
Book Review

Khushwant Singh and Judith Steinau-Clark (eds.), *Voices from Religions on Sustainable Development* (Bonn: German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation [BMZ], 2016), 159 pp. No ISBN. May be ordered from ReligionMatters@giz.de.

In September 2015, world leaders met at the United Nations to hammer out the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, launching its seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) four months later. Replacing the Millennium Development Goals, which expired in 2015, the SDGs aim to reduce significantly poverty, inequality and the devastation wrought by climate change. The UN recognizes the engagement of multiple stakeholders as crucial to the attainment of these goals, in particular, governments, civil society, and the private sector. Yet might religious communities and leaders also have an essential role to play in the SDGs' successful implementation? This book presents a choir of voices all singing 'yes'.

The realization of the SDGs is a chief goal of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ). During the 2015 consultations leading to the drafting of the SDGs, representatives of this ministry met with religious representatives from around the world who expressed a deep interest in working towards a more just, sustainable, and ecologically sound planet. These discussions gave rise to the present book.

Written in English, this book offers views on ten different religions' potential contributions to the SDGs. These religions include the three main Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as well as Baha'i, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Lenape, an indigenous community whose traditional homeland includes parts of the northeastern US and Canada. As if to symbolize a key theme of sustainable development—cooperation—each of the contributions was co-authored by two or three religious representatives, including high-ranking officials, scientists, institute leaders, and community activists. The book further contains an introduction by BMZ's director, Dr. Gerd Müller, and two forewords, the first by His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje and the second by H.E. Horst Köhler, the former Federal President of Germany (2004–2010). These prefacing texts stress religions' functions of conveying values, shaping worldviews, and driving social action. Köhler especially stresses the themes of cooperation, global partnership, and interconnectedness. Both he and the Karmapa suggest that a new global culture or movement may be emerging, one that teaches the values of mutual respect, peace, and reciprocity.

Each contribution is explicitly organized around the Sustainable Development Agenda's five Ps: planet, people, prosperity, peace, and partnership. Moreover, the chapters implicitly refer to the three main goals of reducing poverty and inequality

while fighting climate change. Although purportedly descriptive, the entries are instead prescriptive in that they present each religion in rather idealized form, corresponding to the SDGs. This presentation reflects the purpose of the book, as stated by Müller: it aims to provide ‘insights and ideas’, not ‘cut and dried theological positions’. The book thus represents a source of inspiration, a call to action, and a common basis for interreligious dialog.

Some of the contributors’ ideas are already well known to anyone familiar with other works on religion and sustainability or environmentalism. Christians are stewards of Creation; Muslims are caliphs, designated to maintain the balance set by Allah; Buddhists seek to overcome poisonous mental formations. Yet other insights reveal interesting differences in perspective not only between but also within religions. A case in point is the assertion of all contributors that their religion considers all humans to be of worth and dignity. The Lenape ground this claim in their belief that humans are part of Mother Earth, connected as kin with the rest of the cosmos. Muslims, instead, argue that all humans are the progeny of Adam. Surely Jews and Christians could say the same; instead, the Jewish contribution derives the principle of human dignity from the scriptural exhortation to love one’s neighbor and the stranger, while the Christian contribution argues that all people are created in the image of God. Interestingly, this partly overlaps with the Hindu view, recounted in the text, that because God is in everything, all humans deserve respect.

The place of each religion in the world’s economic hierarchy also plays a role in some entries. For example, the Hindu contribution decries the inequality of wealth between the global North and global South. The Lenape, long ago stripped of their ancestral lands and the target of a colonialist pseudo-development, play with the motif of the American Dream, turning it on its bloated consumerist head and proposing a new dream based on the interconnectedness of all life and long-term sustainability. The Christian authors encourage their fellows in faith to admit to the theological sin of justifying the domination of Creation while exhorting them to admit their complicity in fostering social injustice.

Despite the framework provided by the five Ps, the contributions cannot completely mask those differences that may create interreligious or social strife, such as prosperity and status. Yet the contributors discuss these issues in ways that emphasize how people with more goods or prestige may benefit not just themselves but all of society. For example, the authors on Islam defend the acquisition of wealth and an unequal distribution of goods within measure with charity and social justice as guiding principles. The authors also promote competition, quoting the Quran as encouraging competition in doing good works. Furthermore, the Lenape authors claim that people with special talents have always been honored. Indeed, the unique contribution of each individual upholds the common good. The Baha’i contributors suggest a similar perspective, quoting scripture as saying that an individual is most honored and distinguished by being the greatest force for social good. The Buddhist contribution, instead, presents sufficiency as an essential factor of a healthy economy.

Given the book’s purpose of demonstrating how religions can contribute to the SDGs, its contributors gloss over the teachings and practices in many of the given religions that support forms of injustice or inequality, such as gender inequality. The histories, rules, and current practices of most of the religions in the book show plainly enough that they have often fostered the worst forms of abuse against the Earth and fellow human beings. Indeed, there are plenty of voices—of traditionalists, funda-

mentalist, climate change deniers, and lovers of war—who will continue to shout out religious justification for ethnic and gender discrimination, environmental exploitation, and economic disparity. This book is an important contribution to a growing chorus of individuals who choose to emphasize those aspects of their religion that champion peace, human dignity, mutual respect, and wonder at the magnificent web of life.

Finally, the book raises the question of whether the religious preoccupation with global problems such as climate change, war, and inequality within and between nations is producing a new kind of universal religion. Two aspects of the book might lead a reader to answer this question affirmatively. First, Köhler calls on religions to play a central role in helping attain the SDGs, arguing in line with the 1993 Parliament of World Religions that all world religions share two ethical principles: (1) 'humanity (every individual has the right to be treated humanely)' and (2) 'reciprocity (we must treat others as we wish others to treat us—the Golden Rule)' (p. 10). Second, the five Ps of the Sustainable Development Agenda and the collapse of the seventeen goals into three act to constrain the presentation of each religion, thereby partially homogenizing them. In light of both of these factors, the book may possibly be seen as a sign of 'an emerging civil earth religion or planetary civilization in which people with very different metaphysical understandings could find common ground, recast themselves as citizens of the Earth (whatever other identities they may hold), and sincerely work together to create sustainable and equitable societies' (Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016: 354). Only time will tell if the idealistic sketches of the religions presented in this book can be transformed into reality, if the individual voices singing good tidings can be transformed into a well-functioning, harmonious symphony.

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Reference

Taylor, Bron, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Zaleha. 2016. 'The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis', *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10.3: 306-78.