

## ***Fé no Clima: Faith Communities and Climate Change***

**By Denise Pini Rosalem da Fonseca, Maria Rita Villela, and Alice Amorim Vogas**

The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy...and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation...and we scientists don't know how to do that.

*Scientist Gustave Speth, 2013*

We are being invited to change our development model, because the present model is unsustainable and is based on the ideal of *having*, when it should be based on the ideal of *being*.

*Senator Marina Silva, 2015*

My Franciscan brothers have all learned (...) that we should seek for caring of Mother Earth (...) but this does not mean that the ecological consciousness of my confreres changed.

*Friar Sérgio Görger, 2015*

### **Introduction**

Since the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, in June 2015, we have been witnessing a historical convergence of understanding coming from the scientific, political, and religious fields regarding the urgency of taking action to care for the planet. However, the complexity that emerges from the intersection of these diverse fields presents important challenges to those committed to contributing critical thinking and initiatives to support this emerging ecological consciousness. *Fé no Clima: Comunidades religiosas e mudanças climáticas* (Faith on Climate: Religious Communities and Climate Change), an initiative designed to face such challenges, took place from May to September 2015 in Rio de Janeiro. A well-established Brazilian NGO that had previously worked on issues of religious diversity and human rights (*Instituto de Estudos da Religião* - ISER) and another organization that works on climate change and development projects (*Gestão de Interesse Público* - GIP) created the initiative.

This article describes and discusses *Fé no clima* from the following standpoints: 1) the religious context of contemporary Brazil, where neo-Pentecostal intolerance towards non-Christian faith communities constitutes a human rights matter; 2) the relevance, in such a context, of multi-faith work in the search for a new ecological consciousness, as an opportunity to reshape social and political agendas, and 3) the multi-faith environmental work carried out by ISER since 1992, in view of the 2015 Conference of Parties in Paris.

### **The political need for a spiritual and cultural transformation in Brazil**

Brazil has been one of the world's most populous Catholic nations for more than two centuries, but that has shifted over the last two decades. The national census of 1872 registered Catholics as 100% of the population prior to the proclamation of Brazilian republican regime (1889). For more than 100 years of republican life, that figure remained over 90% of the national population.

The religious affiliations of Indigenous populations, as well as those of people of African ethnicities who had been forcefully migrated to the country, were systematically ignored by national census considerations through the 1940's, due to a combination of religious prejudice and the political denial of civil rights to those communities. Traditional Protestant denominations started to figure in the national census at the eve of the republican period, but their count remained well under 10% of the population up until the end of the military regime in the beginning of the 1980's.

After the promulgation of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Brazil in 1988 —the so-called “Citizen’s Constitution”—the Christian religious segment of the population, along with many other social movements, restated their faith communities’ identities, established new political agendas, and developed other forms of advocacy. In this context, religious intolerance towards non-Christian faith communities not only continued in the social-religious arena, but also emerged in the form of unabashed political activism led by recently created Brazilian neo-Pentecostal denominations.

According to the last official religious census (IBGE, 2010), Brazil’s population is composed of 64.6% Catholics; 22.2% Protestants (including traditional Protestants and Brazilian neo-Pentecostals); 8% with no religious affiliations; 2% Spiritualists; 0.3% with African-Brazilian religions, and a mere .03% with Indigenous traditions; 3% are members of various other religions. The exponential expansion of the population with neo-Pentecostal affiliations in the last 20 years —particularly in African-Brazilian and Indigenous communities, which were historically registered as part of the Catholic denomination—is a phenomenon that has been raising concerns regarding the relationship between religious affiliations and the public sphere, especially in the field of politics (VITAL, 2015).

Although the Brazilian republican state is legally defined as secular, recent events at the National Congress provide strong evidence that the religious political agendas of congressmen and women who belong to Brazilian neo-Pentecostal churches and who comprise the so-called “Evangelical Bench” have heavily influenced the political process. Even though internally diverse and not politically unified, the Evangelical Bench adopts generally conservative positions concerning critical issues such as: pro-fossil fuel industry; anti-environmental protection; pro-extensive monoculture; anti-abortion; anti-GLBT people, and, most recently, support for the impeachment of the left-wing President of the Republic. At the voting session at the Chamber of Deputies, held in April 17, 2016, over 80% of the Evangelical Bench voted in favor of the charges against the President.

While there is not yet enough research on the impact of the Evangelical Bench with regards to environmental protection, control of deforestation, and carbon emissions reduction, it has become obvious from the recent history of Brazil that any analysis of approaches to climate change issues in the country will necessarily need to face the question of religious affiliation. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that religious membership does not only have an influence in the macro-political sphere — like in Congress—but also in the micro-politics of everyday life. Considering that most of the Brazilian population professes some level of religious affiliation, religious ethics and values will inevitably shape environmental opinions and actions at a local level as well as a national one.

Thus, considering that environmental issues —and in this case, climate change— have interfaces with a more comprehensive political arena, where public policy is conceived, and the level of everyday practice, both of which reflect the influence of faith communities, ISER has devoted work to investigating how the actors of different faith communities have been shaping agendas in Brazil regarding the challenge of climate change. What follows is a brief description of ISER’s study of the history of multi-faith environmental work from 1992 to the present, which laid the groundwork for *Fé no Clima*.

### **History of ISER’s engagement with environment and climate change**

ISER was founded in 1970, in the context of the Brazilian military regime. It came into being through the joint efforts of a number of scholars who were interested in the impact of religion upon Brazilian society. Some of those were deeply involved with liberation theology<sup>1</sup> in Brazil. The Institute hosted academic research and became a place where scholars could develop their investigations in a less structured atmosphere than at universities.

By the end of the 1980s, the Institute had started to become involved with new issues that were arising in the public arena, in the context of the end of the military regime and the promulgation of the Citizen’s Constitution. This was the period of newfound openness within Brazilian civil society and social movements, and many intellectuals at ISER played important roles in the participatory process of writing the 1988 Constitution. Therefore, ISER was ready to play a major role in the preparations for what came to be one of the largest and most important international intergovernmental and civil society events in the world: the United Nations Earth Summit of 1992, the so-called ECO-92.

It was then that ISER began to place the environment as a research theme at the heart of its agenda. At the ECO-92 Conference, ISER organized the memorable Interreligious Vigil *One Night for the Earth*, which lasted for 12 hours, with public concerts and prayers from different faith communities from all over the world, in honor of Mother Earth (Vigília Interreligiosa, 1992). The Institute also developed a series of studies (both qualitative and quantitative) on sustainable development called “What do Brazilians think of environment and sustainable consumption?” (ISER, 1992; 1997 & 2002; NATURA, 2006 & MMA, 2012).

In 2007, the British Embassy in Brazil commissioned an adapted version of this study. The result is the report called “What do Brazilian leaders think of climate change and Brazilian engagement?”, which presents the findings of the investigation within six different societal sectors: government, media, congress, private sector, civil society and NGOs, and academia. Although core to the reflections at ISER, religious leaders were left out of this research, as the commissioner’s guidelines of the commissioner did not allow for reflections on this sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Liberation theology is a radical socioreligious movement that emerged in South America in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, arguing that the Catholic Church should devote itself to bringing about social change, in alliance with the poor and other oppressed groups.

But in 2009, ISER organized the Meeting of Religious Leaders on Climate Change, which was attended by representatives of 13 different religious traditions. This success of this multi-faith configuration highlighted the importance of diversity in the learning process for people of different cultural, ethical and spiritual backgrounds. The main concerns that emerged in that meeting pointed to the urgency of developing: 1) a pedagogy of climate change for the religious sector; 2) environmental education for action through faith communities, and 3) skills and experience to enable faith communities to articulate their environmental concerns to different levels of political actors (ISER, 2009).

### **Learning about a spectrum of ecological sacred values and faith-inspired actions**

GIP was created in 2011 with the mission of “combining actors and knowledge to promote social and environmental justice.”<sup>2</sup> One of the organization’s goals is to raise the issue of climate change among different political groups in Brazil, so as to find ways to promote advocacy and help them influence the national and international political arena.

In view of the fact that nowadays religious groups are extremely influential at the Brazilian governmental level, and also have a great impact on everyday community life and political ethics, GIP partnered with ISER to design a strategy for mapping ongoing climate change debate within the religious segment. That partnership gave birth to Fé no Clima. Broadly speaking, it was intended that the initiative should provide positive answers to the needs identified by the Meeting of Religious Leaders on Climate Change and identify further advocacy strategies.

Three central values served as the organizing themes of Fé no Clima: *Reconciliation* —the search for resacralizing the relationship between humanity and nature; *Care* —a new ecological consciousness to enable a revised comprehension of humankind’s role with regards to nature, and *Socioenvironmental Justice* —the construction of instruments to help faith communities articulate environmentalist agendas in defense of the most vulnerable, with a focus on climate change. Designed as a set of events and activities for knowledge production, Fé no Clima consisted of: 1) an initial national qualitative research and internet inventory of initiatives connecting faith communities with climate change; 2) an international meeting of senior religious leaders, and 3) a multi-faith event called *Aldeia Sagrada* (Sacred Hamlet).

The Fé no Clima International Meeting was held in August 2015 in Rio de Janeiro. The main goal of the event was to gather senior leaders from a diversity of faith communities in order to learn about their sacred values regarding nature, their ongoing actions concerning environmental activism, and their future propositions with regard to climate change. To achieve that goal, guest participants were invited to answer the following questions: 1) Which are the religious foundations that guide the relation between humans and nature in your tradition?; 2) Which are the concrete actions of your faith community regarding the care for the environment, with emphasis on climate

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<sup>2</sup> Available in: <http://www.gip.net.br/novo/historico-e-missao/> Access in: 2016/04/18. [Own translation].

change?; and 3) Which are the views of your faith community (your political agenda) with regards to facing the socio-environmental impacts of climate change?

Eleven well-known religious leaders, from Brazil and abroad, accepted the invitation and attended the meeting:<sup>3</sup> Their names are listed below in the left column, with their religious title listed first and italicized, followed by their name. In the right column, their title and the name of their religious or spiritual tradition are listed in the order customary for each tradition. If their organizational affiliation or location is included, it has been placed in parentheses.

### Religious leaders as guest-participants at *Fé no Clima International Meeting 2015*

<i>Mãe Beata de Yemonjá</i>	•Iyalorixá do Ilê Omi Ojuarô (Candomblé Ketu)
<i>Txai Leopardo Yawa Bane</i>	•Txai Huni Kuin
<i>Inkaruna Dolores Ayay Chilón</i>	•Quechua leader (Peru)
<i>André Trigueiro</i>	•Spiritualist
<i>Father Josafá de Carlos Siqueira S.J</i>	•Jesuit priest
<i>Mãe Flávia Pinto</i>	•Babá of Umbanda (Casa do Perdão)
<i>Minister Ariovaldo Ramos</i>	•Pastor, Christian Reformed Church
<i>Baba Kola Abimbola</i>	•Yoruban Babalorixá
<i>Lama Padma Samten</i>	•Buddhist Lama
<i>Reverend Fletcher Harper</i>	•Episcopal priest (GreenFaith)
<i>Pastor Timóteo Carriker</i>	• Igreja Presbiteriana Independente do Brasil

**Source:** ISER, Fé no Clima 2015 Report.

Additionally, the former Minister of Environment, environmentalist and evangelical Senator Marina Silva, sent a video addressing the meeting's audience.<sup>4</sup> The assembly included another 20 people as observers and reporters. The selection of guests was based the following criteria: 1) The participants' public recognition for their contributions on environmental debate and activism; 2) The expression of a geographic comprehensiveness; and 3) The assurance of a diversified representation of faith communities.

The main outcome of the International Meeting was the Fé no Clima Declaration and Commitment,<sup>5</sup> which was agreed to by the participants at the event. In September 2015, the document was delivered at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro

<sup>3</sup> The biographies of the participants and their Fé no Clima testimonials can be seen in a series of videos available on <http://fenoclima.strikingly.com> Access on 2016/04/22.

<sup>4</sup> Available on <http://fenoclima.strikingly.com> Access on 2016/04/22.

<sup>5</sup> Available on <http://www.observatoriodoclima.eco.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/fe-no-clima.pdf> Access on 2016/04/22.

(PUC-Rio) to the current Minister of Environment, Izabella Teixeira, in the context of an event about the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. A month later, the Declaration was delivered to the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, Dom Orani Tempesta, who committed to delivering it to Pope Francis.

The Aldeia Sagrada is an event that has been organized annually by the Inter-Religious Movement of Rio de Janeiro (MIR) since 2002. This multi-faith event is a spin-off of ISER's inter-religious vigil of ECO-92, and was created to evoke a spirit of multi-religious care for Mother Earth. The 2015 Aldeia Sagrada gathered 150 participants with the goal of inspiring and mobilizing religious and non-religious people on the theme of climate change.

As part of the 2015 Aldeia Sagrada, the Fé no Clima panel included four speakers who reported on environmental initiatives undertaken by their faith communities, listed below: 1) Brahma Kumaris, on their experience with natural agriculture and solar panels; 2) Quilombolas (African-Brazilian runaway societies), on their experience with environmental techniques based on their traditional knowledge; 3) Indigenous peoples, on their importance of intergenerational responsibility; and 4) Celtic culture, on the devotion to nature as a foundation for ethical practice. The conversation sought to articulate the contents of the Fé no Clima Declaration and Commitment with practical examples presented by the panelists.

### **Assembling faith communities' ecological consciousness consensus**

In an effort to identify a common vocabulary for future use by faith communities, the gathering's organizers adopted a consensus-based form<sup>6</sup> to identify a selection of words and themes used by the various religious speakers at Fé No Clima, in order to establish a glossary of terms to be used thereafter. The purpose of this glossary was to develop a collection of religious and spiritual terms and themes which represent ways in which various faith leaders utilize and adapt traditional religious teachings for use in the context of climate and environmental concerns. Several examples of these themes are shown in the following graphic, originally published in the Fé no Clima 2015 report.

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<sup>6</sup> The Consensus-Based Form involves a reasoned societal debate, focused on the full scope of technical and social dimension of the problem and the desirability of multiple solutions. (...) Here, resolution is found through a focus on its underlying elements, moving away from positions (...) and towards the underlying interests and values at play (Hoffman, 2012). [Our emphasis].

**Main concepts used by religious leaders and faith communities' representatives  
*Fé no Clima* 2015**



**Source:** ISER, *Fé no Clima* 2015 Report.

Beyond differences in the format of the speeches, in the choices and meanings of the words used, and in the religious practices and perspectives presented, the *Fé no Clima* International Meeting--along with the panel at the Aldeia Sagrada--engaged in an emerging process of consensus building within the religious sector regarding the baseline for the development of a new ecological consciousness.

In short, from the findings of *Fé no Clima* 2015, it can be said that to be successful, a consensus-based new ecological consciousness should build on the following references:

*A New Theological Paradigm.* Within Christianity, it has been increasingly accepted that there is a need for a shift in biblical interpretation to overcome humanity's utilitarian approach towards nature. In this sense, most of the non-Christian traditions can contribute strong religious teachings and liturgical practices based on their traditional recognition of nature's sacredness. Furthermore, there is growing

awareness of a consensus about the existence of an agency and wisdom within nature's creation (God, Orisà, Cosmic Intelligence, Cuxipá). In this context, there is a positive appetite for renewed contemplation of the holiness of the relationship between humanity and Mother Earth (*Mamapacha*, garden, our common house). Finally, there is a common recognition that the current moment offers perhaps the last opportunity for humanity to undergo such a paradigm shift before devastating environmental damage is done.

*Common Care versus Intolerance.* There is already an established consensus that *common care* is one of the few possibilities for the survival of human life in the planet. This agreement is the most powerful ethical standpoint at hand to be used against the increasingly organized, institutionalized, and destructive religious intolerance in the contemporary world. A consensus-based new ecological consciousness might provide the groundwork for a sustainable balance of power between historically dominant and marginalized cultural and religious traditions. Through such a shift in dynamics, the oppositional political positioning that currently pits perpetrators and targets of religious intolerance against each other (such as Neo-Pentecostal and African-Brazilian/Indigenous communities) might give way to an agreement to uphold the construction of an effective inter-religious political agenda that identifies common interests and values.

*An Integrative Worldview.* There is an overall acceptance of the need to move from a fragmented perspective to an integrative worldview. For the religious sector, this consensus particularly relates to: 1) inter-generational roles, and 2) inter-religious communication patterns and tools. Concerning the common care of the planet, it is recognized that senior religious leaders should guide and mobilize their faith communities towards environmental activism while also supporting innovative and ambitious environmental actions by representatives of younger generations. In relation to inter-religious communication, new tools of communication and patterns of interaction are needed to enable justice and balance in the exchange of faith communities' values, concepts, and interests in relation to climate change and the environment. There is also an appetite for education for action with a focus on younger members of faith communities.

*Water as a Central Issue.* There is a consensus about the need to provide the most dramatic evidences of the effects of climate change on water. Water's sacredness, water as a commodity, how climate change impacts on water availability, and water's importance for the maintenance of social and cultural life were pointed out in virtually all faith communities' narratives. Based on the articulation of water's sacred dimension, sustained by ancestral faith communities (African-Brazilian, Indigenous, Orisà); on the political struggle for access to drinkable water (Peruvian Indigenous); and the human consequences of floods and droughts (Brazilian Indigenous), there is a unanimous call for immediate action concerning water.

## **Final considerations**

Fé no Clima sprouted from the questions, findings, and networking put together by ISER over more than two decades of research and action on the engagement of faith communities with environmental concepts and activism. Beyond the extraordinary



richness of the faith communities' values and interests, which this article has attempted to describe and discuss, several other considerations of no lesser importance remain.

First, it should be said that the engagement of faith communities with the issue of climate change is still an uneasy subject. There is much to be done to mobilize the religious sector for climate action, especially because the language used to deal with climate change is often hermetic and either intangible or incomprehensible to the non-scientific public. The same can be said about the traditional environmental movement, which still lacks the vocabulary to connect meaningfully with the religious sector. Therefore, developing innovative communication strategies to connect the religious, scientific, and environmentalist sector represents a high priority.

Because it is assumed that religious ethics could be a major shaper of political and economic practices, it will be necessary to face the challenge of establishing a common understanding of religious terms and concepts, in order to lay the groundwork for convergences of multi-faith of social-political positions and actions, at both the local and global levels. For the same reason, support should be provided to help faith communities to understand and appropriate environmental terms and concepts and their related political agendas.

Finally, a communication strategy to successfully promote this dialogue must consider the importance of the use of traditional means of communication within local faith communities, preserving their language, forms, and meanings. On the other hand, there is a need for capacity building in the use of new digital tools and online means to enhance communication between faith communities worldwide.

The challenges of making climate change a substrate for multi-faith work are large and deep. May the consensus-based new ecological consciousness featured by Fé no Clima lay the groundwork for innovations in various social technologies to flourish.

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