

Faith Rising: Multi-Faith Millennial Voices on the Climate Crisis **By Lotifa Begum, Allen Ottaro, Nimai Lila Das, Rabbi Yonatan Neril, and Mélisande Schifter**

In June 2015, GreenFaith held the Emerging Leaders Multi-Faith Climate Convergence (the Convergence) in Rome, a gathering of 110 Millennial generation leaders from multiple faiths and more than 30 countries. The Convergence began on June 28 with a dramatic march by several thousand people of diverse faiths as well as environmentalists into St. Peter's Square, to thank Pope Francis for his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. It continued with a three-day series of workshops and trainings at which these young faith leaders shared their passions and concerns with each other, built relationships, and developed climate action plans which they would proceed to implement in their home countries. Convergence participants developed the hashtag #faithrising and launched an active on-line community of mutual encouragement that continues to this day.

To lift up the voices and perspectives of this new generation of multi-faith leaders under age 35, we invited several of them from different countries to share their perspective on the intersection of faith and the climate crisis, bringing their generational identity to bear.

Vulnerability-Inspired Activism: The Perspective of a Young Muslim Climate Activist
Lotifa Begum, Global Campaigns Coordinator, Islamic Relief Worldwide, is based in the UK.

Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries. It is also my family's homeland.

As a young British Muslim woman, I have seen firsthand the impact of climate change on my family and community in Bangladesh. People I know personally struggle to grow sufficient crops every year due to heavy rainfall and floods. In 2009, Cyclone Aila damaged or destroyed 500,000 thatched homes, 7,000 km of roads, and 123,000 hectares of agricultural land.¹ Many people are still recovering from its devastation.

I visited my home country in the wake of Aila, and could see the poverty and despair of those bearing the brunt of climate change, a crisis to which they had contributed nothing. The visit left me with a huge sense of moral responsibility. I became adamantly committed to raising awareness about the faith-inspired teachings in Islam where the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "God has made the earth green and beautiful, and He has appointed you as stewards over it." Islam teaches that Allah has created the earth in balance and as a unity. Muslims learn that we must be conscious about using the finite resources God has bestowed upon us, and teaches us to be conscious about destroying the earth gifted to us. We need to take these teachings seriously because they are now a matter of life and death.

This prophetic tradition pertinently describes my motivation and sense of custodianship as a Muslim campaigner and climate activist with Islamic Relief. I believe

¹ <http://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/cyclone-aila-losses-bangladesh-estimated-269-mln-usd>
accessed 6.1.16

that while the secular environmental movement is powerful, people of faith add a loud and powerful voice in the fight against climate change. Faith communities can be motivated by spiritual teachings to make positive social change and bring about social justice, and can offer a strong and inspiring sense of purpose towards protecting our earth, from which people are often otherwise detached in their day-to-day lives.

I've pushed forward the issue of climate change in the wider Muslim community through initiatives that include an Interfaith Youth lobby at the Houses of Parliament, where 30 young people from the Abrahamic faiths came together to lobby their MPs on climate change. I helped to mobilize Islamic leaders internationally with the launch of the ground-breaking Islamic Climate Change Declaration² last year. I felt privileged, and excited, to be part of these actions.

Within my Muslim community, I see Millennials as more environmentally educated and conscious than preceding generations. I find hope in the actions taken by Millennials to raise awareness about changing our lifestyle and habits, actions which are not always as high a priority for older generations. The direct impact we are already seeing from climate change requires a strong movement created and led by young people of all faiths and no faith to put pressure on decision makers to act before it is too late. Islam teaches that we should leave this world in a better place than we found it, and that there are immense rewards for those who plant even one seed before the earth perishes.

Unlike other issues, addressing climate change and protecting the earth is something that all faiths agree upon. All faiths teach at their core that we are to cherish and care for the earth. This common vision is what has inspired me to work with people of diverse faiths. Governments, multinational corporations, and non-governmental organizations have a great deal of power and influence. However, faith communities reach billions of faithful global citizens who can take action at a local level to have a positive global impact.

The large amount of faith-inspired action in response to last year's Paris Agreement shows how much faith communities can contribute—but we need to do more to move forward as a generation. We need to be well informed about the religious and moral duty to take care of our earth. We need to be better engaged in actions that bring about sustainable change. We need to save more lives from the catastrophe of climate change before it is too late. We must act, now.

Young People of Faith and Climate in an African Context

Allen Ottaro, founder and director of Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa, is based in Kenya.

Four years ago, several friends and I started a conversation about how, as young Catholics in Africa, we could get involved in sustainable development issues. At the time, a series of forums were running in a number of African countries, in preparation for the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, more popularly known as the Rio+20 Conference.

² <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/>

One such forum was held in Nairobi, specifically for Kenyan youth leaders. I applied to participate as a representative of the youth ministry of my home diocese, and was accepted. As it turned out, I was the only representative of a faith organization, something that was quite perplexing to fellow participants and to me, albeit for different reasons. While participants from secular youth organizations wondered what faith had to do with matters related to sustainable development, I was concerned that not enough faith representatives were at the table. This disconnect fuelled conversations with my Catholic friends, eventually leading to the creation of the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa (CYNESA), which I currently lead.

At CYNESA, Catholic Social Teaching on care of creation is a major pillar of our work. Some of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching that have deeply touched and motivated us to get engaged in climate change issues as young Catholics are teachings on the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, care for God's Creation, and solidarity – the belief that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. I remember clearly coming to the realization that my faith is “a faith that does justice,” and therefore, climate justice has to be part of the expression of my faith.

On a global scale, Africa has contributed the least to global carbon emissions, but is the most vulnerable and hardest hit by the impact of climate change. This is something I have seen close to home. Just a few weeks ago, raging floods caused the collapse of a building in a low-income neighbourhood in Nairobi. Over fifty people were killed. Many others in poorer parts of the city lost their homes. It was yet another reminder of the need to listen to both “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

As a young boy growing up in the small town of Njoro, situated in Rift Valley province of Kenya, I marvelled at the green and forested hills I saw on the horizon. However, I was also perturbed by the many trucks and tractors that I saw ferrying hundreds of logs every hour to local saw mills. As I grew older, I watched the trees I was used to as a young boy disappear, followed soon after by the closure of the saw mills. The forests had been depleted. Water shortages began to afflict Njoro. The variety of vegetables and other farm produce in the local market declined. However, I was not sure if I could do anything about the situation. After re-discovering my faith in my early twenties, Catholic Social Teaching clarified for me the links between my faith and social justice. Gradually, my passion to engage my faith in caring for creation became intense and more concrete.

As our goals and objectives at CYNESA have continued to develop, my colleagues and I have discovered that while our faith as Catholics fires us up to do something about the climate crisis, we can not do it alone. We all grew up and went to school with people from all faiths. In fact, many of the important social developments in Kenya have been realized through interfaith initiatives. Pope Francis underscored this point when he met faith leaders on the first full day of his visit to Kenya in November 2015. He said, “In democratic and pluralistic societies like Kenya, cooperation between religious leaders and communities becomes an important service to the common good.”

Responding to climate change is certainly “an important service to the common good.” In my context, I see that young people have a great sense of solidarity with their peers

from different faiths and understand the importance of cooperation between faith communities. I personally experienced this last summer, when over 100 young people from across the world gathered in Rome for the Emerging Leaders Multi-faith Climate Convergence. In a spirit of mutual respect, we shared experiences of climate change and activism, inspired each other to create action plans, and most importantly, formed deep bonds of friendship. This past May, CYNESA, the United Church of Canada, and the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University co-hosted an interfaith “GreenRoom” event which explored the contributions of faith communities in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals at the recently concluded United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-2).

Young people of faith are showing the way, shifting the conversation on climate change towards hope, and showing that interfaith collaboration is a newly emerging, yet normal form of religious expression.

A New Kind of Target

Nimai Lila Das is a monk in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and Chief Sustainability Officer at Govardhan Ecovillage, in Maharashtra, India.

We are living at a juncture in the history of this planet, a juncture that will define what history books of the future will depict. The story, about our relationship to Mother Bhumi (Sanskrit for Mother Earth), will either describe a phenomenal transformation or a tragically wasted opportunity.

Climate change is no longer an abstract concept. In India, it is a harsh reality. Born in India and belonging to the Millennial generation, I have seen my nation undergo many transformations in the past three decades – from a struggling agrarian economy into a booming technological power house. In the race to catch up with other advanced economies, India has been repeating the same mistakes as others, compromising our ecological health and biodiversity for economic prosperity. But now, the impact of climate change is hitting us hard. In India, more than 60% of the population is dependent on climate sensitive sectors. The global ecological crisis is one we cannot escape.

While respect for nature and reverence for all forms of life has been intrinsic to Indian culture for millennia, it is quite astonishing to see how various ecological systems in India are being degraded. Hindu sacred texts, the Vedas, explain how God expands like creation, and how every element in creation is to be held sacrosanct. It is quite common to see rivers, mountains, forests, and even plants and animals considered holy in India. Traditional Hindu rituals, customs, practices, and lifestyle have been centered on such eco-centric values. At its very heart, Hinduism respects nature’s diversity, and shows us that by living respectfully of nature, we progress towards our divine unity with God.

These traditions have long protected the ecological systems of India. But today, these faith-based values are slowly diminishing. As India surges ahead on the path of economic development, more and more youth of my generation are confused about their cultural identity; a dichotomy in value systems haunts them from within. Often in their pursuit of economic gain, they have lost inner peace; in the quest for higher education, they have not yet explored the depths of their rich spiritual tradition.

Like most youth of this nation, I aspired to socioeconomic betterment through technological advancement. I earned a Master's degree in engineering, feeding my intellect with the best skills from one of the top universities in India. Later I was proud to be involved in one of the pioneering military projects in India. Our team's job was to build a missile launcher, completely based on Indian technologies. As a control engineer, my role was to design a mechanism to control the launcher's movement with the finest degree of precision. After months of hard work we did manage to achieve this goal. It was time for us to rejoice. And amidst all the celebrations, an indomitable thought surged in my heart: "Using all my skills, I can control the launching angle of the missile with the best possible precision, but I have absolutely no control over the person who is going to press the launch button."

I could have very easily disowned the indirect consequences of my actions. But the cosmic laws reveal that if we are not contributing to the solution, we are definitely part of the problem! Based on the Vedic teachings on the law of karma, I understood that I will also be held accountable for the result of the missile attack. It was then that I realized that it is not enough to be a good employee or a righteous individual; one must lead one's life in a way that can make one righteous by a universal standard, and at a wider social and systemic level. It is the books of faith that teach these universal standards by which one can learn to resolve the dichotomies of life and harmonize life's goals.

Often I am asked, "What relevance do these ancient Hindu teachings have in addressing modern day ecological issues? Shouldn't we be focusing our efforts on developing technologies that solve future issues?" The answer is both yes and no. Technological interventions, while important, cannot solve the current crises of the world. Along with engineering, a technological "skill," there is a dire need to foster an eco-friendly "will" among each one of us. We need a will to say NO to high carbon footprint lifestyles and a will to say YES to alternative lifestyles.

Bringing about this change is a big challenge. Even with our existing technologies, so much could be done. Yet to date, we have not mustered the will to use these technologies in meaningful ways. As Gus Speth, a senior advisor on climate change once said, "I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that." As a person of faith, I see that I can contribute my part in bringing this transformation; I see interesting times ahead, where faith can redefine the future.

Why I Care About and Act on Climate Change

Rabbi Yonatan Neril is founder and executive director, The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development, based in Jerusalem. (www.interfaithsustain.com)

I care about climate change because God has entrusted us with a gift, Planet Earth. I care because we are facing a spiritual and religious crisis. My soul cares for all of creation-- people, animals, birds, fish, trees, plants, insects, and microorganisms. I care about the

Divine vision for Planet Earth, teeming with life, manifesting the wondrous diversity that the Creator has bestowed upon it. I care because the Creator has given human beings abilities unique among all the Earth's creatures, and we are being tested regarding whether or not we will use those abilities in a Divine-aware way. I care because the way we are living and acting is not in resonance with the Higher will.

I care because I want my children to inherit a liveable planet. I do not want them to experience the extreme *Storms of My Grandchildren* that the leading climatologist Dr. James Hansen warns about in his book by this title. I want them to enjoy and appreciate nature, and not for nature to wreak havoc on them. I want them to eat healthy, local foods that are nourished from beneficial rains that come at the right time. I want them to live in peace, and to have positive, peaceful relations with their neighbors. And I desire the same for their children, and their children's children. Older generations were less aware of the magnitude of the problem, and thus less compelled to act. But our generation cannot wait. Unless we radically change our orientation, the life I envision will not be possible for my children and grandchildren.

I care because I fear for my own future. From Jerusalem, I know that in neighbouring Syria, millions of refugees flee a civil war that, research indicates,³ was partly fuelled by recent drought⁴ exacerbated by climate change. I care because I do not want to see other countries afflicted by similar levels of disruption and suffering.

Why have I chosen to engage these issues from a faith perspective? Because we must confront irrationality, hatred, and despair with hope and optimism inspired by religious teachings. Because religions can be God's gift to humanity for a sustainable future, containing sacred teachings for how to live in balance on this planet. A 2014 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and the American Academy of Religion found that "most Americans who attend religious services at least once or twice a month hear little from their clergy leaders about the issue of climate change."⁵ As long as this remains the case, it is unlikely that there will be bipartisan action on climate change – a fact that has been made all too obvious after 30 years of inaction in the US Congress.

I draw on Jewish teachings as a source of inspiration and guidance for sustainability. In *Ethics of the Sages* (Pirkei Avot), it states, "Who is the wise person? The person who can see the effect of their actions."⁶ Each one of us is called upon today to look into what is likely to be and to try change the way we are living now—to change both our spiritual and physical orientation.

³ Mark Fischetti, *Climate Change Hastened Syria's Civil War*, Scientific American, March 2, 2015, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-change-hastened-the-syrian-war/> citing "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought," Kelly et. al., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S., January 30, 2015, <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.abstract?sid=c60a6740-eb55-4fb5-a249-615704e6881e>

⁴ Benjamin I. Cook, Kevin J. Anchukaitis, Ramzi Touchan, David M. Meko, Edward R. Cook, *Spatiotemporal drought variability in the Mediterranean over the last 900 years*, Journal of Geophysical Research, First published: 4 March 2016, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/2015JD023929/full>

⁵ *Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics: Why Americans are Conflicted about Climate Change*, Environmental Policy, and Science, Nov. 21, 2014, online at <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/2014-Climate-Change-FINAL1.pdf>

⁶ This translation by the author is based on Maimonides' interpretation of the mishnaic text.

I choose to promote sustainability through interfaith work in order to multiply our impact. I am inspired and energized in working with clergy of many faiths who come together to promote a liveable planet for us and future generations. By working in an interfaith context, I have found common cause with people who think and dress differently than me, yet who share the same home that is Earth. I find this to be energizing and inspiring.

Out of this sense of inspiration, and living in Jerusalem, I founded and direct The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development (ICSD), the largest interfaith environmental organization in the Middle East. Because so many seminarians – myself included – received little seminary education and training on ecological concerns, ICSD encourages and helps seminaries to increase their work in this area. Because my generation recognizes that science and faith absolutely must work in concert to meet the environmental crisis, ICSD convenes clergy and scientists, and creates short videos spread via social media to promote public awareness, political will, and action. Close to home, ICSD engages women of faith in Jerusalem on the intersection of religion, coexistence, and environmental stewardship, and we educate visitors on the connection between the Holy Land, ecology, and faith teachings. In a city that symbolizes the hope and the challenge of our religiously plural world, we do our best to help people of all faiths put theirs into action for the earth.

What About Those Not In The Ark?

Mélisande Schifter is Programme Assistant at the Globethics Leadership Centre in Geneva and is a member of the Climate Change Working Group of the World Council of Churches.

Born in 1988 to an Asian Buddhist mother and a European Christian father, what I call home spans two continents. Experiencing life in beautiful and yet impoverished Thailand, on the one hand, and enjoying life in abundance in developed Germany, on the other, I was confronted with questions of justice from very early on. Growing up, I found that I could not turn a blind eye to either reality—I was and always would be a part of and home in both realities.

But it was specifically the climate realities in Southeast Asia—and the injustice these realities entail—that has made me an activist on the matter. I share the conviction of Peter Christian, President of Micronesia, that “I need no convincing. I am convinced already that there is danger in the air.”⁷ I have seen the negative impacts of climate change that go beyond “nature” and affect issues like food security, peace and war, livelihood, and the dignity of people. If one part of the world is suffering, the other cannot turn a blind eye.

When it comes to climate change, it was much less my environmentalist heart than my drive for justice that pulled me in--a drive that does not only derive from my hybrid heritage but from my Christian faith as well. Faith touches the human heart and is a reminder that we are one human family. As God’s children, our linguistic, racial, cultural, and religious differences are not meant as divisions but as elements of a beautiful mosaic. We are one human family and we are accountable to one another.

⁷ cf. Peter M. Christian, Statement made at the COP21 Leaders Event, 30 November 2015, Citing Sources: [http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/paris_nov_2015/application/pdf/cop21cmp11_leaders_event_micronesia.pdf]: page 1: [May 27, 2016]

The crown of creation is not meant merely as a jewel to hold, but it is a great responsibility. Jesus said: "I have come to give you life in its fullness" (John 10:10). He invited all nations and peoples to participate and enjoy the feast of life, overcoming the powers of death and destruction. When life in its fullness is in danger, the commitment to peace, justice, and the integrity of creation is ultimately an aspect of discipleship. It is a spiritual task.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis presents us with a moral imperative to act. He tells us that questions of social justice must be integrated in debates on the environment, so as to hear "both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."⁸ This defines the intimate relationship that exists between the poor and the fragility of our planet. It emphasizes that human beings are in an interdependent relationship with our common home, the Earth.

Mother Earth has cried out in pain many times, and that call has gone unanswered too often. She has cried out louder, begging us to respond. She cried out to us in 2013 when typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, killing at least 6,300 people. She cried out to us again in 2015 when cyclone Pam hit the South Pacific islands. Meanwhile, the victims in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have joined her voice, with cries of injustice: "God promised to send no more flood, and now those who have caused the climate change seem to be sitting in the ark." To an apathetic world, they plead in desperation: "Why have you forsaken us?" Victims of climate change are the new face of "the poor, the widow and the stranger" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). As a Christian, I am called to respond to the pleas of the vulnerable and protect the integrity of creation.

I confess God as creator of heaven and earth, and of all living creatures. This implies that God, as creator of all, is active and present in the life of all people – irrespective of the religion they claim. Confessing the biblical testimony of God as Creator of all things means taking seriously the diverse, wholehearted expressions of all faiths around the world. As one human family, there is a special need to collaborate with the "religious other" in the search for a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

There have been wonderful first steps in the global fight on climate change, notably the Paris Agreement adopted at COP21 last year, where faith communities stood together and had a strong voice. The task now – especially for faith communities – is to turn these grand statements into acts of love and charity. Every person of every spiritual community needs to bring his or her principles of justice to the table; together we can turn the tide.

⁸ Holy Father Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*: On Care For Our Common Home, 2015, Citing Sources: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html]: para. 49: [May 27, 2016]