

## **Religions in Transformation to Sustainability-the Role of the Sacred in Human Flourishing**

Dr. Mary McAleese June 12 4pm -6pm

Workshop June 12-13 2024 at The New Institute Hamburg

It was Plato who said “The City is what it is because our citizens are what they are”.<sup>1</sup> He could have been talking about today’s planet earth and us the citizens of the earth. There is growing debate about the earth’s existential crises and how to overcome them. The evidence is in that if we continue to be as we are and do as we do then this City which is our Planet Earth will continue to experience the increasingly catastrophic consequences of man-made failures. That statement is utterly ironic in a world where those man-made failures are avoidable and where the rapid technological, scientific and medical advances mainly of the past century have brought great benefits to humanity. Those advances fuelled by the massification of education have released the talents and voices of once disempowered masses. Empires have fallen, democracies have grown, globally agreed treaties and institutions have created a web of principled global connectivity and a degree of collegiality unheard of before the mid twentieth century. None of it is yet enough to stem and turn the tide of human stupidity and iniquity.

There is no doubt that our burgeoning technical, scientific and medical power have the capacity to solve or at least mitigate the problems that beset large swathes of the earth’s citizens whether those problems are man-made or arise from the many cruel way’s nature has of reminding us of our individual and communal vulnerability. But despite all the amazing gamechangers that are reshaping our everyday lives and despite that fact that this generation of earth’s inhabitants have the resources and opportunity to collaboratively lift all of humanity to new heights of widespread well-being our shoulders are not yet fully to the wheels that need to grind to give every child the education, healthcare, nutrition, food security, housing, welfare, empowerment, protection and peace he or she needs to flourish.

Instead, the old gravitational pull of superficiality, elitism, war-mongering, rivalry, exploitation, greed, negligence, short-termism and downright selfishness conspire to ensure that not only are opportunities wasted on a global scale but the very technologies and sciences

---

<sup>1</sup> PRADEAU, JF. - LLOYD, J., *Plato and the City: A New Introduction to Plato's Political Thought* (Liverpool, 2002).

that could be life enhancing are instead menacingly capable of extinguishing life on a global scale, extinguishing even the earth itself.

Why are we in this mess? Could it be as some like Hariri<sup>2</sup> and Legrand<sup>3</sup> suggest that the world of science and technology has far outrun the development of robust moral, spiritual and philosophical engines needed to provide us with the depth of human wisdom and the sound moral compass demanded by these times of churn. If they are right then looking for answers in better and bigger technologies and in the political, economic and social policies that focus on them may simply be kicking a lot of cans down a shortening, land-mined road. Sustainable answers that embrace the earth and all its inhabitants lie in profoundly changed hearts and minds, in remaking the city to a new vision for humanity so that it works for all its citizens, a new vision that leads to a new praxis and not just a welter of worthy words. But while we know we are capable of change, even rapid change as Covid showed, are we capable of the scale of change these times and that vision demand?

Despite years of high-level international discussions, agreements and treaties how trustworthy are the fingers that can press the buttons on devastating nuclear weapons. Not very. Despite years of high-level international discussions, agreements and treaties how effective have been the actions taken to turn back the tide of menacing climate change? Not very. The earth's existential crises exist, are real are immediate and they are our problem but in the eyes of earth's citizenry are they big enough, credible enough, near enough, compelling enough to galvanise a thoroughgoing common human effort focussed on promoting the best interests of all humanity? Can we see any realistic way in which a sense of shared responsibility and of active good neighbourliness can take hold globally in place of the aggressive, hostile, mutually suspicious, mutually ignorant, competitive finger-pointing and othering, the obsessions with things that ignore our mortality and keep us distracted from the urgent problems mounting around us? Are we naïve to imagine humanity is capable of hitting a reset button of such an order of magnitude that we can collaborate to finally end deadly conflict and climate damage so that the future will be made in the likeness of hope from lessons learnt and not from mistakes repeated over and over again?

Today's reality is that the miserable past keeps repeating itself over and over again. Many who inhabit this earth despite huge advances in communication and even because of

---

<sup>2</sup> Hariri, Y.N., Cf. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* ( London 2011); *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* ( London 2015) *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. LEGRAND, T., *Politics of Being*, Ocean of Wisdom Press 2021.

those huge advances, live in embedded and persistent ignorance of one another, fear of one another, contempt for one another, at war with one another at odds with one another or just in simple but treacherous indifference towards one another. Some have too much, most have too little. A few care a lot, most are not bothered.

The earth's resources as in the past are still exploited to the detriment of the many, the aggrandisement of the few, the appeasement of some with crumbs from the rich man's table, the distracting entertainment of the masses with the trivial and frivolous. Political power structures even in the most stable liberal democracies are susceptible to economic and political aneurisms that can weaken their moral core. Fear of the rise of the right can compromise the resolve of the centre, shift its language, harden its heart.

Political and civic leadership at national and international level can and do often work within unified structures. They dialogue their way to agreed plans and targets but have so far been incapable of delivering effective answers whether to ending conflict or reversing climate change. Instead, it often seems that in reality their mutual engagement results in maximum publicity but minimal progress. Instead, they have littered our threatened world with photo ops, worthy words, broken promises, unmet targets, careful compromises and dates for the next meeting where hands will be wrung and ominous warnings issued but in all likelihood nothing much will have improved enough to reassure us that we are making the future work well for a blossoming humanity in a way that the past has not.

Should we just watch hard won democracy disintegrate, cower before yet another generation of self-righteous dysfunctional leaders and their bullying followers, watch such civilisation as we have managed to muster get washed away in the tsunamis of war, poverty, racism, water and fake narratives or do we do as we are doing here- insist on fighting for a culture of human decency and mutual care strong enough to resist the worst in humanity and convincing enough to promote the best that humanity is capable of so that the future will not just be the grim past repeated over and over. Can we change the trajectory of long and deeply embedded thinking and actions that have made bitter enemies and strangers even and especially of near neighbours?

Can the hugely diverse peoples of the earth be rallied purposefully to the causes and the collaborative endeavour that could transform life on earth for the benefit of all, synthesising our focus, becoming single-minded about what really matters, elevating to top priority that humanity- all of it matters, the earth matters and that that these are our highest priorities, because they are sacred core values our common and hallowed by all.

I use the word *sacred* here not in a particularly or exclusively religious sense though I accept it has been used and manipulated by religions and may invoke understandable scepticism. But it has not been consumed to the point of exhaustion by religion and is a concept capable of being understood in the secular as well as the religious spheres<sup>4</sup> as embracing the notions of reverence and respect, of inviolability and precedence demanded by the inalienable dignity of every human being and by the earth itself. It is a word which helps us prioritise putting the earth and its resources at the service of humanity. It is not the opposite of the secular. It is not even at odds with the secular for like the strands in a skein of wool the secular and religious have been woven together for centuries. Rather a sense of the sacred is potentially a powerful and accessible, knowable resource already present within our very secularity as well as our religious spheres.

The sacred simply points up the things that demand to be revered, that are or should be sacrosanct, that are such because they are in the best interests of humanity and the planet. Placed at the centre of an advanced human wisdom a developed politics of the sacred would insist on the protection of the earth from violation, desecration, and damage by us and the protection of the human person from tyranny, cruelty, subjugation imposed by us, so that each can flourish, have a roof, water, food, education, sufficient unto their day and with a careful stewardship of the legacy handed to the next generation.

The sacred understands that nature gives and takes away life; that nature can be cruel, that damage and disease lie unannounced, uninvited around every corner. But a new culture and politics infused with a deep sense of what it is that is or should be sacred to us would insist that these very realities not of our human making provide us with enough challenges to overcome without the additional overwhelming challenge of preventable man-made messes. What is sacred to us should be capable of healing the world, not hurting it. What is sacred to us should not be vanities that desecrate but ideals that consecrate though we have to acknowledge history past and present is littered with sacred vanities that claim divine authorship while wreaking havoc. Slavery, imperialism, manipulation, misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism, religious wars, to name just a few.

When Thomas LeGrand calls for a new politics of being I recognise what we here might more colourfully call a new politics of the sacred. Both are about the business of redefining

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. GRZYMALA-BUSSE, A., *Sacred Foundation: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State* (Princeton 2023).

what is in the best interests of all humanity and the best way to serve those interests in the here and now.

We may be a little nervous around the word sacred for we have to acknowledge that people of faith who are the vast majority of inhabitants of the world are already familiar with this concept. The word sacred already has a place within their world view. It may place limits on that view; It may be more sword than ploughshare. It may even be an obstacle in its current understanding to the development of a new politics of the sacred but also it may not. It could be just the word we need. A word and idea that can be retrieved and retooled to mend a broken world.

Nervousness around discussion of the sacred is a natural consequence of the dismissal of religion because of its at times baleful contribution to human development. Who can doubt its formidable braking effect on the advancement of the human rights of all and especially women and LGBTIQ+ and its toxic dalliance with politics throughout global history including today?

But if we dismiss religion, are we missing out on a transcendent dimension embedded widely in every continent and culture and particularly already present in hearts and minds where there is a familiarity with the notion that some things are of their nature sacred, bigger than anything else, more important even than the biggest of our tribal preoccupations. Could that transcendent dimension if properly harnessed, fed with updated heroic ideals, build dialogical bridges across the many cavernous differences to a miraculous realisation of our common vested interest in elevating to radical new levels of consciousness and action, the sacredness of the earth, of the individual and of creation.

The religions of the world have until recently been largely missing in action on this intriguing front except to the extent that they flatter themselves by preaching to the secular world from the lofty heights of their self-reverential pulpits. They are great at telling governments or indeed each other what to do but not so good, in fact resistant to internal self-critique, to critically pondering their own great givens. But what if their adherents and leaders were invited to consider the possibilities of a new politics of the sacred capable of saving our world and indeed its religions from perdition for of course if the earth disappears its faith systems disappear too. Sad to say that many religions seem more concerned with their own dwindling numbers than the bigger existential picture.

Could the world's religions and their adherents have a significant role to play in building "with other religious and secular actors on the basis of a common ethical foundation of care, love and respect"<sup>5</sup> a wholly new, wholesome, culture of embrace not disgrace.

Let's look at what potential exists, what possible roadmaps can be devised, for making the world's religions and religious actors both active and lapsed, generators of, collaborators with each other and with non-religious actors in, the seminal watershed that can move us out of bunkers and trenches which ironically reinforce instability and global precariousness and help make us instead wherever we are in the world, open shelters of care for all the earth, shepherds of all its peoples.

The story is mixed and complex. It is to a large extent also overlooked, even dismissed but we dismiss the pervasive, ingrained, but also shifting role of religion, at our peril. It is a reality worth understanding. It is a resource worth reevaluating for the evidence is in, particularly here in the Western world that religion itself is in a process of transformation, some might even say of disintegrating as numbers across all the major Christian denominations in the West plummet, finances become parlous, schism, dissent and disinterest conduce to internal existential crises.

That situation creates a real opportunity for radical rethinking. By far the most important characteristic of religion is the elementary fact that according to the PEW/Templeton report eighty four percent of the world's inhabitants are aligned with religion in one form or another and a majority are aligned<sup>6</sup> with the three largest faith systems, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. If the entire world is heading towards falling off a cliff, then religions and religious adherents will be the biggest losers by far.

The process evident currently in Christian Europe, once so strong and hierarchically dominated, so conformist and controlling of members, is of seismic change and a struggle for both credibility and relevance in the face of growing challenge, distrust and cynicism especially among the educated young. It is best summarised by a stanza from Seamus Heaney's poem From the Canon of Expectation: "*What looks the strongest has outlived its term/ the future lies*

---

<sup>5</sup> Extract from the introduction to the Programme for The New Institute Hamburg Workshop on Religions in transformation to Sustainability-the role of the sacred in human flourishing June 12-13 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. PEW-TEMPLETON GLOBAL RELIGIOUS FUTURES December 2022, available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/>

with what is affirmed from under”.<sup>7</sup> Voices and views once silenced within hierarchical systems are now being heard. Many people today walk away from formal religions because they can, because they are human rights literate and know that they have freedom of conscience, opinion, belief, religion including the right to change religion (cf. Universal Declaration of Human Rights). They refuse to be life-long religious conscripts by birth or baptism or cultural initiation as demanded by significant numbers of influential world religions. The prevailing normative notion of faith membership by conscription rather personal conviction is the source of much of today’s crisis within faith systems.

Take the one I know best, the Latin Catholic Church, with a membership of one in six of the world’s population, the biggest NGO in the world, a key influencer on five continents, an unequalled global provider of education and healthcare especially to the poor, the only faith system to have permanent representative status at the United Nations. It has its own extensive legal system, called canon law which insists on the right of its governing hierarchy (Magisterium) to limit the inalienable intellectual freedoms of Church members<sup>8</sup> set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>9</sup>. It also insists that membership begins at Baptism with promises made at Baptism, that the obligations of membership are lifelong and cannot be resiled from. Yet 84 percent of all Catholics are baptised as babies as canon law demands, in other words when non-sentient and incapable of evaluating the nature of the obligations imposed by Baptism and manifestly incapable of making any kind of promises. The myths upon which Church membership and magisterial control are founded are just that, fictions and incapable of sustaining serious scrutiny. And that scrutiny is growing exponentially.

Until recently the 1.3 billion members of the Catholic Church had no internal forum in which to state their views. But the murmurings of an educated laity, a collapse in vocations to the priesthood, a collapse in income, the sound of feet retreating from the Church, created a pressure-cooker context in which Pope Francis resorted to opening a global synodal process. Hard as he tried to keep controversy off the agenda, the genie was already out of the bottle and the which opened up in almost every diocese in the world showed clear support for gender

---

<sup>7</sup> HEANEY S., From the Canton of Expectation, in *The Haw Lantern* (London 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Codex Iuris Canonici*, (=CIC) 25 Jan. 1983, in *AAS* 75/2 (1983) 1-324. The Code was promulgated by JOHN PAUL II, ap. const. *Sacrae disciplinae leges*, 25 Jan. 1983, in *AAS* 75/2 (1983) vii-xiv. (=CIC). The CIC came into effect on 27 Nov. 1983. It abrogated the 1917 Pio-Benedictine *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC/1917). The official language of the CIC is Latin. See canons 209, 212 §1 and 3, 223 §1 and 227. See also CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH (=CDF,) Instruction on infant baptism, *Pastoralis actio*, 20 October 1980, 22, which describes such rights as “an illusion”.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (=UDHR), resolution 217A (III), adopted 10 December 1948.

equality, for an end to demonisation of LGBTIQ people, for accountable governance, protection of children and penalisation of bishops who betray the trust of abuse victims.

While progress seems grindingly slow and papal as well as magisterial pushback is strong the reality is that it is no longer possible to ignore the huge subterranean undertow driven by people of faith in the direction of serious reform. *The future lies with what is affirmed from under*<sup>10</sup> and that constituency can now be reached directly. It no longer bends the knee in passive obedience to the discredited m

Magisterium. It hears and listens to other voices. Recent referenda in Ireland on same sex marriage and abortion showed a voting population nominally at least majority Christian and Catholic, at odds with and overwhelmingly defying Church teaching on both subjects. These and other contested issues repeated particularly in other Christian countries are indicative of the human capacity to change, to be persuaded by compelling arguments, to think again, to act differently, to be transformed by information from within and without. Without faith in that possibility, I would not be here, I could easily be persuaded to let this dismal earth and all who share it disappear in self-inflicted ignominy, to let nature take its course, as it did with the dinosaurs, to concede that after all we humans may not be worth the candle, this earth and all in it may not be worth preserving.

I have reason to know the possibility and the price of transformation. I was born in Belfast shortly after the Second World War had made a bloodbath of Europe. I lived as a Catholic in a sectarian quagmire in a corner of the United Kingdom which called itself a Christian democracy but which was neither. It was a Protestant government for a Protestant people capable of manipulation of laws, partial policing and withholding including by violence the civil rights of Catholics to maintain its hegemony.

There were thankfully wise minds in Northern Ireland and Europe and the US which imagined a world powered by new engines of collaboration, partnership and good neighbourliness. They devised radical new structures to safeguard peace, to promote shared prosperity, to recognise and vindicate the inalienable dignity and human rights of each human. They gave us, the beneficiaries of their genius, protected platforms from which to call out overt despotism, tyranny and authoritarianism as well as their more subtle forms which flourish even in liberal democracies and influential religious institutions. We grew up in that brave new world with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the European Union, a multiplicity of global rights-based treaties with embryonic global

---

<sup>10</sup> See HEANEY S. above.

accountability mechanisms, International Courts, a burgeoning industry of human rights NGO's, free media, social media, massified education, the onward march it seemed of democracy and democratic alliances. None of it unfortunately was enough to stop the streets I grew up in in the United Kingdom, becoming a sectarian war zone where repressive government policies stoked the dying embers of old paramilitarism to a raging flame again. In a small jurisdiction like Northern Ireland, where you can encounter a Christian Church on almost every street corner, the Christmas image of peace on earth and good will to all was dishonoured in the breach, Christians hated other Christians for their politics and their religion with an intensity that caused thousands of deaths and injuries. The Churches in the United Kingdom at governance and leadership level were singularly ineffective for decades in building dynamic networks of common endeavour for peace. A tepid minimalism was the order of the day. But the patient endeavours of the peacemakers over decades eventually gave us a Peace Process and the intercommunal political compromises captured in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998<sup>11</sup> which have made peaceful shared governance and parity of esteem fragile but real.

What that Process taught me was the remarkable transformative power of courageous people, working individually and collectively who believed change was possible, who analysed all sides of the problem with a generosity of spirit, stood in the shoes of the other, refused to be blinded by othering the other and who constructed a vision for a shared, quiet future and developed it against a wall of hostility and scepticism from their friends and enemies alike. Almost all of them drew from deep wells of Christian, religious sensibility and from them I learned what they had firmly believed from the outset eventually revealed the truth of, that within each human heart regardless of whether religious or not, regardless of how skewed their beliefs, there is a sacred space and a space for the sacred that can be appealed to in the pursuit of a culture of common endeavour devoted to the best interests of all humanity. In that space compromise can take hold especially when the alternative is the continuing violence, and when enough of the dogmatic hundred percenters eventually realise that ninety percent of something is better than one hundred percent of nothing.

It is in that space there can be cultivated a willingness to self-critique, to change, to grow, to embrace the other, to warm to the idea of a common human family with the possibility of together finding answers to common human problems. What the Process taught me is that the political and legal and cultural institutions we have designed to underpin peaceful co-

---

<sup>11</sup> The Good Friday Agreement is the Northern Ireland peace accord an International Peace Agreement signed April 10, 1998 and also known as the Belfast Agreement.

existence are in and of themselves not enough without the heft of mobilising the occupants of that sacred space and sense of the sacred. They need to become the persuaders to the future they claim. And they are legion for despite our understandable impatience with religion the quiet people formed usually from childhood in one faith or another, now with access to education, mobility, public debate and the informed insight that past generations lacked are the best hope for the growth of a new politics of the sacred, whether they are still adherents or are lapsed adherents or have left religion behind for whatever reason. They are here and in the now- the same threatening now that impacts everyone.

Today we can say that whatever their dogmatic or other differences they are all part of the twenty first century savvy generations which are living with common existential threats right on their doorsteps no matter what continent or country They are in fact global, transnational, pervasive, hugely influential at individual and communal and cultural level. There is still little convincing evidence of the purposive use of their collective power to be the agents of change we need if this earth is to be nurturing mother and father and family to all its inhabitants. As it could be, as it should be with the right language in which to paint the future. While there has been considerable political discussion nationally and internationally of targets and technologies in the search for solutions which can guarantee sustainability and while there have been some modest but mostly inadequate results, the mobilisation of the massive resource represented by the worlds citizens who carry a sense of the sacred, is still awaited, still needed and with increasing urgency.

Once the possibility of change arises and once the imperative of change becomes desperately obvious as it now is then the extent of change, the content of change, the purpose, the how and why become our call to dialogue, discernment, creative thinking and action. Engaging with people and institutions we have little time for is precisely how problems get resolved. Bunkers, no matter how comfortable need to fling open their doors.

The sheer extent of the undertaking is as exciting as it is ambitious, as undermined by pessimism as it is by the realisation that the power of persuasive ideas is a double-edged sword. History even recent and indeed contemporary discourse shows how toxic ideas, myths, perceptions and ideologies can run amok, can overwhelm and wreak bullying chaos. The danger is that the vast and rapid change of culture and consciousness needed to hold back the surging tide of human stupidity that is continuously fuelling the existential crises will just seem too unlikely, too difficult. The rise of the bullying right can inhibit courageous contradiction but as events this week in Europe and indeed my homeland of Ireland show the centre can hold, must hold.

And yet once we focus on the mobilisation of the sense of the sacred as an ally in the task we can see how it meets our requirements whether we are people of faith or not. The process of radical transformation has to be global in its reach. It has to appeal across physical and cultural borders. It has to reach into hearts and minds already formed along particular and highly differentiated even oppositional pathways and perspectives. It has to reach across the current generations and time is of the essence for no matter how long our lives, in the great scheme that is humanity, life is always very short and the time available to make an impact is short in the short term and shorter still in the medium to long-term.

Evil has swamped our world, century after century. Bloodbaths of epic and industrial proportions have written the history of the world, of the very Europe within living memory in which we meet. We are a sobered European and western citizenry, educated and confident in ways our forebearers were not, seeking to develop the radical answers, ideas and structures which take us far beyond those developed in the post war era and which despite their integrity, with the best will in the world, have not cooled the magma that courses beneath the surface of humanity and which is always in danger of erupting in the zero-sum games of tyranny or worse still apathy. And all the while the existential crisis grows exponentially and we are forced to be spectators as we waste time we do not have. And so we turn our minds to fresh possibilities we have overlooked or dismissed, including the mobilisation of a sense of the sacredness of the earth and human life which is a feature of all major religions and its synthesis into a new problem-solving, epoch changing power, a global politics of the sacred. The obstacles are formidable but far from insurmountable despite the reality that the world's great faith systems have historically worked independently with their backs to one another rather than collaboratively side by side. Not only that but human dominion over the earth including the asserted right to plunder its resources, to conquer a neighbour territory or even his or her mind, has sometimes relied on divine authority gleaned from the great sacred texts and from religious backing. New theologies of the sacred, new scholarly interpretations and challenges are needed to push the idea of the sacred to new and incorruptible limits.

The historic relationship between the world's religions is largely one of historic enmity, mutual suspicion fear of mutual conversion, hubristic claims of exclusive divinely ordained superiority, religious wars, petty vanities. Collaborations and partnerships have been relatively rare. Ecumenical relationships between the major Christian denominations even after decades of late twentieth and early twenty first century endeavour have barely managed to progress beyond photo opportunities and aspirational language. Somehow the focus on doctrinal and dogmatic differences, the unhealed wounds inflicted by history that allows each to see

themselves as victims and martyrs at the hands of the others, have conspired to keep the individual religious bunkers hermetically sealed. But even as the world's children by the tens of million are being educated in their respective faith systems and left largely ignorant of if not indifferent or hostile to the faith systems of others, even as internal disputes tear at the cohesion within denominations and faith institutions and entities, there is a sacred space where voices argue for mutual respect, mutual understanding, dialogue, and tolerance of diversity.

From these have emerged green shoots of hope from advanced thinkers within the major faith systems and political systems which could galvanise a new power of the sacred dedicated to sustainability with support from across the major faith systems and with support from those who espouse no faith but who are just as much impacted by the same existential crises.

Relatively long-standing organisations like the World Parliament of Religions and Religions for Peace in reality have made little impact apart from keeping the space for tepid dialogue warm but green shoots began to break through the surface most visibly in 2015. It was in the lead up to the Paris Climate Accords negotiated by 196 member states of the United Nations and today ratified by almost all. It was the year of significant interventions by leaders of faith systems on the subject of climate change.

There was the Rabbinic Letter on Climate Change<sup>12</sup> signed by hundreds of rabbis insisting that all share responsibility for the earth and the wellbeing of humanity; the Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change<sup>13</sup>; the second Hindu declaration on climate change which noted that despite great diversity within Hinduism there was a unity of faith through which Hindus “will be able to make the sort of inner and outer transitions that addressing climate change requires”. There was the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change<sup>14</sup> issued by Islamic scholars, reconciling climate science with the Quran and calling on Muslims “wherever they may be [...] to tackle habits, mindsets, and the root causes of climate change, environmental degradation, and the loss of biodiversity in their particular spheres of influence, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and bring about a resolution to the challenges that now face us”.

---

<sup>12</sup> Published May 12 2015. Text available at: [https://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/climate\\_declar](https://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/climate_declar)

<sup>13</sup> May 12 2015. text available at: [https://fore.yale.edu/files/buddhist\\_climate\\_change\\_statement\\_5](https://fore.yale.edu/files/buddhist_climate_change_statement_5)

<sup>14</sup>Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change 18 August 2015, available at, [https://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/climate\\_declar](https://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/climate_declar)

The Church of England Synod<sup>15</sup> in that year urged world leaders to work for the global consensus needed to provoke action on carbon reduction and it pledged to look internally at what it could do in practical ways to promote actions which were consonant with sustainability.

Of all the faith interventions in 2015 probably the most comprehensive and impactful was that of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*<sup>16</sup> which may yet prove to be his most enduring legacy. Repeating and building on concerns which had been expressed by his predecessors John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, and acknowledging the concerns expressed by other religions he addressed not just Catholics but "every person living on this planet" saying:

"The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all. The worldwide ecological movement has already made considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges. Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity..... A healthy politics is sorely needed, capable of reforming and coordinating institutions, promoting best practices and overcoming undue pressure and bureaucratic inertia. It should be added, though, that even the best mechanisms can break down when there are no worthy goals and values, or a genuine and profound humanism to serve as the basis of a noble and generous society."<sup>17</sup>

Within the text of *Laudato Si'* was a strong theological advocacy for individual and collective responsibility. It was followed in 2019 by the Abu Dhabi Declaration (Fraternal Declaration) between Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar<sup>18</sup> which invites "all persons who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and

---

<sup>15</sup> 13 July 2015 . Cf. <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/urgent-action-needed-climate-change-urges-synod>

<sup>16</sup> FRANCIS, encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, available at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_ enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_ enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>17</sup> FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, paras. 13; 14; 181.

<sup>18</sup> *A Document on Human Fraternity*. Text available at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/docu\\_ments/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_ documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/docu_ments/papa-francesco_20190204_ documento-fratellanza-umana.html)

work together.... to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings' brothers and sisters." This is by far the most important document in terms of inter-faith dialogue for it embraces the world's two biggest religions accounting for virtually half the world's population and exhorts a future of ongoing dialogue designed to break down mutual fear and ignorance and to "declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard." They called on world leaders "to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace; to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood and bring an end to wars, conflicts, environmental decay and the moral and cultural decline that the world is presently experiencing." They asked leaders and would-be influencers "to rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere."

In recent years more conscious debate on the issues covered in the Abu Dhabi Declaration including dialogue concerning peacebuilding and climate sustainability is evident within faith systems and inter-faith groups which have built networks of common endeavour particularly in the lead up to COP intergovernmental meetings since Paris. So an emerging nucleus of effort and focus is evident. An emerging though still inchoate theology of the role of the sacred in care for the earth is also evident. But given that 84 percent of the world's citizens have a religious affiliation somehow there is a real deficit in terms of political impact and identifiable progress. One wonders why.

The answer lies in how major faith systems self-identify as the teachers and not as those who have something to learn. That is their *modus operandi*, to preach, to teach, to convert, to rely on old worn texts, to resist updating, to assume they know best and have everything to offer others and little to learn from them. The Latin Catholic Church to which I belong is good at telling the rest of the world how to behave, what to believe. It has very poor self-critiquing skills, is quick to reprimand, penalise internal criticism no matter how deserved or well-intentioned. It is still operating a governance and decision-making structure that is unelected, unaccountable, hierarchical, exclusively male and self-perpetuating. It is increasingly irrelevant to its own constituency. The gender decision making gap is of gargantuan proportions. When it preaches human rights and dialogue it can easily be accused of hypocrisy and populist minimalism. Yet still it has created important conduits for discussion, mutual discernment, challenge and change, the impetus for which more often comes from below and is not driven top down but puts pressure for top-down responses. A global web of politics of

the sacred capable of embracing the world's religious leaders and faithful could be their redemption and their challenge. In alliance with to the secular, political world it could be something almost miraculous. A new politics of the sacred could be the Hail Mary pass the world has been waiting for. What benign power that alignment of secular, spiritual, religious and non-religious interests and actions could unleash into our world.

Now we just need the coherent vision to inspire the people of the City with new ideas, respectful but relentless dialogue, persuasive arguments, a message of hope, a call to action and faith in the capacity of the heart and mind to be changed. The people of the City are reachable, erudite, cultivated and ready as never before to reappraise the old systems and structures that have dragged them down these cul de sacs of cluelessness and worst practice. The politics of the sacred for those of real faith and those of none could prove to be nothing less than the fulness of Nature/God's plan for humanity and its earthly home, made real, at last.

.

.