finance” has become a source of funding for major United Nations entities’ development and relief efforts (e.g. UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF) around the world – and more of that is being sought after, with various Muslim entities rushing to provide *fatwas* (religious edicts) and justifications for why this is good Islamic practice. Increasing “faith

investments” in and for sustainable development are being strongly advocated for by some, with new initiatives emerging in that advocacy space to help and encourage ... ethical religious investments. Private sector interest is focusing on how ‘faith-based actors’ are facilitators of emerging markets – and possibly multipliers of profits, for some pharmaceuticals, among other companies.

So What Are We Learning?

We are living in the age of the decline of all forms of institutions, from political parties to unions, from governments to civil society, from large corporations to community centers and families. Institutions, as we know them, are struggling for legitimacy. As social media and Artificial Intelligence slowly take over our ways of communicating and organizing, it is not only our markets and our industries that are being affected and impacted, rather, it would seem as if every seam of social fabric is tearing.

At the same time, it is clear that we do not lack for religious leaders who seek to serve our spiritual worlds and needs. Nor do we lack for multiple forms of institutions, scientific knowledge, and indeed access to all types of information, alongside myriad forms of activism. Rather, we do lack a sense of and means for accountability of existing leaders, entities, to one another beyond the increasingly limited circle of belonging and affiliation. Rather than receding into a hard shell of impenetrable or exclusive access to privileges (or resentments), we need leaders – of all types – who are determined to work together to serve all – and are prepared to be accountable to that way of serving.

So just as we hold our governments, political and business institutions accountable at the global level, for our environment – in which air, land and water are all threatened species – and where human rights of all barring none is fast becoming a myth, so must we hold our religious leaders accountable for the will and means to work together to serve all, without distinctions of race, class, religion, gender or any other basis.

The Crisis of Institutions and Their Legitimacy

Why is it the case that when the Catholic Pope speaks, the world’s media reports, but when many other religious leaders speak, not one global newspaper reports? Why is it the case that when a handful of terrorists kill hundreds, the world’s media and academia report and analyze, but when

representatives of all the world's faith traditions convene to urge for health justice for all populations, no one appears to be listening?

The answers to these questions take us to the very heart of what ails all civic and political institutions in contemporary contexts. It would be wrong to assume that religious institutions (of whatever faith tradition) are out of character with all other institutions. Humans, after all, populate and manage and intersect in each and all institutions. Our religious institutions – be they churches, mosques, synagogues, temples or NGOs, community based or regional or global – all reflect the wider simultaneous institutional crisis of competence, coherence, and efficiency. All of which lead to a crisis of legitimacy.

When I served as Secretary General of Religions for Peace, I set up the *Multi-Religious Humanitarian Fund* in record time after the global lockdown, in April 2020, to pool financial resources of diverse faith communities to serve the shared needs, together. Responses to the call for religious organisations to contribute to this shared pool of resources intentionally developed to encourage multi-religious responses, varied. From utter silence, to murmurs about already having “our own humanitarian mechanisms and work”, to an outright lament that coordination and collaboration are a luxury few have time for, as it was difficult enough to manage the mechanisms already at hand.

The amount of global consultations (virtual and in person) with faith-based organizations (FBOs) and governmental as well as intergovernmental entities, and between diverse FBOs, around almost all conflict, social inclusion, health and humanitarian matters, are innumerable. Some are now inviting His Holiness Pope Leo XIV and His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, among their list of distinguished leaders. In November 2022 alone, there were five global interreligious meetings (two in the United Arab Emirates, one in Bahrain, one in Oman and one in Spain). In short, there are myriad efforts of governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental entities to convene faith leaders and FBOs around their efforts. Indeed, they are as numerous as they are disparate, and some even appear to be competing with one another in terms of how many they invite, how expensive the venues they book for these meetings are, and how expansive the banquets.

Putting aside a sense of discomfort and concern, the fact is that we have an unprecedented opportunity today. The shared voices of all faith leaders – including but not limited to the Catholic Pontiff – are required to raise awareness, remind of the human and planetary imperative, hold themselves accountable to serve the needs of all, hold politicians and political institutions accountable to justice, and ensure we follow ways to

live and act healthily, beyond business and political interests. Many religious leaders, on the 'right side' of science and steeped in their theological and practical intricacies of service to all barring none, are keen to influence worldwide awareness, and to insist on reaching all those currently marginalized.

The Litmus Test – More Multi-Religious Collaborations

At the same time, in the midst of an emerging 'circus' of important and multiple convenings, we must have a litmus test for concrete efforts which are geared towards genuine social cohesion. Is it good enough to convene more times, albeit in different cities, on diverse themes, and with a peppering of new faces in each meeting? I contend that this show of good intentions – by all convenors alike – is also a path to a hell of our own making.

Just as in the 1990s we started to learn how investing in women's rights makes economic sense, today we are hearing how investing in faith actors makes that kind of sense, too. In fact, some humanitarian and development religious NGOs (mostly with a Christian background, many Evangelical) are being actively mobilised to run initiatives to champion freedom of religion and belief, and/or to facilitate strategic 'advocacy' for major faith-based NGOs – ostensibly as part of their learning and wisdom acquired defending other human rights.

Religious institutions, faith leaders and faith-based NGOs have a responsibility to protect civil society. Instead of seeking to earn a celebrity status with some governments or political parties, or trying to leverage their own influence as Catholic/Protestant/Orthodox/Evangelical/Jewish/Muslim/Hindu/Buddhist/etc., all faith actors need to learn to come together as a collective power that is part of their secular civil brethren. In doing so, their combined moral, economic, financial, political, cultural, and social weight, *will* dwarf the most authoritarian of structures. At the very least, in coming together to serve all, religious communities can hold all decision makers accountable to a collective justice – of gender, of environment, of voice, of representation, and ultimately, of dignity.

Civil societies are the barometers of collective planetary wellbeing. As we dismember and silence civil societies, by using/focusing on (some) religions at a time, and serving piecemeal selective interests, we ensure that the arc of history remains mired in the abuse of indivisible and interdependent human rights, which are central to vibrant and healthy democracies. To the tyranny of states and religious institutions alike, I

would urge religious leaders to stop using individual religions to gain political and financial expediency. Instead, work with all religions on a level playing field, with the rest of civil society, to hold one another accountable, and thereby, to ensure peace and security for all times.

Beyond Meetings, more Research and Knowledge on Actual Collaboration

Our world needs faith leaders to come together for sure, and indeed to hold each other accountable to always being in dialogue. But our world cannot afford the dialogues alone. We have too much suffering that is not resolved by dialogue alone. Dialogues are necessary, as are laws, but on their own, they are insufficient. Instead, we need more of these religious and faith leaders, and their institutions, to work together. How? By doing two things which remain critical gaps: investing in joint work (at national, regional and global levels) and speaking together as one on all matters, with a view to upholding human rights of each and all.

Given a fair chance of being reported, the impact of multi-religious actors collaborating at community, regional and global levels, can and will shift mindsets of individuals and policymakers alike. After all, before holding other policy makers accountable to social justice, cohesion, coordination and efficiency, faith leaders need to lead by example.

It is imperative that faith leaders in their diversity, from Indigenous to the latest, work together to jointly, persistently, and systematically remind one another and political leaders, to safeguard the global attack on human rights by authoritarian regimes in every continent. While there are many faith leaders who are ready to speak in one voice for all human rights, there are few with the foresight, courage and tenacity to support their efforts to serve on the frontlines of the global struggle for universal, inalienable and indivisible human rights.

We need more stories, knowledge, and critical analysis about the realms of religions and human rights to be studied, and having this research undertaken using different language sources, which may challenge the demands of Western academic 'rigour'. This means that a thesis written in Urdu by a Pakistani graduate for their degree will rarely qualify as 'scientific' enough by a Western academic institution working in English or French or Spanish.

We also need the works of the *multi-religious* actions to be reported in mainstream Western media (and that is a *big* ask since the bulk of the attention still goes for Christian actors or leaders, rather than collective

multi-religious work). We need this in order to begin to see how the impact of faith actors working together – at community, regional and global levels – can and will shift mindsets of individuals and policymakers across the globe. We complain – rightly – about religious actors being instrumentalized to serve the vested interests of some. Yet, we are also witnessing a moment where the multi-religious voices for moral dignity, human rights, and shared well-being are at their most plentiful.

As we began by noting our multiple challenges, I conclude with significantly paraphrasing another timeless author, Charles Dickens: These are the worst of times, these are the best of times.

References

- Arabi, I. (1911). *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*. Translated and edited by Reynold A. Nicholson. Royal Asiatic Society.
- Grosshans, H. (2023). Religion and Change: Fourth Annual Conference 2021. De Gruyter.
- Karam, A. (2023). Complimenting the Divine: The Multireligious as the Poetics of Resilience. In H.-P. Grosshans (Ed.), *Religion and Change* (pp. 77-88). De Gruyter.
- Lähnemann, J. (2024). Interreligious and Peace Education in Times of Crisis: A History of Religions for Peace. EB-Verlag.
- Pirner, M. L., Lähnemann, J., Haußmann, W., & Schwarz, S. (Eds.). (2018). *Public Theology Perspectives on Religion and Education*. Routledge.

A Global Ethic and Spiritual Perspective on Education for Sustainable Development

Ulrich Hemel

In this contribution, I first of all wish to deepen a fundamental consideration of the role of language in education, also with respect to education for sustainable development. Often, we are not aware of the bias included in our everyday linguistic behavior. It therefore seems to be important to discuss the implications of language for education because there is no education without language. In a second part, I shall refer to a specific proposal elaborated in the context of the Global Ethic project called “Good Religious and World-View Practices”. Its significance lies in finding common ground for a variety of religious education practices, especially concerning the challenge of a pro-social education for a peaceful co-existence of a variety of religions and world-views in a pluralistic society.

1. Our Educational Language: What do we mean by “Sustainable Development”?

Education is a world-wide practice when raising children. It obviously depends on culture, technology, world-view practices and religion of those who transfer both, knowledge and patterns of behavior, in a given society. There is no education without an explicit or implicit pattern of ethical values, within a religious context or distant from it. Education is at the same time highly individual and highly social, influenced by the surrounding civil society. We have our personal and unique experience of our own education, good or bad, and we follow patterns which are common for our time and our society. Education therefore can be seen as an “embedded universal” in human history. It for sure is universal but it always is embedded in a context of “encoded readings” in the sense of a symbolic universe of language, meaning and purpose.

Languages can express similar concepts and experiences but they are far from transferring the same content from one to the other language. If we look at “education”, the word has Latin origins and somehow means “leading towards something” or “leading out of something”, probably the state of ignorance and lack of orientation. Education in a sense is finished when a person is grown-up or “adult”. The degree of freedom for one’s personal actions is definitely higher as an adult than as a child. Freedom

hence could be either the objective or at least the legal outcome of education. In any given society, the freedom of adult persons refers to a kind of socially embedded freedom where certain types of behavior will be accepted, others not.

Education therefore is not possible without an implicit or explicit idea of an acceptable range of value patterns for adult persons. This includes knowledge as well as ethical orientation, behavior as well as inner concepts of behavior. In a global civil society, education for sustainable development might be a concept which is a candidate for globally shared values. Nevertheless, the interpretation of what is sustainable may be subject to a diverging and confusing disparity. We should consider this point a little bit deeper.

In an ethnically homogeneous context, all Swedish children speak Swedish, all Colombian children speak Spanish, all Ewe people in Togo speak Ewe. Language therefore is a first context of learning. It is the vessel of our world-view. It determines our ability to communicate with others, and it lines out the limits of communication.

We do not live, however, in a world of closed ethnic communities. Swedish children easily understand that they need to learn English in a world of global connectivity. The same is true for young persons in Togo where they have to learn French, and in Colombia where beyond Spanish more than 60 other indigenous languages exist.

Pluralist societies somehow follow pluralist paths of education, including some contradictions. There are different degrees of respect for languages and educational practices in our societies. In Europe, we have several million of the Roma and Sinti people but their language and culture often enough are object of legal and social discrimination. In such a case, what does education for sustainable development mean? Is it a tool to learn for being able to survive in the culture of the majority? Or is it a new name for existing practices in their own culture, though easily overlooked and framed in different words?

The relatively new phenomenon of a global civil society, where we know from each other in real time, should not prevent us from realizing how deep we are embedded in the specific contexts of our local communities. In general, our societies tend to embrace a huge variety of life styles, linguistic, religious and world-view communities.

One of the first things to learn therefore is a certain respect for the plurality of approaches to our world, including a variety of approaches to “sustainable development”.

Again, a linguistic consideration may help to go deeper. If we see languages as the key to a house of culture, we easily understand that not

only persons but also cultures are different. One major cornerstone in such difference is the importance of certain concepts and practices and the diverging assignment of meaning to them.

For sake of an example, we could refer to the practice of “virginity” in some religious cultures. In some contexts, it is extremely important to enter marriage in the state of virginity. In some other contexts, such as we have them in contemporary Western societies, the ethical value assigned to “virginity” is not as high, and it certainly is not a pre-requisite for entering marriage or any relationship at all.

The interesting point here is the fact that we can use common words even with common meanings while at the same time the relevance of the subject matter is not identical at all.

This brings us to the inevitable result of education. As a matter of fact, education may create a huge variety of “tools of assigning importance”. Without a thorough dialogue, it will not be possible to understand the meaning and the practical importance which my neighbor assigns e.g. to the term of “sustainable development”.

As a matter of fact, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN help us to materialize the range of meaning for the term “sustainable”. Nevertheless, we have to face the reality of successful “omnibus” concepts: The more widespread they are being used, the broader is the umbrella of possible connotations. The association room for “sustainable” sometimes refers to ecological sustainability in the field of climate and biodiversity, sometimes it simply becomes a word for “long-term” considerations. We easily speak of financial sustainability even if we happen to talk about investment in new carbon plants.

From the standpoint of some religions, there is a further dimension of the association room of “sustainable development”. It is relatively clear that the term “development” in a religious context refers to a *spiritual reality*, in a material or non-material way. Religions are characterized by symbolic universes of their own. All matters in the world therefore can be, should be and will be connected to the ultimate reality called God in the Abrahamic religions, called differently in other religious realities.

If we relate “development” to such an ultimate reality, it can only be a movement bringing us closer to God or the contrary. In a strict meaning, development always is positive such as e.g. the development of a tree, of a child and so on. In such a case, each and any kind of development is good and part of the spiritual journey of human beings towards God. “Sustainable development” in such a context may sound pleonastic and tautological as it simply means that we are continuously acting or trying to act according to God’s will and commandments.

The contrary of such a “good” development therefore is a distance to God. In religious language, this is sin. In secular terms, we could talk of a negative development.

Even if we take into account something like a negative development, it should be clear that as such, it is not sustainable. In a strict sense of the word, “sustainable” in the sense of a long-term positive effect is part of what is covered by the term of “development”. Otherwise, we rather should talk of events, behavior, actions but not development.

Critically speaking, however, we all know that “sustainable” is more than “long-term” because the term of “sustainable development” meanwhile is currently used for all actions and activities aiming at a world in balance, with a special eye towards ecological balance concerning water, air, climate, biodiversity and soil.

Applied to spiritual terms and to religions, the association room of “sustainable development” therefore is twofold. It is critical towards all and any practices of spoiling soil, water, air and biodiversity. It is positive and embracing towards the idea of a human connectedness to the physical world including the responsibility to not indulge in excess damage for egoistic and short-sighted interests.

If we move our intentional direction towards this kind of association room, religious communities can unite in common and even in political action. Religious language and a religious way of viewing the world therefore can lead to ecological activism.

The spirituality of environmental action in favor of sustainability therefore is the conservation of God’s good creation. The interesting point here is the fact that such a faith-based religious activism will be different in reasons but joint in action with more secular forms of ecological activism. In other words, there is an inherent affinity of the symbolic universe of religious and spiritual word-views with the 17 SDG of the UN!

If we look at language, a religious context concerning education for sustainable development generally follows a framing within a holistic *spiritual word-view*. All religions offer a kind of spirituality. On the other hand, even secular activists may feel a spiritual connection, be it to nature, be it to their fellow-citizens. It is important to understand that “spirituality” therefore is not a privilege of religions but simply expresses the human ability to symbolically embrace the whole of the world, feeling a connection with the universe. It seems to be an anthropological fact that all human beings can be spiritual in the sense of feeling such a *connection to the universe*.

If spirituality expresses the human connection with the whole of the universe, religiousness then should be seen as the specific form of

expressing this connection within the context of a given religion such as Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim or Buddhist.

Taking “spirituality” as the larger term, we even could stretch forward to the idea of considering various religions as different “languages” in which we live, feel and express the above-mentioned human connection with the whole of the universe.

The consequence of this insight results in the argument of both diverging and converging “chains of reasoning” in favor of sustainable development in the world of religious activists. The convergence is the fact that all of us do have a “spiritual” connection with the universe, the divergence is minor and stems from different religious codes and practices for giving a good reason for such action!

2. A Global Ethic Perspective: Good Religious and World-View Practices

The “Global Ethic” project has been established by the Swiss catholic theologian Hans Küng (1928-2021). In 1979, due to a controversy with the Catholic Church, he was forced to leave the Tübingen Faculty of Catholic Theology. This was a background for diving deeper into the reality of other “world religions”. Küng, however, did not only publish books but looked for the support of the Parliament of World Religions. In 1993, he gained the support for an Ethics Code consisting of two principles (“humanity” and “reciprocity”) as well as of four distinct values: Justice, truthfulness, partnership (or better: equality of men and women) and non-violence. In 2018, the value “Sustainability” was added (Hemel, 2019a).

Soon, Küng found supporters for his idea. This led to the establishment of the “Global Ethic Foundation” (Stiftung Weltethos) in 1995 and of the Global Ethic Institute” (Weltethos-Institut), in 2012.

As the director of the Global Ethic Institute from 2018 to 2025, I had the chance to enlarge the Global Ethic Perspective by articulating the principles of “Good Religious and World-View Practices” (Hemel, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). I specifically used the argument that all religions and worldviews (such as atheist or agnostic perspectives) will be able to find common ground on five principles:

- Freedom of religion in the sense of freedom of state persecution
- Freedom of cultic expression also in the public space
- Freedom for a religious conversion history

- Religious and world-view tolerance as a tolerance both “in favor” and “against” religious convictions
- Absence of human rights violating practices.

I proposed these guidelines as an additional sustainable development goal of the UN called “SDG 18”. The value of these principles, however, is independent from UN recognition, also because the time horizon of the 17 SDG does not stretch beyond 2030.

The important point in the consideration of a “SDG 18”, however, was the fact that religions have not been duly considered in the articulation of the 17 SDG. The background, obviously, is the great ambivalence of religions within the perspective of the UN where religions can often be perceived as a cause of conflict, as a root for terrorism or as a systemic cause of sexual abuse (Werkner, 2024).

The ambivalence of religion, however, also works the other way round. Still today, more than 80% of the world population adhere to a specific religion. Religious communities do have an extremely helpful role in the battle against hunger and poverty (SDG 1-2), and in access to health-care and to education (SDG 3-4). A systematic cross-check will show that religions deploy important supporting activities in favor of practically all SDG including SDG 14 (climate action), despite some short-comings, e.g. in SDG 5 (gender equality). Religions especially embrace the gap between ecological concerns and issues of social justice (Peter et al., 2011; Wenger, 2008). Religions and spiritual practices in general are open for their specific socio-cultural context and therefore deliver a very practical and lifestyle-adjusted mode of transferring educational values (Kyburz-Graber et al., 2006; Weselek et. al., 2022). This is of utmost importance if we consider that the objective of education for sustainable development is not only a world in ecological balance but also a world of justice and dignity (Hemel, 2019b). This means in other words that political and spiritual values may go hand in hand.

A Global Ethic perspective on education for sustainable development therefore first of all is an invitation to seriously take into account the positive impact of religions on the realization of many of the current SDG.

If we specifically look at the five principles of good religious and world-view practices, we easily discover a large common space. Actually, freedom of religion (i.e. principle no.1) is a condition for a free and democratic society. The state never has the right to practice religious persecution. This, by the way, is one of the founding inspirations of the United States of America!

As a matter of fact, some states do practice religious persecution. This is the case in India under Prime Minister Modi, but also in some Islamic states. In a democracy, however, religions have learned that from a religious standpoint it is not the competence of any human being to judge people practicing another religion. The state, then, has to guarantee a level playing field for all religions.

This also refers to their cultic expression (i.e. principle no.2), ranging from the bath in the Ganges to the Mecca pilgrimage, from Corpus Christ processions to Good Friday practices. The important point here is that societies have to learn that religion is not only a private fact, but stretches, under certain conditions, into the public sphere. We therefore need both: religions able to live in a pluralist democracy, and democracies able to respect religions and religious practices!

The freedom for a personal history of religious conversion (i.e. principle no.3) is quite important and partly controversial. From the internal standpoint of a religion, a change in religious belonging is called “apostasy” and is strongly condemned, often including not only “excommunication” but even expulsion from family and local communities.

This should not be the case, as a religious conversion often is a fact of family history. Christians marry with Muslims and vice versa, and often this is the cause for a change in religious belonging. An attitude of respect for religious conversions is crucial for good religious and world-view practices. Therefore, civil society and the international community should act in those countries where State Law does not permit such conversions, e.g. in Jewish Israel or in Muslim Bangla Desh.

In the end, this leads us to the principle of tolerance (principle no. 4) which is one of the core issues of good religious and world-view practices. Tolerance is indispensable for a peaceful co-existence of religious communities in pluralist societies. From a religious standpoint, this, however, may sometimes seem to be challenging. During the discussions on the Vatican II council in Rome where the Catholic Church officially recognized religious liberty, some opponents argued that no error can be accepted if there is one single truth. The majority argued in the contrary and stated that the limitations of the human mind may end up in error even without any moral fault or intellectual neglect. This means that we have to accept the “right of error” in religious matters and hence stand up for freedom of religion.

This is still true in the 21st century. In some societies, however, we find an alignment between public media and some protagonists of atheistic or agnostic positions where some actors fall short of word-view tolerance while claiming religious attitudes as a sort of intellectual or moral flaw. For

the sake of a good co-existence of all persons in the global civil society, we need tolerance on both sides, religious and non-religious, because the “right of error” in such matters goes along with the universal human rights.

Finally, good religious and world-view practices should have a strong stance in favor of human rights (principle no. 5). It is for sure that ethical standpoints change in the course of time. To give an example, nobody today would tolerate girls to marry at the age of 12 or 14 years even if this was accepted some centuries ago. Most religions today have a strong position against the death penalty. Female genital mutilation cannot any more be seen as “somehow Islamic” as this cruel practice has been officially banned by a Fatwa.

On the other hand, it is quite obvious that the tangible interpretation of “violations of human rights” continues to be controversial. Is male circumcision a legitimate religious practice or bodily injury? Is the present denial of female access to priesthood in the Catholic Church a legitimate tradition or a human rights violation? We can find more of these issues. Nevertheless, the simple fact that religions unite in a ban of human rights violating practices is of valuable importance despite a series of diverging opinions in detail.

In this sense, we can draw a line to education for sustainable development. In present times, and against some drawbacks as in Trump’s US presidency since 2025, religions more and more raise their voice. Faith-based organizations have a spiritual access of their own towards a holistic conception of education for sustainable development. This especially refers to the insight that we need to live a life of balance, in a material, ecological and spiritual sense. Peace today is understood not only as peace among people but also as “peace with nature” and inter-generational peace.

From a Global Ethic perspective, education for sustainable development in this sense is an expression of common concerns of religious and spiritual, of secular and political forces within the global civil society. Along with the principles of good religious and world-view practices, the movement in favor of sustainable development and in favor of a better implementation of human rights go hand in hand. They show how religions with different origins, beliefs and faith-based practices can unite forces and be a driving force for building a peaceful society in the future.

References

- Hemel, U. (Ed.). (2019a). *Weltethos für das 21. Jahrhundert*. Herder.
Hemel, U. (2019b). Politics of Dignity: A Bridge between Public Theology and Economy. In M. L. Pirner., J. Lähnemann, W. Haußmann & S. Schwarz (Eds.),

Public Theology Perspectives on Religion and Education (pp. 107–118). Routledge.

- Hemel, U. (2022). Wie gelingt gutes Zusammenleben der Religionen? „Gute religiöse Praxis“ (SDG 18) als Ziel der globalen Zivilgesellschaft. In K. Braun, G. Ratzinger & R. Zörb (Eds.), *Zum 95. Geburtstag, Festschrift der Gesellschaft zur Förderung christlicher Verantwortung e.V. für den Heiligen Vater Em. Benedikt XVI.* (pp. 126–146). Wenzlik-Verlag.
- Hemel, U. (2024a). Das Engagement religiöser Akteure für globale Aufgaben. In J. Werkner (Ed.), *Handbuch Religion in Konflikten und Friedensprozessen* (pp. 1271–1287). Springer VS.
- Hemel, U. (2024b). Religion in der globalen Zivilgesellschaft. In Religions for Peace Deutschland e.V. – Stiftung Weltethos – Bundeskongress der Räte der Religionen – Forum Religionen im Kontext (Eds.), *Interreligiöse Initiativen in Deutschland, Ein Wegweiser* (pp. 229–242). Ergon.
- Kyburz-Graber, R., Hofer, K., Wolfensberger, B. (2006). Studies on a socio-ecological approach to environmental education – a contribution to a critical position in the education for sustainable development discourse. *Environmental Education Research*, 12(1), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620500527840>
- Wenger, A. (2008). Bildung in einer sich formierenden Weltgesellschaft: Ein Schlüssel zur Förderung einer nachhaltigen Entwicklung. Bestandsaufnahmen und Perspektiven. Forschungsinstitut für Anwendungsorientierte Wissensverarbeitung/n.
- Weselek, J., Kohler, F. & Siegmund, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Digitale Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung: Anwendung und Praxis in der Hochschulbildung*. Springer Spektrum.
- Werkner, J. (Ed.). (2024). *Handbuch Religion in Konflikten und Friedensprozessen*. Springer VS.

List of Authors and Editors

Phillip **Angelina** is working on his PhD on "The climate debate within US-American Evangelicalism" at the Berlin Institute for Public Theology. He holds a master's degree in Religion and Culture at the Humboldt University of Berlin, with a focus on religion, ethics, and politics. Currently, he is working as a researcher at the Research Unit for Public Religion and Education (RUPRE) at the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany, in a project on Open Educational Resources in religious education communities funded by the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMBFSF).

Prof. Dr. Simone **Birkel** (Simone Birkel – KU) is a professor of Religious Education at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Germany). Her research focuses on religious and ecological education for sustainable development. She played a significant role in the transformation process of the Faculty of Religious Education into the School of Transformation and Sustainability. In this position, she undertakes interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research on social-ecological transformation and sustainability, whilst also contributing to the academic instruction of the BA Transformation – Sustainability – Ethics programme and the MA Education for Sustainable Development programme. She is an active participant in the global Uniservitate network (Uniservitate), a programme dedicated to the promotion of solidarity service-learning (SSL) within Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs).

PD Dr. Maike Maria **Domsel** studied Catholic Theology and Romance Studies at the University of Bonn, Germany and earned her PhD in Systematic Theology from the Philosophical-Theological University St. Augustin, with a focus on end-of-life care. After serving as a substitute professor at the University of Duisburg-Essen, specializing in Practical Theology and Religious Education, she completed her habilitation in Religious Education at the University of Bonn, with particular attention to the spiritual self-concept of educators. Her academic work is situated at the intersection of interreligious learning, compassion-based education, and crisis-sensitive religious pedagogy. She regularly contributes to international conferences and interdisciplinary networks, advancing dialogue between theology, education, and contemporary societal challenges. In addition, she serves as co-editor of the *Handbook of Religions* (HdR).

Dr. Pascal **Frank** is assistant professor for ‘Teaching and learning for the development and unfolding of human potential for sustainability’ at Wageningen University and Research, The Netherlands. His work focuses on inner development and sustainability, and how to foster inner development for sustainability in formal and informal learning contexts. He has conducted extensive research on mindfulness and how it affects sustainability-related behavior. In recent years, his work focuses on first-person research methods (Personal Sustainability Science), which he also integrates in educational practices and professional trainings in the form of self-inquiry-based learning.

Dr. Werner **Hausmann** was Academic Director at the Chair of Religious Education at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany. He works on the development and research of innovative teaching and learning formats. A particular focus lies on digital educational media and learning environments, currently especially in the field of antisemitism prevention and the teaching of Jewish life. Further areas of interest include interreligious learning, Biblical didactics, and ESD (Education for Sustainable Development). He is the author of numerous school textbooks and editor of several publications in the field of religious education.

Prof. Dr. Dr. Dr. h.c. Ulrich **Hemel** is the former director of the Global Ethic Institute (Weltethos-Institut) in Tübingen, Germany. He holds a doctorate in Catholic Theology (“Theorie der Religionspädagogik”), made his habilitation in Religious Education Theory (“Ziele religiöser Erziehung”) and has a licentiate and a Dr. h.c. in Economic Sciences. He worked as a consultant for The Boston Consulting Group and as a CEO, among others, for Paul Hartmann AG with 10,000 employees. He has been teaching at Regensburg University for more than 40 years and is the author of 15 books. Beyond fields such as AI ethics (“Kritik der digitalen Vernunft”), his focus is on religious and world-view values in education and in society as well as on “inclusive development” embracing all of the four dimensions: economic, ecological, social and ethical.

Prof. Dr. **Joan Hernandez-Serret** is Professor and Researcher of Sociology at the International University of Catalonia (UIC Barcelona). His work focuses on social change, with particular attention to digitalization and artificial intelligence, climate change, communication, intercultural and interreligious dialogue. He teaches sociology, artificial intelligence, religion and culture, and Asian studies. He is a member of the Observatory for

Artificial Intelligence and New Technologies (OIAN) at UIC and Board Advisor to the Journalists and Writers Foundation (New York). Additionally, he teaches at the Institute of Religious Sciences of Barcelona (ISCREB) and has been deeply involved in interuniversity research projects. ORCID:0000-0002-6080-8293

Prof. Mag. Michael **Holzwieser** is holding a master's degree in Pedagogy of Religion (Cath. Theology) at the University of Vienna, Austria. He is a teacher of intercultural and interreligious competences at the University College of Agrarian and Environmental Pedagogy in Vienna and emphasizes on Education for Sustainable Development and Spirituality. He is involved in the international pedagogical network PILGRIM for Education of Sustainable Development and Spirituality (www.pilgrim.at). He is working on his PhD on "Questions of normativity in Education of Sustainable Development" at the University of Passau, Germany.

Zoltan **Hosszu** is a seasoned leader in the intersection of sustainability, education, and spiritual development. After moving to Krishna Valley Eco Village, Hungary, in 2005, Zoltan Hosszu expanded his academic pursuit by earning a degree in Agro-Economy and Rural Development Engineering. His studies concentrated on sustainable agricultural practices and the development of rural communities, aligning with his growing responsibilities within Krishna Valley and beyond. Zoltan Hosszu currently serves as the Governing Body Commission (GBC) secretary for Hungary, Romania, Turkey, and Cyprus, and as the co-GBC for Greece. In these roles, he oversees the integration of spiritual education with sustainable development initiatives.

Jerin **Jacob** studied technology, philosophy, theology as well as spirituality and counselling at different universities in India. He has completed his Research Master of Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion at the university KU Leuven in Belgium. Jerin Jacob is a Catholic priest from the religious congregation Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI). He has begun his PhD programme at KU in September 2024 and has already published several peer-reviewed articles.

Jennifer **Jakob**, MA MSc PhD is Vice Rector of Private University College of Teacher Education of Christian Churches Austria (Kirchliche Pädagogische Hochschule Wien/Niederösterreich). She worked as a teacher for Protestant religious education and in the training of Protestant religious education teachers. Her main research fields are: children's theology and

philosophy; (religious) education for sustainable development; teacher education.

Prof. Dr. Eunice **Kamaara** is a professor of Ethics in the department of Philosophy, Religion and Theology at Moi University, Kenya, and founding member of the African Character Imitation Program (ACIP), a local community-funded and led programme mentoring adolescents to transition from childhood to responsible adulthood (www.acip.kenya.org). ACIP is recognised by the World Health Organization as Top Innovation in Social Health. <http://innov.afro.who.int/innovators/professor-eunice-kamaara-25> Her main research fields are: gender, youth formation and character values, spirituality, health and wellbeing.

Bianca **Kappelhoff** studied Political Sciences, specializing in European Studies, at the University of Münster (Germany). From /2014 to 2016 she was Personal Assistant to a member of the Parliament of the City of Hamburg; from 2016 to 2018 she served as Project Manager for the Protestant Church in Germany, and from 2018 to 2019 she was contact person for Australia of the Global Pedagogical Network “Joining in Reformation”. Presently, she is working as an educational researcher at the Comenius-Institute, Protestant Centre for Research and Development of Education, in Münster, Germany.

Prof. Dr. Azza **Karam** is the Director of the Kahane United Nations Program, of Occidental College’s Department of World Affairs. She is also the President and CEO of Lead Integrity, the first women-of-faith-led global consultancy, with representative offices in 41 regions. She serves as a member of the United Nations Secretary-General’s High Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism. She has authored multiple books and peer reviewed Journal articles, translated into several languages on sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and interfaith dynamics.

Dr. Sung **Kim** is a programme executive for theology and intercultural learning at *Mission EineWelt* in Neuendettelsau, Germany. Trained as a systematic theologian with a specialization in ethics, his primary research interests include the historiography of mission and intercultural ethics. He also directs the annual summer school, which brings together participants from the partner churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria.

Dr. Annika **Krahn** is an academic councillor at the University of Bamberg, Germany, for Biblical Theology. She studied Protestant theology and German language and literature in Cologne, Bonn, Amsterdam/NL, and Oxford/GB. As a teacher, she has taught at secondary schools and vocational colleges as a class teacher in so-called international support classes, where refugees learned German as a second language. She is involved in interdisciplinary approaches to, among other things, radicalization processes (new right-wing movements, conspiracy ideologies) and transformation processes in relation to the climate crisis.

Dr. Emma **Kurenlahti** is a Doctor of Education and a researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland, Faculty of Educational Sciences. Her research examines themes of evil and death, as well as the formation of emotions and spirituality in educational contexts, particularly in relation to contemporary sustainability crises.

Prof. Dr. Arniika **Kuusisto** is Professor at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland, and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on children's values, worldviews, existential resilience and wellbeing, constructed in relational interplay between the individual and their environment. At present, she is the PI for the Academy of Finland funded research project 'Child in Time: Existential Resilience in Early Childhood' (2023-2027; no. 356905).

Prof. Dr. Johannes **Lähnemann** served as Chair of Religious Education (Protestant) at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany, from 1981-2007, as predecessor of Prof. M. L. Pirner. A pedagogical expert for Religions for Peace (RfP) since 1986, he has chaired the Peace Education Standing Commission (PESC) and currently contributes to the Standing Commission on Interreligious Education. He is Founder and Convenor of the triennial „Nürnberger Foren" for Interreligious and Intercultural Education (since 1982, since 2010 together with Manfred Pirner). His recent publication "Interreligious and Peace Education in Times of Crisis. A History of Religions for Peace" (EB Publishers Berlin 2024, www.ebv-berlin.de) has received widespread international acclaim and is available as an e-book.

Prof. Dr. Lasse **Lipponen** is a Professor of Education, with special reference to early childhood education, at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland. His research focus is on emotion-related

cultural practices in early childhood education from a cultural-historical perspective.

Dr. Eric R. **Masese** is a Senior Lecturer and Academic Leader in Sociology at Moi University, Kenya. He holds a PhD in Anthropology/Ethnology from Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, France. His research spans the sociology of everyday life, medical sociology and anthropology, gender, bioethics, higher education policy, and governance in Africa. His work is grounded in collaborative and interdisciplinary research projects that emphasize the co-creation of knowledge with communities, institutions, and policymakers. Dr. Masese has published widely in peer-reviewed journals, Chapter books and serves as a reviewer for several international refereed journals.

Dr Claire **Médard** is a social scientist working with the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD, France). She is currently based at Les Afriques dans le Monde (LAM, Bordeaux). From 2020 to 2024, she was hosted at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. Her main focus is land and resource tenure in East Africa. She is currently taking part in a research programme “FamilEA: *the Remaking of the Family in East Africa*”.

Prof. Dr. h.c. **Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh Ahluwalia** is a leading figure of the Sikh religion. He serves as Chairman of the international Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, based in the UK, promotes peace, compassion, and interfaith dialogue, focusing on sustainability by integrating spiritual and ethical dimensions into development. He is also a major leading representative of Religions for Peace International.

Anna-Lena **Moselewski** studied “Transformation Studies: Public Theology and Social Work” (M.A.) at the YMCA-University in Kassel, Germany (CVJM-Hochschule), building on her studies in religious education and social work. She works as a research assistant at the YMCA-University and conducts research on Christian youth work, church development, socio-ecological transformation and creation spirituality. She is a member of the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD). In this context, she recently worked with the “EKD Chamber Network Group on Social-Ecological Transformation” on a new paper on “Christian Spirituality and the Ecological Crisis”.

Prof. Dr. Ulrich **Müller** is retired professor for Educational Leadership and Management and for further education at the Ludwigsburg University of

Education (LUE, <https://www.ph-ludwigsburg.de/fakultaet-1/institut-fuer-bildungsmanagement>), Germany. For many years he was director of the institute for educational management at LUE and headed the German Master's program "Bildungsmanagement". He also works as trainer, coach and speaker in companies and organizations of adult education (<https://neue-lernkultur.de>). His main fields of work and research are educational leadership and management, executive education and training, education for sustainable development, adult education, teaching and learning methods, and didactical design.

Prof. Dr. Elisabeth **Naurath** is professor of Religious Education at the University of Augsburg (Germany). She founded the Peace Education Center for Interreligious Education at the University of Augsburg with the study for Certificate of Interfaith Mediation (CIM). Since 2021 she was elected as Chair of Religions for Peace Germany and as a Member on the Board of Religions for Peace Europe. She is also engaged in the Standing Commission on Nurturing a Sustainable Environment of Religions for Peace International. Since November 2023, she has held the position of project manager in the International ErasmusPlusProject "Facing Global Challenges. Environmental and Peace Education in Interreligious Cooperation for Teacher Training" (<https://religions4ecology.org>). Since January 2025 she has been involved as a board member of the European Christian Ecotheology Research Network (ECeRN).

Dr. Jens **Palkowitsch-Kühl** is a specialist in digital education and global learning at RPZ Heilsbronn, part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria (ELKB). His expertise centers on digital transformation in educational contexts, teacher professionalization in digitalization, and the integration of artificial intelligence in learning environments. He has served as a research associate at Goethe-University Frankfurt and Julius-Maximilians-University Würzburg, where he coordinated projects on media integration in schools (RELab digital). He held an interim professorship in Ethics and Education at EH Darmstadt (2023) and works nationally and internationally as a consultant, trainer, and speaker on digitalization and AI in education.

Christian **Pfliegel** is a specialist for digital education at *Mission EineWelt* in Neuendettelsau, Germany. He studied educational sciences with a focus on education and media. His main areas of interest include learning in digital contexts, artificial intelligence, open-source technologies, and Open Educational Resources.

Prof. Dr. Manfred L. **Pirner** is senior professor of Religious Education Research at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany. He is also Director of the Research Unit for Public Religion and Education (RUPRE, www.rupre.uni-erlangen.org), founding member of FAU's Centre for Human Rights Erlangen-Nürnberg (CHREN; <https://www.humanrights-centre.fau.de/>) and associated member of the Bavarian Research Center for Interreligious Discourses (BaFID) (<https://www.bafid.fau.eu/>). His main research fields are: public theology and public education; human rights, education and religion; refugees and religion; religiosity and professionalism of teachers; digital media and religious education; faith-based schools.

Dr. Saila **Poulter**'s research interests include religious and worldview education as school subjects, pedagogy of sacred space, children's grief, spirituality and citizenship education. She works as a Senior Lecturer in Religious Education in the Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Finland. Currently, she is conducting research on young children's existential resilience.

Prof. Dr. Axel **Siegemund** is an engineer and theologian engaged in mission, development cooperation and ecumenism, currently at the Reformed Churches of Bern-Jura-Solothurn, Switzerland. His scientific path included the Hemmerle Professorship for Interdisciplinary Research Areas in Theology, Natural Sciences, and Engineering in Aachen (Germany) and the Hanns Lilje Foundation Prize for Freedom and Responsibility. His main research interests are in the Study of Science and Theology, Ethics of Technology, and intercultural ethical questions.

Prof. Dr. Karin **Sporre**, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden, is professor in Educational Work with a focus on values, gender and diversity. Her recent research has a focus on children's ethical and existential questions and educational responses to them. Since 2001 Karin Sporre has taken part in and developed research cooperation with South African colleagues in Theology and Education with a focus on Human Rights, Ethics and Sustainability. As Professor Emerita Karin Sporre is affiliated with the Dept. of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, and additionally serves as Extraordinary Professor, Dept. of Theology and Religious Studies, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa.

Prof. Dr. Blair **Stonechild**, Professor of Indigenous Studies at First Nations University of Canada, is a member of the Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nation and is a survivor of the Qu'Appelle Indian Residential School. He obtained his Bachelor's degree from McGill University, and Master's and Doctorate degrees from University of Regina. In 1976 Blair joined the First Nations University of Canada as its first faculty member and has been Dean of Academics and Executive Director of Development. He has served as a Trustee of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Major publications include *Loyal Till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion*, (1997); *The New Buffalo: Aboriginal Post-secondary Policy in Canada* (2006); *Buffy Sainte-Marie: It's My Way* (2012), *The Knowledge Seeker: Embracing Indigenous Spirituality* (2016), *Loss of Indigenous Eden and the Fall of Spirituality* (2020), and *Challenge to Civilization: Indigenous Wisdom and the Future* (2024). He lives in Regina with his wife Sylvia and has three adult children.

Dr. István **Tasi** obtained his degree in cultural anthropology from the Faculty of Humanities at ELTE (University of Budapest, Hungary) in 1997. He graduated as a Vaishnava theologian from the Bhaktivedanta College of Theology in 2005. He defended his doctoral dissertation on the history of science in 2016 at the Faculty of Humanities at ELTE. He is an active practitioner and teacher of the Vaishnava religion, which is one of the main branches of Hinduism. Over the past two decades, he has been a faculty member at the Bhaktivedanta College in Budapest, Hungary, teaching courses such as Overview of the Bhagavad-gītā, World Religions, Rhetoric, and Vedic Worldview and Modern Science. He is the author of several books, most notably "Nature's IQ." His habilitation dissertation focuses on Vaishnava ecotheology.

Dr. Mary Evelyn **Tucker** is co-director of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology with her husband, John Grim. She is affiliated faculty with the Yale Center for Environmental Justice at the Yale School of the Environment. With Grim, Tucker directed a 10-conference series and book project at Harvard on "World Religions and Ecology." They have created six online courses in "Religions and Ecology: Restoring the Earth Community" and three online courses on *Journey of the Universe* with Yale-Coursera. They also edited the books of cultural historian Thomas Berry. Tucker's research focus is Chinese and Japanese Confucianism. She co-edited *Confucianism and Ecology*, *Daoism and Ecology*, and *Buddhism and Ecology*. Tucker and Grim have created the new Living Earth Community website and have also been involved in the movement in China on Ecological Civilization.

Prof. Dr. Markus **Vogt** is professor of Christian Social Ethics in the faculty of Catholic theology at Ludwig-Maximilian University Munich, Germany. From 2000 to 2006 he coordinated the Environment Section at the Council of European Bishops' Conferences; from 2010 to 2015 he was Spokesperson for the Working Group of Social Ethicists in German-speaking Countries. He published widely on theological foundations of ethics, on Christian Environmental Ethics, sustainability and climate change, political ethic and especially peace ethics.

Dr. Simon **Wiesgickl** is a pastor in the Bavarian Lutheran Church and assistant professor at the Chair of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany. His research focuses on decolonial religious studies, ecology, and indigenous communities. He is the editor of several volumes on postcolonial theologies.

Spirituality can help to bridge the mind-behavior gap when it comes to ecological and sustainability issues. It holistically addresses the questions of who we are as human beings in relation to ourselves, to others, to nature and to the transcendent. Therefore, spirituality can promote the deep ecological and social transformations that we need - in individuals, groups and societies. This is the reason why spiritual dimensions should be integrated into Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The contributions in this volume build on these fundamental theses and address various aspects of ESD from different academic disciplines and different faith traditions.

ISBN 978-3-96147-929-0



9 783961 479290