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From Environmental Activism to Environmental Education A historical overview, evaluations and a suggestion for a path forward for the religious institutions as partners for a global green shift

Tom Sverre Tomren¹

In the Western world today, it is obvious to many that religious leaders stand in the front line in the struggle for environmental care and climate action. In political speeches and official documents, faith-based organizations are considered important partners for society when it comes to motivating the masses to accept and work for the green shift. This has not always been the situation. Back in the 1960s and '70s, many of the leaders in the Western environmental movement viewed religious organizations as obstacles more than partners. In this article, I will start with a brief review of what led Western religions to be concerned with climate and environmental questions, continuing with some examples of what various religious traditions have focused on during 50 years of environmental and climate agendas, and discuss whether this has had the desired effect. Against this background, I will give some suggestions concerning which role religious institutions should play in the future as arenas for environmental education.

History: Climate and the Environment are on the Religious Agenda in Europe

In 1965, the European Council decided to make 1970 the European Conservation Year. Each member state was asked to establish national committees tasked with working to ensure that nature and environmental protection came high on the public and political agenda in each state. The European Conservation Year was a success and was celebrated across Europe.² This year (2020), actually marks that it is fifty years since the first European Nature Conservation Year took place.

According to the historian Bredo Berntsen, the period from 1965 to 1972 can be referred to as "The Childhood of the Green Movement".³ It was a period that marked a collective awakening of the value of nature and the environment. The wave became global with its peak coming two years after the European Conservation Year, at the succeeding UN conference in Stockholm in 1972.

This first green wave soon reached churches in the West. Historians and theologians began to ask what role churches and regions had played and should play in creating ecologically-oriented attitudes, action, ethics and politics. In 1967, Lynn White Jr. wrote his well-known essay focusing on the role that churches and Christian theology had played in relation to the "ecological crisis" facing the world. Whites Jr. was not the first to write about Christianity's view of nature and the environmental problem. Joseph Sittler, professor of Systematic Theology at the Chicago Lutheran Seminary, did the same thing as early as 1954

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² Berntsen 1994: 135.

³ Berntsen 1970: 136.

through the essay entitled *Theology for the Earth* without that this led to considerable debate.

White Jr.'s essay, on the other hand, ignited a global debate about the relationship between Christianity and environmental issues. White's thesis was that Christian theologians had, for more than a thousand years, preached and taught that nature was profane, and that God was not in nature. Furthermore, that as God's representatives, human beings should maximize the benefits of nature. In combination with a linear understanding of time with an emphasis on a better future, the church's ontology, cosmology and ethics had, in White's view, left nature open to exploration and abuse. White's essay, however, ends by emphasizing that there are theological impulses, especially in Orthodox Christianity and Catholic Franciscan theology (and Eastern religions), that provide more ecological impulses that churches should absorb and apply in the years to come.

Lynn White Jr. was not alone writing about the role of Christianity or religion in relation to the ecological crisis in 1967. That same year, Clarence Glacken, in his great historical work *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, analyzed Western philosophical history and Christianity's impact on nature and the environment. In Western philosophical history, Glacken found ambivalence in relation to nature. Some philosophical and theological traditions underestimated and emphasized unity in nature, while others downplayed nature and emphasized that man was something different and larger than the rest of nature.⁴ The Muslim theologian Seyyed Hossein Nasr also shared this criticism. In the book *Man And Nature: The Spiritual Crises of Modern Man* (1967), Nasr wrote that Christian theology has been so focused on the question of salvation and humanity's relationship to God that they have surrendered nature to secular science. This has led to Western thinking about nature that reduced it to an object driven by mechanical causality. The totality is lost from sight and respect for nature has disappeared.⁵

Christian theologians and churches responded directly and rapidly to the criticism of Christian nature conceptions. Soon there were a number of publications on Christian faith and environmentalists. Some examples: American theologian H.P. Santmire wrote the book *Brother Earth: Nature, God and Ecology in Time of Crisis* in 1970. John Cobbs' *A Theology of Ecology* was later released in 1972. In Germany, pioneer Günter Altner released *Between Nature and Human Rights: Anthropological, Biological, Ethical Perspectives for a New Creation Theology* (1975). In the Nordic countries, the Danish theologian Ole Jensen (1976) especially contributed to the debate. In the following decades, several prominent theologians followed, including, among others, Gerhard Liedke (1979), Jörg Zink (1981), Douglas Hall (1982), Jürgen Moltmann (1985), Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (1987), Sallie McFague (1987), Per Lønning (1989) and Leonard Boff (1993). This list can be easily expanded. Many of them referred to White directly or indirectly.⁶

Several ecclesiastical forums also became involved in the environmental debate. In 1968, at the Lambeth Conference (LC), the Anglican Church issued its first ecological proclamation. The World Federation of Reformed Churches (WARC) followed in 1970. Pope Paul VI then issued a declaration for the Catholic Church in 1972. The World Council of Churches (WCC) addressed the environmental issue in 1974, while the Lutheran World

⁴ Glacken 1967: 252-253.

⁵ Nasr 1997: 31-33.

⁶ Tomren 2014: 17.

Federation (LWF)'s General Assembly issued its first ecological statement in 1977. Since then, there has been ongoing work on environmental issues both in the various churches and in ecumenical forums such as the World Council of Churches. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period that marked the beginning of what we now call ecotheology.⁷

Susan Power Bratton, has defined the term "ecotheology," as follows:

Ecotheology has been developed to motivate Christians to engage in ecological sustainability. Ecotheology includes systematic theology, environmental ethics, practical theology and environmental politics. The concept is normative and interdisciplinary.⁸

According to Bratton, the concept is applied in Christian theology, but there is nothing in the way of applying the definition to all religious statements and practices that aim to motivate an ecologically sustainable way of life and development. That is how I will use the term in this article.

From 1970 to today, the environment and ecology have been on the international churches' agenda on a regular basis. The number of theological publications and ecclesiastical statements concerning environmental problems has increased. Ecology and environmental ethics have gained a foothold in church and theology, and the approach has been accepted in academics, in the ecumenical movement and in the larger Christian denominations.

The ever-increasing eco-theological activity in religious organizations has made them interesting as partners for the environmental movement. Eco-theological engagements allows others to see world religions as potentially important allies in their efforts to create an ecologically sustainable world. The father of deep ecology, Arne Næss, wrote in 1976 that Christians who have studied ecology find support in the Bible for their dedication to this aspect and that they tend to join the ecological movement because of it.⁹

In 1986, the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) responded to the call from Næss, White, Glacken, Nasr and others. WWF invited representatives from Christian churches, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims to an interfaith pilgrimage for the environment through Italy to Assisi. The interfaith pilgrimage project was aimed at providing the starting point for what was called *The New Alliance*, also known as *The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC)*. According the Danish researchers Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein, the WWF initiative toward the world religions was part of a well thought -out strategy. First, the WWF believed that world religions had the potential to mobilize billions of believers to actively contribute to environmental engagement. Second, the WWF believed that world religions have authority and channels of communication that will affect people in many parts of the world, not least in the poor countries. Thirdly, the WWF thought that world religions shaped reality, images, values and norms. Because of this, WWF wanted to mobilize the religions for ecological sustainability.¹⁰

The WWF initiative was fruitful. The ARC continued and facilitated activities with an emphasis on world religions as environmental players until 2019. Another concrete result

⁷ Ibid. : 29-78.

⁸ Bratton, 2000.

⁹ Næss 1999: 351.

¹⁰ Jensen and Rothstein 1994: 18-20.

of the Assisi gathering was that at the meeting, an idea of a liturgical day in the church's calendars with an emphasis on environmental protection was launched. The Orthodox Church seized the challenge and in 1989, Patriarch Dimitrios launched the idea of a prayer day for the Creation and for all Christian churches to do the same in their respective denominations.¹¹ The idea of a separate day in the church's annual calendar dedicated to the environment has since spread and is incorporated by most major Christian denominations today. In 2002, former Patriarch Bartholomew received the Sophie Prize for both his and the Orthodox Church's efforts to protect the environment.¹²

The year after Bartholomew received the Sophie Prize, the environmental organization *World Watch Institute*, through its director, Gary Gardner, published an essay in its annual report in which it emphasized the importance of bringing the world's religions into the work for the environment and climate. In *The State of the Earth 2003*, Gardner writes that religious institutions and leaders "can add to the work of building a sustainable world through at least five basic values: the ability to create cosmologies, moral authority, a great following, great material resources, and the ability to build community".¹³

From 1967 to the present, Christianity in particular and other world religions in general have gone from being seen as part of the cause of environmental problems to part of the solution. This brings us to the next stage of this study, namely, to examine whether, over this fifty-year period, religion has been able to become a force for greater commitment to ecological sustainability. Before answering this question, we will examine some key features and examples of what has been written and done in each of the four major world religions.

Christian Ecotheology

Since the late 1960s and to this day, ecotheological involvement has increased in scale and diversity in the world's churches. By 2020, the environment and sustainability had become among the most important ethical issues for Christian denominations.¹⁴

In addition to churches' official environmental statements and engagements, theologians produced and published professional books on how the environmental crisis could be interpreted theologically. Ecotheology has become a separate research branch with its own professorships and specialized journals.¹⁵ Ecotheology has its own journals (such as *Ecotheology*, or *The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, as it is called today); several ecclesiastical and religion-based professional environmental networks have been established, and conferences have been held on the subject. In some countries, special professorships have been established in ecotheology. I will illustrate with the example from the Church of Norway (CoN), which is the central case study/illustration in this article. First some contextual information.

The Church of Norway (CoN) is a Lutheran church with 3.8 billion members. Approximately 70% of the population in Norway are Lutheran. Fifty per cent of the youth in Norway attend CoN confirmation classes. The historical background behind its strong position is that this church was the official state church of Norway until 2012. Even today,

¹¹ Tomren, 2014: 59.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gardner 2003: 177.

¹⁴ Tomren 2014: 17-68.

¹⁵ Tomren 2014: 17.

the church enjoys a privileged position in the Norwegian Constitution, and the King of Norway must be member of the CoN. The supreme level in the church is its annual General Synod elected democratically by all the members. In addition to its democratic structure, the CoN has a clerical structure, with the Bishops' Conference as its highest level. The bishops are appointed for the remainder of their professional career. The Bishops' Conference normally meets four times per year. In the period from 1969 to 2019, the national church assemblies and the Bishops' Conference issued 18 statements on the environment and climate.¹⁶

The dominant methodology in the ecotheological statements from the Church of Norway in particular, and in Christian ecotheology in general, is to link biblical motifs and metaphors with environmental issues. Known as the *correlative* method, it was introduced by the famous Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich in the 1950s. Tillich believed that by letting biblical motifs and narratives shed light on contemporary reality, new nuances can be discovered both in religious material and in contemporary reality.¹⁷ Tillich's methodology has gained a foothold in churches and Christian theology far beyond the Lutheran context, and is visible in the ecotheology of these churches.

Through statements from the General Synod and Bishops' Conference, the Church of Norway uses a variety of biblical motifs (metaphors, narratives, and theological arguments) and correlates it to environmental issues to convince congregations and individual Christians to become involved in environmental and climate issues. Examples of motifs from the Church of Norway: The *steward motif* is used to say that God has created everything and has given mankind responsibility for taking care of the earth. It is about ethics. The story of the covenant of Noah between God and the creation, Psalm 104, is used to emphasize oneness, that God sustains everything and is in everything that lives in His Spirit. Other motives are the incarnation of Jesus as solidarity with the whole creation, that the call for love for one's neighbours means charity for future generations and other species. When we examine these motives, we quickly discover that some are designed to discuss ethical practice, others are designed to discuss ethical value and yet others are designed to discuss anthropology and cosmology. Ecology therefore alternately focuses on cosmology, ontology and ethics.¹⁸

In addition to theological texts and statements, the Church of Norway, like most churches, has developed practical environmental projects. Some examples include: *Creation Day*, which is a liturgical day with a focus on environmental protection; *green churches*, which have been developed as an environmental certification system; the *energy-saving project*, with an emphasis on solar cells and energy savings; and development of a separate environmental structure with committees to work on the environment throughout the whole national church. In addition to this, the Church of Norway has addressed political authorities concerning specific environment and climate topics. The Church of Norway is not unique. We find similar developments in most major Christian churches around the world.¹⁹ I will return to the Norwegian church as a case study later in the article.

¹⁶ Tomren 2019: 5-8.

¹⁷ Tillich 1950: 61-62.

¹⁸ Tomren 2019: 230.

¹⁹ Tomren 2019: 13.

Islamic Ecotheology

Muslim theologians and institutions have also worked actively on environmental and climate ethics. The most well-known environmental statement from international Muslim organizations is *the Muslim Declaration on Climate Change*, which came after a symposium in Turkey on August 17-18, 2015. The declaration was drafted by 80 prominent Muslim leaders and theologians, and was endorsed by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation consisting of 57 Muslim states.²⁰

The focus on climate and the environment is not new in Islamic theology. Already in 1967, Nasr wrote about the relationship between Islam and the ecological crisis. Nasr criticized the prevailing Western understanding of reality to distinguish between spiritual and worldly reality. The physical world lies in the West's thinking outside the sphere of religion. Without the protection of religion, it is open to secular exploitation. According to Nazr, the despiritualization of the material world is the main cause of the ever-increasing environmental problem.²¹

Nasr's thesis was that Islam has an understanding of *Tawid* that is more holistic than what exists in the West. *Tawid* means everything in the cosmos: human life, social life and nature come from the same Divine will and impulse. It is Allah who created everything, maintains everything and controls everything. Everything, including science and politics, should be arranged according to the will of the Godhead; theological ethics should govern society. The motif emphasizes the connection between everything in the cosmos. Nasr further points out that everything that lives has a spiritual dimension. Everything that lives is an expression of Allah's presence. Living beings can therefore never be reduced to instrumental, soulless objects.²²

In the years since the publication of *Man and Nature*, Muslim imams and the academic environment have produced numerous theological publications on Islam and the environment. An article collection that shows some of the breadth of Muslim ecotheology is *Islam and Ecology - A Bestowed Trust*.²³ In the collection, we find reflections from over 20 imams and Muslim academics. Some of the motifs included in the articles are The Creator Motif, Human Role and Responsibility as Deputy Regent (Caliph), God as Sustainer, Tawhid, and Sufi Unity Concepts such as *Wahdat al-Wujud*.²⁴ In short: In Muslim ecotheology, we also find a variety of motives. Some are aimed at ethics. Others at cosmology and world views.

Parallel to the fact that Muslim academics have been working on ecotheology, mosques and Muslim organizations have also carried out practical environmental projects. Examples include: In Morocco and Indonesia, imams have, with state support, introduced a concept called "Green Mosques," with the goal of electrifying the mosques using solar panels.²⁵ In Norway, the Ahmadiyya Mosque at Furuset has organized rubbish collection days (Gjerstad and Esjeholm, 2017), and the Daru Saalam Islamic Centre in Oslo has introduced "Green Jihad" (Saidy, 2017).

²⁰ The Islamic Foundation For Ecology And Environmental Sciences, 2015.

²¹ Nasr, 1997: 74-75.

²² Nazr 1997:94-97.

²³ Foltz, Denny and Baharuddin, 2003.

²⁴ Siddiq 2003: 452.

²⁵ Lindekleiv 2016.

Hindus Working for the Environment and Climate

Hindu religious communities also have been involved in the work on climate and the environment. The first international Hindu declaration on climate change was issued in December 2009. Ahead of the 2015 climate negotiations in Paris, a sequel declaration was also made (Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies et al., 2019). The Hindu declarations were a result of monks and leaders showing concern for and working on the relationship between ecology, the environment, climate and religion since the 1970s. On the Hindu side, the article collection gives *Hinduism and Ecology* an insight into its diversity.²⁶ The collection contains 20 subject articles about Hindu ecotheology.

In 1991, the Danish researchers Tom Jensen and Mikael Rothstein presented a study of how the various world religions worked on the environment. For Hinduism, they found ecotheology that focused on: The connection between the divine, human and nature (pantheism), dharma as the supreme cosmic order that everything must adhere to, the demand for non-violence (ahimsa), a pervasive respect for everything living since most profoundly all is the flow of the Divine (Brahman), a notion that it is God and not humans who own the world, and finally a widespread notion of sacred trees and natural phenomena.²⁷

If we follow Jensen and Rothstein, we see that in Hindu ecotheology it is important to establish a new understanding of the relationship between man and nature. By extension, there is an environmental ethic where everything has intrinsic value. Ethics is biocentrically oriented. Hindu religious establishments have also engaged themselves in practical work concerning environmental problems and climate change. Examples include: Hindu pilgrims who come to Vrindavan in India are endowed with sacred trees to plant. The Bishnoi Hindus in India use ahimsa activism to protect the Bishnoi's forest. The Bishnoi's forest, which they have protected for 500 years, is home to complex and diverse wildlife that is extinct elsewhere in India. The list of projects can be expanded.²⁸ In a Western context, it is worth noting that the father of deep ecology, Arne Næss, was strongly inspired by Hinduism. In the book *Ecology, Society and Lifestyle*, Næss turns to passages from Hindu literature and tradition with an emphasis on unity and non-violence when he argues for his own environmental philosophy, which he calls "Ecophilosophy T" (Næss, 1999, pp. 374-377).

Buddhism

In 2009, Buddhist theologians also issued a statement on climate change, which was updated and confirmed in 2015. More than 5,000 practicing Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama, signed the statement in 2015.²⁹ One publication indicating the diversity of Buddhist ecotheology is *Buddhism and Ecology - The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, which contains 19 articles on Buddhist ecotheology.³⁰

Returning to the study conducted by Jensen and Rothstein (1991), they found that Buddhist ecotheology emphasized the promotion of knowledge that all living and sentient beings suffer, that all living beings are part of the *samsara* (rebirth) and are bound by karma,

²⁶ Chapple & Tucker 2000.

²⁷ Jensen and Rothstein 1991: 72-73.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dalai Lama et al. 2015.

³⁰ Tucker and Williams 1997.

and that everything depends on everything, the realization that everything is changing, that everything contains the Buddha nature and that everything is consciousness. Furthermore, they draw on anthropology with an emphasis on the five *Skandha*, and focus on an awareness that everything is emptiness and without self-esteem.³¹ If we are to believe Jensen and Rothstein, Buddhist ecotheology places great importance on awareness of the totality of existence. It is cosmologically oriented.

Buddhist monasteries and thinkers have also been involved in specific environmental projects. One project is *The Buddhist Preservation of Nature*, which is a study project in which Thai and Tibetan Buddhists analyze classical Buddhist texts to collect and highlight passages that deal with ecology and the environment.³²

In a Western context, it is worth mentioning that one of the front figures in Norwegian deep-ecology, Sigmund Kvaløy Sætreng, converted to Buddhism. Through more than thirty years of publications and lectures, Sætreng argued that Buddhist ontology, cosmology and ethics were the best platform for environmental activism (Kvaløy, 1979, p.11).

Effect of Religious Environmental Involvement

This review of how the number of institutions and individual representatives of world religions have been working actively for fifty years to contribute to a more ecologically sustainable society has shown that Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists have been committed to mobilizing supporters for environmental protection. Some focus on changing worldviews, others on attitudes, values and ethics, and still others on a change of political systems. The approaches are diverse, but the actors have in common that they are working to preserve biodiversity and to curb the human-made global temperature increase. We have also seen that environmental organizations (and politicians) have referred to world religions as necessary allies and contributors in their efforts to preserve nature and the environment and to reduce CO2 emissions. Religious actors have gained recognition as environmentalists.

Since 2020, marking more than fifty years of commitment from religious actors for the environmental issue, it is still wise to examine this issue with a critical approach and ask what effect this engagement has had on the ecological state of the world and on the climate discursion.

At a global level, the environment and climate have been under pressure for the last fifty years. According to the UN report on biodiversity published May 29, 2019, 25% of the world's species are threatened with extinction in a short time period unless drastic action is taken. The earth's temperature has risen by an average of 1% in the industrial period, which was a horror scenario in the Stockholm Report of 1972. Extreme weather, floods and droughts have increased. Water and soil pollution have increased over large parts of the earth.³³ The manmade influences on the earth are so tangible that we talk today of our anthropogenic geological age. According to the UN, the explanation of these negative developments come from increased pressure on nature, the environment and climate, increased population, technological development and unjust economic growth. These are conditions over which the religious actors have little direct influence. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the amount of greenhouse gas emissions and pollution has been negative during the

³¹ Jensen and Rothstein 1991: 52-73.

³² Jensen and Rothstein 1991: 68-72.

³³ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2019/05/nature-decline-unprecedented-report>.

years that world religions have been committed to the protection of the environment and climate.³⁴ The involvement of the world religions has not been able to stop or reverse a negative development.

What, then, has been the effect of the environmental commitment of the world religions? To be able to say something about it, we return to the WWF's goal of engaging world religions for environmental and climate efforts. The background was the idea that world religions could help create cosmologies, morals and engage the masses for ecological sustainability efforts. To find out whether the efforts of world religions have had the intended effect, one approach is to look at sociological studies in environmental attitudes during the period. A relevant survey here is the European Social Survey (ESS), which has been conducted every two years in most European countries since 2002. One of the questions that has been asked is the extent to which respondents identify with the statement "importance of preservation of nature and environment". By examining what respondents respond to in terms of religious background, we get an indication of the development of attitudes towards nature and the environment in different religions over the last twenty years in Europe. Since we have to confine ourselves to the long timelines, I limit myself to data from every eight years of this survey: 2002, 2010 and 2018.

Before presenting the figures for environmental attitudes in various religious groups, it is necessary to say something about religious sociology in Europe from 2002 to 2018. According to the data from the ESS, respondents state the following affiliation:

Religion→ Year↓	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Eastern Orthodox	Other Christian	Jewish	Muslim	Eastern	Other	Not Relevant
2002	32.6	15.8	9.6	2.9	3.2	1.9	0.3	0.4	34.2
2018	30	10.8	11.5	1.0	0.1	3.0	0.8	0.3	42.5

The picture that emerges is that both the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches are losing members in Europe, the Orthodox Church is advancing, the number of Jews is declining, and the number of Muslims and followers of Eastern religions is increasing in Europe. However, the group that is growing the fastest is the percentage who respond that religion is not relevant. According to Peter Berger, the West is characterized by secularization. That means, on the one hand, that religious institutions are losing support and influence, and on the other hand that more and more individuals are interpreting and living their lives without reference to religious interpretations. According to Berger, secularization characterizes Protestant-dominated areas more than Catholic areas.³⁵ Measured against ESS data on religious membership from 2002 to 2018, Berger's analysis of Europe is accurate. In the years that followed 2002, Europe has been increasingly characterized by secularization.

Another researcher who has studied secularization, Ronald Inglehart, sees secularization as a cultural phenomenon related to the level of education and level of industrialization. He believes that Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Japan are characterized by the phenomenon.³⁶ In other words, the secularization trend in Europe is part of the framework for data on environmental attitudes in Europe. In other

³⁴ Straume 2017: 3-9.

³⁵ Berger, 1997: 94-97.

³⁶ Inglehart and Norris 2009: 24-26.

words, this data cannot easily be transferred to measures of attitudes in religious institutions in less secularized areas such as Africa, South America and Asia.

How, then, has this development affected environmental engagement in various religious communities throughout Europe during the period from 2002 to 2018? Measurements to what extent the respondents in the ESS have identified themselves with the statement: “Important to care for nature and the environment” in 2002, 2010 and 2018 are shown in the following table.

The “Yes” category corresponds to those who respond to “Very much like me” and “Like me”. The “Little” category represents those who answer, “Somewhat like me” and “A little like me”. Categories “No” represent those who respond “Not like me” or “Not like me at all”. The figures are given as a whole percentage of the respondents in the individual life perspective groups.

Religion	2002			2010			2018		
	Yes	Little	No	Yes	Little	No	Yes	Little	No
Is environmental responsibility important?									
Roman Catholic	71	26	2	68	28	3	76	22	2
Protestant	69	28	2	73	24	3	78	19	2
Eastern Orthodox	82	16	1	77	22	3	77	21	2
Other Christian	69	28	3	69	28	3	76	21	3
Jewish	63	31	6	69	29	2	69	29	3
Muslim	64	30	6	75	22	2	70	27	4
Eastern religions	76	18	6	77	20	3	78	21	1
Other	72	23	4	78	21	2	79	21	1
Average result	71	27	3	71	26	3	77	21	2

From these figures, we can see that the number of respondents who believe that nature and environmental protection are important has increased in the population of Europe. All religious groups have had a significant increase in respondents who believe that nature and environmental protection are important. Most notably, the percentage growth in environmentally friendly attitudes has been within the category Protestant Christians, followed by Muslims and Catholic Christians.

On the whole, it seems that supporters of the eastern regions place great emphasis on the environment and nature conservation. So do the Orthodox Christians. Returning to Lynn White Jr.’s essay, he stated that in 1967, Eastern religions and Orthodox Christianity were more eco-friendly than Western Christianity. Of course, we have to be careful about drawing firm conclusions about causality. There are probably complex and complicated causal effects behind the trends, and it is important to bear in mind that the religious divides largely coincide with geographical and cultural lines. However, it is interesting that the ESS answers point in the same direction as Lynn White Jr., who believed that Orthodox Christianity and Eastern religions were more eco-friendly than Western Christianity.

The variations in attitude within Catholic and Orthodox Christianity are interesting. When we are going to interpret this variation it is important to bear in mind that both churches have hierarchical clerical and worldwide structures. They can thus be interpreted as *organizations*. Other religious groups have weaker supranational structures and no joint

leadership, therefore becoming more difficult to interpret as one organization. Since we understand the Catholic Church and partly the Orthodox Church as organizations, it could be useful with theory from the science of organizational culture when we try to understand it. One of the foremost researchers in this field is Edgar Schein.

According to Schein, organizational culture and focus are largely governed by what the top executives in an organization emphasize.³⁷ If we link this theory to the Catholic and Orthodox respondents' answers, it is worth noting that Bartholomew had a very high focus on this theme in the Orthodox Church from 1989 to 2002 (through environmental sailing seminars and the Sophie Prize). Furthermore, we can see that the ups and downs of the Catholic Church coincide with the change of pontiff. Under Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis, several Catholic respondents said that protection of the environment and nature was important compared with Pope Benedict's time. If Schein's theory is correct, churches and religious organizations are dependent on their top leaders having a major focus on the environment and climate and to lead as good examples in word and action if they are to influence the attitudes of the members.

It is also interesting to note that especially the Protestants have gone from being the less environmentally engaged group to being a group with one of the strongest environmental attitudes. It is therefore relevant to ask what the Protestant church has done to succeed. In Protestantism, the national and sometimes the local churches are autonomous. Getting a full overview of developments in these churches will require extensive research. Therefore, in my studies, I have done a case study of one church, the Church of Norway.

I have as mentioned earlier published a case study of what has been achieved through Church of Norway environmental statements and work (Tomren 2019). There I examined the background of the environmental statements, theology and what the church achieved with their resolutions. The first environmental statement came from the Bishops' Conference in 1969. Since then, there have been 17 statements. Some are about changes in individual behaviour, some about theology, some about practical measures in the church, and some about politics directed towards politicians. In short, I identified four target groups for the resolutions: 1. The Norwegian people, 2. Church members, 3. Church council and 4. Appointed political actors.³⁸

The theology in these texts was dominated by *creation and stewardship* motifs. The logic that is visible in almost every text is that: God has created the earth and owns the earth. Further: He has given humans the task of using it with respect and to take care of it within the framework that God has provided. We also find other ecological models, but this model often referred to as the creator-stewardship model (or just the stewardship model) dominates. This is not surprising. In the study "Stand up for Justice" (2012) conducted by the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), the researchers concluded that the biblical foundation of the ethics of the Protestant churches was based on an argument based on the first article of faith and on a stewardship model. In other words, the ecotheology of the Church of Norway is an example of a pattern that is dominating ecotheology in the Protestant churches, at least in Europe.³⁹

³⁷ Schein 1998: 270-278.

³⁸ Tomren 2019: 275-278.

³⁹ Tomren 2019: 278.

The church's statements had the greatest impact when they were addressed towards their own organization. When the church was speaking to the "Norwegian people" we find no trace of effects, when they addressed the "church members" (the large membership which was 97% of the population in 1969 and 70% in 2019) we also find no noticeable effect. Where we do find an impact is in the attitudes of the "active churchgoers" group. That is, those who attend church once a month or more. During the period from 1969 to 2012, the attitudes of the "active churchgoers" changed. During this period the "active churchgoers" group in the CoN went from having little environmental engagement to becoming the group with the strongest environmental attitudes and commitments in the Norwegian society. Here it is appropriate to include that in the following years, the picture changed slightly, but there is still a marked difference in environmental attitudes between the "active churchgoers" group and the average Norwegian population.⁴⁰

In other words, the church's environmental work, decisions and projects appear to influence the environmental attitudes of the active believers. If I am to speculate on the reason for the small decline from 2012 to 2016, my hypothesis is that it reflects that the attitudes were declining among the population as a whole.⁴¹ Also, this may have meant that the top leaders of the church in the period 2012 to 2016, the bishops, have not had as much focus on the environment and climate in their work as leaders as in earlier periods. My study showed that the top leaders' engagements in this church tend to reflect the focus of the public debate in the media.

When it comes to decisions about its own organization, such as introducing Creation Day, introducing an environmental certification system, increasing energy saving in the churches, adopting an environmental profile on capital, and including the theme in diaconal plans, the decisions had the desired effect. As we have seen, the Church of Norway has implemented many measures. When the church decides to clean up its internal house and use the tools it has at its disposal, it experiences a breakthrough.⁴²

When it comes to the decisions that the CN has directed at various political authorities, I only found a few examples of impact. Compared to the number of decisions aimed at political levels, the effect has been rather weak. This may be because the Church of Norway is a Lutheran church with a tradition that the church should not speak too explicitly about politics. The church's environmental political statements were often very general, while politicians often focus on concrete decisions.⁴³

To summarize this case study, the Lutheran Church of Norway, succeeded best and had the most impact with its ecotheology in relation to its own active members and in relation to its own organization. In other words, we have an indication of that the church has a clear role to play as the environmental pedagogical learning arena for its own members. In my opinion, the study of this church indicates that if the goal is to have an effect, the religious institutions could and should develop and cultivate their role as environmental pedagogical learning arenas. Church leaders should focus on forming their own active members. This case study and the social studies from European social studies indicate that the churches and

⁴⁰ Tomren 2019: 266.

⁴¹ Straume 2019: 44.

⁴² Tomren 2019: 276-277.

⁴³ Ibid.

other religious institutions can succeed in equipping their active members to become involved in environmental work.

Religious Organization as Arenas for Sustainability Education

A historical review of Christian Ecotheology shows that the idea of the church as environmental formation actors is not new. As we saw earlier, both White Jr. and Nasr challenged the churches to take nature and environmental impact more seriously. One of the first projects that focused on how to engage churches in environmental activities was the work of the Faith-Man-Nature Group in the United States (1965–1969). In their work, they discussed and produced publications on the issue; how could the churches become environmental didactical arenas.⁴⁴

This should make it interesting for the churches and other religious institutions to join UNESCO's work on Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE).

UNESCO's first intergovernmental conference on environmental education was held in Tbilisi in the Soviet Union in 1977. The main goals of environmental education which was adopted in the Tbilisi Declaration are as follows:

- to foster clear awareness of, and concern about, economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas.
- to provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and skills needed to protect and improve the environment.
- to create new patterns of behavior of individuals, groups, and society as a whole towards the environment.⁴⁵

In other words, the goal for environmental education is, on the one hand, to provide knowledge about ecology and environmental problems, and on the other, to create attitudes and new patterns of behaviour in individuals, groups and societies. In short, it is well suited for interpreting the churches' environmental activity in the context of the Tbilisi Declaration on environmental education.

The ESE activity has much in common with the activity labelled under the heading ecotheology. It is therefore interesting to see what the religious institutions can learn from the ESE tradition.

It has been more than 40 years since the Tbilisi Declaration was adopted. During this time, large volumes of literature on environmental pedagogy have been tested and published. Environmental and Sustainability Education has been established as a professional field with its own journals and research network. The past decades gave birth to several ESE research journals. Some of the most well known are Environmental Education Research, Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability, The Journal of Environmental Education, and International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education.⁴⁶

Some of the issues that have been discussed in the ESE tradition in recent decades are the relationship between knowledge, values and behaviour, the tension between providing skills in individual behaviour and political influence and the relationship between ecological,

⁴⁴ Joranson, N. Philip and Anderson, Alan, 1973: 4.

⁴⁵ UN, 1976: 26.

⁴⁶ Östman and Öhman, 2019: 3.

economic and social development in the education.⁴⁷ All of this has, as we have seen here, high relevance for religious institutions that want to challenge their members to contribute to an environmental and sustainable future. In my opinion, the religious ecotheology actors would (and should) find interesting knowledge, know-how and partners within the ESE tradition and networks.

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⁴⁷ Östman and Öhman, 2019: 76-81.

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