

Opening Remarks for “Interreligious Responses to Climate Change”
By Anthony J. Watson

Good afternoon and thank you for attending the first joint panel between the Comparative Theology Group and Interreligious and Interfaith Studies Group at the American Academy of Religion. While our subject this evening, *Interreligious Responses to Climate Change*, is prompted by the focus of this year’s Annual Meeting on climate change and the environment, it is also a highly appropriate subject for this panel.

In the past thirty years we have witnessed an increasing level of interconnectedness that makes both this panel and its topic quite relevant. Despite popular descriptions of this interconnectedness as making a “flat” world, I would argue that the conception of the world being flat implies a mode of thinking that is beholden to the twentieth century, where one moved between points on map. In this conception of the world, nations sought to be united, world wars were fought, and businesses strove to become “world-wide” in their operations. By contrast, in the society of the twenty-first century, we increasingly perceive our existence to be less that of moving across a flat surface than to be comprised of an increasing web of complex interconnections. We perceive our existence as global. This change in perception from the worldwide to the global is accompanied by a shift in what it means to belong to such a society. At a time of instantaneous communication, at a time when anyone in this room can board a plane after this talk and disembark tomorrow on the other side of the planet, the degree to which we are interconnected has increased exponentially. Scholars such as Diana Eck have highlighted the new interreligious fabric of American society, where the world, so to speak, is next door. In such a society, we have different obligations to one another, to those we have yet to meet, and to the planet we all call home. We have moved from a society where a select few were considered citizens of the world while the rest stayed in place, to a framework where we are all interconnected global citizens. As such, we all bear responsibility to one another. A key aspect of this responsibility is the implied stewardship we therefore have for the health of our planet. The application of this stewardship to an interreligious context is a task to which many practitioners and scholars of religion have turned their collective efforts.

Thus this panel and its topic. A central question asked by those practicing comparative theology and interreligious dialogue centers on the issue of how members from within one particular tradition and those from outside that tradition learn from one another. To state the topic for this panel, a guiding principle of comparative theology is exploring and enriching one's own theology and practice through the close study of another theological tradition. Indeed, this was a guiding principle set forth in the Group Statement for the American Academy of Religion’s Comparative Theology Group in 2006. The process is inherently dialogical, and this invariably leads to a degree of solidarity between traditions. Interreligious engagement similarly seeks to create solidarity through joint action, such as actions for peace and social justice, grassroots encounters, and

relationship-building. Both modes of engagement can be seen at play in interreligious responses to the global crisis of climate change.

This panel explores how these two modes of response are informed or deepened by the other in the specific context of climate change. In addition, it raises a broader question: How can we create a space at the intersection of comparative theology and interreligious engagement that allows for pragmatic and constructive responses to global crises? In addressing these questions tonight we are joined by an excellent panel. The Reverend Ian Mevorach holds a B.A. in Philosophy from Middlebury College, an M.Div. from Boston University School of Theology (BUSTH), and is currently in the final stages of a PhD in Theological Ethics at Boston University. His dissertation, in the field of ecological theology and ethics, explores the role of religion and spirituality in the ecological crisis. In a spiritual sense, the ecological crisis is a result of our loss of awareness of the sacredness of creation; to reverse the crisis, we need to restore our spiritual vision of nature. The Reverend Mevorach represents the American Baptist Churches USA on the board of Creation Justice Ministries, a national, multi-denominational ecological justice coalition. He recently published a book chapter titled, "Stewards of Creation: A Christian Calling for Today's Ecological Crisis," which appeared in *For Such a Time as This: Young Adults on the Future of the Church* (Judson Press, 2014). He is currently teaching a course at Emmanuel College in Boston called, "Religion and the Environment: Ethical Explorations." He is active in the movement for peace, justice, and the integrity of creation that includes people of conscience from all cultures, beliefs, and generations.

Loye Ashton is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. He is the Director of the Center for International Studies and Global Change at Tougaloo and Director of the Tougaloo College Honors Program. He served as Department Chair of the Liberal Studies Department (interdisciplinary humanities) from his hiring at Tougaloo in 2006 until his appointment to become the Director of the CISGC in 2013. He received a Masters of Theological Studies degree from the Boston University School of Theology and earned a PhD in Religious Studies (Comparative and Systematic Theology) from Boston University. In addition to numerous papers delivered at academic conferences, he has had three theological commentaries (for Propers 16-18) published in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Lectionary Commentary Series, Year B, Volumes 3 & 4* (2009, Westminster John Knox Press). He is also drafting a chapter submission for a forthcoming book on religion and immigration to be published by Fortress Press. He is completing work on a collaborative book-length project about the sources of the opposition to the Gülen/Hizmet interfaith peace movement (GHM) in Turkey and throughout the Turkish-speaking world. Interviews of his work with the Gülen movement are available on YouTube and many of his interfaith conference presentations have been published in Turkish.

Daniel P. Scheid completed his PhD at Boston College in Theological Ethics and is currently Assistant Professor of Theological Ethics at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh,

PA. His research interests are in ecological and comparative theological ethics, and he is currently completing a book entitled, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics*. Previous publications include: “Thomas Aquinas, the Cosmic Common Good, and Climate Change” in *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives*, and “Vedānta Deśika and Thomas Aquinas on the Intrinsic Value of Nature” in the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*.

Michael VanZandt Collins is a doctoral student in Comparative Theology, minoring in Theological Ethics. He had served as a teacher of religion at Boston's Cristo Rey School and later worked as a community organizer in urban communities around issues of environmental justice. In 2011, returning to academia, Michael began a master's program in Islamic Studies at Harvard in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, where he focused his research in medieval Islamic thought and practice. In 2012, he studied classical Arabic at the Qasid Arabic Institute in Amman, Jordan, while working in interreligious dialogue at the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center (Al-Markaz al-Urdunī libahūth al-Ta‘aysh al-Dīnī). His research interests in medieval Sufi philosophy and spiritual practices and Qur'anic hermeneutics are placed in conversation with Jesuit spirituality and medieval Catholic theology. The long-term scope of his project is to develop a creative hermeneutic and constructive moral theology through which to engage issues at the intersection of religion and ecology.

Finally, responding to our panel will be Professor Wilhelmus “Pim” Valkenberg, who is Ordinary Professor of Religion and Culture at Catholic University of America. In his distinguished career, Professor Valkenberg has published, among others, *Words of the Living God* (Leuven, 2005), *The Three Rings* (Leuven, 2005), *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership* (Amsterdam/New York: Editions Rodopi, 2006), and recently edited *World Religions in Dialogue: A Comparative Theological Approach* (Anselm Academic, 2013).