

THE POTENTIAL OF RELIGION IN THE PROMOTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: This article presents religion's potential where the promotion and implementation of the concept of sustainable development are concerned. First inspired by Lynn White in the 1960s, discussion on religion's role in the ecological crisis now allows for an honest assessment of the ecological potential of various religious traditions and their contribution to the building of a sustainable world. This article on the one hand points to the religious inspirations behind the concept of sustainable development, and on the other highlights the joint action of representatives of religion and science in the name of sustainable development, as well as the involvement of religions in the concept's implementation.

KEY WORDS: sustainable development, religion and ecology, ecological crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of a still-operating stereotype that religions are blameworthy when it comes to environmental issues, it should be stated at the outset that they have in fact played a major part in both the recognition of the environmental crisis and actions to combat it. Intensified interest in environmental matters on the part of intellectuals

identifying with different religious traditions was to be noted as early as in the 1950s, as a number of studies report (Sheldon 1992; Fowler 1995; Bakken, Engel and Engel 1995). Religions thus played their part from the outset when it came to the identification of today's environmental threats; and for several decades now have been actively involved in combating the environmental crisis, *i.a.* through support for the sustainable development concept.

A breakthrough in the discussion of the role of religion vis-à-vis the question of the environment came as Lynn T. White published an article on *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* in 1967. In White's opinion, the blame for today's environmental crisis could be laid squarely with the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. By propagating the biblical story regarding the creation of the world, the religion had shaped among its adherents a conviction as to the dominant role of humankind over creation, as well as an unlimited right to deal with nature as we wish, transforming it in any way necessary to meet human needs. White's article proved a catalyst for a lively discussion of the role of Christianity in perpetrating the environmental crisis (Sponsel 2016). And that discussion has continued through to the present day. Meanwhile, the thesis regarding the environmental guilt of Christianity passed into the subject literature as the *Lynn White thesis* (Whitney 2013).

The discussion White initiated led to far-reaching, inter-disciplinary research into the role Christianity played in matters of the environment. It has in fact emerged that learned opinion on the matter is divided. At the present stage of the dispute it would seem that arguments deployed by opponents of White's view are tending to prevail. For today's research not merely comes out against his interpretation of biblical texts, but even in fact points to their environmental potential (Sadowski 2015, 83–95 and 268–287).

Over time, the debate provoked by White ceased to concern the Judaeo-Christian alone, instead starting to ask questions about how other religious traditions shape the relationship between their adherents and the environment. A good example of the scope of the discussion being extended is offered by the research of M. E. Tucker and J. A. Grim, who organised a 1996–1998 series of conferences at Harvard devoted to the relationship between the major world religions and the natural environment. The conferences bore fruit in a series of publications on *Religions of the World and Ecology*. The scientific investigations launched in this way proved promising enough to ensure the emergence of a group of academics opting to prolong the initiative under the *Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE)* name (Taylor 2016, 293).

Over time, the dispute regarding the role of Christianity in the environmental issue became a broader one addressing the role of religion in general. The division line at present runs between the *FORE*-related group of proponents of the so-called *greening of religion hypothesis*, as well as those behind the *dark green religion* concept. The first group has taken up the stance that traditional religions represent a partner of critical importance when it comes to the building of a sustainable world (Taylor 2016, 296). In contrast, the second group, as followers of a developing biocentric *dark green religion*

movement based on scientific cosmology and a conviction as to the relatedness of all living things, show far greater reverence for nature than do the representative of any traditional religion (Taylor 2010; 2011, 259).

Alongside detailed research on which religion influences sustainable development and to what extent, this study has had as its aim the indication of the potential for religions to promote and implement the idea of sustainable development. For it would seem that, by revealing the religious inspiration behind the idea, and by involving religious leaders in cooperation with academics, politicians and environmental activists, religion may offer considerable support for the implementation of the sustainable-development concept, not only at the global, regional and national levels, but also above all at the local and individual levels. Given the limited size of this work, the author here concentrates on demonstrating the influence of religion on the environmental aspect to the sustainable development concept, leaving for a later work a presentation of religion's influence on the economic, social and institutional/political aspects of that same overarching idea.

RELIGIOUS INSPIRATION FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT

The idea of sustainable development refers to concepts of moderation and abstention that have been present in European thought for millennia. Numerous examples serving to confirm this thesis are supplied by both Greek philosophy and Roman literature. Thanks to their presence it proved possible for Western culture to devise principles relating to the “golden mean” (*aurea mediocritas*) otherwise “the happy medium”; as well as praise for the moderation and harmony that (sometimes at least) served as a basis for classical culture (Sadowski 2011, 71–72; Sadowski 2016a). Today, an important role in shaping a “culture of moderation” is played by religion. Furthermore, this is true of both the monotheistic tradition prevailing in Europe and the polytheistic religions of Asia.

A good illustration of the contribution of these last to promoting a “culture of moderation” is provided by Buddhist religious writings, which encourage adherents to take a middle course (*madhyamā-pratipad* in Sanskrit) and to eschew extremes, be they of excess or insufficiency. As The Buddha teaches, only moderation can ensure the achievement of full humanity (Gross 1997, 298–299; Lang 2004).

In contrast, what is strong in Hindu tradition is the idea of the common good (*savva-bhūta-hitā* in Sanskrit), which obliges followers of this religion to take care of nature, amongst many other things. Such foundations support the principle of *sarva-kalyāṅkarī-karma*, which encourages adherents to engage in activities serving the common good, and in general to take care of others (Dwivedi 2000, 12–13). Moreover, the Hindu tradition also acts in support of inter-generational justice, as such a key element underpinning the sustainable development concept. Contributing to all this is

the concept of karma, in line with which each deed done intentionally has long-lived, if not always immediately noticeable, consequences (*karma-phala*). This is also true of deeds that influence nature either directly or indirectly. Karma once commenced with cannot be restrained, even by the death of the person who initiated the process, for it reaches that person in their next incarnation. It would seem we can therefore speak here of a uniquely understood kind of religious/cultural safeguarding against short-sighted and irresponsible ways of proceeding by human beings vis-à-vis nature (Sadowski 2011, 68–69).

However, the greatest contribution to the building of a civilisation of moderation and the devising of a basis for today's concept of sustainable development came from the monotheistic religions. The Judaic tradition is unambiguous in its praise of moderation and abstention, encouraging its followers out of all kinds of exaggeration and excess. This is confirmed in many parts of the Old Testament (*Proverbs* 30: 1–9; *Book of Wisdom* 8: 7; *Sirach* 37: 31). The Bible also leaves no doubt in the matter that the world was created by God is good, and He is its only owner (*Psalms* 24: 1; *I Chronicles* 29: 11–12). Humankind is only a kind of leaseholder, who may use the world to meet its own needs under conditions set out for that by the Creator (*Leviticus* 25: 23). The Book of Genesis shows clearly humankind's obligation towards Creation as symbolised by the Garden of Eden. The task of Adam and Eve was to work the Garden and to take care of it (*Genesis* 2: 15). Linguistic analysis of the text shows clearly that it was humankind at the service of Eden, rather than *vice versa*. It is thus the task of the human being to serve, guard and protect nature (Pardee 2013, 127; Sadowski 2015, 91–95).

A good illustration of abstemious use of environmental resources and decisionmaking with account taken of the interests of future generations was the Rabbis' introduction of a ban on increasing herd size shortly after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (in 132–135 AD), given the contribution to serious degradation of Israel's pastureland (Tirosh-Samuelson 2006, 45). Another example illustrating humanity's responsibility for nature in the rabbinical tradition comes with the commentary on the Book of Genesis contained in Midrash's *Kohelet Rabbah*, which states: "When God created the first man, he showed him all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said: «See my works, how fine and excellent they are? Now all that I have created, for you have I created them. Think upon this and do not corrupt and desolate My world. For if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it right after you»" (Sadowski 2016a, 305).

Christianity, in making reference to the Old Testament tradition, also stresses the value of abstinence and moderation. This is confirmed in the New Testament, in which we often also find such terms as modesty, simplicity, moderation, restraint, temperance and abstinence (*Acts* 24: 25; *Titus* 2: 11–12). Furthermore, the Christian tradition announces that a person's development may not be confined merely to the horizontal dimension (worldly good), since it must also take in the vertical dimension (spiritual and cultural good). In this way, Christianity appears in opposition to excessive consumption (*Matt.* 16: 26; *Matt.* 19: 23–24; *1 John* 3: 17), and hence matches up with the sustainable development concept.

The Fathers of the Church and later Christian writers many times emphasised the significance of care for creation and the need for circumspect use of its resources. Confirmation of this thesis is to be found in numerous writings by Gregory the Great, Minucius Felix, Tertullian, Lactantius, Arnobius the Elder, Irenaeus of Lyon, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo and many others (Sadowski 2015, 96–101). Much influence in shaping an appropriate relationship with nature was also exerted by later currents of Christian spirituality. In this respect, what would seem to be of particular interest are four models for relationships with nature described as follows:

- The animating Celtic model treats nature as a place or circumstance in which God's presence can be experienced.
- The Benedictine caretaking model points to humankind's responsibility for perpetuating the world conferred upon our species by the Creator.
- Hildegard of Bingen's nuptial model pays attention to the need to restore harmonious relations between people, the world and the Creator, who, in marrying Mother Earth, filled all of creation with the life-giving force known as *viriditas*.
- St. Francis of Assisi offered a fraternal model, stressing the relatedness of human beings and other forms of life allowing for partnerly relations with all members of the Earth's community of life (Sadowski 2017).

The Christian inspirations behind the idea of sustainable development may also be noted in the axiological bases. Constant reworking and perfecting have inclined towards an ever fuller expression of these. For only the indication of these foundations in an explicit way holds out hope for greater cohesion of this still-evolving concept, as well as for its effective implementation. The principles underpinning sustainable development are usually taken to include those of moderation, of the happy medium, of justice, and of the common good, as well as those of peace, solidarity, liberty, truth and love. Most of these have strong anchoring in the Christian tradition, as the social teaching of the Catholic Church makes clear (Dołęga and Sadowski 2009, 14–17 and 22–33).

Certain inspirations are also to be sought in the Muslim tradition. The Koran is unequivocal in its condemnation of waste and over-consumption, for example (VI, 31) and famously encourages moderation (XIII, 8; XV, 21). A good illustration of that is a sentence attributed to The Prophet which runs: "Conduct yourself in this world as if you are here to stay forever, and yet prepare for eternity as if you are to die tomorrow." (Foltz 2006, 211).

It would thus seem that the idea of sustainable development was present in latent form at least in Western culture, as well as to some extent in the cultures shaped by the Eastern religions. Although it is hard to assess the extent to which particular religious traditions supplied the inspirations for the idea, there is no way to deny that influence when it comes to the shaping of cultures that provided for its development in the circumstances of today's environmental crisis.

RELIGION TOGETHER WITH SCIENCE IN THE NAME OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The debate that White initiated on the role of religion in either perpetrating or working to counteract the environmental crisis ensured that *FORE* gathered around it a large circle of academics representing very diverse disciplines and identifying themselves with many different religious traditions. This representative group commenced with a new stage of reflection on issues at the interface between religion and the environment. As a result of the enhanced and enlivened cooperation between *FORE* participants, an attempt was made to identify a new branch of knowledge defined as *religion and ecology* (Tucker 2002, 11; Monserud 2002). To propagate the results of work done in this field a journal called *World Views: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* came out as long ago as in 1997, while two years later another of similar title and content emerged, namely *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*". A further step came in 2005, with the founding of the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture. In direct consequence of activeness on the part of this scientific society, there are a number of key publications, though most notably perhaps *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Sadowski 2009a, 216–217).

An important stage in the shaping of the new branch of knowledge was marked by the introduction into university-level education of a *religion and ecology* subject. Thanks to the efforts of M. E. Tucker and J. A. Grim, Yale University commenced with Inter-faculty studies entitled the Yale Religion and Ecology Program. Similar studies have also become possible at other Western higher-education institutions. Yet a further stage in the development of research into matters at the point of contact between religion and the environment was constituted by the opening at the University of Florida in 2001 of specialised doctoral studies, again under a *religion and ecology* title (Sadowski 2009a, 217–218).

The crowning of the efforts of many academics involved in research into the links between religion and ecology came as it became more and more realistic to describe and delimit the discipline of *religion and ecology* which is – naturally enough – interdisciplinary, *i.a.* taking in environmental studies, geography, history, anthropology, sociology and political science. It deals with both issues from history and contemporary ones, in order to better understand the relationships between humankind, the Earth, the Universe and the reality of what is sacred. *Religion and ecology* also studies issues like the creative and destructive dynamics present in nature; God's presence in nature; the purposeful side of nature and the cosmos; the ways in which, and extent to which, the natural environment and culture impact upon each other; the symbolic manifestations of nature in myths and religious rituals and the understanding of ecology present in traditional agricultural, trading, fishing and hunting practice. Moreover, *religion and ecology* analyses the ways in which religious communities portray the relationship with the environment for life which is proper to them. In short, *religion and ecology* can be described as a new cognitive paradigm for complex and diverse systems entailed by

the humanity-Earth relationship that are present in the various religions (Tucker and Grim 2001, 14–17; Sadowski 2009a, 218).

The engagement of academics representing different scientific disciplines and religious traditions has done much to enliven the dialogue in religious circles, but also those of academics dealing with the crisis of the environment, of politicians, and of environmental activists. The introduction of a scientific basis into religiously-motivated care for nature has allowed the two circles to pass through to an entirely new level of dialogue. Scientific reflection on the different religious traditions has revealed their environmental potential and encouraged a perception of religions as important partners in the building of a sustainable world. A change of mentality when it comes to how religions are perceived among those occupied with promoting and implementing the sustainable development concept is well illustrated by the book authored by Gary Gardner entitled *Inspiring Progress. Religions' Contributions to Sustainable Development*. This work emphasises the role of religion in bringing to light an ethical layer essential to the effective implementation of sustainable development (Gardner 2006). Gardner had in fact signalled such a thesis several years earlier in the *Worldwatch Institute* publication entitled *State of the World 2003*. In a chapter entitled *Engaging Religion in the Quest for a Sustainable World*, the author lists five key attributes of religion sufficient to justify its encouraged involvement in the building of a sustainable world. These are:

- a capacity to shape cosmological views of the world;
- moral authority;
- a large number of adherents;
- major economic means;
- a potential to generate communities (Gardner 2003, 154).

In turn, Paula J. Posas, in studying the possible benefits of involving religion to try and limit the worst effects of climate change, shows how the environmental potential of religion has its roots in:

- the traditional and unique functions of religion in society;
- ethical teachings;
- scope and influence;
- a capacity to inspire followers into taking up different activities (Posas 2007, 38; Sadowski 2013b, 84).

Equally, Artur Pawłowski emphasises the influence of religion in shaping attitudes of moderation among followers, especially through a signalling of the ethical dimensions to deeds. In his view, a precondition for effective implementation of sustainable development is a hierarchical organisation of its layers, with simultaneous highlighting of the fundamental role the ethical layer has to play (Pawłowski 2008, 109–111).

The perceiving of religions as important partners in the building of a sustainable world makes it clear that they may assist academics, politicians and environmental activists, not only where reflection is concerned, but also when it comes to practical actions to combat the environmental crisis. A start has been made to diverse forms of

cooperation and the involvement of religious circles in efforts to safeguard our planet's homeostasis.

A direct effect of change in the way the role of religion in environmental matters was perceived came as academics felt encouraged to involve different faiths in caring for the environment. In response to such proposals, the leaders of the different religions began to take up individual or collective initiatives in the form of missives, lobbying and the supplying of indications regarding the moral dimension to the environmental crisis, encouraging people of faith to engage directly in activities helping to build a more sustainable world.

Co-author of *Limits to Growth* Jørgen Randers was one of the first academics to perceive the role religion might play in the struggle against the environmental crisis. As early as in 1972, Randers was suggesting that religion was probably the only source of moral authority and strength capable of leading the necessary change (Randers 1972, 32). An important step towards the development of dialogue between academics and religious leaders with a view to building a more sustainable world came with the appeal in an "Open Letter" from an international group of leading academics, who called upon the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders for help. In the appeal from the academics, we read that: "*Problems of such magnitude and solutions demanding so broad a perspective, must be recognized from the outset as having a religious as well as a scientific dimension. Mindful of our common responsibility, we scientists – many of us long engaged in combating the environmental crisis – urgently appeal to the world religious community to commit, in word and deed, and as boldly as is required, to preserve the environment of the Earth*" (Sagan 1990, 615; Sadowski 2013b, 85–86).

In response, the leaders of the religions declared that they: "*accept a prophetic responsibility to make known the full dimensions of this challenge, and what is required to address it, to the many millions we reach, teach and counsel.*" (...) *We believe a consensus now exists, at the highest level of leadership across a significant spectrum of religious traditions, that the cause of environmental integrity and justice must occupy a position of utmost authority for people of faith. Response to this issue can and must cross traditional religious and political lines*" (NRPE 2003, 118–119).

The environmental dialogue between academics and religious leaders was also joined by politicians, who also recognised the importance of religion's involvement in the sustainability movement. For several decades now, representatives of the religions have been invited to climate summits and meetings at which decisions of key importance for the environmental crisis are taken. A good illustration of the change of attitude of politicians towards religion when it comes to cooperation in the name of sustainable development is the calling into being in February 2016 in Berlin of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). This brings together governmental and non-governmental entities, including religious and secular organisations, all united by a conviction as to the importance of religious values in achieving the *2030 Sustainable Development Goals* (PaRD 2017). A further example of politicians' appreciation of

the role played by religions in implementing sustainable development came with the Scientific Conference on *Religion & Sustainable Development: Building Partnerships to End Extreme Poverty* (New York, 12.06.2015). The co-organisers of that Conference were: the World Bank Group, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, US Agency for International Development, UK Department For International Development, GHR Foundation, World Vision and the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (The World Bank 2015).

Today's dialogue on sustainable development brings the involvement of specialists in almost every academic field. There are participants representing the humanities and social sciences, the pure and natural sciences, technical and technological spheres, and the agricultural, forestry and veterinary sciences. The group of academics has also been joined by politicians, and by representatives of NGOs, environmental movements, the world of the arts and the religions. The participation of the latter in the dialogue surrounding the protection of the Earth has been noticeable for some time now (Tucker 2003, 43–44). Indeed, the involvement of religious leaders in combating the environmental crisis has now become something self-evident, and the leaders of the major world religions speak out on this subject more and more often. Among those especially active in this regard are the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I in Constantinople and Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. This last, delivering his *Laudato Si'* Encyclical in 2015, initiated a huge mobilisation of believers in various religions around the world, in the context of the Paris COP-21 Climate Summit (Sadowski 2016b).

RELIGION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT

The literature offers many statements from religious leaders on subject matter connected with sustainable development. However, it is particularly worth looking at the relatively little-known address given by Pope John Paul II to members of the Papal Academy of Sciences, in which he reflects on the dangers posing a threat to the entire planet, as well as possible directions of action that might protect the world from destruction (John Paul II 1999).

Also seemingly of exceptional importance is the message contained in John Paul II's missive announced on 1.01.1990, on the occasion of World Peace Day. "Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be *the responsibility of everyone*. Its various aspects demonstrate the need for concerted efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, States and the international community" (Jan Paweł II 1990, 15).

There is much to indicate that the involvement of leaders of many Christian communities has helped bring about the emergence of many environmental organisations of religious provenance. These organisations are a kind of phenomenon, for their

members engage in the protection of nature mainly for religious reasons. Furthermore, the phenomenon is to be observed in all the major religions of the world. However, most such organisations have a basis in Christianity, though many of them are inter-denominational, at times even inter-faith. This process was noticeable by the 1980s, but only gathered pace in subsequent decades. It is also possible to note the emergence of organisations that are not truly religious in character, but do have as their aim to support religions as they seek to make their activities in the name of sustainability more dynamic (Allison 2007; Sadowski 2013b, 87; Sadowski 2009b, 157–159).

Among activities in religious circles seeking to take care of the Earth, it is possible to mention:

- the lobbying of politicians to take more-decisive action to protect nature;
- action serving the introduction of more environment-friendly modern technologies;
- projects entailing the afforestation and restoration of land threatened by desertification;
- media campaigns seeking to achieve a change in consumer habits;
- environmental education campaigns;
- teaching to show the faithful that the humankind-nature relationship also has its moral dimension;
- prayer for Creation and the training of the faithful in making an “environmental conversion” (Sadowski 2009b, 150–152).

Many of these activities have been described in the subject literature. The activity of Polish environmental organisations of religious provenance in the name of sustainable development has not yet been studied and described reliably. However, the first work on the subject has already appeared (Sadowski 2009b; Sadowski 2013b, 89–92; Sadowski 2013a).

Many initiatives supporting implementation of the sustainable development concept are presented in *State of the World 2003*. This stresses the contribution religion makes to the eschewing of the obsessive consumption very much characteristic of the societies in developed countries (Gardner 2003, 160 and 167–171). The latest research in turn shows that action within religious circles to implement sustainable development are a *sine qua non* condition for any effort to curb climate change. Sigurd Bergmann gives numerous examples of religious initiatives serving climate protection. Religions cooperate in this area, *i.a.* with such organisations as WWF, the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture and the Alliance of Religion and Conservation. He also reports on numerous global climate initiatives of the Council of Churches and the European Christian Environmental Network, as well as projects implemented with organisations of Muslims, Buddhists and the primary religions (Bergmann 2015, 389–392).

It is worth emphasising the major mobilisation of Catholics around the world that was inspired by the content of the *Laudato Si'* Encyclical. A key development (though not the sole one) was the founding of the worldwide Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM). This organisation brings together both individual Catholics and Catholic organisations across the world who seek to take up the struggle against our ongoing and upcoming climate crisis. The GCCM has set itself the aim of mobilising Catholic

circles encouraged by Pope Francis into action in the service of climate protection. At the initiative of the GCCM, some 907,048 signatures were collected on a petition presented to Parties present at the “Summit” (i.e. the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC) convened in Paris (GCCM 2015). Concern to achieve a reduction in CO₂ emissions is a main goal of activity engaged in by the Catholic Climate Covenant (CCC), to which more than 17 000 of the United States’s Catholic parishes belong, along with many millions of individual believers. The greatest successes of the CCC can be said to include climate-related projects like the St. Francis Pledge; Creation Care Teams; Feast of St. Francis; Advocacy and Catholic Climate Ambassadors (CCC 2017). The panorama of environmental engagement of religion in curbing climate change gains presentation in *Religious Organizations Taking Action on Climate Change*, which mentions many religiously-motivated steps being taken to help protect the climate (Allison 2007).

In analysing the activity of religions in the name of global sustainable development, Ian Barbour draws attention to the several key reasons why religions willingly involve themselves in initiatives of this type. In Barbour’s view, this is assisted by the relatedness of many religious doctrines and concepts of sustainable development in conceptualising such issues as:

- a long-term global vision of the world,
- respect for all forms of life,
- concerns linked with population increase.

Reference is also made to certain issues specific to particular religions, i.e.:

- commitment to social justice,
- a realistic vision of human nature,
- the basis of humility,
- visions relating to a happy life that is not based on consumption (Barbour 2000, 388–399).

All of these arguments noted above allow for a forecast that religions’ involvement in global sustainable development will go on increasing steadily, with religions becoming ever-more important partners in the process.

CLOSING REMARKS

There would now seem to be few people who would negate the value and virtue of engaging the world’s religions in efforts to build a sustainable world. This recognition has had its effect in the many environmental initiatives launches and pursued in religious circles now stimulated into active engagement in the combating of the environmental crisis. These initiatives are seen to assume a variety of different forms, i.e.:

- addresses in favour of the protection of the environment given by religious leaders;
- active participation in Earth Day celebrations as well as other important events at which decisions are taken as regards “the issue of the environment”;

- the exerting of pressure on politicians, with the aim of the latter being pushed into more decisive action to care for the condition of our planet;
- public campaigns making clear the moral dimension to humankind's relationship with nature;
- activity serving environmental education;
- efforts to promote such a model of human development as will go beyond horizontal development (in the economic sphere), also emphasising vertical development (in the spiritual and cultural spheres);
- affiliating people in environmental organisations whose leading motivation for action in the name of nature conservation is religious conviction;
- the pursuit by the above organisations of concrete action to protect nature;
- spiritual training of the faithful in the direction of an environmental "conversion";
- prayer for all of creation.

It is hard to arrive at an unambiguous indication of the scope to the positive contribution religious circles might be able to make when it comes to care for the condition of our planet, and hence the building of a sustainable world. There is also no way of assessing in which religious tradition and in which field a strategy for sustainable development might be most favoured. One of many attempts to assess this influence has come with sociological research carried out in the USA in respect of Americans' convictions regarding climate change. The work was done in the context of Pope Francis's delivery of his *Laudato Si'* Encyclical (on 24.05.2015), as well as his utterances on the same subject as he met with President Obama and also gave an address to a Plenary Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015. The study took in two series of polls carried out in late February and early March 2015 (prior to the Encyclical), as well as in late September and early October – just after His Holiness's visit to the USA. The results of the work were published in a report entitled *The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming*. This left no doubt as to the influence the Pope was able to exert in convincing the American people. The fact that the term "the Francis Effect" came about at all attests to the significance of the impact in changing people's views (Maibach *et al.* 2015, 1).

An important attribute of religion where the promotion and implementation of the concept of sustainable development are concerned is the way it can encourage an awareness in believers that this idea is deeply-rooted in their religion's doctrines, given the correlation or concordance with such concepts as moderation, abstinence, the obligation handed down by the Creator to care for creation and for those close to us, the primacy of "to be" over "to have", long-term thinking and so on ... However, it would seem that these huge environmentally-relevant pluses of religion remain under-appreciated, and hence not utilised as fully as they might be. In fact, the idea of sustainable development continues to be perceived by the public (at least rather often) as something alien, external, imposed from outside – with the result that it seems to be being implemented to the minimum possible extent. A presentation

of the concept as in fact deeply-rooted in the religious culture and tradition of the given society will obviously give hope of it instead coming to be seen as indigenous, something of our own, with all the presumed positive effects on more effective implementation that that seems likely to yield, at the local and individual levels in particular.

Notwithstanding the laicisation that today's Western civilisation is very much subject to, the role of religion remains considerable. Research carried out in the years 2006–2008 in 143 countries, and concerning the influence of religious convictions on the daily decisions of faithful people, shows that the greater part of the world's population makes its choices by reference to religious norms (Sadowski 2013b, 82–83). A basis is therefore offered for environment-friendly change to be achieved in people's mentality, with the result being more favourable attitudes and approaches to the issue. It may thus be claimed with a high degree of certainty that the role of religion as an important partner in the fight against the environmental crisis and in the promotion of the idea of sustainable development will continue to grow. While it is obvious that religions alone are not able to complete this task, it is also clearer and clearer that achieving the change entirely without them is simply impossible (Tucker and Grim 1997, xvii).

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