D **Communities**

Adam Hearn, Jens Koehrsen, Ann-Lea Buzzi

Realizing the Potential of Religious Environmental Engagement: Insights on Climate Change Mitigation and Sustainable Development in Switzerland

Abstract: This article investigates the role of religion in addressing environmental challenges and climate change mitigation. To this end, it draws on semi-structured interviews with representatives from established Christian congregations and umbrella organizations in Switzerland. Utilizing the concept of capitals from the sustainable livelihoods framework—natural and physical (e.g., biodiversity initiatives, energy retrofitting), financial (e.g., divesting from fossil fuel companies), social/symbolic (e.g., public campaigning), and human capital (e.g., educational programs, dissemination of environmentally friendly behavior through sermons)—the study highlights the increasing but heterogeneous engagement of religious organizations in environmental sustainability. Faith-based environmental certification schemes exemplify steps being taken, but tensions remain regarding participation in public environmental campaigning. While our research indicates a perceived growing involvement of religious groups in environmental efforts in Switzerland, the potential for religion to play a significant role in tackling climate change still appears to be an underutilized opportunity, particularly in terms of social and human capital. This article advances the academic debate on religious environmentalism by elucidating both the barriers and the opportunities for religious communities and umbrella organizations to contribute to climate and environmental goals.

Keywords: climate change, energy transition, religion, sustainability, sustainable development

Acknowledgments: This work is based on a previous article: Hearn et al, 2024a.

This project has received funding from the SNSF project “Are religions becoming green?” grant number: 192407, which was carried out from 01.02.2021 to 31.01.2024 at the Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics (ZRWP), University of Basel.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111453750-011

1 Introduction

The potential of religion for addressing the climate crisis and fostering sustainable development has been widely discussed in academic literature (Koehrsen, Buzzi, and Hearn 2025; Hearn et al. 2024a; Hearn et al. 2024b; Narayanan 2016; Harmannij 2022; Christie, Gunton, and Hejnowicz 2019; Preston and Baimel 2021; Veldman et al. 2021). Scholars have examined how religious organizations can act as vehicles for climate change mitigation by disseminating environmental values and influencing social attitudes (Buckley 2022; Myers et al. 2017; Maibach 2015). However, this potential goes both ways, as religion can both motivate pro-environmental behavior and support skepticism or disengagement regarding environmental crises (Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016; Veldman 2019; Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber 2023). This article investigates religious environmental engagement at the meso-level of religious groups, with a focus on climate change mitigation, and examines how this takes place in Switzerland. By exploring both the opportunities and barriers to religious environmental engagement, this study contributes to social science research on climate change and to religious studies by analyzing religions' role in transformations towards sustainability.

Despite ongoing trends of secularization in Europe, religion remains a central force globally, with 80% of the world's population adhering to a religious tradition (Pew Research Center 2012). Religious organizations have historically influenced social cohesion and ethical behavior, giving them significant potential for promoting sustainable development and addressing climate change (Tucker and Grim 2001; Djupe and Hunt 2009). Recent pro-environmental statements, such as Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2015) and the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change (IFEES, 2015) have bolstered the notion that religious communities are becoming more environmentally aware (Buckley 2022). Evidence suggests that some religious organizations, particularly in high-income countries, are adopting environmentally friendly practices, including renewable energy use and recycling (Haluza-DeLay 2014; Jenkins, Berry, and Kreider 2018; Rolston 2006). However, this engagement remains uneven across and within religious traditions.

This study focuses on religious communities in Switzerland, encompassing both local congregations and umbrella organizations, and examines their engagement with environment-related behavior and climate change mitigation. Umbrella organizations are head organizations of particular faiths based in particular geographic areas. Religious congregations are social groups consisting of individuals who gather regularly for activities that hold clear religious meaning or purpose (Chaves 2004). A sustainable livelihoods framework is applied to analyze natural and physical, financial, social/symbolical and human capital within

these organizations. By conducting thirty semi-structured interviews with representatives of twenty-one congregations and nine umbrella organizations, the research identifies key barriers to climate engagement, including resource constraints, conflicting priorities, and internal tensions between theological positions and environmental commitments.

2 Religion in Switzerland

The religious landscape in Switzerland is shaped by trends of secularization, pluralization, and individualization (Bochinger 2012; Baumann and Stolz 2007; Pickel 2011; Pollack and Olson 2012). The two largest Christian denominations—the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Church—face declining membership, while the proportion of individuals identifying as "non-religious" continues to rise. Despite these trends, the Catholic and Reformed churches remain the largest religious groups with a following of approximately 32.9% and 21.1% of the Swiss population, respectively. Other religious traditions represent much smaller proportions of the population, with Muslim communities making up around 5.7% and evangelical church and other Christian communities 5.6% (Federal Statistics Office (2023). Owing to this, our focus is on the two largest Christian denominations within Switzerland.

Religious communities in Switzerland differ significantly in terms of their legal recognition and societal status. Legal recognition, which provides rights such as tax exemptions, religious education in schools, hospital and prison chaplaincy, and protection by the state, also imposes obligations, including adherence to democratic principles and formal representation before the state (Huber 2022). In Switzerland, recognition is granted at the cantonal level. The Roman Catholic and Reformed churches are recognized in all cantons.

3 Method

Semistructured interviews were conducted as part of the research project "Are Religions Greening? (ARG)", a research project at the University of Basel.[1] Although ethnographic fieldwork is often preferred in order to observe individual or small samples of congregations, the inclusion of twenty-one congregations and

1 https://greenreligion.theologie.unibas.ch/en/are-religions-becoming-green/ [retrieved 02.04.2025].

nine umbrella organizations from across Switzerland meant that this was not feasible for this research. In total thirty interviews were conducted with representatives from the Swiss Evangelical Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Of these, nine were representatives of regional umbrella organizations (In the quotes below these are marked with a U). Notably, interviews were not conducted with church leaders but with key informants who were identified as being part of the church staff and possessed knowledge of processes and ecological measures, as well as the conflicts that arose. Interviews were conducted with congregations that were engaged in some form of environmental activity, identified through both internet research and an environmental certification lists from the religious environmental NGO, Oeku.[2] Further information on our sampling can be found in a previously published article (Hearn et al. 2024b).

Interviews were transcribed and coded in MAXQDA. A part of the coding and grouping process was conducted after all interviews had been transcribed, allowing codes to emerge organically from the data, continuously refining and revising our understanding throughout the analysis. In order to interpret the data, we took a framework that has been used extensively within sustainability, the sustainable livelihoods framework (Natarajan et al. 2022), which has been used extensively for policy decision-making particularly in the Global South (Lienert and Burger 2015), but more recently connected to sustainability initiatives in the Global North (Hearn, Sohre, and Burger 2021). This framework was considered to be suitable for the study as it provides a holistic understanding of religious environmentalism, which aligns well with the five capitals. The framework was considered and applied only once all interview data had been collected, transcribed and coded. Reinterpreting the interview codes through the lens of the sustainable-livelihoods framework demonstrated the easy alignment of this framework to religious environmentalism, as it allowed a clear and simple categorization of data.

4 Results

4.1 Natural and Physical Capital

Natural or ecological capital refers to the existing natural landscape and actions which can protect and mitigate biodiversity loss and environmental degradation

2 https://oeku.ch/ [retrieved 02.04.2025].

(e.g., planting bee-friendly areas). Physical capital in contrast, refers to the built environment (e.g. the installation of renewable energy resources).

Religious organizations undertake various actions to address environmental concerns, ranging from basic recycling to complex biodiversity projects. Many of these measures are low-cost and can be implemented quickly, although implementation is not uniform. Examples include introducing recycling bins, bat protection measures, urban gardens and biodiversity initiatives, both on church and public land.

> Yes, then we still have some environmental work to do this year, we're going to upgrade it a bit ecologically down here by the car parks. And greening the wall, that's also the issue of heat in summer. (Interview 1)

In the quote above, one can also see that some of the additional benefits of certain forms of action are recognized in that the greening of a church wall will also have an effect on reducing temperatures in summer.

Church buildings present both opportunities and challenges. Modifications to physical capital in rented buildings tends to be more complicated due to the external authorization required. Where congregations are owners, measures include upgrading heating/hot water systems, installing photovoltaic (PV) panels, and making energy efficiency improvements.

> The church itself belongs to the city. That means we can't just slap an insulation mat on the wall. All the more so because it has frescoes inside, we can't really glue insulation onto it (laughs). (Interview 12)

However, some buildings are unsuitable for upgrades for physical reasons, such as the weight of solar panels on a church roof. Monument protection is also a significant barrier, as regulations can prevent changes to historic buildings.

> We can't put a solar installation on our church anyway, because it is already a listed building. (Interview 17)

> People put a second pane of glass in front of it as protection, but then condensation formed and destroyed the colours. And there's a lot of problems and a lot of glass windows, including very valuable windows. And it takes a lot of professionals and a lot of thoughtfulness as to what you can do to become more sustainable. Isn't it really better to say: "Okay, put on a jacket, and we can withstand 14 degrees in the church." (Interview U2)

In the quote above, the interviewee seemed to suggest that energy efficiency measures were not necessarily the best way to reduce the environmental impact of church buildings, and that reducing heating and asking attendees to dress warmly would be better. Furthermore, sometimes environmental measures are perceived as running in conflict with each other, such as implementing energy

efficiency measures in churches that house protected bat species that could be disturbed by the work:

> I think that if you wanted to upgrade this church from an energy point of view, it would probably be very complicated and expensive. Also because of the bats in the belfry. (Interview 12)

Urban-rural differences can be a barrier as some forms of environmental engagement may be seen as detrimental to rural areas, and there is a balance to be struck between protecting farmers' interests and backing environmental regulations which may affect them negatively.

> Well, they are always worried about excessive regulations for farmers, of course, but. . . . nature itself is important to them, that it stays healthy, that is, yes, still important to them (Interview 14)

While these initiatives reflect a growing engagement with sustainability, the varying feasibility of measures—from simple behavioral changes to large-scale infrastructural upgrades—highlights the complex interplay between environmental goals and institutional realities within religious communities.

4.2 Financial Capital

Financial capital includes the financial measures which could be taken in order to mitigate climate change (e.g., through divesting from fossil fuel companies). This category also includes financial barriers which may impede actions.

The perception that taking many environmentally-friendly action is too costly is a recurring theme.

> Yes, there was resistance. Simply because of how much everything costs. Money is, of course, always an issue. (Interview 1)

Some interviewees were concerned that their budgets could decrease due to declining membership and the potential abolition of church taxes, negatively affecting environmental measures. Cost and time were both seen as significant barriers to achieving environmental certification known as *Grüner Güggel* [green certification].

> Many people were also afraid that it would be very expensive. I also heard that from many people who said they didn't want *Grüner Güggel* because it was so expensive. (Interview U3)

Environmental causes are seen as secondary to areas where funding has already been allocated, which tend to revolve around meeting basic needs (e.g., providing

housing/food). Some interviewees think that it is impossible to engage in climate change mitigation without the appropriate financial resources. Oeku is a religious NGO that spearheads the *Grüner Güggel* ecocertification in which churches can take part, Oeku also provides an environmental management system and conducts audits with congregations. This certification provides a ten-step framework for religious environmental certification which takes congregations through planning, implementation and evaluation of environmental actions.

4.3 Social/Symbolic Capital

Social/symbolic capital refers to the social relations and participatory processes that churches engage in, including engaging with environmental organizations and taking part in public campaigning.

Some religious organizations engage in public campaigns, such as supporting the Climate and Innovation Act, declaring their support, making donations, displaying posters and distributing flyers. However, overall, there is skepticism about religious organizations getting involved in environmental campaigning. Indeed, members of congregations do not always see the environmental engagement of their churches as positive. Therefore, it is a polarizing topic within religious communities.

> Some people say: "If only there were more of you" and others say: "No, definitely not" and it is difficult to position yourself there. (Interview 3)

Others believe it is the role of the church to take action to mitigate climate change based on notions of preserving and protecting creation, and that this argument is given impetus by church authorities.

> If the highest authority sets this as a focus, in the encyclical, then of course (ahem) there is a completely different emphasis on this topic. The spiritual forces (ahem) can hardly avoid it if the Pope says that this is / Exactly, creation theology is one of the central themes. (Interview U5)

Some members feel that the church should not get politically involved and that other organizations are better placed to focus on environmental issues.

> . . . basic concerns that used to be the churches are now better and more competently implemented by secular institutions. Our voice is, is simply the ethical voice, or, part of society, but we are one of many and that is . . . quite clear. (Interview 18)

However, there are clear signs that, although environmental issues have been very polarizing in the past, this is changing, and environmentalism is no longer seen as the opposite of conservatism.

> The big divide between conservative and green . . . those who fought against it at the beginning, when green was just a . . . er, that's the color of the devil! They fought against it and suddenly realized it wasn't like that. But . . . in their behavior and in their statements . . . they became more moderate. (Interview 17)

Umbrella organizations are often dependent on the state for funding and are required to be politically neutral. There is also a perception that communication between umbrella organizations and faith-based organizations is often well-meant but is not always clear.

> But that would have been training this autumn; we were a bit irritated that the (Umbrella Organization) doesn't understand how budgeting works, that I can't give information in May and then send these people on training in the autumn because the money isn't there. (Interview 21)

There is also a perception that no clear institutional support for promoting environmental engagement exists, despite signals from the top of religious organizations.

Some think that churches miss their actual mission by focusing on environmentalism rather than on the spiritual needs of their members. While environmental engagement remains a contested issue within religious communities, shifting attitudes and top-down theological imperatives suggest a gradual—though uneven—acceptance of ecological stewardship as part of the church's social mission, despite persistent tensions over institutional priorities and political neutrality.

4.4 Human Capital

Human capital concerns the education and knowledge base which is available and how this is used to disseminate environmentally friendly messages, such as through "green" sermons. Some organizations, such as Oeku, provide educational campaigns for environmental action, including sermon materials and instructions on broaching certain topics.

There is a concern that taking any form of environmental action would entail significant time and effort. On the other hand, many of the interviewees noted that environmentally-related messages could be disseminated through sermons:

> We pointed out that we buy fair trade, organic coffee and justified this with a psalm and basically with the creation story. I mean, our religious writings are 2,000 years old, it's not that easy to find very specific instructions for such a practice. But, of course, you can interpret it accordingly. (Interview 7)

> We mainly say that people should not overconsume, it's not just about consumption, consumption, but what I need to live . . . This is done through various prayers and also sermons and songs. (Interview 17)

While certification programs, such as the *Grüner Güggel*, are viewed positively, it is also noted that they can overburden church congregations.

> It was a long process to get this certification, first of all to get it started and form this group and see what we need, and, and, and . . . Also to get the people on board, well, it doesn't work. (Interview 3)

The need to conform to rigid requirements of certification programs may deter some congregations from starting the process.

There is a critique that the church is merely "jumping on the bandwagon" (Interview U9) of environmental activism and needs to be neutral in climate activism, which is perceived as a political topic.

> Well, we don't take sides directly in such things. We are actually politically neutral in that sense. (Interview 20)

Simultaneously, there is a recognition that the church could act as a role model, that highlighting environmental measures taken may inspire members to take action, but that there is always more that could be done:

> We are also perceived as a bit of a role model. Yes. That's still a bit of an inhibition or a big step towards publicizing it on a large scale: "We're doing **this** now, we're doing **that** now." And all they have to do is open the door and point somewhere and say: "You, you don't have that there yet. Or, you're still heating with gas and what are you trying to tell us, you should heat differently or you're still driving around in your cars." (Interview 19)

At the same time, there is a perception of societal pushback from some groups who think religious leaders should not focus on "secular" issues such as climate change. Furthermore, it is not always clear who to communicate with and how to approach relevant stakeholders, and conflicting ideas between organizational bodies can be a stumbling block.

Despite challenges of capacity, polarization, and institutional inertia, the strategic use of human capital—from theological reinterpretation to grassroots education—suggests that religious communities could play a pivotal role in fostering environmental awareness, provided they navigate these tensions with clarity and adaptability.

5 Discussion

This study offers a robust, contextually grounded understanding of Swiss Christian environmental engagement, but generalizing its findings requires careful consideration of sample biases, regional specificities, and the limits of self-reported data. While the framework and identified capital dynamics provide a transferable analytical lens, the extent of religion's potential for involvement in sustainability will vary significantly across cultures, theologies, and political economies. Thus, the research is most valuable as a foundation for targeted follow-up studies rather than as a universal model. Overall, it should also be noted that the heterogeneity of engagement captured in the interviews provides the basis for a nuanced understanding of how religious environmentalism takes place, and that the insider perspectives offered by the respondents give valuable insights into how roles, barriers and motivations are perceived with regards to environmental engagement.

The interview respondents seem to indicate that the two largest Christian denominations in Switzerland consider climate change a growing concern, reflecting wider societal environmental concerns. However, climate action does not seem to be the main concern for many of the congregations represented. Thus, there is untapped potential for these groups to engage more actively in environmental efforts (Haluza-DeLay 2014; Koehrsen 2015; Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber 2022; Tucker and Grim 2016). This finding parallels previous research, indicating that while some action is taking place, climate change is not yet a primary concern for most religious organizations (Caldwell, Probstein, and Yoreh 2022).

Religious communities' sense of moral authority and their close ties to members can create pathways for influence. For example, Protestant communities often exhibit higher participation in congregational activities, increasing opportunities for pro-environmental values to permeate members' lives (Hearn et al. 2024). Additionally, although some research indicates a negative correlation between those who hold anthropocentric and monotheistic religious views and engage in pro-environmental behaviors compared to pantheistic traditions (Taylor, Wright, and LeVasseur 2020), their extensive reach in Europe could facilitate significant environmental change as climate awareness grows. Furthermore, the notion of religious stewardship, which is prevalent in Abrahamic religions, may offer potential for increasing religious environmental engagement (Eom and Ng, 2023). Evidence from a study of Christians in the USA suggests that emotions such as both guilt and anger towards perceived environmental transgressions may play a role in religious pro-environmental behavior (Ng and Eom, 2024). Thus, capitalizing on emotions may help to further encourage pro-environmental religious engagement.

Regarding natural and physical capital, some religious communities contribute to climate change mitigation directly by reducing CO2 emissions, improving energy efficiency, and generating renewable energy. Although the overall impact of these efforts remains modest when compared to sectors like industry, religious organizations can act as moral role models, inspiring broader societal change (Mohamad, Idris, and Mamat 2012).

Indeed, while some religious organizations already engage in visible sustainability efforts, such as installing solar panels or driving electric vehicles, the broader impact of these measures remains uncertain but is certainly more than their physical application. Visible actions and implementations, such as installing PV panels or biodiversity drives, serve as a pro-environmental message that may influence members and the wider community, acting as an extension of social and human capital.

In the area of financial capital, initiatives such as installing PV systems may demonstrate long-term financial benefits and could motivate further investments in sustainable projects (Martinopoulos 2020). However, these projects require funds, which are often lacking. Material implementation of eco-friendly measures may be financially sound in the long term but require up-front funding (Gottlieb 2006; Harper 2011; Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber 2023).

Religious umbrella organizations and congregations engage to varying degrees in communicating environmentally friendly values. In terms of social capital, religious environmental engagement appears to reflect broader societal trends. In Switzerland, the visible effects of climate change, such as glacier decline (Huss, Bauder, and Linsbauer, 2024), and the influence of movements like Fridays for Future,[3] have heightened environmental awareness (Fritz et al. 2023). However, religious engagement in climate action through campaigning remains relatively low compared to broader societal efforts, suggesting that much of religion's potential remains unrealized. Globally, there are examples of religious organizations influencing climate policy, such as the Evangelical Climate Initiative in the U.S. (Johnston 2010; Wardekker, Petersen, and van Der Sluijs 2009). Umbrella organizations can serve as intermediaries between congregations and policymakers, leveraging their networks to shape both political decisions and the implementation of policies within congregations.

Furthermore, the significant human capital within religious communities could also drive change through actions such as reducing meat consumption and recycling, especially when tied to religious principles like the Roman Catholic Church's *Laudato Si'* encyclical (Wilkins 2020). Indeed, research seems to indicate

3 https://fridaysforfuture.org/ [retrieved 11.08.2025].

that awareness, sense of responsibility and moral beliefs regarding climate change can be positively influenced by exposure to religious environmentalism expressed by religious leaders, such as Pope Francis. (Schuldt et al., 2017)

The potential of sermons as a tool for mobilization is particularly compelling, given their historical role in social movements like civil rights activism (Houck and Dixon 2006). As the climate crisis deepens, integrating pro-environmental values into religious teachings and practices could catalyze significant societal change as can be seen in a study in the United Kingdom that assessed environmental behaviors involving a religiously framed environmental text (Ives et al., 2023). Research on the reading of Bible passages that support notions of stewardship were also shown to have a significant effect on participants in a study in the United States (Shin and Preston, 2021), indicating that the use of such texts in sermons could have a noticeable effect.

Despite the challenges, religious organizations have significant potential to play a greater role in addressing climate change. Umbrella organizations can facilitate initiatives like ecocertification schemes, providing guidance and support to congregations. Additionally, the moral authority that is often bestowed upon religious organizations, along with their ability to shape values and influence political decisions, uniquely positions them to tackle environmental and social justice issues.This moral authority, however, has been significantly eroded owing to the many cases of sexual abuse that have come to light, and which have received significant press coverage in Switzerland. (For example, in the USA, the Catholic church spent $301.6 million in one year alone on abuse related costs, a figure which likely dwarfs spending on environmental measures, for which costs are not reported) (Burke 2019). Even so, the role of umbrella organizations in fostering the exchange of information between those seeking to become more engaged may be crucial, such as sharing new ecocentric interpretations of religious texts and sermons.

While the findings of this study are based on Switzerland's Christian congregations and umbrella organizations, they contribute to the broader understanding of religious environmental engagement. However, the dynamics observed here may not translate directly to other regions or other faith traditions, particularly the Global South, where different socioeconomic and political contexts require separate analyses. Further research is needed to fully explore the potential of religious organizations as agents of environmental change.

6 Conclusion

Future research on religious environmental engagement could consider several promising directions. For example, examining the Global South and emerging economies could offer valuable insights, as religious influence on climate change attitudes may be stronger in different contexts (Haluza-DeLay, 2014). While theoretically possessing significant potential for climate-mitigating action through religious engagement, these regions often face financial constraints that weaken their ability to act. Additionally, since per capita carbon dioxide (CO2) footprints in the Global North far exceed those in the Global South, and the latter's footprints are likely to increase with economic development, it will be important to explore how religion might contribute to mitigating these projected rises. Another compelling area for study is the contrasting roles of religious umbrella organizations and congregations, particularly regarding whether umbrella organizations facilitate or inhibit local level engagement due to the perception that they have already addressed the issue at a higher level (Koehrsen and Huber 2021). Furthermore, investigating religious entities that actively support environmentally harmful practices or industries (e.g., mining or fossil fuels) could provide a fuller understanding of religion's varied roles in environmental engagement.

This study demonstrates that religious actors perceive themselves to be increasingly engaged in pro-environmental behavior. However, significant barriers remain. For instance, actions in physical and natural capital are often perceived to be limited by legislative constraints such as monument protection. Given the installation of 184 PV panels on the historic York Minster in the UK in January 2025 (Harris, 2025), it would seem that perhaps these constraints are not insurmountable. In the area of financial capital, one can see that changes are often hindered due to scarce resources—a challenge that could be addressed through stronger multi-stakeholder partnerships.

The greatest opportunities, as well as challenges, lie in the realm of social and human capital. There is considerable scope for further research into how umbrella organizations can act as catalysts for environmental engagement, though their role as potential inhibitors also warrants closer examination.

One limitation of this study is its focus on the organizational level (macro-meso) rather than individual-level (micro) dynamics. Factors such as gender and age, which are known to influence environmental engagement, were not directly addressed and represent an important area for future research. Furthermore, the interviews focused on congregations and umbrella organizations that had already been identified as being environmentally engaged to some extent, rather than a random sample of congregations. However, the likelihood of being able to discuss environmentalism with unengaged congregations is low as respondents would be

unwilling to potentially portray their congregations in a poor light. Additionally, faith-based organizations specialized in environmental issues, alongside reinforced environmental networks within umbrella organizations, could accelerate the ”greening“ of religions. These organizations could serve as intermediaries between secular actors, businesses, and local congregations, helping to disseminate the knowledge and skills necessary for increased environmental engagement. For instance, they might promote renewable energy adoption, advocate for green energy suppliers, or provide resources such as sermon guidelines and public campaign strategies.

To further accelerate religious environmentalism, strong leadership may be essential, particularly within more regimented top-down religious organizations. While initiatives like Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (2015) have demonstrated progress, religious leaders may need to take an even more resolute stance in promoting environmental action, complemented by participatory processes that engage communities. Religious organizations and their leadership could be pivotal in driving global environmental change by fostering collaborations, addressing criticisms, and developing solutions. Ultimately, this article underscores the significant, yet often untapped, potential of religion to contribute to climate change mitigation. However, it also raises a critical question: Should religion be expected to fulfill these external demands or do such expectations risk positioning religion as a mere resource for solving the climate crisis rather than focusing on the moral and spiritual guidance it provides?

References

Baumann, Martin, and Jörg Stolz. 2007. “Religiöse Vielfalt in der Schweiz: Zahlen, Fakten, Trends.” In *Eine Schweiz - Viele Religionen*, edited by Martin Baumann and Jörg Stolz, 39–66. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Bochinger, Christoph. 2012. “*Religionen, Staat Und Gesellschaft: Weiterführende Überlegungen*.” In *Religionen, Staat und Gesellschaft: Die Schweiz zwischen Säkularisierung und religiöser Vielfalt*, edited by Christoph Bochinger and Martin Baumann, 209–241. Zurich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung/Editions Neue Zürcher Zeitung.

Buckley, David T. 2022. “Religious Elite Cues, Internal Division, and the Impact of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*.” *Politics and Religion* 15 (1): 1–33.

Burke, Daniel. 2019. “The US Catholic Church Spent More than $300 Million on Abuse-Related Costs in 12 Months.” CNN. 4 June 2019. https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/04/us/catholic-church-300-million-abuse-claims/index.html.

Caldwell, Charles, Natalie Probstein, and Tanhum Yoreh. 2022. “Shades of Green: Environmental Action in Places of Worship.” *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 12 (3): 430–452. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-022-00760-2.

Chaves, Mark. 2001. “Religious Congregations and Welfare Reform.” *Society* 38 (2): 21.

Christie, Ian, Richard M. Gunton, and Adam P. Hejnowicz. 2019. "Sustainability and the Common Good: Catholic Social Teaching and 'Integral Ecology' as Contributions to a Framework of Social Values for Sustainability Transitions." *Sustainability Science* 14 (5): 1343–1354. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00691-y.

Djupe, Paul A., and Patrick Kieran Hunt. 2009. "Beyond the Lynn White Thesis: Congregational Effects on Environmental Concern." *Journal for the Scientific Study of* Religion 48 (4): 670–686.

Eom, Kimin, and Shu Ng. 2023. "The Potential of Religion for Promoting Sustainability: The Role of Stewardship." *Topics in Cognitive Science* 15 (3): 480–499. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/tops.12641.

Federal Statistics Office (2023) "Religions. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/languages-religions/religions.html.

Francis, Pope. 2015. "*Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis."* Vatican City: Vatican Website. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

Fritz, Livia, Ralph Hansmann, Blanche Dalimier, and Claudia R. Binder. 2023. "Perceived Impacts of the Fridays for Future Climate Movement on Environmental Concern and Behaviour in Switzerland." *Sustainability Science* 18 (5): 2219–2244. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-023-01348-7.

Gottlieb, Roger S. 2006. *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haluza-DeLay, Randolph. 2014. "Religion and Climate Change: Varieties in Viewpoints and Practices." *WIREs Climate Change* 5 (2): 261–279. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.268.

Harmannij, Derk. 2022. "Environmental Action Within Local Faith Communities: Navigating Between High Expectations and Practical Action." In *Religious Environmental Activism. Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship*, edited by Jens Köhrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber, 303–318. Abingdon: Routledge.

Harper, Fletcher. 2011. "Greening Faith: Turning Belief into Action for the Earth." *Zygon* 46 (4): 957–971. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2011.01231.x.

Harris, Paula, 2025. "Solarwatt Proudly Supplies Iconic York Minster with Solar PV System,". https://www.solarwatt.co.uk/company/press/press-releases/solarwatt-proudly-supplies-iconic-york-minster-with-solar-pv-system.

Hearn, Adam, Ann-Lea Buzzi, Julius Malin, and Jens Koehrsen. 2024. "Sustainable Development through Religious Environmental Engagement? Evidence from Switzerland." *Sustainable Development* 32 (6): 6934–6949. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.3064.

Hearn, Adam X., Fabian Huber, Jens Koehrsen, and Ann-Lea Buzzi. 2024. "The Perceived Potential of Religion in Mitigating Climate Change and How This Is Being Realized in Germany and Switzerland." *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, January. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-023-00884-z.

Hearn, Adam X., Annika Sohre, and Paul Burger. 2021. "Innovative but Unjust? Analysing the Opportunities and Justice Issues within Positive Energy Districts in Europe." *Energy Research & Social Science* (78): 102127.

Houck, Davis W., and David E. Dixon. 2006. *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement: 1954–1965*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

Huber, Fabian. 2022. "Environmentalism in the Religious Field: The Role of the Establishment for Competition in Switzerland." In *Religious Environmental Activism*. *Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship*, edited by Jens Köhrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber, 157–175. Abingdon: Routledge.

Huss, Matthias, Andreas Bauder, and Andreas Linsbauer. n.d. “Annual Mass Balance of Swiss Glaciers in 2023/2024,” Glacier Monitoring System in Switzerland. Accessed 22 January 2025. https://doi.glamos.ch/pubs/annualrep/annualrep_2024.pdf.

Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change. 2015. https://www.ifees.org.uk/ [retrieved 02.04.2025].

Ives, Christopher, Buys, Clark, Ogunbode, Charles, Palmer, Matilda, Rose, Aneira, Ruth and Valerio. 2023. “Activating Faith. Pro-environmental Responses to a Christian Text on Sustainability.” *Sustainability Science* 18 (2): 877–890. https://10.1007/s11625-022-01197-w.

Jenkins, Willis, Evan Berry, and Luke Beck Kreider. 2018. “Religion and Climate Change.” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43 (1): 85–108. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102017-025855.

Johnston, Lucas. 2010. “The Religious Dimensions of Sustainability: Institutional Religions, Civil Society, and International Politics since the Turn of the Twentieth Century.” *Religion Compass* 4 (3): 176–189. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00202.x.

Koehrsen, Jens, Buzzi, Ann-Lea, and Hearn, Adam. 2025. “Are Religious Organizations Becoming Green? Faith Communities’ Role in Advancing Environmental Sustainability in Switzerland.” *Sustainability Science* 62 (3): 296–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615587808.

Koehrsen, Jens, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber. 2022. “How ‘Green’ Can Religions Be? Tensions about Religious Environmentalism.” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 6 (1): 43–64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-021-00070-4.

Koehrsen, Jens, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber. 2023. *Religious Environmental Activism: Emerging Conflicts and Tensions in Earth Stewardship*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Koehrsen, Jens, and Fabian Huber. 2021. “A Field Perspective on Sustainability Transitions: The Case of Religious Organizations.” *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* 40: 408–420. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2021.09.005.

Lienert, Juri, and Paul Burger. 2015. “Merging Capabilities and Livelihoods: Analyzing the Use of Biological Resources to Improve Well-Being.” *Ecology and Society* 20 (2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/26270215.

Maibach, Edward W. 2015. “The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming.” *Available at SSRN 2695199*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2695199.

Martinopoulos, Georgios. 2020. “Are Rooftop Photovoltaic Systems a Sustainable Solution for Europe? A Life Cycle Impact Assessment and Cost Analysis.” *Applied Energy* 257: 114035. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apenergy.2019.114035.

Mohamad, Zeeda Fatimah, Noorshahzila Idris, and Zuffri Mamat. 2012. “Role of Religious Communities in Enhancing Transition Experiments: A Localised Strategy for Sustainable Solid Waste Management in Malaysia.” *Sustainability Science* 7 (2): 237–251. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-012-0169-1.

Myers, Teresa A., Connie Roser-Renouf, Edward Maibach, and Anthony Leiserowitz. 2017. “Exposure to the Pope’s Climate Change Message Activated Convinced Americans to Take Certain Activism Actions.” *Global Challenges* 1 (4): 1600019. https://doi.org/10.1002/gch2.201600019.

Narayanan, Yamini. 2016. “Religion, Sustainable Development and Policy: Principles to Practice.” *Sustainable Development* 24 (3): 149–153. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1616.

Natarajan, Nithya, Andrew Newsham, Jonathan Rigg, and Diana Suhardiman. 2022. “A Sustainable Livelihoods Framework for the 21st Century.” *World Development* 155 (July): 105898. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.105898.

Ng, Shu, and Kimin Eom. 2024. "Religious Stewardship and Pro-environmental Action: The Mediating Roles of Environmental Guilt and Anger." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 16 (3): 263–271. https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2023-51196-001.

Pew Research Center. 2012. "The Global Religious Landscape." *Pew Research Center* (blog). 18 December 2012. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/.

Pickel, Gert. 2011. *Religionssoziologie*. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Pollack, Detlef, and Daniel Olson, eds. 2012. *The Role of Religion in Modern Societies*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Preston, Jesse L., and Adam Baimel. 2021. "Towards a Psychology of Religion and the Environment." *Current Opinion in Psychology* (40) (August): 145–149. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.09.013.

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, Bundesamt für Statistik. "Religionen." n.d. Accessed 2 April 2025. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/content/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bevoelkerung/sprachen-religionen/religionen.html.

Rolston, Holmes. 2006. "Caring for Nature: What Science and Economics Can't Teach Us but Religion Can." *Environmental Values* 15 (3): 307–313. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327106778226338.

Schuldt, Jonathon, Adam Pearson, Rainer Romero-Canyas, and Dylan Larson-Konar. 2017. "Brief Exposure to Pope Francis Heightens Moral Beliefs about Climate Change." *Climatic Change* 141 (2): 167–177. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-016-1893-9.

Shin, Faith, and Jesse Preston. 2021. "Green as the Gospel. The Power of Stewardship Messages to Improve Climate Change Attitudes." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 13 (4): 437–447. https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000249.

Taylor, Bron, Gretel Van Wieren, and Bernard Zaleha. 2016. "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part Two): Assessing the Data from Lynn White, Jr, to Pope Francis." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10 (3): 306–378. https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29011.

Taylor, Bron, Jen Wright, and Todd LeVasseur. 2020. "Dark Green Humility: Religious, Psychological, and Affective Attributes of Proenvironmental Behaviors." *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 10: 41–56. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-019-00578-5.

Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John Grim. 2016. "The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and Dynamic Force." In *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, 3–12. Abingdon: Routledge.

Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John A. Grim. 2001. "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of World Religions and Ecology." *Daedalus* 130 (4): 1–22.

Veldman, Robin G., Dara M. Wald, Sarah B. Mills, and David A. M. Peterson. 2021. "Who Are American Evangelical Protestants and Why Do They Matter for US Climate Policy?" *WIREs Climate Change* 12 (2): e693. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.693.

Veldman, Robin Globus. 2019. *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate Change*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Wardekker, J. Arjan, Arthur C. Petersen, and Jeroen P. van Der Sluijs. 2009. "Ethics and Public Perception of Climate Change: Exploring the Christian Voices in the US Public Debate." *Global Environmental Change* 19 (4): 512–521.

Wilkins, Dominic. 2020. "Pope Francis, Care for Creation, and Catholic Environmental Imagery." *Environmental History* 25 (2): 361–371. https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emz085.