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WATER AND SPIRITUALITY FOR CLIMATE ADAPTATION

A report on the WAC webinar on 19th October 2021

This session was one in a series of webinars organized by the Water Adaptation Community WAC, hosted by the Global Centre on Adaptation (GCA). Further information about these webinars and other events organized by WAC, please visit <https://communities.adaptationexchange.org/water-town-halls>.

Background

People have always understood the value of water to sustain life, health, economies and ecosystems. A lot of cultural heritage has been built around water over the millennia. Examples are civil structures for water supply and for defence against water-related perils, for navigation, and for the generation of energy. Also part of this heritage are the governance systems set up for equitable and efficient management of water resources. Besides, societies and religions have developed a multitude of visions, rituals and practices related to water.

Despite the abundance of water-related cultural heritage, its significance for addressing present and future climate challenges is not widely recognised. This is partly due to the complexity of our relationship with water, and partly because of disciplinary and institutional divides between water managers and heritage experts.

As a contribution to COP26 and to kickstart the Community of Practitioners on Water and Heritage, GCA's Water Adaptation Community (WAC) and the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Water and Heritage (ISC Water) organized this dialogue among spiritual leaders, who discussed water-related spirituality as a source of inspiration and wisdom to cope with climate change impacts on the water cycle—such as the increase in the frequency of droughts, floods and storms. This was a precursor to the dialogue among spiritual leaders to be held at the UN Water Decade Mid Term Review to be held in New York (2023).

Key questions:

- What does a spiritual view on climate challenges look like?
- Can spirituality prove to be a source of resilience to climate change effects?
- How do we build upon our water-related cultural heritage, to forge strategies for climate change adaptation?

Speakers and panellists at the webinar included:

- (Moderator) **Sergio Ribeiro**, Director General, CIRAT, Brazil, and Board Member, ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Water
- **Maria Hammershoy**, Justice and Peace Europe
- **Austin Núñez**, Leader of the Wa:k Community
- **Mona Polacca**, Native American Spiritual Elder, Havasupai Community; Char, International Council of the 13 Indigenous Grandmothers
- **Hasan Shikoh**, Lecturer, University of Birmingham
- **Valériane Bernard**, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University UN Representative
- **Venerable Chan Master Hsin Tao**, Founding Abbot of the Linj Jiou Mountain Buddhist Society and Founder of the Museum of World Religions
- **Iberê Guarany Mbyá**, Guanary Tribe Leader, Brazil
- **Sister Marvie Misolas**, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic's

Visions on adaptation to Climate Change: Faith and spirituality-based perspectives

Setting the scene, the moderator, **Sergio Ribeiro (CIRAT Brazil and ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on water)**, pointed out that much of the discussion around climate change is anchored in facts, figures and technocratic solutions. While that is but understandable, it is also important to recognise the value of the perspectives and solutions contained in our “inner world”—one where our

spirituality and religious perspectives reside. He pointed out that the webinar was meant to (a) contribute to discussions at COP26, (b) kickstart the Community of Practitioners on Water and Heritage, GCA's Water Adaptation Community, and (c) act as precursor to the dialogue among spiritual leaders to be held at the UN Water Decade Mid Term Review to be held in New York (2023).

Maria Hammershoy was representing **Justice and Peace Europe**, a network of 32 national Justice and Peace Commissions mandated by their Bishop's Conferences. Ms. Hammershoy pointed out that religious institutions, including the Catholic Church, have often stepped up in times of calamity, exhibiting much capacity for disaster relief and caring for affected communities. At the same time, stewardship of resources was very much coded into the core beliefs of the Catholic faith. Catholic social teaching calls for stewardship of natural resources, based on the principles of universality (referring to the universal importance of natural resources and to faith being a universal voice), common good (including the principle of lesser evil, which guides the choice between difficult options), and preferential option of the poor (e.g. mindfulness that the poor are the hardest hit by climate change effects). The church has not operated in isolation but interacted with policy and governance where needed, as evident in examples such as Justice and Peace Europe's contribution to the EU consultations on International Ocean Governance and EU Arctic Policy.

Mona Polacca, an elder of the **Havasupai community in North America** and **Chair of the International Council of the 13 Indigenous Grandmothers**, highlighted the inextricable relationship between natural resources and ethos of indigenous communities around the world. She pointed at water as a substance necessary for survival of all life, and therefore the connection that binds all life forms. She explained that indigenous people are those who continue to live where they originated, a decision guided by the belief that the creator has put them there as custodians of the natural resources. She called attention to that instinct of custodianship that underlies most faiths, and nurture the environment from a state of fragility to one of resilience, in the face of climate change effects.

Austin Núñez, a leader of the indigenous **Wa:k community** with home in southern United States and northern Mexico, narrated the story of both the origin and future of his community being inextricably linked to water and climate. The Wa:k community made its home in the region hundreds of years ago because a river flowed there. However, the river all but disappeared as rains became irregular and snow packs on the Colorado mountains thinned out. The community is now dependent for its water needs on a river 300 miles away. There have been only 1 or 2 rainfall events over the past 3-4 years, leaving the community battling a long drought.

Hasan Shikoh from **University of Birmingham** laid out the various teachings of Islam that guide the day-to-day interactions of the faithful with water and other natural resources, as well as imbibe them within their spirituality and culture. He cited the example of the Ali Asghar Water Appeal, an initiative to raise money for improving water supply in arid/semi-arid areas in the developing world, which is based on a Quranic story of a child who succumbed to thirst on a difficult journey. Mr. Shikoh stressed that this example showed how religion and spirituality can be invoked to mobilise resources for climate adaptation.

Valérie Bernard, from the **Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University**, outlined the view on natural resources in the Brahma Kumari philosophy, which has its spiritual underpinnings in Hinduism. Ms. Bernard emphasized the role of personal choices we make as consumers and citizens and the impact that they have, among other things, on climate mitigation and adaptation. Consequently, mitigation/adaptation efforts would hinge on individual participation and action to a large extent. Drawing on the Hindu philosophy of Karma, Ms. Bernard posited that nature caters to human needs when humans protect nature, and called for individual-level contributions towards natural resource management. She outlined the work done by Brahma Kumaris in this regard, such as efforts towards greening of land, water harvesting, supporting small-scale agriculture to be more productive and sustainable. She concluded by inviting participants to the [Interfaith Talanoa Dialogue Towards COP26](#) (October 31).

Venerable Chan Master Hsin Tao, **Founding Abbot of the Linj Jiou Mountain Buddhist Society and Founder of the Museum of World Religions**, explained the Buddhist perspective of viewing the earth as an organism, or a system of interlocked parts. While acknowledging the importance of individuals doing their bit for the ecosystem, he argued that there is a need to proactively facilitate them to do so, through

education and awareness raising. This is the idea behind the 'University of Life and Peace,' founded by Master Hsin Tao himself, which offers education in the area of 'Spiritual Ecology.' In his own words, Spiritual Ecology is "the discovery that everything is equal and that we are in partnership with each other." His speech is found [here](#).

Iberê Guarany Mbyá, a Guanyary Tribe Leader from Brazil, began by reflecting upon his name—Iberê—which means 'the path of water' in Guarany language. This, to him, was a reflection of the recognition of the value of natural resources by indigenous cultures. He made an appeal to recognise the connection that living beings have with each other, and to recognise how damages to the natural resource base corrodes the lives and livelihoods of indigenous communities. As example, he pointed specifically to the 2000 dams upon Brazilian rivers that he claimed have displaced more than 1 million people. He also cited river pollution as an example of extractive development, and the sparse coverage water and sanitation facilities in Brazil as an example of its limitations. In conclusion, he called again for a greater respect for natural resources like water, suggesting that we could learn more from indigenous cultures how to do that. His full speech is found [here](#).

Sister Marvie Misolas from **Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic's** drew attention to the catastrophic forms climate change can assume, by sharing her experience working in her native Philippines which has been battered by increasingly frequent typhoons over the years. She argued that any discussion on spirituality and climate change should include the idea of climate justice. For governments and other institutions that wield significant power in the matter, this should mean delivering what was promised in the Paris agreement rather than playing up the idea of 'resilience' of communities.

Sister Marvie pointed to Thomas Berry's ten principles of jurisprudence as a key basis for this idea. Principle #2 therein posits that every member of the Earth community has the rights to be, to habitat the planet, and to fulfil their role within the community. No. 5 among the principles explains that all members of the community have intrinsic relationships with each other and, by extension, obligations towards each other. Humans must recognise nurturing and protecting the environment as one of these obligations.

Panel Discussion

A panel discussion followed the presentations. It was based on questions and comments from the audience.

Would it be useful for religious/ spiritual leaders to receive training in specific actions that contribute to climate change mitigation/adaptation?

Maria Hammershoy: Faith-based communities have a good understanding of the value of natural resources like water, and the importance of their good management. This goes for most religions. It might be more important to offer such orientations to large corporations, the 'little man' should not be expected to assume all responsibilities towards climate mitigation/ adaptation

Sister Marvie Misolas: It was my studies at the University of Peace in Costa Rica that oriented me towards the field of Climate Change. So we would all do well to engage more with formal education, science and policy institutions. With the same consideration, Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic's engage actively with climate funds to support their climate-related work.

How can climate interventions reach the general public, who might not be privy to high level interventions?

Valériane Bernard: There is a strong case to be made for faith-based organisations here, whose interventions engage individuals among the general public directly. Spirituality can be the part of the mitigation/adaptation efforts that assuage the anxiety created by the climate emergency, and bring a sense of power and hope to people.

An example of faith-based communities taking specific, pointed climate action is when their members pull their investments out of banks with and corporations with a bad climate records; and investment in institutions with more sustainable portfolios.

Is there a need for faith-based solutions/ interventions to connect with policy, or is it their comparative advantage to operate on a parallel track”?

Maria Hammershoy: Faith-based organisations represent real people, they are parts of the society. Thus, their view should definitely be taken into account in policy and legislative processes. Politicians do listen to corporations, the scientific community, and civil society; but not faith-based organisations. This is to the detriment of the policy process.

Ways Forward

In the follow up to the webinar, a community of practice on Water and Culture was set up on the Water Adaptation (WAC) website. <https://communities.adaptationexchange.org/knowledge-base/water-and-culture>

Additionally, webinar organisers as well as a wider range of organisations belonging to water, heritage, and spirituality communities co-drafted and signed a statement on ‘Water-related Spirituality for Climate Adaptation.’ The statement served to inform discussions that followed at COP26. <https://communities.adaptationexchange.org/knowledge-base/water-and-culture/water-and-spirituality-statement>

