

## Connectedness as the spiritual basis of religious education for sustainable development

Elisabeth Naurath

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

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# 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)<sup>10</sup>.

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

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<sup>10</sup> “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*.<sup>11</sup>

It will probably come as no surprise, then, that rESD has been slow to arrive in German religious education (Bederna, 2019; 2020)<sup>12</sup>. 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*

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

<sup>12</sup> 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)<sup>13</sup> 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

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<sup>13</sup> 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 Soul<sup>14</sup>

“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.

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<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup> 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

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<sup>15</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup>-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.<sup>16</sup>

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

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<sup>16</sup> 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!

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