



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Prospects and possibilities for interfaith environmentalism

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### Abstract

This article probes some philosophical issues that pertain to interfaith environmental collaboration. I distinguish some forms of interfaith environmentalism, starting with a form that is relatively easy for religious communities to pursue and that appears straightforward and easy to understand. Then I propose that even this easily pursued type of collaboration has interesting components that may not be obvious at first glance, including various sorts of mutual recognition. In addition, this sort of collaboration beckons those who engage in it to take various additional steps, some of which have to do with mutual understanding and mutual enrichment. Next I turn to forms of interfaith collaboration that some religious communities and religious traditions will find challenging. In the final sections I consider the possibility that environmentally constructive religious perspectives might emerge from interfaith collaboration and I consider forms of interfaith collaboration that involve religious exploration. At the end I consider the implications of the fact that to date the religions have generally failed to undertake the robust large-scale interfaith collaboration that the environmental crisis requires.

**Keywords:** Interfaith; collaboration; environment

### Introduction

Religious communities and religious traditions have an obligation to contribute to solving environmental problems. One reason this is so is that members of all major religious communities are among those whose way of life, consumption, and economic and productive arrangements have given rise to the current crises. We have all contributed, and are all contributing, to causing the problems and we therefore all have an obligation to contribute to finding and pursuing solutions.

The obligation to contribute to this project also arises in part from the capacities and resources of the religions and in general from the sort of organizations they are. This has a number of aspects, including the following three. First, the religions exercise considerable influence in the lives of many people. They have an ability to encourage and inspire and to rally people to a cause. They are experienced in reminding people to make important what they have failed to attend to and in asking from their members what it is difficult to give, often eliciting the response they aim for. They have some experience in restraining people from being seduced by the attractions of wealth and privilege and power and from attempting to make themselves safe and secure at all costs. Also they

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have some experience in leading people to be less selfish, less greedy, less casual about assuming that they deserve what they have, though, needless to say, the track record of the religious traditions in matters such as these is mixed.

Second, many religions have considerable wealth, power and influence at their disposal and they can steer these resources in one way or another: in particular they can choose to use them to help to solve major current problems such as the one under discussion here. Third, the religions generally aspire to providing guidance and leadership and to telling people what they need to know in order to live well. So the role they have a capacity to play in the case of the current environmental crisis is one they actually aspire to playing; or at any rate a case can be made for the appropriateness of doing so.

The most important source of the obligation that the religions have to contribute to solving environmental problems, however, is just the urgency of the situation and the scale of the problems. Loss of biodiversity, climate change, and the accumulation of plastics in the ocean are such acute problems and addressing them immediately is so important to the future of human life, and of all life, that institutions that are in a position to contribute to finding solutions ought to do so at once. It is too late for religious institutions, or any institution that can help, to engage in token gestures or merely to show promise.

There are advantages to the religions working collaboratively rather than independently on matters such as these. When there is collaboration each group can reasonably feel that it has contributed to whatever is jointly accomplished and that it has partial ownership thereof. Hence accomplishments that issue from cooperation are more likely to endure. Perhaps each group is more likely to persevere and to stay involved when it joins in a collaborative project. If they give up, they cast their own community in a bad light relative to the others involved, and they let more people down. These are advantages of interfaith cooperation in general and hence of *environmental* interfaith cooperation in particular. If religious communities have an obligation to contribute to solving environmental problems, and if collaboration is likely to make such efforts more successful, then there is an obligation to collaborate. Here too the urgency and scale of the problems are relevant. Efforts that are adequate to the task require a mass movement in which many groups participate. The efforts of each group will be enhanced by the cooperation of others.

Moreover, interfaith collaboration will help to build bridges; it will promote interreligious goodwill and reduce tensions. Religious differences will inevitably be downplayed somewhat in an effective interfaith environmental effort: it would be disruptive for such differences to be at the forefront of attention. Some appreciation of the others involved is likely to develop. So interfaith collaboration will open doors that some religious engagement tends to close. Also, negative stereotypes and prejudices towards others involved are likely to fade. The thought that the others in question are deeply defective in some way – a thought that is an unfortunate element in some religious perspectives on outsiders – will be at least a little harder to sustain.

Interfaith collaboration can also provide people with a way to respond to the appeal of two competing attractions, to both of which many people are drawn. There is, on the one hand, the appeal of belonging to a well-defined home religious community. That community might even involve powerful factors that keep the group within its own boundaries; perhaps maintaining a distance from others is deemed necessary for preserving the world view or cohesion or identity of the group. And there is, on the other hand, the matter of being a citizen of the world at large and addressing challenges that face everyone, and indeed pitching in and working with others in response to those challenges. Interfaith collaboration can provide a way to respond to both appeals, enabling people to belong to a home religious community while cooperating with others to address common

challenges. In some cases in which stepping out would otherwise be frowned upon or perceived as risky this collaboration may provide a safe zone that legitimates going beyond the home community.

Interfaith collaboration has other interesting benefits. Joanne Rider, drawing on a PhD thesis by Steven Douglas (2007), makes this observation about interfaith environmental collaboration in particular: ‘the low level of participation and attention paid to ecological change within the traditional institutions . . . has left . . . internal players no choice but to unite in their cause with people of other institutions and faiths’ (Rider (2011), 114). The idea is that if there is a little interest or support among co-religionists, some religious environmentalists may badly need the opportunities provided by interfaith collaboration.

Needless to say, there is much more to be said both about the case for religious engagement with environmental matters and about the value of that engagement being collaborative. Quite apart from the matter of obligation, religious traditions and the communities that make them up sometimes look on this engagement as a calling. They deem it important to play a role in responding to this crisis without thinking in terms of an obligation to do so; or this may not be the primary, or the only, mode in which they reflect about such matters.

### Environmental collaboration

I want to consider some forms this collaboration might take. I begin with the easiest sort of collaboration. Suppose there is an environmental problem that needs to be addressed. It might be a local problem. Perhaps coal ash has been left at an abandoned mine and is polluting a nearby river.<sup>1</sup> Or a powerful and unscrupulous political leader has allowed logging companies to displace indigenous forest dwellers and to destroy the habitat of numerous local species, so that after a few decades of industrial-scale logging and plantation development that have enriched the leader and his cronies, only 5% of the forest remains intact.<sup>2</sup>

Or, on the global scale, consider the fact that if global greenhouse gas (ghg) emissions do not fall by 7.6% each year between 2020 and 2030, the 1.5 °C temperature goal of the Paris Agreement will not be achieved and there will be wider-ranging and more destructive climate impacts.<sup>3</sup> (Anyone who is not alarmed by the challenge of responding appropriately to this problem should consider that the large-scale international shut-down of commercial and other activity in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in only a temporary 7% reduction in ghg emissions and made little difference to long-term accumulation of ghg in the atmosphere.<sup>4</sup> And as if that were not alarming enough, global ghg emissions quickly bounced back from this temporary reduction.<sup>5</sup>) Or the issue might be the global loss of biodiversity, with the current rate of species extinction globally now tens to hundreds of times higher compared to average over the last 10 million years, with the rate accelerating.<sup>6</sup>

There is a relatively uncomplicated and relatively easily pursued form of interfaith environmental cooperation that is available to all religious communities in response to such problems, be they local or global. This is just for religious communities to rally together in response to the problem. In this sort of collaborative effort, each group comes as it is and does its own thing religiously and engages in a joint venture whose importance the parties involved recognize and agree upon.

For example, Father Aloys Budi Purnomo, an Indonesian Catholic priest, describes just such a collaborative effort in which he was recently involved in Java, Indonesia. Catholics, Muslims, and members of a local indigenous Samin community joined with environmental activists to oppose limestone mining for cement in the North Kendeng Mountains Region of Java, judging it both a threat to the people in the area and an environmental

threat. He observes that according to the various religious communities participating in this action

the North Kendeng Mountains Region is a part of Mother Earth that should not be damaged and hurt. That is why, in every struggle and [in] their protests, they always [sang] as follows. ‘Mother Earth has already given, Mother Earth hurt, Mother Earth will judge.’ They sang the song’s lyrics in the Javanese Language, ‘*Ibu Bumi wis maringi, Ibu Bumi dilarani, Ibu Bumi kang ngadili.*’ For the Muslim, usually, the song is connected with Islamic prayers. So, they continued singing with the refrain: *Laa ilaaha illa Allah. Al-Malikul Haqqul Mubin. Muhammadur Rasulullah. Shadiwul Wa’adil Amin.* With that song, they believed that the Lord God Almighty would give justice to His people. I am a Roman Catholic priest, Samin Community is indigenous, but we sing the song as a joint prayer in the framework of eco-interreligious praxis . . . I was involved intensively in the struggle in North Kendeng Mountains Regions from August 17, 2012, to August 17, 2019. (Purnomo (2020), 14–15)

As these remarks exemplify, groups involved in this sort of collaborative effort may explicitly draw on their own tradition and its resources while collaborating with others who come with their traditions and resources. (In this particular case there may also have been some shared quasi-religious content: I note the mention of ‘Mother Earth’ though I am unsure what the groups involved mean to commit themselves to by using this term.)

Everyone can readily engage in collaboration of this sort. For example, even very conservative religious people can do so without compromising their commitments or threatening their identity. Even those who have difficulty associating with religious outsiders and who restrict such dealings can take part: one such group might work on restoring one stretch of a river while another works independently on another stretch so that they jointly protect the habitat of an endangered species, each mustering the talents and energy of its members. (You can imagine though that a dissenting voice or two might question such a segregated approach!) Even groups that take part in collaborative action in order to exhibit to their collaborators the appeal of their own religious wares and even those who hope for the conversion of those with whom they collaborate – who hope the outsiders with whom they collaborate will become insiders – can find a place at this table.

Global environmental problems obviously require initiatives on a large scale and these would benefit from the involvement of large groups such as entire traditions, although there can of course be small-scale and local contributions to solving global problems. Here too there is the possibility of large groups such as entire religions pursuing shared goals while staying as they are religiously. Thus the major global religions could, without much disruption, collaborate effectively on responding to climate change or on protecting biodiversity and they could do this on a massive scale. Or they could join in the globally relevant project of developing less destructive forms of capitalism and less destructive ways of living and promote these vigorously among their members. And all without compromising their core commitments and identity.

Environmental collaboration among religious communities obviously is one case of a broader phenomenon since there are any number of worthwhile causes in support of which such groups might co-operate. And any conclusions we come to in the environmental case are likely to have broader application.

### **Mutual recognition**

Collaboration of the sort mentioned so far is, as I say, relatively easily engaged in: it is compatible with robust continued membership in and identification with the home

tradition of those who take part. Indeed this is a reason it is not burdensome. Members of a number of religious traditions recognize a problem and jointly try to do something about it. What, you might ask, could be more straightforward?

However, even this sort of collaboration has some interesting aspects and implications, some of which have already been mentioned or hinted at. In particular I want to identify some forms of mutual recognition that are normally implicit in this sort of collaboration. Here there is a lot to say, including the following seven points.

First, in this sort of collaboration each participating group implicitly recognizes that the other collaborating groups are contributing something worthwhile: they are deploying their own resources, mobilizing their own community, and rendering a public service, while understanding these as worthwhile things to do. Second, each group implicitly recognizes that the others involved have an appreciation for, and are able and willing to pursue, important and worthwhile environmental goals. More to the point, if a shared action gets off the ground, each recognizes that the others involved are actually pursuing those environmental goals. Third, all parties involved implicitly recognize that the others involved are responding appropriately to what science is reporting about the nature of the relevant problems, be they local or global, and not ignoring or denying the relevant science. Fourth, all think well enough of the others involved and trust them enough to cooperate and to stand together publicly in support of a shared cause. Fifth, all parties implicitly recognize that the others involved join them in providing evidence that religious faith and religious participation are not irrelevant in the face of this contemporary crisis and instead have something important to contribute.

Sixth, there are organizational aspects that involve forms of recognition. For example, planning a shared action requires cooperation of various sorts. Even if it is just a matter of representatives of each group agreeing on an action and its aims, finding volunteers within their own community, and making sure everyone shows up at the appointed hour, and the like, various sorts of recognition of each other are implicitly involved, including recognition that the collaborating groups have the wherewithal to co-operate in these ways. If the groups involved see themselves as together constituting, or as being part of, a movement or organization, this too is implicitly to confer a certain status on the others involved.

Seventh, interfaith collaboration makes available a new shared sense of identity, however inchoate it may remain. We can see others as those with whom we have taken a stand in, say, opposing destructive logging or in protecting a locally endangered species or in challenging business or political leaders to act on the climate emergency. Indeed each of the elements mentioned in this section might be part of a shared sense of identity. We may share a lot less than this with many of our co-religionists.

To summarize, the sort of collaboration under discussion so far, while straightforward and easy to pursue, implicitly commits the parties involved to recognizing, among other things, that the others involved have various capacities and accomplishments to their credit and meet certain standards. It is not just that the elements mentioned *might* be present when there is this sort of collaboration. It is natural and to be expected that they would do so. These elements are normally part of the reality of the situation even if not spelled out or reflected upon. (It may be easier to collaborate if such matters remain implicit, so that the participants pursue joint actions while avoiding controversies they might have to confront if these matters were made explicit.)

Recognition of all of the sorts mentioned is a matter of degree. For example, the first element mentioned might range from acknowledging that the others involved are contributing something modest to a judgement that their contribution is about as worthwhile as ours. And recognition of others as those with whom we have jointly stood in opposition to an environmentally harmful development may be a minor aspect of how we think of

them or it might be prominent in and even definitive of how we think of them. So what is recognized is a matter of degree; and the extent to which the recognition is salient is also a matter of degree.

### Mutual understanding and mutual enrichment

I have identified some elements, including some forms of recognition, that normally are implicitly involved in interfaith collaboration of even the easiest and most straightforward sort. Next I suggest that collaboration of this sort beckons in various additional directions, inviting those involved to respond to religious others in additional ways, creating momentum in these directions, even if the participants decline the invitation.

Those who collaborate with others may find they are asking certain questions about those with whom they are collaborating and about their views that had not occurred to them before, or at least not in as compelling a way. Who are those others? What is their story? How did they become the way they are? There is the question of their own understanding of their story and there is the question of what relevant academic scholarship in fields such as history, archaeology, and anthropology has to say about them and about how they came to be the way they are. It would be fitting, especially in light of what has been said about various elements implicit in collaboration, to wish to understand the others involved, to be open to learning something about them, even to be open to learning something *from* them. In addition to a general curiosity about them, it would be natural to be curious about what has led them to the collaborative action in particular.

These are natural extensions to where collaboration, as discussed so far, takes you. Moreover, if someone judges that various religious others have the wisdom, concern, sensitivity, sense of urgency, and so forth, required to respond appropriately to an urgent environmental crisis, while members of their home tradition are generally lacking in these respects, a wish to understand those others may be all the more compelling. And when there is joint pursuit of shared environmental goals, a good understanding of each other just makes sense for practical reasons. As simple a matter as a sense of the places and times considered sacred by others, or of how they wish outsiders to behave around them, will facilitate collaboration.

So it is not surprising to find instances of interfaith environmental collaboration intertwined with an express commitment to understanding and learning from each other, as in this statement of its aims from Green Faith Australia:

1. To bring together people from the different faiths in responding to environmental issues.
2. *To learn from the wisdom of the faith traditions* in responding ethically to our ecological environment.
3. To act practically on ecological issues aimed at healing ourselves and our environment.
4. Through this action, to create *opportunities for interfaith friendship and learning*.
5. To foster ecological and *cultural flourishing* through diversity.<sup>7</sup> (my italics)

In the statement of the fifth aim here there is even an acknowledgement that it is important and worthwhile that the other groups involved should flourish.

In further probing directions in which collaboration beckons, an interesting possibility to consider is that when we collaborate with others we might adopt environmentally constructive elements from them. This is one type of case of learning from them. Let's consider some examples. In essays in which they probe central aspects of Pope Francis's environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'* and discuss the Pope's emphasis on learning from



indigenous religions, the Catholic scholar Celia Deane-Drummond (2020) and the Islamic philosopher Zainal Abidin Bagir (2020) propose that Christianity would benefit from taking account of indigenous perspectives. Bagir contends that this is also the case for Islam and indeed for all world religions (Bagir (2020), 40). Both of these scholars argue that these faiths should absorb from indigenous traditions these elements in particular: greater reverence for nature, recognition of the presence of non-human persons in nature, awareness of the presence of the sacred in nature, and awareness of the interconnectedness of humans with nature (*ibid.*, 40–42, 51–55; Deane-Drummond (2020), 189–190, 196–199). Deane-Drummond also says that an adequate Catholic approach to being human should combine a traditional Catholic emphasis on human dignity and human uniqueness with an appreciation of what anthropology and other fields are revealing about indigenous perspectives on what it is to be human (Deane-Drummond (2020), 190, 196–200). (How the indigenous ideas in question might be accommodated in these faiths, what sort of difference their addition would make, and indeed how each of these ideas is best understood, are of course important additional questions, and ones I cannot pursue here, though they are most interesting.)

Here is another area in which members of a tradition might turn to others for insight, and here too I draw on a response to *Laudato Si'*. The biblical scholar Margaret Daly-Denton (2020) advocates reading Christian scriptures in the light of current challenges and knowledge. Central to 'ecological hermeneutics', which has been an active sub-field in biblical studies for twenty years or so, is the idea that believers should reinterpret their scriptures in light of the environmental crisis in particular.<sup>8</sup> She writes about 'the meaning that lay thousands of years ahead . . . when [sacred texts] were first written, but that jumps off the page when we read them in the twenty first century, standing on our damaged earth' (Daly-Denton (2020), 140). Clearly the challenge of re-reading scriptures in light of current realities and crises is not unique to Christianity. All traditions with scriptures or sacred texts face this challenge. And this opens up the possibility of learning from each other in this area. For example, interpretative techniques found helpful by one tradition as it reads its scriptures in light of a current challenge may be found helpful by others. This is, in effect, to extend the idea of re-reading scriptures in light of current challenges to include re-reading scriptures in light of the re-readings others have developed in response to those challenges.

What we have seen are some examples of how a tradition might glean environmentally useful elements from one or more other traditions. These are elements that are possessed by those traditions that the home tradition lacks and by the addition of which it would be enriched. There is also the possibility of elements already present in the home tradition but not yet properly accessed or properly understood or properly incorporated and that might be better accessed (etc.) with the help of others.

In the examples given, the elements in question are ideas or interpretative techniques, but they might instead be, say, rituals or practices. For example, one community might have an annual rite of expressing gratitude for the return of migratory birds; traditions that lack this element might adopt it.<sup>9</sup> As indicated, I am thinking of these various examples of mutual enrichment and enhanced mutual understanding as possibilities towards which interfaith collaborative environmental work beckons. And the addition of such elements takes us beyond the relatively simple form of interfaith collaboration with which I began.

### Challenging business as usual

My discussion so far is mostly about people collaborating with others while remaining as they are religiously. They define themselves as belonging to their home tradition while

cooperating with others even if they implicitly acknowledge positive aspects of those others or of their traditions or come to understand them better, or are enriched by elements absorbed from them. To use a nice phrase from Rider, the main topic of discussion so far has been ‘mainstream religious adherents who become inspired to undertake an ecological conversion within their traditional frameworks’ (Rider (2011), 85). The focus has been business as usual while becoming more green. Next I consider additional directions in which interfaith environmental collaboration may beckon participants, and hence additional forms that this collaboration can take. Some possibilities I consider in this context are more of a challenge, perhaps even going beyond what some religious traditions can accommodate or can easily accommodate. So here we consider the possibility of some disruption of religious business as usual and a new religious perspective, or a somewhat new perspective – or at any rate a perspective that goes beyond anything discussed so far – endorsed. In this section I probe some aspects of this area of enquiry. In the next section (‘Possibilities’) I briefly sketch a few options and possibilities.

To begin, I would repeat the observation that the forms of recognition discussed in an earlier section (‘Mutual recognition’) admit of considerable variation and are a matter of degree. Actually the same point can be made about the elements introduced in the next section (‘Mutual understanding and mutual enrichment’).<sup>10</sup> In the case of all elements mentioned in both of these sections, there are points at which you push up against the limits of what can comfortably be accommodated in some religious traditions.

For example, curiosity about others can take the form of a modest degree of interest in, say, their history or views or practices or sacred texts. But it might instead involve trying hard to look at things from their point of view. That goes further and may be difficult to accommodate. Likewise, being open to learning from others is a matter of degree. At one end there is, say, a slight openness to the possibility that some others see some things we fail to see or a slight openness to learning something minor from them. At the other end is enthusiastic and vigorous exploration of other traditions in the hope of gleaning important insights and even a willingness to revise what was antecedently believed in light of what we learn.<sup>11</sup> Being open to modestly supplementing our current portfolio of ideas is one thing; being open to doing so on a large scale is another. Being open to replacing some of them with ideas we adopt from others goes further still. The key point is that in the case of such elements there is a range of options, some of which may be difficult to accommodate in business as usual. One way to think of this is that departures from business as usual have never been far from the topic of discussion in this article: it is a topic that has lingered just beneath the surface all along.

Another fertile area to consider is the range of topics or areas of enquiry over which an openness to learning from others might extend. Actually openness to learning from how others respond to one contemporary challenge, such as a particular environmental problem or the environmental crisis in general, in turn beckons in the direction of openness to learning from how others respond to other contemporary challenges. This might be a matter of openness to learning from how others respond to, say, the challenge provided to many religions by contemporary cosmology or modern evolutionary biology or, for that matter, openness to learning from how they respond to the tough intellectual and religious challenge provided by the very presence of competing religious traditions, each of which generally has its own perspective, practices, traditions, repositories of learning, modes of argumentation, and so on. In short, a willingness to learn from others may extend beyond environmental matters and include religious enquiry as such. A receptive approach in one area may invite the same approach in others. And this in turn may provoke something of a rethinking of business as usual.

Moreover, members of a tradition might make some paradigm-disrupting discoveries about others in the course of interfaith collaboration with them. For example, having



previously thought otherwise, they might decide that their collaborators are about as impressive in one or another respect as members of the home tradition. Thus, having previously thought otherwise, they might conclude that their collaborators have, throughout their history, done about as well as the home tradition in terms of taking steps to face up to tough intellectual challenges or to pursue the truth or, to turn in another direction, to promote justice. Or, whatever their history, they might conclude that their collaborators are about as impressive as the home tradition in such respects now. So members of the home tradition might change their thinking about the relevant other religions and their members. After all, the others in question are partners in a morally impressive collaborative endeavour. And the greater the extent to which those collaborators are viewed positively, the more too will their very presence be challenging in a newly compelling way. All this is to say that interfaith collaboration can provide a challenge to pre-collaborative religious perspectives, including perspectives on others and on their relation to us.

Having made a few observations about how interfaith activities might push up against the boundaries of business as usual, I want to identify a few future possibilities. It would be unwise to try to provide a road map for where interfaith environmental collaboration will lead: predictions would be hazardous if they go beyond saying that in this area we can expect the unexpected. An acquaintance with other worldviews that is acquired through collaborative action will come with its own dynamic and its consequences are difficult to anticipate. Still, as we consider the road ahead we can identify some features we might keep an eye out for. Or, to mix metaphors, there is an ocean to be navigated and we can identify some currents that may be encountered.

### Possibilities

One factor that is likely to have a bearing on directions taken is whether, in addition to collaborating on solving an environmental problem, the collaborating groups come to understand themselves to be engaging in a shared quest of another sort so that there is something else they seek together. The focus of this shared quest might itself be environmental, in part or in whole. Thus it might be focused on, say, a search for ways of thinking that will protect biodiversity, perhaps by providing everyone with a fresh way to comprehend the tragedy of humanly induced mass extinction. Or it might be focused on a search for a new or improved religious or spiritual outlook that will, in general, help us to live better on earth. Such a quest might reflect shared opposition to a certain perspective or idea. Thus it might be built around shared opposition to permitting the unrestrained abuse of nature provided it is profitable (Pope Francis (2015), 109; also 56, 187, 190).<sup>12</sup> A shared quest might even involve interfaith religious exploration for its own sake and openness to new forms of religiousness. Or environmental and religious exploration might be combined.

A shared quest that is focused in one or other of these ways might involve open-ended conversation between partners from different traditions that takes seriously what others have to say and that is open to going wherever it may lead. Who is to say what the outcome of such exploration might be and what forms of religious practice and observance would emerge if the major traditions were to combine collaborative environmental activity with a quest along any of the lines for, say, a few centuries, or longer? We have no idea what might be the consequences for the future of religion.

The process through which new proposals might emerge could itself take various forms. A proposal might be a by-product of collaboration: it might emerge spontaneously so that participants just find themselves thinking in new ways. Or it might be the product of a process whose aim is to arrive at such an outcome. New rituals that reflect input from

several religious traditions might emerge and help to define future directions. These might give expression to what is embodied in a collaborative interfaith initiative. They might develop as shared ways to celebrate ecological restoration, for example. Academic reflection might play a role: it might help to identify options that otherwise would not have been considered.

The result could range from business as usual with modifications to something far removed from where the participants started. In considering the former case we should not lose sight of the possibility that there might be convergence on something familiar. For example, dear reader, the perspective you find most congenial, or something close to it, might be what people would gravitate towards. In the latter case there might be free-wheeling reflection that is not closely tied to any currently existing religious tradition and that is comfortable taking useful ideas from wherever they are to be found. That sort of enquiry would appeal to someone who has an attachment or orientation towards a particular tradition but who is also open to whatever they find plausible or impressive or valuable in some other way, irrespective of its source, as well as to environmentally minded religious seekers of no fixed abode.

There might be convergence on, or movement in the direction of, a religious proposal that helps us to navigate our way through what is learned in the course of collaboration. The environmental scholar, activist, and Methodist lay preacher Bill McKibben proposes that through such collaboration diverse people of faith might 'begin to knit together a new story of who we are and how we should act' with 'new and powerful visions emerging' (McKibben (2001), 305). He mentions in this context the experience of churches in the U.S. that supported the civil rights movement: 'they searched more deeply through their traditions, and certain verses came to new and real life; certain themes emerged'. (*ibid.*, 302). He says that 'the deepest religious insights on the relation between God, nature, and humans may not emerge until religious people, acting on the terms indicated by their traditions, join [environmental] movements. The act of engagement will itself spur new thinking, new understanding' (*ibid.*). He even says that '[ecology] may rescue religion at least as much as the other way around' (*ibid.*, 305).

Interesting observations from other scholars about significant changes that, in their view, are already underway might provide an indication or a hint of what is to come. The Jewish philosopher and environmental scholar Roger Gottlieb contends that the religions are becoming more open to each other and to the relevant science as they grasp the nature and extent of environmental problems. He also thinks that an ecological consciousness is developing across the religions and that this suggests the possibility of a new shared religious outlook and fewer differences among the religions. The need for this partly arises from the fact that traditional religious ideas are, in his view, being found by those who endorse them to be inadequate for responding to the environmental crisis, with many concluding that their own religion is no better than others in this regard (Gottlieb (2011), 293). Each tradition is also inevitably dependent on the relevant science for an understanding of environmental problems (*ibid.*, 298). So his view is that the religions are already turning outward in two respects. Gottlieb also says that:

there is a sense among the vast majority of religious environmentalists that action on behalf of 'all of life' involves an expression of religious values and has as its object the care of something that itself possesses at least a modicum of holiness. When we work together on this holy task . . . there is a sense in which we are all part of the same religion. (*ibid.*, 300)

Bron Taylor contends that a different religious change is occurring. He says that 'dark green religion' according to which 'nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore

due reverent care' is 'influencing the world's religions and producing novel hybrids'; it is 'gathering strength and breaking out in new places and ways' (Taylor (2010), 21, 214, 217). Joanne Rider also reports on changes that, her findings suggest, are already underway:

The interfaith ecology movement . . . is beginning to influence the status quo of both religious and secular positions on diversity, faith, ecology, place, spirituality and community. . . . [New] ways of relating across differences and forging avenues for spiritual engagement and community belonging away from both sectarianism and universalization [are emerging]. (Rider (2011), 110, also 227)

### Final thoughts

However, despite many impressive exceptions what we find all over the world and in the case of all major religions is a failure to engage in interfaith environmental collaboration of the robust sort that the present crises call for. Pick an environmental problem that has caught your attention, be it local or global. (It will not be difficult.) And ask yourself what determined collaboration among religious communities might already have accomplished in terms of providing a solution to that problem if they had put their minds to it. Are such communities working together to find a solution? Are they even engaged individually?

The problem is systemic and it should be a source of embarrassment to religious communities and traditions. The late great biologist E. O. Wilson commented thus on the current scene: '[most] troubling of all, our leaders, including those of the great religions, have done little to protect the living world in the midst of its sharp decline' (Wilson (2006), 10). And Bron Taylor et al. write that 'there is little evidence in support of claims that the world's religions are coming, or might come, to the environmental rescue' (Taylor et al. (2016), 348)

Summarizing their assessment of recent relevant literature Taylor et al. write as follows:

Not only is there a dearth of evidence that religious greens are playing a leading role in promoting effective environmental protection movements, they do not appear to contribute significantly to the environmental movement in general. Indeed, read carefully, even the many articles celebrating the individuals and groups who are promoting religious environmentalism speak more of the *promise* of what is unfolding, rather than about its significance or effectiveness. (*ibid.*)

What these commentators are describing is a failure to engage; and that makes a failure to engage *collaboratively* inevitable. When collaboration has barely begun to occur, where it might lead if it were to get underway and amount to something is all the more a matter of speculation.

In fact, what these failures reveal is that the religions are not what their adherents often claim them to be. Contrary to what their adherents frequently assert, the religions are failing to grasp and to proclaim the ways in which we humans need to change the way we live and the ways in which, and the reasons why, we need to reduce our impact on the earth. For example, they have failed to explain to their members the reality of mass extinction and its causes, which even now remains invisible to large numbers of religious people. Perhaps this is because of the absence of a leadership that itself comprehends the problem. In any case, since the religions have failed to provide leadership that is badly needed and that they could have provided, they are lacking and need improvement.

Failure of this sort on the part of governments or businesses is one thing. When it is exhibited by institutions that generally aspire to providing guidance and leadership and to telling people what they need to know in order to live well, and in some cases are understood by their adherents to provide all the guidance that humans need to live well, it is quite another. If we wanted to give it a name, we might call this the problem of religious inadequacy. Exactly what will be the implications of this failure for the future of the religions remains to be seen. Because of this failure, this article is mostly about what is possible but has yet to be achieved.

But let's briefly direct our gaze in more positive directions. If, even at this late hour, one religion were to rise to the occasion and distinguish itself by its response to the environmental crisis, leading the way in this regard, its appeal would be enhanced, even to its members. Moreover, to some extent all religions are in a global marketplace of ideas and a global marketplace of leadership and a religion that distinguished itself in this regard would enhance its appeal to others too. The question is whether any religion will rise to the occasion. To do so would be to solve the problem of inadequacy I just mentioned, at least in the case of that religion and with respect to responding to the environmental crisis.

Also, the current failures provide an opportunity for the development of a robust, effective, and visible interfaith environmental movement. This movement might incorporate all the options canvassed in this article, and more. People in different parts of a broad movement of this sort might see others in that movement as their fellow travellers. So, to return to an earlier theme, there is the possibility of a new and distinctive religious identity with participation in a movement of this sort as the basis for a sense of belonging and for being recognized as belonging. And, as mentioned, an interfaith identity hammered out on the anvil of shared struggle could help to counteract the divisiveness that religion sometimes promotes. Every religion has an opportunity to help to create and to define this movement.

Actually, we need an energetic and robust global movement that will be impatient with *all* organizations and institutions, and not just religious organizations and institutions, when they fail to respond appropriately or fail to provide the leadership that they are capable of providing in the face of the global crisis under discussion here. And the religions could, even now, collaborate on defining, developing, and leading *this* movement, which would extend in its scope far beyond the religions. Which among the religions will rise to the task of leading the way in this venture?

An unprecedented storm is approaching and it is surprisingly difficult to keep people's attention on it and on what needs to be done to prepare for it. The door is open for the religions to join together and to play *this* role.

Changes in religious perspective will occur and the character and situation of religious institutions and organizations will change. It happens all the time and undoubtedly will continue to happen. Business as usual becomes the way business used to be done. Mutual enrichment that arises from tackling collaboratively a profound current crisis could contribute to the process of ongoing change and could even play a defining role. So, reflection about future directions that religions might take in response to environmental crises is a contribution to reflection about an even larger topic, namely, the future of religion.

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## Notes

1. <https://prairierivers.org/dyneyg-vermilion-middle-fork/>.
2. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/forests/inside-malaysias-shadow-state/>.
3. <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/press-release/cut-global-emissions-76-percent-every-year-next-decade-meet-15degc>.
4. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/11/covid-record-drop-global-carbon-emissions-2020.html>.
5. <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/covid-19-caused-only-temporary-reduction-carbon-emissions-un-report>.
6. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report/>.
7. <https://www.arrcc.org.au/greenfaith-australia>.
8. For a good introduction to ecological hermeneutics Dr Daly-Denton recommends the Preface to Habel and Trudinger (2008).
9. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/23/cathedral-bells-ring-out-as-new-zealand-welcomes-god-wits-after-longest-migration>.
10. These sections still deal with different topics. The discussion of forms of mutual recognition is about *what is implicitly involved* in interfaith collaboration of the straightforward sort I probe initially whereas the discussion of mutual understanding and mutual enrichment is about *where this sort of collaboration might lead* those who take part in it.
11. In McKim (2012), ch. 3, I say a bit more about these matters.
12. These references to *Laudato Si'*: *On Care for Our Common Home* are to section numbers in this document.

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