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SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGY OF CREATION

**Inter-Asian Conference, 19-21 February 2019,
Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru,
India**

**Organised by: Pontifical Mission Society,
Missio Aachen, Germany and Dharmaram
Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru, India**

“Walk lightly; or the earth will feel the pain.”¹ Rey-Sheng Her, a Taiwanese/Chinese Professor of Philosophy, speaking at an inter-Asian conference on the “Spirituality and Theology of Creation,” emphasised an ethical imperative for our times based on a Buddhist claim. “Since all religions, carrying the same essence of divinity, promote respect for life and good inter-human behaviour, it is necessary that they come together,” Tabassum Hameed, a teacher of Islamic Philosophy and Religion in Bengaluru, pointed out the importance of this inter-Asian conference with Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Indigenous and Islamic representatives.² Pope Francis shared this opinion in his *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’, On Care for our Common Home*.³

¹Rey-Sheng Her, “Giving the Example of Dharma Master Cheng Yen’s Environmental View of Life & Development of Tzu Chi Environmental Mission,” Paper presented at the Inter-Asian Conference on the Spirituality and Theology of Creation, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru, 19-21 February 2019, 86 [N.B. The page number refers to those in the bound volume of the papers presented].

²Tabassum Hameed, “Environmental Ethics from an Islamic Perspective,” 94.

³Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, 12.12.2019, cited by Klaus Vellguth, “Inter-Asian Conference on the Spirituality and Theology of Creation,” 7.

This conference was part of a series of conferences on the spirituality and theology of creation conducted in three continents (South America, Asia and Africa) by the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* in Aachen, Germany. These conferences attempt to look at this topic in a worldwide, intercultural, interreligious and comparative perspective and thus to promote the interreligious and intercultural dialogue on creation theology and environmental ethics. The first interreligious dialogue inspired by *Laudato Si'* was organized by *missio* Aachen and the Orco Huasi Institute in Argentina. Intercultural Investigations in Salta, Argentina, in 2017. The title was "We are only guests on Earth. In memory of Berta Cáceres (1971-2016)."⁴ The second in the series, an inter-Asian conference was organized and conducted in collaboration with Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram with *missio* Aachen. The third conference is to take place in Gaborone, Botswana, in 2020.⁵

Representatives of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Indian Indigenous Religions presented papers at the conference held from 19 to 21 February 2019 at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram. Isis Ibrahim and Klaus Vellguth of *Missio* were the convenors of the conference, and Shaji George Kochuthara was the local coordinator.

The main aspects of creation theology discussed at the conference were:

1. Myths of Creation
2. Spirituality of Creation
3. Ethics of Creation

Representatives of the five traditions, as mentioned above, presented papers on each of these three aspects. Moreover, perspectives from different traditions were presented by representatives from various countries of Asia.

⁴Berta Cáceres was a maya-lenca woman. She was murdered because she fought for the withdrawal of the world's largest water power industry from the Agua Zarca dam on the Gualcarque river in Honduras. See Elisabeth Steffens, "Indigenous Peoples and Religious Freedom in Abya Yala - Latin America. Reflections from a European Point of View," <https://iirf.eu/articles/theory-of-religious-freedom/indigenous-peoples-and-religious-freedom-in-abya-yala-latin-america/17.12.2019>.

⁵See Isis Ibrahim, "Sorge tragen für das gemeinsame Haus: eine Tagungsreihe zur Schöpfungstheologie aus interreligiöser und interkultureller Perspektive," in: *Concilium. Internationale Zeitschrift für Theologie*, 54 (2018) 5, S. 577-581.

The “excessive anthropocentrism,” criticized today by Pope Francis, is responsible for the ongoing exploitation of nature and human beings in the world.⁶ “A shift of emphasis from material acquisition to inner spiritual growth” is needed.⁷ Can we state a “common ground” between religions irrespective of their cyclical or/and linear cosmovisions to realize this shift?⁸ In this flashlight I am going to work out four elements for an interreligious ground.

(1) The basic element of such a ground is *creation*, of course, perceived as nature with its rich and threatened diversity of living beings who all manifest divinities.⁹ Myths relate to these relationships between all beings and higher powers in order to try to explain “fundamental questions of life: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?”¹⁰ The following hymn from the *Atharva Veda* is only one example of many Hindu concepts of creation from 2500 to 500 BCE: “The Earth, which possesses oceans, rivers and other sources of water and which gives us land to produce grains and on which human beings depend on for their survival – may it grant us all our needs for eating and drinking: water, milk, grains and fruit” (XII.1.3).¹¹

(2) Another element shared by nearly all the speakers is our *relationship to Earth*. Regarding Ganda philosophy, exposed by Goldy M. George, social scientist and activist, human beings and Earth are a “complete whole sustained and maintained through coexistence and mutuality.”¹² “According to the Yahwistic creation story, man is formed from ‘the dust of the ground’ ... He is from *adamah*, and therefore his name is Adam,” explained Saji Mathew Kanayankal, a Catholic priest and Assistant Professor for Religious

⁶LS, 115-121 cited by Shaji George Kochuthara, “*Laudato Si’*: On Care for Our Common Home: Call to an Integral Ethics and Spirituality,” 109. See Carlos María Pagano et al., *Wir sind nur Gast auf Erden. Lateinamerikanische Schöpfungsspiritualitäten im Dialog*, Ostfildern: Edition Schöpfung, volume 1, 2019.

⁷Shaji George Kochuthara, 113.

⁸Isis Ibrahim, “Introduction,” 9.

⁹Nanditha Krishna, “Spirituality of creation in Hinduism,” 46.

¹⁰Hector D’Souza, “Creation Narratives from the Indigenous Peoples. A Northeast India perspective,” 38.

¹¹Nanditha Krishna, 47.

¹²Goldy M. George, “Spirituality of Creation – An Indigenous Dalit Perspective,” 73.

Sciences.¹³ “It is HE who created you of dust,” narrates A. Faizur Rahman, Secretary General of the India-based Islamic Forum for the Promotion of Moderate Thought, from the Quran.¹⁴ “We should assume the Earth as a part of our body,” demanded Rey-Sheng Her.¹⁵

To overcome destructive anthropocentrism in the world “interconnectedness is the key word... There is a relationship between environmental issues and social and human issues, that can never be broken,” analysed Shaji George Kochuthara, Associate Professor of Moral Theology at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram.¹⁶ “After centuries of controlling nature; conquering nature; heaven and earth lost its balance... such imbalance has caused great shock and impact on mankind.”¹⁷

(3) All beings are relational beings, the momentous individualism with its hard-won rights and responsibilities is an illusion. *Interconnectedness* is therefore the third element of a common ground.

We have “to hear *both the cry for the earth and the cry of the poor*” in the sense of Pope Francis. These are the two guiding options for today and in the future.¹⁸ Daniel Franklin E. Pilario, Professor of Theology in Quezon City, Philippines, works as a pastoral steward at the largest garbage dumpsite in Manila and Rey-Sheng Her guides Buddhist recycling missions in Asia and Latin America. Their engagement provides virtues like “altruism, collaboration, solidarity, humility and a simpler life.”¹⁹ Therefore ethics of creation not only demands renunciation, concrete and creative (new) ways of (technical) re- and upcycling but also “spiritual enlightenment. If this fact is kept in mind and all the members of the society act according to ethics, there is no reason why all should not live in happiness and peace,” concluded

¹³Saji Mathew Kanayankal, “The Significance of Biblical Creation Stories for the Contemporary Environmentalism,” 31.

¹⁴A. Faizur Rahman, “The Spirituality of Creation in Islam,” 61.

¹⁵Rey-Sheng Her, 84.

¹⁶Shaji George Kochuthara, 110.

¹⁷Rey-Sheng Her, 84.

¹⁸Shaji George Kochuthara, 110.

¹⁹Daniel Franklin E. Pilario, “From Environmental Justice to Ecological Justice: Rereading Christian Texts,” 97; Rey-Sheng Her, 85.

Swami Tattwarupanandaji Maharaj, Bengaluru, from a Hindu perspective.²⁰

(4) We need a *creation spirituality* as the last element of an interreligious ground to shift from less material acquisition to more inner spiritual growth. According to Pope Francis a “profound interior conversion” is urgent.²¹

Spirituality derives from the Latin verb *spirare*.²² Respiration is vital for the production of energy for all living beings. Respiration is a permanent process of balancing. Through respiration the inside of the body is in permanent coexistence with other bodies. Our bodies are inner homes of our Common Home, the divine creation.

From a Dalit perspective in India balancing means “formation and reformation of energy. Accordingly, power is not the mechanism to govern others, rather it is a process to minimize oneself in connection with other human beings and nature. In such a context power is a transformative catalyst; meaning transforming senses, feeling, touch and every aspect of mind and intellect...”²³

So “spirituality is not just within the soul or inside of us. It is also outside us...”, stated Daniel Pilario.²⁴ Creation spirituality offers ways to transform ourselves in interconnectedness with others. Respiring (un)consciously we can see beauties: ““If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple””(LS 215).²⁵ Respiring (un)consciously we can feel pain of (non)human beings locally and globally, including our own. Respiring (un)consciously creates power to struggle against any kind of

²⁰Swami Tattwarupanandaji Maharaj, “Ethics of Creation: Hindu Perspectives,” 80.

²¹Saji Mathew Kanayankal, “A Hopeful Message at the Wreck of Crisis,” 115.

²²See Emperatriz (Surinama) Montalvo Chuma, “In der Schöpfung sein und leben. Schöpfungsspiritualität beim Volk der Kichwa in Ecuador,” in Carlos María Pagano et al., *Wir sind nur Gast auf Erden. Lateinamerikanische Schöpfungsspiritualitäten im Dialog*, Ostfildern: Edition Schöpfung, Volume 1, 2019, 59.

²³Goldy M. George, 78.

²⁴Daniel Franklin E. Pilario, “Matters of the Heart,” 116.

²⁵Pilario, “Matters of the Heart,” 116.

injustice like the Dalits condemning the caste system. Are we conscious of this divine power?

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N.B. The Papers of the conference will be published soon in German and subsequently in English. German edition: Isis Ibrahim, Shaji Kochuthara, CMI and Klaus Vellguth, ed., *In der Schöpfung Heimat Finden: Asiatische Schöpfungsspiritualitäten im Dialog*, Ostfildern: Grünewald, (forthcoming: April 2020). See: <https://shop.verlagsgruppe-patmos.de/in-der-schoepfung-heimat-finden-303227.html>