

# **103. THE SOUTH AFRICAN-GERMAN RESEARCH HUB ON RELIGION AND SUSTAINABILITY (SAGRAS): AN INTER-CONTEXTUAL INITIATIVE FOR TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION FOR ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Fundamental socio-ecological transformations are needed to develop pathways into a sustainable future. This process requires not only appropriate policies, but necessitates radical paradigm shifts and changed mindsets.<sup>7</sup> Religious communities are crucial stakeholders for achieving these paradigm shifts because of their ability to act as agents of social change and to function as sources of knowledge. They bear a significant transformative potential, i.e. the “capacity to legitimise, in religious or ideological terms, the development of new motivations, activities, and institutions”<sup>8</sup> and strongly shape social and cultural values and worldviews. While ecological teachings and ecological engagement have substantially increased in religious communities during recent decades in what has been called a “greening of religions”,<sup>9</sup> the impact of these teachings on religious communities’ collective actions and their adherents’ individual behaviours

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<sup>7</sup> Martin L. Parry (ed), *Climate Change 2007 – Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “The Protestant Ethic Thesis in an Analytical and Comparative Framework”, in Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (ed), *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization: A Comparative View* (New York, London: Basic, 1968).

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Chaplin, “The Global Greening of Religion”, *Palgrave Communications* 2(16047) (2016). [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.47>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

in the realms of ecology and sustainability remains largely unknown. The question of how religious communities contribute to socio-ecological transition and sustainability is the core theme being investigated by the newly established international and transdisciplinary research consortium, the *South African-German Research Hub on Religion and Sustainability* (SAGRaS).

SAGRaS approaches this question in five case studies in Buddhist, Muslim, mainline Protestant, new Christian and African traditional religious communities. As a collaborative initiative, SAGRaS scrutinises ecological theologies to determine what types of ecological values are represented in each of the respective religious communities and what their impact is. Core points of analysis address the following questions: What forms of environmental commitment exist in these religious communities and what does their specific commitment depend on? What theological considerations lead to ecological action? Under what circumstances does ecological theological preaching or interpretation of scripture translate into action by the communities' adherents?

SAGRaS was founded by scholars from University of Pretoria, University of the Western Cape and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and is funded by the National Research Foundation in South Africa and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The inter-contextual research hub operates from 2022-2025 in South Africa and Germany. It relies on the perspectives of various different stakeholder groups, including religious leaders, academic researchers, development practitioners and policymakers, who are actively involved in the consortium. The research will be conducted by transdisciplinary collaborative research teams from both countries made up of academic experts on the respective religious communities and of development policy and practice partners who are implementing measures to reach the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Furthermore, the research will also be conducted in close collaboration with representatives of the religious communities to ensure a research design that produces relevant results for all stakeholders involved.

### **Background: Religion, Culture and Socio-Ecological Transformation**

SAGRaS explores the potential of religion and religious communities to promote socio-ecological transformation and the global transition towards sustainable societies. This undertaking is based on the assumption that the kinds of innovation required by socio-ecological transformations towards achieving sustainability need to be seen in the first instance as a process of change at the cultural level – the level of values, mindsets and attitudes. Religion is operative at precisely this level and the desirable notions of the quality of life, of wellbeing, of cultural and social values (and of sustainability) are fundamentally influenced by religion, as captured by concepts such as *buen vivir*, *ubuntu* and human flourishing. The consortium therefore seeks to engage with the cultural and value-based foundations of sustainability and the underlying prerequisites for the socio-ecological transformation of societies.

Religious communities, as important societal actors, are among the largest social service providers in many parts of the world today. Eighty-four per cent of the world's population is affiliated with a religious community.<sup>10</sup> Religious communities reach believers across social strata and age groups, while also influencing politics and the media. Most importantly, religion shapes social imaginaries and people's values.<sup>11</sup> The UN Environmental Programme's report on "The Role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics

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<sup>10</sup> Conrad Hackett and David McClelland, "Christians Remain World's Largest Religious Group, But They Are Declining in Europe," 5<sup>th</sup> April 2017, *Pew Research Center News Release*, [Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>11</sup> Roger S. Gottlieb, "Introduction: Religion and Ecology – What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?", in Roger S. Gottlieb (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

in Galvanizing Nature Based Solutions”<sup>12</sup> further elaborates on the essential role of religious values in shaping the behaviour of people towards achieving sustainability. Religious communities are important sources of relief and psychosocial support in times of global crises and contribute substantially to the resilience of individuals and communities – this might also be true for ecological crises and the necessary adaptations to the changing climatic conditions. By fundamentally shaping people’s worldviews, religion can be an important source for the promotion of sustainable development and behavioural change. But it can also hinder these processes and constitute a source of exclusion, marginalisation or opposition to transformations in the striving for sustainability. It becomes vital, therefore, to deepen our understanding of how religious communities use their value-shaping role in the light of the great global challenges of our time and in what directions their influence will shape societies facing the challenges of climate change and global environmental degradation.

Recognising the necessity to engage with religious actors in the promotion and implementation of the SDGs, governments and international development initiatives around the globe have started collaborations with religious communities. Leading examples of such engagement with religion are the World Faiths Development Dialogue initiated by the World Bank in 1998<sup>13</sup> the Religions and Development initiative at the University of Birmingham funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID),<sup>14</sup> and the initiative on religion and development started by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development in 2014.<sup>15</sup> Recently, the United States Agency for International Development also embarked on a process of strategic religious engagement, while the United Nations established an Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development.<sup>16</sup> Specifically focused on ecological sustainability, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has established the Faith for Earth Initiative that engages with faith-based organisations for achieving the SDGs.

In a “turn to religion”<sup>17</sup> in academia, there has been a steeply increasing interest in religion in the sustainable development debate, leading to the emergence of a new research field.<sup>18</sup> Where more than 20

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<sup>12</sup> UNEP, “The Role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Galvanizing Nature Based Solutions” (Nairobi: UNEP, 2020). [Available at: <https://faithformature.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-role-of-Environmental-and-Spiritual-Ethics-in-Galvanizing-Nature-Based-Solutions-Final-Version-002.pdf>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>13</sup> Deryke Belshaw, Robert Calderisi and Chris Sugden (eds), *Faith in Development: Partnership Between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2001); Paul M. Bisca and Rebekka Grun, “Higher Power to Deliver: The Overlooked Nexus Between Religion and Development,” *Brookings, Future Development Blog* [Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/02/25/higher-power-to-deliver-the-overlooked-nexus-between-religion-and-development/>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>14</sup> Séverine Deneulin and Carole Rakodi, “Revisiting Religion: Development Studies Thirty Years on,” *World Development* 39(1) (2011), [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2010.05.007>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Gerrie Ter Haar, “Religion and Development. Introducing a New Debate,” in Gerrie Ter Haar (ed), *Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Emma Tomalin (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and Global Development* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> BMZ, *Religionen als Partner in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit* (Berlin: Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> United Nations, *2018 Annual Report of the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development: Engaging with Religion and Faith-Based Actors on Agenda 2030/the SDGs* (New York: United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development, 2019), [Available at: <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/27504/UNIATF2018.pdf>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>17</sup> Emma Tomalin, “Global Aid and Faith Actors: The Case for an Actor-Orientated Approach to the ‘Turn to Religion’”, *International Affairs* 96(2) (2020): 323-342. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa006>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>18</sup> Ignatius Swart and Elsabé Nell, “Religion and Development. The Rise of a Bibliography”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4) (2016). [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3862>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Barbara Bompani, “Religion and Development: Tracing the Trajectories of an Evolving Sub-

years ago, the sociologist Kurt Ver Beek famously stated that “spirituality [was] a development taboo”,<sup>19</sup> numerous research projects have now approached this field from different thematic, methodological and disciplinary angles. A multitude of books, articles and reports have begun to explore the manifold relationships and interactions of religious beliefs, religious practices and religious communities with the economic, social, ecological, political and cultural dimensions of sustainable development.<sup>20</sup> This field is highly inter- and trans-disciplinary,<sup>21</sup> ranging from religious studies and theology<sup>22</sup> to anthropology,<sup>23</sup> sociology,<sup>24</sup> political science,<sup>25</sup> development studies<sup>26</sup> and economics.<sup>27</sup> In the wake of this emergent field, several studies have also focused on ecological sustainability, highlighting the role of religion in this respect.<sup>28</sup> In a survey on Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona conducted by the Research Programme

Discipline”, *Progress in Development Studies* 19(3) (2019). [Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993419829598>, [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>19</sup> Kurt A. Ver Beek, “Spirituality: A Development Taboo,” *Development in Practice* 10(1) (2000): 31-43. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520052484>, [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>20</sup> For overviews, see Ben Jones and Marie J. Petersen, “Instrumental, Narrow, Normative? Reviewing Recent Work on Religion and Development”, *Third World Quarterly* 32(7) (2011): 1291-1306. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.596747>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Swart and Nell, “Religion and Development. The Rise of a Bibliography”; Bompani, “Religion and Development: Tracing the Trajectories of an Evolving Sub-Discipline”; Jens Köhrs and Andreas Heuser, eds., *Faith-Based Organizations in Development Discourses and Practice* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020); Tomalin, *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and Global Development*; Tomalin, “Global aid and faith actors”.

<sup>21</sup> See Swart and Nell, “Religion and Development. The Rise of a Bibliography.”

<sup>22</sup> Andreas Heuser, “Refuse to Die in Poverty!: Armutssüberwindung und Varianten des Wohlstandsevangeliums in Afrika” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 69, 1/2 (2013); Andreas Heuser, “Religio-Scapes of Prosperity Gospel: An Introduction”, in Andreas Heuser (ed), *Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-Scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015); Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Erica Bornstein, *The Spirit of Development: Protestant NGOs, Morality, and Economics in Zimbabwe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Dena Freeman (ed), *Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Dena Freeman, *Tearfund and the Quest for Faith-Based Development*, Routledge Research in Religion and Development (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Peter L. Berger, “Max Weber Is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic Today”, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 8(4) (2010): 3-9. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2010.528964>, [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>25</sup> Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings (eds), *Development, Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Barbara Bompani, “Religion and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview”, in Emma Tomalin (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and Global Development* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano (eds), *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script* (London: Zed, 2009); Bompani, “Religion and Development: Tracing the Trajectories of an Evolving Sub-Discipline.”

<sup>27</sup> Daniel L. Chen and Daniel M. Hungerman, “Economics, Religion, and Culture: A Brief Introduction”, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 104 (2014): 1-3. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2014.04.008>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Sedefka V. Beck and Sara J. Gundersen, “A Gospel of Prosperity? An Analysis of the Relationship Between Religion and Earned Income in Ghana, the Most Religious Country in the World”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55(1) (2016): 105-129. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12247>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Gharad Bryan, James Choi, and Dean Karlan, “Randomizing Religion: The Impact of Protestant Evangelism on Economic Outcomes”, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 136(1) (2021): 293-380. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa023>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>28</sup> See Gottlieb, “Introduction: Religion and Ecology – What Is the Connection and Why Does It Matter?”, Mary E. Tucker, “Religion and Ecology,” in Peter B. Clarke (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Teddy C. Sakupapa, “Spirit and Ecology in the Context of African African Theology,” *Scriptura* 111(1) (2013): 422-430. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7833/111-1-12>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Elisabeth Gräßl-Schmidt, “Umweltethik”, in Wolfgang Huber, Torsten Meireis and Hans-Richard Reuter (eds), *Handbuch Der Evangelischen Ethik* 1st ed. (München: C.H. Beck, 2015); Jens Koehrsen, “Eco-

on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 75 per cent of responding religious leaders worldwide considered the obligation to strengthen “environmental protection” as highly important in the post-COVID-19 future – environmental concerns thereby constituting the highest priority overall. Still, the specific role of religious communities for ecological sustainability in the contexts of Germany and South Africa remains unclear. SAGRAS seeks to address this lacuna through a comparative, empirical approach.

### SAGRAS's Comparative Approach in a Nutshell

SAGRAS explores specifically the roles of religious leaders, youths and women in the striving for ecological sustainability to arrive at nuanced results from triangulated perspectives. Religious leaders are the key decision-makers. Youths represent the group most active in advocating for climate justice in social movements such as Fridays for Future. Women represent the group most affected by climate change and environmental degradation.<sup>29</sup>

The aim of the multi-religious approach reflected in the five case studies is to provide comprehensive findings on the role of religion for sustainability in a way that transcends the boundaries of existing approaches focusing on single religious communities. The case studies were chosen because they represent communities with well-developed eco-theological teachings, which differ vastly in terms of the collective and individual ecological actions produced by them.

#### *1. Engaged Buddhism*

This case study focuses on the international Buddhist organisation Fo Guang Shan, which has branches around the world, including in South Africa and Germany. From a comparative research perspective, Fo Guang Shan thus represents a notable example that can be studied to develop a deeper understanding of the overarching global dynamics within the context of intentional religious networks working on ecological sustainability. In the SAGRAS research, more specifically, the focus falls on the German and South African branches of this movement of engaged Buddhism<sup>30</sup> to explore the range of engagements and ecological initiatives developed within this movement in response to specific environmental challenges.

#### *2. Islamic Eco-Jihad and Islamic Eco-Theology: Activism and Theology*

Focusing on different Muslim ecological initiatives like “nourEnergy” or “green iftar” and on particular eco-theological concepts, this case study examines the entanglement of religious practices and normative ethics concerning environmental protection from an Islamic perspective.<sup>31</sup> The scope of this case study is,

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Spirituality in Environmental Action: Studying Dark Green Religion in the German Energy Transition”, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 12(1) (2018): 34–54. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrc.33915>], [Last accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Emmanuel Anim, “Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice: Reflections from an African Pentecostal”, in Louk Andrianos et al. (eds), *Kairos for Creation: Confessing Hope for the Earth: The “Wuppertal Call” – Contributions and Recommendations from an International Conference on Eco-Theology and Ethics of Sustainability* (Solingen: Fodens Verlag, 2019); Dietrich Werner, “The Challenge of Environment and Climate Justice: Imperatives of an Eco-Theological Reformation of Christianity in African Contexts”, in Philipp Öhlmann, Wilhelm Gräß and Marie-Luise Frost (eds), *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development: Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Monika Barthwal-Datta and Soumita Basu, “Land, Water and Food,” in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, Second edition (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. David E. Cooper and Simon P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue and Environment*, Ashgate World Philosophies Series (Florence: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Moegamad R. Gallant, “Sustainable Development: a Challenge to Muslim Countries” (Doctoral dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009), [Available at: <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/handle/10413/399>], [Last accessed: 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

therefore, to investigate Muslim contributions to environmental transitions in terms of (1) the kind of normative knowledge developed by an eco-theology,<sup>32</sup> (2) the intentions, motivations and objectives in Muslims' environmental actions,<sup>33</sup> (3) the performance of Muslim environmental practices,<sup>34</sup> and (4) relations to other Islamic, other religious and non-religious ecological activism.

### 3. Mainline Protestant Christianity

Since Lynn White's widely discussed article on the role of religion in environmental destruction,<sup>35</sup> mainline Protestant Christianity has come a long way in its development of sophisticated ecotheologies.<sup>36</sup> Ecotheologies in this movement are mostly based on new interpretations of the biblical creation stories (Gen. 1:2), which also have a substantial influence on the perceived role, responsibilities and contributions of women with regard to ecology and "nature".<sup>37</sup> Successful ecological networks have been established in these churches (e.g. The Green Anglicans who are active in South Africa or the German movement Umkehr zum Leben). This case study explores how well-established churches with long-standing traditions emphasise ecological theologies that influence whether congregations and individuals do or do not join collective ecological actions.

### 4. New Christian Movements

In South Africa, new Christian movements include churches founded independently of mainline Christian churches. Empirical research shows that an ecological movement is evolving in these churches.<sup>38</sup> The case study consists of an in-depth study of the largest church in South Africa, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). Its members primarily belong to the group most vulnerable to climate change and ecological destruction.<sup>39</sup> On the German side, the case study focuses on independent Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in Germany. Only a few explicit ecotheologies can be detected in this movement in Germany,<sup>40</sup> as Pentecostal

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Sara Binay and Mouhanad Khorchide (eds), *Islamische Umwelttheologie: Ethik, Norm und Praxis*, Die islamische Theologie im Aufbruch Band 1 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Ursula Kowanda-Yassin, *Öko-Dschihad: Der grüne Islam – Beginn einer globalen Umweltbewegung* (Salzburg, Wien: Residenz Verlag, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Rosemary Hancock, *Islamic Environmentalism: Activism in the United States and Great Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155(3767) (1967): 1203-1207. [Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>], [Last accessed: 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

<sup>36</sup> Pope Francis, "Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home," Encyclical letter (Vatican City, 2015), [Available at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)], [Last accessed: 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Torsten Meireis, "Avatar: Nachhaltigkeitsethik, Kultur und Theologie," in Brigitte Bertelmann and Klaus Heidel (eds), *Leben im Anthropozän: Christliche Perspektiven für eine Kultur der Nachhaltigkeit* (München: oekom verlag, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Tanya van Wyk, "Reproductive Health, Deconstructed: A Nonbinary Understanding of the Womb," in Jakobus M. Vorster et al. (eds), *Reconceiving Reproductive Health: Theological and Christian Ethical Reflections* (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2019): 1.

<sup>38</sup> Juliane Stork and Philipp Öhlmann, "Ökologische Nachhaltigkeit in African Initiated Churches," Copyrighted Material Kurzstellungnahmen des Forschungsbereichs Religiöse Gemeinschaften und nachhaltige Entwicklung 6/2019 (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2019), [Available at: <https://www.rcsd.hu-berlin.de/de/publikationen/pdf-dateien/kurzstellungnahme-04-2019-oekologie-in-aics.pdf>], [Last accessed: 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022]; Anim, "Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice"; Benjamin A. Ntreh, Mark S. Aidoo and Daniel N. A. Aryeh (eds), *Essays on the Land, Ecotheology and Traditions in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (London: Routledge, 1992); Stork and Öhlmann, "Ökologische Nachhaltigkeit in African Initiated Churches".

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Kröck, "Klimawandel: Eine Frage Der (Un-)Gerechtigkeit," in Tobias Faix, Thomas Kröck and Dietmar Roller (eds), *Ein Schrei Nach Gerechtigkeit* (Marburg: Francke-Buchhandlung, 2016); Johannes Reimer, *Missio Politica: The Mission of Church and Politics* (Carlisle: Langham Creative Projects, 2017); Bernhard Olpen, "Jetzt wächst Neues: Schöpfungsverantwortung aus Sicht eines Vertreters der Pfingstbewegung", in Elisabeth Dieckmann,

sanctification theologies tend to reinforce traditional distinctions between inward renewal and engagement in worldly affairs, thus impeding ecological theologies and actions from gaining influence. The case study explores how ecological theologies develop within the framework of an other-worldly theological orientation and how inner and outer ecological impulses shape new ecological actions.

### *5. African Traditional Religions in South Africa*

Religious environmental actions in African Traditional Religions (ATRs) have received little attention in the literature because of their heterogeneity across the continent.<sup>41</sup> ATRs have been described in recent literature as featuring an epistemological conception of the connectedness between humans and nature.<sup>42</sup> This literature calls for an “African” approach to environmental protection in opposition to the exploitative ways of the Global North. This case study aims to produce new insights into the environmental actions of this influential religious movement in South Africa.

## **An Innovative Approach to Researching Religion and Ecological Sustainability**

Based on the five case studies, SAGRaS generates knowledge about the impact of religious concepts and notions of sustainability on the transformation of societies in the Global South and North. Drawing on the collaboration in this transdisciplinary consortium including investigators from various academic disciplines, civil society actors, policymakers and closely involving the religious communities themselves in the research process, SAGRaS intends to generate new insights into how religious communities can contribute to the transformation necessary for achieving sustainability and how other societal actors can draw on the resources inherent in such communities to foster this transformation.

SAGRaS has been conceptualised as a highly transdisciplinary initiative. Non-academic actors were involved in the planning stages and have therefore been involved in the research process from the start. While the main research activities will be carried out by university scholars, all the practitioners, policymakers and representatives of religious communities will jointly, and on an equal footing, contribute to the overall knowledge production. This includes participation in research workshops, joint work on publications, co-hosting of events and feeding knowledge into academic, practice, policy-making and religious discourse. SAGRaS thereby seeks to create common ground between the worlds of academia and practice, which provides the basis for implementation of the research results. This innovative form of cooperation will ensure direct use of the research results for all partners involved – ranging from policy implications for practitioners and policymakers to approaches to ecological actions for religious leaders and in-depth insights for researchers.

Several activities are planned to facilitate the implementation of the research results. A key activity will be the planned annual hybrid meetings where the case study designs, methodologies and results will be discussed by all the partners. A second activity envisaged will be the Religious Leaders’ Forum on Ecological Sustainability to which religious leaders (research project partners and beyond) will be invited annually to meet in a hybrid format to exchange insights on different approaches to ecological theologies and on best practices to meet the challenges of ecological action and building sustainable communities. A third activity will involve the development of online postgraduate and practitioner courses, which will draw

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Verena Hammes and Jochen Wagner (eds), *Verantwortung für die Schöpfung: 10 Jahre ökumenischer Tag der Schöpfung* (München: Herder Verlag, 2020).

<sup>41</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> James N. Amanze, “From ‘Dominion’ to ‘In Communion’: Ecotheology from an African Perspective,” *Anglican EcoCare Journal of Ecotheology* 2 (2016); Emmanuel Anim, “Environmental Sustainability and Eco-Justice” in Louk Andrianos, Michael Biehl, Ruth Gütter et al. (eds), *Kairos for Creation* (Solingen: foedus-Verlag, 2019); Jacob K. Olúpónà, “Religion and Ecology in African Culture and Society,” in Gottlieb, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

from the knowledge gained from the research with a view to creating a platform for advanced knowledge exchange and learning on religion and ecological sustainability. A fourth activity will involve the presentation of annual half-day policy and practice webinars, which will be co-hosted by policy and practice partners and serve as a platform for critically engaging with global policy events for ecological sustainability, such as COP 28. A fifth activity will take on the form of policy briefs, produced with the aim of informing development practitioners and policy makers on the results of the research. Finally, academic conferences, edited volumes, journal special issues and academic articles will form an indispensable part of the dissemination of the new academic knowledge. All results and knowledge products will be shared in an open-access format on the SAGRaS Digital Knowledge Platform.

### Conclusion

SAGRaS explores and elucidates the nexus between religion and ecological development, between religious teachings and ecological actions. It does so by comparing different religious communities in two different countries across the South-North spectrum, that offer very different climatic and societal circumstances for climate change mitigation and adaptation. By providing the opportunity for inter-contextual and transdisciplinary exchange on the highly important issue of climate change, the research hub generates vital knowledge about the crucial religious stakeholders in the fight against climate change. Moreover, it provides an innovative space of knowledge production between various partners from different religious, geographic and professional backgrounds. It is therefore evident that SAGRaS explores new formats and research products to implement inter-contextual knowledge production processes between partners on an equal footing.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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