

## Practical report on the project «Urban Green Religions»<sup>1</sup>

- Study investigating the role of religion in sustainable urban transformation
- 67 interviews with representatives of religious communities and urban actors of sustainable change
- Most of the interviewees justify their interest in ecological issues in scientific and/ or social terms
- Mostly «theoretical» knowledge that environmental protection and religion belong together, but often only partly passed on by religious communities
- Local religious communities are on average less committed to the environment than their regional or national umbrella organizations
- Cooperation between different denominations and religions, but also with non-religious partners, should be initiated more often. The willingness to participate exists on both sides, usually only the “first step” is missing.

---

<sup>1</sup> The project was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The grant number is: 100015\_172754. In addition to the support of the SNSF the project team would like to thank the interview partners, without whose participation the study would not have been possible.

## What was the research question of the study?

**What influence does religion have on sustainable change in cities?** This question was the starting point of the research project conducted at the Centre for Religion, Economics and Politics at the University of Basel between 2018 and 2021.

The scientific debate assumes that religion is able to play a central role in sustainable change. Religion has numerous potentials for conveying ecological values to people. For example, 80% of the world's population describe themselves as religious. At the same time, religion is seen as having great significance as a moral guidepost.

So much for the theory.

However, what this means in terms of sustainable change in German and Swiss cities has not yet been investigated. Therefore, we were interested in data on the following points:

- How do local religious communities influence ecological measures on the ground?
- Where do they start in motivating the faithful to live a more sustainable lifestyle?
- And on the other side: What influence has the belief of urban actors (e.g., representatives of the urban environmental management) on their ecological commitment?

## How did we investigate these questions?

To investigate these questions, we conducted **67 interviews** in Germany and Switzerland. **43 of them with religious representatives.** The interviews covered numerous religious communities. These include Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Free Church, other Christian (Old Catholic, Jehovah's Witnesses), Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu communities. In addition, we conducted **24 interviews with people involved in the environmental field** (municipal employees, conservationists, climate activists, scientists and entrepreneurs). The interviews provide an overview of what is happening in ecologically open-minded, medium-sized cities in Germany and Switzerland. In addition, we also conducted interviews with representatives of religious umbrella organizations at the national and regional level. **The interviews were based on the assumption that religious communities are able to engage in sustainable change in three different ways:**

- **Public relations:** e.g., press releases, participation in protest activities
- **Practical implementation of change through environment-related projects:** e.g., energy-efficient building renovations, installation of solar panels
- **Conveying of ecological values:** e.g., thematization of environmental responsibility in sermons or religion class

## What were the results regarding religious communities?

**During the conversation, all interviewees referred to the fact, that the natural environment is an important area in their religion and that there are corresponding beliefs (e.g., theologies, guiding principles).** Hence, living according to these «guidelines» results (directly or indirectly) in an environmentally friendly lifestyle. Some emphasized that they also actively communicate these values to adherers, for example in religious education or in the context of religious celebrations. We were told further, that they are also publicly involved in environmental issues, for example by participating in rallies (Fridays for Future), by making statements in the media or even by active lobbying. The last points, however, are initiated less by local communities than, if at all, by religious umbrella organizations. Moreover, various projects have been implemented to promote environmental sustainability. These projects range from the introduction of a waste separation system, the purchase and consumption of sustainable food, efforts to preserve biodiversity and energy-efficient use of technical equipment to structural measures (optimization of heating, insulation, lighting) making the buildings more sustainable.

**The various religious communities have placed different emphases on these three areas.** The «weighting» that the interviewees made is very interesting: In the case of those communities that are strongly committed to environmental protection, the interview partners mostly mentioned the implementation of concrete practical projects (e.g., structural energy efficiency measures, waste separation) first. Apparently, in the local context, public relations work is a rather negligible aspect for most of the interviewees, while it is being pursued very consciously on the umbrella organization level.

The **theological content of sustainable action** in the sense of communicating values represents a reference horizon for the commitment of some of the interviewees, **but is only partially incorporated into theological (mediation) practice on site.**

The role that different religious communities play in ecological change can be summarized as follows: the **traditionally established religious communities** (in Germany: the Catholic Church and the church(es) organized in the EDK; in Switzerland the Catholic Church and the Reformed Church) **see themselves as people's churches and therefore also take up (more easily) guiding themes for society as a whole of which sustainability is unquestionably one.** In addition, they have a comparably high resource endowment, which is of fundamental importance for ecological change. Since they have a larger financial and personnel cushion, they can address long-term issues much more easily than groups that do not receive any government funding and are dependent on contributions from their often less wealthy members. Congruously, Evangelical Free Church communities, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or even Jehovah's Witnesses qualify the area of sustainable change more or less explicitly as a luxury or marginal issue.

**Sustainability certainly arouses interest among many non-traditionally based communities, but it can only be actively worked on this issue if there are still capacities available after basic community activities have been secured (e.g., payment of building rents).**

Although most major religious traditions today have normative approaches to understanding the environment, references to those approaches by local actors remain scarce. The enthusiasm with which representatives of different religions praised Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si" is exemplary for that. Only in the fewest cases it is being referred to the fact, that many reflections on the topic had already been made by different religions before the publication of the encyclical. Hence, religious actors justify their environmental commitment very rarely in religious terms.

## What did the research reveal about urban actors involved in the environmental field?

Besides conversations with religious communities, the project team conducted interviews with people who are and have been very engaged in the sustainable transformation process of their particular city. **At this juncture, the team was interested in the extent to which religious or spiritual ideas have shaped or influenced environmental commitment.** Frequently, the interviewees responded negatively to the question of whether they considered themselves “religious”, but realized afterwards in many cases, that they had Christian socialization. At the same time, the question arises whether new forms of spirituality shape the ecological commitment of the interview partners, since some of them referred to spiritual ideas of the environment, such as the idea of nature as a system in which everything is interdependent and even small changes often have an unpredictable impact. **However, there is no comprehensive religious or spiritual character of the environmental engagement of these actors ascertainable, as they mostly put scientific considerations (for example with regard to climate change) in the foreground of their engagement.**

At the synopsis of the interviews, it stands out that there is hardly any exchange between religious communities and the actors involved in the field of sustainability. Ecologically committed actors from the respective cities only very rarely bring their knowledge into religious communities and people who are mainly active in the religious field seek the connection “to the outside” very rarely. The few exceptions in which such an exchange actually takes place show that an exchange of impulses between religious and environmentally committed urban actors can be very fruitful. **On enquiry (and also as a result of the on-site meeting organized by the project), it becomes apparent that various actors have a strong interest in cooperation (e.g., in the form of project partnership).**

## Where is potential to expand the ecological commitment?

- The **exchange** between religious communities and sustainability-relevant departments of city administrations as well as environment-related civil society groups **does lend itself and could play an important role for sustainable change in the future.** Even if both sides rarely think of **seeking contact with the potentially not “typical” counterpart**, this should be consciously strengthened. All interview partners emphasized that they welcome such an exchange.
- Religious communities should make **greater use of less resource-intensive opportunities offered by religious communities:** Especially the sphere of conveying values offers peculiar potential without requiring financial resources. Thereby people who have not been so sensitized to ecological issues can be addressed and the broad range of different approaches to religious environmental commitment is being complemented.
- The **subject “sustainability”** could be used more intensively as a **basis for ecumenical or even interreligious dialogue or exchange.**

## Who carried out the project?

The research project was conducted at the **Center for Religion, Economics and Politics** at the University of Basel.

- Project management: Prof. Jens Köhrsen
- Project team members: Dr. Julia Blanc, Fabian Huber
- Student employees: Nadine Brühwiler, Anabel Da Pra, Vanessa Heiniger, Vanessa Kopplin, Vera Schaffer.

Please feel free to visit our website for further information: **[greenreligion.theologie.unibas.ch](http://greenreligion.theologie.unibas.ch)**

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact the project team at the following e-mail address: **[julia.blanc@unibas.ch](mailto:julia.blanc@unibas.ch)**