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The international workshop “Religions and the Environment: Methodological Reflection and the Contribution from Social Sciences”, held in Warsaw 27-28 June 2024

KSENIYA MEDVEDEVA

Major religious leaders advocate for environmental awareness and action. However, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian communities as well as new religious movements have responded to their leaders' appeals unevenly, with their reactions ranging from eco-theology and deep ecology to climate change denial and indifference. Many religious grassroots initiatives are engaged in environmental action independently of respective religious leaders. How does environmental awareness change the life of contemporary religious communities? How do they accept and reject, contest and engage with environmental topics? And how can social studies contribute to understanding the greening of religions?

On the 27th and 28th June 2024 the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences held an international workshop in Warsaw, Poland. The intention of the workshop was to gather social scientists and environmental practitioners in order to discuss the environmental engagement of faith-based communities from a social science perspective and to provide reflections on the methodology of research involving such groups and their related activism.

Thirteen participants from eight countries (Italy, Denmark, Poland, Lithuania, Switzerland, Türkiye, Canada, and the United Kingdom) were invited to present their research related to the environmental engagement of religious communities.

The papers presented at the workshop included scholarly research relating to groups from Islam, Buddhism, the main Christian denominations



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(Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant), neo-paganism, and new religious movements such as the Anastasia Ringing Cedars movement.

The geographical scope of the presented research covered South and North America, Europe, and Asia. The participants presented unique first-hand field material and gave voice to their research interlocutors from Laos, India, Nepal, Italy, Poland, Ukraine, Greece, Türkiye, the United States, Canada, the Brazilian Amazon, and worldwide – in the latter case, in the context of a qualitative survey of eco-villages.

Speaking of methodological aspects, the presentations discussed methods relating to the discourse/content analysis of religious texts, (non-) participant observation, interview, survey in a mixed-method study of eco-villages worldwide, and activist research in ethnographic fieldwork, which involves video production and collaboration with local activists and city administration.

The workshop “Religions and Environment” lasted two days and included five sessions with twelve presentations which allowed enough time for discussion and networking. The first session included two papers both using the method of the content/discourse analysis of religious texts in their relation to ecology and environment. One paper analysed Italian and Polish newspapers and discussed the impact of the *Laudato si* encyclical Letter and the greening of Catholic personalism (Wojciech Sadłoń, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland). Another paper analysed Friday sermons prepared and distributed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs and discussed the environmental topics brought up in these texts (Figen Uzar Özdemir, Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University, Türkiye). The session incorporated a discussion on anthropocentrism, which, on the one hand, is the reason for the current ecological crisis, as claimed by Lynn White (1967), but which, on the other hand, is presented as a solution to ecological problems in contemporary Christian eco-theology.

The second session addressed the issues of emic and etic perspectives in research and comprised three papers. One discussed the reception of environmental ideas and initiatives in the Orthodox Church in the United States and Greece (Ksenia Medvedeva, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland), another presented a critical analysis of neo-pagan approaches to ecology through a meta-modern lens (Marco Castagnetto, University of Turin, Italy), and the third one dealt with Christian identity and environmental perspectives among the Hmong of South East Asia (Rachel Grandey, University of Leeds, UK). The session provoked discussions on the terminology used by

researchers to denote religious groups, language limitations such as the absence of specific vocabulary for the studied phenomena (e.g., no words for “religion” or “environment” in Hmong), and the conscious avoidance of certain jargon by informants.

The final session of the day addressed the stakeholders of research and included two presentations from environmental practitioners. Magdalena Kadziak (a Catholics for the Environment representative) talked about green parishes in Poland, and Nilos Nellis (an Eastern Orthodox priest and representative of the Orthodox Church of America) spoke about the wilderness retreat he runs on a remote island in Canada.

The second day began with three presentations and tackled the topics of the researcher’s impact on the field, indigenous people, agency and environmentalism, national and transnational ecologies, and faith-based ecological networks. The participants discussed “waste interventions”, i.e. researcher-driven waste-management practices in Dharamshala, India (presented by Trine Brox, University of Copenhagen, Denmark); Catholic environmentalism in the Brazilian Amazon (Isacco Turina, University of Bologna, Italy); and the impact of sustainable innovations in eco-villages on local communities (Nadine Brühwiler, University of Basel, Switzerland). The session provoked discussion on the stakeholders of research and the expectations of the studied communities from researchers and their research. It turned out that such expectations vary: in some cases, religious communities are rather skeptical of academic research – of its benefit, its necessity, and its impact. In other cases, such research “is running late” to address the burning issues related to environment protection in religious communities, where the slow process of publication cannot keep up with changes in the field.

The final session of the workshop included two papers and discussed the idea of desacralisation; one paper looked at the ambivalent attitude towards waste as a factor in understanding religion, the environment, and menstrual hygiene management in Sankhu, Nepal (Sierra Humbert, University of Copenhagen, Denmark), the other presented recent developments in the ecospiritual utopia of the Anastasia Ringing Cedar movement in the light of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson, University of Vilnius, Lithuania).

The conference ended with a field trip to St Patrick’s Roman Catholic parish in Warsaw, which is known as a green parish. The workshop participants were met by the gardener of the parish and two *Laudato si* movement activists, who gave a tour of the parish grounds and its green areas.



The full book of abstracts is available on the webpage of the organizer.¹

1 Religions and Environment: Methodological Reflection and Contribution from Social Sciences [online], “Program and Abstracts”, <<https://ifispan.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Religions-and-Environment-Program-and-abstracts.pdf>>, [2. 7. 2024]. The workshop and this review were prepared with financial support from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 847639 and from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. I also acknowledge the support of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, grant agreement PAN. BFB.S.BDN.310.022.2022, PASIFIC 2 ECOCO.