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Towards ICCS 2025

Religious Ecology: Transforming Crises Into Opportunities for Dialogue and Cooperation

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SYNOPSIS

As the climate crisis intensifies, various religious environmental groups have emerged in a bid to encourage more people to become ecologically conscious. Such efforts have increasingly become interfaith in nature, providing an alternative space for those of different faiths to gather in dialogue and collaboration. These approaches can contribute to fostering more cohesive, resilient and compassionate societies.

COMMENTARY

Named the “[defining crisis of our time](#)” by the United Nations, climate change is arguably the most universal and pressing threat affecting humanity today. Rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and the degradation of natural ecosystems are already adversely affecting communities worldwide.

In the face of such existential threats, faith traditions and organisations are increasingly responding with renewed moral and spiritual urgency. As stewards of sacred texts and centuries-old traditions, religious communities have a [vested interest](#) in preserving the ecological conditions necessary for their practices, values, and survival.

This has led to a flourishing of religious ecological movements around the world, where faith-based approaches are mobilised to address environmental degradation. Some of these initiatives include [A Rocha](#), a global Christian network of conservation organisations, and [EcoSikh](#), a cross-national body founded by the Sikh community.

Beyond that, interfaith religious organisations such as the [Interfaith Coalition for Earth Justice](#), the [Interfaith Rainforest Initiative](#), and [Green Faith](#) have been established. These organisations engage in a wide range of activities, from reforestation projects and advocacy work to climate education and sustainable community initiatives.

Faith and Environmentalism in Singapore

Singapore is no exception to this global trend. In recent years, local religious environmental groups have joined secular initiatives in such advocacy work. Notable examples include [Our Father's World](#), a Christian environmental group that links stewardship with scripture; [FiTree](#), a Muslim youth group that grounds its work in Quranic teachings about the Earth; and [Joyful Garden Sangha](#), a Zen Buddhist group that encourages mindfulness toward nature. These three groups have since gathered to form the Interfaith Environmental Coalition, which marks a step forward in interfaith environmentalism efforts in Singapore and is a sign of increasing collaboration across religious lines.

Apart from these efforts, the [Climate Interfaith Youth Network \(CIYN\)](#) was also established after the Climate Youth Development Programme (CYDP) held in July 2024. Unlike the other three groups, the CIYN adopts a deliberately inclusive and secular approach, offering a platform for youth of all or no religious affiliations to come together around the shared cause of climate action. This distinction highlights the growing variety of interfaith environmental efforts in Singapore.

Interfaith Environmentalism as Socially Engaged Dialogue

The emergence of such initiatives is part of a broader phenomenon known as religious ecology. Religious ecology highlights the role that religious texts, teachings, and faith leaders can play in shaping behaviours toward sustainability and encouraging communities to care for the Earth.

When such efforts are collaborative and interreligious in nature, they exemplify what is known in interfaith studies as the dialogue of action or socially engaged dialogue. This constitutes one of the [four main types of interfaith dialogue](#), the others being the dialogue of theological exchange (discursive dialogue), the dialogue of religious experience (interior dialogue), and the dialogue of life (human dialogue).

Besides environmental advocacy and activism, religious communities have collaborated on [other causes](#), such as poverty relief, education, and immigration. Therefore, the dialogue of action can be directed at other urgent goals as well.

American theologian Paul Knitter [makes a compelling case](#) for such interfaith movements and socially engaged dialogue. He argues that “the complex problems that call for our attention and action are global, and the solutions therefore must be global”. He also points out that since most of the world’s population identifies with a religion, interfaith collaboration offers a powerful and often underutilised means of collective action.

Faith-based initiatives not only speak to people’s moral and ethical frameworks but

also create a deep sense of personal responsibility and belonging, which secular approaches sometimes struggle to replicate.

An Interfaith Approach in the Singapore Context

In Singapore, where a secular government coexists with a highly multireligious population, the success of religious ecological movements depends on navigating sensitivities around faith and inclusivity. Explicitly religious messaging by any religious community may not always resonate with the wider public, especially in a society that prioritises multicultural harmony and neutral public discourse. In this context, interfaith initiatives offer a balanced way forward.

The three faith-based environmental groups – Our Father’s World, FiTree and Joyful Garden Sangha – draw deeply from their respective faith traditions to imbue their initiatives with spiritual significance. They integrate their respective religious texts and teachings into their activities to encourage participants to reflect on the divine aspects of creation and stewardship. Their messaging is explicitly religious, and they often engage their own faith communities through theological framing and spiritually meaningful rituals.

In contrast, the CIYN intentionally avoids specific spiritual practices, opting instead for a broader, more inclusive approach. This strategy allows participation by those of minority faiths or no religious background, making it well-suited for outreach in secular or interfaith settings. By focusing on universal values such as caring for future generations and respecting nature, the group can reach across divides and build common ground.

An interfaith approach, or even a focus on shared values without overt religious framing, could help organisations achieve wider acceptance and a larger critical mass. Interfaith collaborations can foster inclusivity and allow for broader engagement across society. There are additional benefits, including reductions in prejudice and increases in societal resilience.

From Crisis to Common Cause

While climate change represents an existential threat, it also provides a unique opportunity for building solidarity. It has become a shared concern that transcends national, cultural and religious boundaries. In this sense, the crisis has created opportunities for those of different faiths to forge new partnerships towards a common cause. Faith groups that might have previously remained within their own communities now have reason to collaborate. The common cause of protecting the planet can serve as a powerful foundation for dialogue and cooperation.

This collaboration also has strategic value. In societies where environmentalism has become politicised, faith-based environmental messaging can offer an alternative route to engagement. By framing ecological stewardship as a moral or spiritual obligation rather than a partisan issue, interfaith groups can bypass ideological resistance and inspire action from communities that may be sceptical of mainstream environmental discourse.

Admittedly, many such interfaith movements are still fairly nascent and their long-term impact remains to be seen. Nonetheless, such efforts should be encouraged and given the space to grow. Global crises like climate change can be transformed into platforms for unity, mutual learning and collective hope. Instead of lamenting that we are in the midst of crises, we should remain hopeful that we can find strength in numbers and work towards a shared solution, despite the challenges ahead.

In a time when societies are increasingly fragmented and polarised, such interfaith efforts are not only environmentally necessary but also socially valuable. By working across boundaries of belief, identity, and tradition, interfaith environmental movements help lay the groundwork for more cohesive, resilient, and compassionate societies.

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