THE ROLE OF FAITH INSTITUTIONS IN PROMOTING PEACE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE*

O PAPEL DAS INSTITUIÇÕES RELIGIOSAS NA PROMOÇÃO DA PAZ E DA JUSTIÇA CLIMÁTICA

EL PAPEL DE LAS INSTITUCIONES RELIGIOSAS EN LA PROMOCIÓN DE LA PAZ Y LA JUSTICIA CLIMÁTICA

Cilene Victor

● Full professor of Communication and Religious Studies at the Methodist University of São Paulo, where she leads the research group Humanitarian Journalism and Media Interventions (HumanizaCom). She is also a Professor at FGV LAW and Co-Coordinator of the Global South Perspectives Network.
● E-mail: cilenevictor@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role of faith institutions in addressing global challenges through the promotion of peace and climate justice. Grounded in moral and ethical frameworks, these institutions possess unique capacities to mobilize communities, influence public discourse, and advocate for systemic change. From diverse religious contexts in Brazil, the paper highlights how faith-based initiatives foster dialogue, resilience, and collective action in the face of environmental and social crises. The discussion focuses on the ways in which faith institutions connect spiritual teachings with practical interventions, from supporting sustainable development practices to advocating for policies that prioritize equity and justice. It also addresses the challenges faced by these institutions, including navigating political tensions and maintaining credibility in secular spaces. Faith institutions serve as agents of change, bridging gaps between grassroots efforts and global frameworks. Their active involvement is essential in fostering a just transition to a more sustainable and peaceful future, particularly in regions disproportionately affected by climate impacts and social inequalities.

Keywords: Religion and Climate Justice; Faith-Based Action; Peacebuilding and Religion in Brazil; Global South Perspectives.

RESUMO

O artigo analisa o papel das instituições religiosas no enfrentamento dos desafios globais por meio da promoção da paz e da justiça climática. Fundamentadas em quadros morais e éticos, essas instituições possuem uma capacidade singular de mobilizar comunidades, influenciar o debate público e advogar por mudanças sistêmicas. A partir de contextos religiosos diversos no Brasil, o texto evidencia como iniciativas baseadas na fé promovem diálogo, resiliência e ação coletiva diante de crises socioambientais. A discussão focaliza as formas pelas quais essas instituições articulam ensinamentos espirituais com intervenções práticas, desde o apoio a práticas de desenvolvimento sustentável até a defesa de políticas que priorizam equidade e justiça. O artigo também aborda desafios enfrentados por essas instituições, como a necessidade de lidar com tensões políticas e manter credibilidade em espaços seculares. As instituições religiosas são apresentadas como agentes de mudança que conectam esforços de base a estruturas globais, tendo participação essencial na promoção de uma transição justa para um futuro mais sustentável e pacífico, especialmente em regiões desproporcionalmente afetadas pelos impactos climáticos e pelas desigualdades sociais.

Palavras-chave: Religião e Justiça Climática; Ação Baseada na Fé; Construção da Paz e Religião no Brasil; Perspectivas do Sul Global.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza el papel de las instituciones religiosas en el abordaje de los desafíos globales mediante la promoción de la paz y la justicia climática. Basadas en marcos morales y éticos, estas instituciones poseen una capacidad singular para movilizar comunidades, influir en el discurso público y abogar por cambios sistémicos. A partir de diversos contextos religiosos en Brasil, el texto destaca cómo las iniciativas basadas en la fe promueven el diálogo, la resiliencia y la acción colectiva frente a las crisis socioambientales. La discusión se centra en las maneras en que estas instituciones vinculan las enseñanzas espirituales con intervenciones prácticas, desde el apoyo a prácticas de desarrollo sostenible hasta la defensa de políticas que priorizan la equidad y la justicia. El artículo también aborda los desafíos que enfrentan dichas instituciones, como la necesidad de navegar tensiones políticas y mantener credibilidad en espacios seculares. Las instituciones religiosas son presentadas como agentes de cambio que tienden puentes entre los esfuerzos de base y los marcos globales, siendo su participación esencial para promover una transición justa hacia un futuro más sostenible y pacífico, especialmente en regiones desproporcionadamente afectadas por los impactos climáticos y las desigualdades sociales.

Palabras clave: Religión y Justicia Climática; Acción Basada en la Fe; Construcción de Paz y Religión en Brasil; Perspectivas del Sur Global.

INTRODUCTION

As global crises intensify, from escalating climate emergencies to widening social inequalities, new forms of ethical engagement and systemic transformation become increasingly urgent (IPCC, 2022; Santos, 2007). Faith institutions, rooted in long-standing moral traditions and embedded in everyday community life, have emerged as key actors in responding to these challenges (Appleby, 2000; UN Task Force on Religion and Development, 2021). Their ability to mobilize collective action, shape public discourse, and sustain practices of care and justice positions them as vital contributors to peacebuilding and environmental resilience (UNESCO, 1999; Pope Francis, 2015).

This paper investigates how faith institutions in Brazil respond to the intersecting crises of environmental degradation and social injustice, while also participating in broader global efforts to promote sustainable and equitable futures. Drawing from diverse religious traditions, including Catholicism, Evangelical Christianity, Afro-Brazilian religions, and interfaith networks, the discussion highlights how spiritual teachings are translated into concrete practices that support ecological stewardship, human rights, and policy advocacy (Boff, 1997; Gebara, 1999; Prandi, 2019).

Beyond their local impact, faith-based initiatives often bridge grassroots experiences with national and international frameworks, contributing to the architecture of climate governance and the culture of peace (UN, 2015; UNDRR, 2015). Yet this engagement is not without tension. Religious institutions must navigate political polarization, internal pluralism, and the complexities of operating in secular or pluralistic public spheres (Casanova, 2011; Santos, 2007).

In exploring these dynamics, the article argues that religious actors are not merely symbolic voices but active agents of transformation. Their contributions are essential to fostering a just transition (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013) in regions disproportionately affected by climate impacts and historical vulnerabilities.

THEORETICAL AND ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS

The intersection between faith, peacebuilding, and climate justice is rooted in long-standing ethical traditions that offer frameworks for interpreting ecological and social crises. Faith institutions, anchored in diverse cosmologies, invite communities to see the world not merely in material but also in spiritual and moral terms. These traditions interpret environmental degradation and inequality as ethical failures and demand collective transformation (Appleby, 2000).

Within the field of climate justice, the notion of a "just transition" calls for the decarbonization of economies alongside the correction of historical injustices and the inclusion of marginalized voices. Roberts and Parks (2007) emphasize how global inequality and historical responsibility shape climate vulnerability and policy, laying a foundation for ethically grounded transitions. Faith-based perspectives strengthen this discourse by grounding it in values such as compassion, care, and the sanctity of life - values that can mobilize social action beyond policy.

In Latin America, particularly in Brazil, liberation theology has contributed significantly to the ethical interpretation of environmental and social challenges. Leonardo Boff (1997, 2003) proposes the concept of **"ecological wholeness",** asserting that the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor are inseparable. He critiques anthropocentrism and advocates for an ethics of interdependence, arguing that ecological destruction is an extension of systemic social violence. Similarly, Ivone Gebara (1999) offers a feminist liberation theology perspective, emphasizing that care, relationality, and embodied ethics are central to resisting ecological and patriarchal exploitation. Her work highlights how the logic of domination, of women, of nature, of the poor, is a single systemic reality.

These theological contributions resonate with Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015), which calls for an **integral ecology**, linking environmental justice, social equity, and spiritual renewal. "There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself" (Francis, 2015, p. 118). This encyclical has galvanized a wide range of faith-based climate actions globally and provides a doctrinal basis for Catholic institutions in Brazil to engage climate justice as a moral imperative.

Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda contribute to this ethical landscape through their reverence for natural forces embodied in the orixás. These cosmologies articulate a worldview of mutual dependence between humans and nature. Rituals that honor forests, rivers, and ancestral energies are not only spiritual practices

but also acts of ecological memory and resistance (Prandi, 2019; Carneiro, 2018). Philosopher-theologian Raimon Panikkar (1998) supports this relational vision through the notion of **"cosmotheandric reality",** where the divine, the human, and the cosmos are interconnected. This view challenges dualistic thinking and invites a planetary ethic of care and shared responsibility.

Faith-based ethical traditions are thus not peripheral to climate debates; they are central to the construction of alternative imaginaries and actions. As noted by UN initiatives on religion and sustainable development, religious actors possess both social legitimacy and moral authority to promote peace, environmental stewardship, and justice, especially in contexts of polarization and systemic neglect (UN Interagency Task Force, 2021).

FAITH-BASED ENGAGEMENT AND THE PRINCIPLE OF "LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND"

The principle of Leave No One Behind, enshrined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), represents not only a rhetorical commitment by the United Nations but also a political-ethical directive aimed at reorganizing global systems around equity, social justice, and the centrality of historically marginalized populations. Operationally, the concept unfolds in two complementary analytical dimensions, the subject perspective, who is being left behind, and the action perspective, what is being done to ensure they are not left behind (Turunen, 2021). This dual framework draws from both recognition-based policies and the imperative of material and symbolic reparation, particularly in contexts of vulnerability exacerbated by climate change, armed conflict, and systemic socio-economic crises.

The engagement of faith institutions in the realization of this principle could be considered strategic, especially within the current landscape of war, forced displacement, and environmental degradation. Across the Global South, including Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, religious institutions have the capacity to act as mediators between global agendas and local dynamics. They connect normative values with concrete practices of assistance, protection, and resilience, particularly in territories shaped by structural exclusion. The session Religious Engagement: The Contributions of Faith Communities to Our Shared Humanity, held at the World Humanitarian Summit in Turkey (2016), formally acknowledged these contributions and produced collective commitments to expand the role of faith actors at all levels of humanitarian response and post-crisis reconstruction (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016). Among the commitments emphasized were the centrality of affected populations, the reinforcement of local presence, and the affirmation of dignity as a guiding principle of action.

One of the authors of this article attended the summit as a special correspondent for a Brazilian public broadcaster, covering the session and related events. This firsthand experience contributes to the analysis presented here by highlighting how the principle of Leave No One Behind was repeatedly invoked by religious leaders as a moral foundation for humanitarian and climate responses. Active listening to communities and the recognition of spiritual practices as integral to response strategies were recurring themes in the summit's deliberations (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016).

The Global South Perspectives Report (Victor & Kostakos, 2023) further reinforces the centrality of this principle in discussions on global governance reform. Based on qualitative data from 530 institutions across Latin America, Africa, and the MENA region, the report asserts that the effectiveness of multilateral reforms depends on the active inclusion of historically silenced actors, not merely as recipients of policy but as knowledge producers and co-creators of global solutions. This perspective challenges technocratic models of international policymaking and calls for a multilateralism grounded in climate justice and human dignity.

From this perspective, the involvement of faith institutions in governance processes and crisis response should not be seen as auxiliary or charitable. Rather, it is a structural role that mediates between spirituality and rights, community values and institutional mechanisms. When religious organizations adopt the principle of Leave No One Behind as a transversal commitment, they reframe humanitarian practices through a lens of territorial listening, pastoral presence, ritual enactment, and political engagement. By integrating spirituality, care, and systemic transformation, these institutions expand the scope of climate justice and sustainable peace across the Global South (Victor, 2024).

FAITH INSTITUTIONS AND CLIMATE JUSTICE IN PRACTICE

Faith institutions in Brazil have increasingly positioned themselves as moral and practical actors in the struggle for climate justice. Their responses take multiple forms, from community-based environmental programs to public advocacy aligned with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement.

One example is the work of the *Pastoral da Terra* and the *Conselho Indigenista Missionário*, Catholic initiatives that support land rights, ecological preservation, and indigenous sovereignty in the Amazon and other vulnerable regions. These organizations adopt an integral ecology perspective, rooted in both liberation theology and the teachings of *Laudato Si'*, to denounce environmental crimes and promote sustainable alternatives in regions targeted by extractive industries (Boff, 1997; CPT, 2021).

In Afro-Brazilian religious communities, spiritual practices are inherently ecological. Candomblé *terreiros* often act as environmental guardians, preserving biodiversity in sacred groves (*matas*) and fighting for water rights in urban peripheries. The work of leaders like Mãe Beata de Iemanjá and Mãe Stella de Oxóssi exemplifies the spiritual and political leadership of Afro-Brazilian women in defending ecological and social justice (Ribeiro, 2018; Prandi, 2019). These practices are increasingly being recognized by academic and policy communities as examples of "ancestral sustainability" grounded in non-Western knowledge systems.

Evangelical churches, although diverse in their political orientations, have also seen the rise of ecologically engaged sectors. The Evangelical Alliance's *Evangelicals for Climate Action* platform promotes biblical interpretations that link creation care to the fight against poverty and inequality. In Brazil, local initiatives by progressive evangelical groups, particularly among youth, have combined environmental education with food security, urban gardening, and community resilience, often in coordination with interfaith networks (Stoll, 2015; Pierucci & Prandi, 1996).

These efforts are not isolated. Faith-based organizations in Brazil have increasingly connected local advocacy with global climate action. For instance, the *Faith for Climate Justice* campaign, led by the international interfaith network GreenFaith, mobilized religious communities in over 40 countries ahead of COP26 and COP27 to demand urgent climate action. Although Brazilian participation was modest and decentralized, several religious leaders and groups contributed symbolic actions and public statements aligned with the campaign's call for justice from a Global South perspective (GreenFaith, 2021).

Moreover, interreligious initiatives such as the *Instituto de Estudos da Religião* (ISER) and the *Religiões por Direitos* coalition have strengthened faith-based advocacy for climate justice, especially in dialogue with national and international institutions. Their work includes the publication of policy briefs, participation in climate summits, and collaborative research with academic centers and grassroots movements (Conectas, 2021). Despite their contributions, these institutions often face structural challenges: limited funding, political backlash, and the secularization of public discourse that can marginalize religious voices in climate governance. Yet, their credibility among communities, ethical coherence, and capacity to sustain long-term engagement offer a powerful counterweight to technocratic or market-driven approaches (Appleby, 2000).

Faith institutions thus occupy a unique position. They mediate between global imperatives and local realities, connecting spiritual teachings with sustainable practices, and moral appeals with political action. Their practical involvement provides lived examples of what climate justice can look like when anchored in values of dignity, solidarity, and care (Appleby, 2000).

GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS AND LOCAL AGENCY

The engagement of faith institutions with climate justice cannot be fully understood without considering how their actions are embedded within, and contribute to, broader global governance frameworks. These include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and the United Nations' initiatives on peacebuilding and religious engagement (United Nations, 2015).

The United Nations recognizes the strategic importance of religious actors in achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). According to the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development (2021), faith-based organizations are among the oldest and most trusted civil society institutions, offering unique capacities to influence values, promote behavioral change, and reach marginalized populations (UN Interagency Task Force, 2021).

In this context, local initiatives carried out by faith communities in Brazil gain transnational relevance. For instance, interfaith coalitions such as *Religiões por Direitos* and academic networks like the *Rede de Religiões e Políticas Públicas* are increasingly involved in multilateral dialogues on climate governance, often bringing lived experiences from favelas, quilombos, and indigenous territories to the attention of international bodies. These contributions exemplify what de Sousa (2007) calls the "ecology of knowledges", where epistemologies from the Global South confront and complement dominant policy discourses.

The UN High-Level Panel on Peace Operations (2015) emphasized the role of local agency and cultural legitimacy in peacebuilding. Faith institutions, often embedded in the fabric of community life, embody this legitimacy. Their involvement in environmental advocacy and social mediation offers concrete pathways for a culture of peace as defined by UNESCO: "a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that reject violence and endeavor to prevent conflict by addressing root causes" (UNESCO, 1999).

In Brazil, examples of this include the engagement of religious leaders in interfaith peace circles during episodes of socio-environmental conflict, such as in the aftermath of the Brumadinho dam disaster or in resistance to deforestation in indigenous lands. These leaders often act as intermediaries between communities, state institutions, and international observers, bringing ethical perspectives to technical or political negotiations (CPT, 2021; Gebara, 1999).

This bridging function, linking local realities to global principles, is central to the role of faith institutions in shaping what the UN calls a "just transition" (UNFCCC, 2016). This concept, originally rooted in labor and environmental movements, has been taken up in religious discourse as a call for transformation that is not only sustainable but also equitable and inclusive. As Pope Francis stated at the UN General Assembly (2015), "a true right of the environment does exist, for two reasons: first, because we human beings are part of the environment; second, because every creature has an intrinsic value in its existence".

In this way, faith institutions contribute not just with moral appeals but with structured, embedded, and relational forms of knowledge that challenge the epistemic and ethical limits of dominant governance models (UN Interagency Task Force, 2021).

CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Despite their historical role in shaping moral imaginaries and community resilience, faith institutions face significant tensions when engaging in climate justice and peace advocacy. These challenges emerge both **internally**, from doctrinal disputes and institutional hierarchies, and **externally**, from increasing secularism, political polarization, and the instrumentalization of religion in public discourse (Appleby, 2000; Asad, 2003; Casanova, 1994; Pierucci & Prandi, 1996).

One of the key internal challenges is the **fragmentation within religious traditions** themselves. In Brazil, for instance, the Catholic Church has experienced tension between progressive movements inspired by liberation theology and more conservative currents that align with neoliberal or authoritarian ideologies (Gebara, 1999). Similar divisions are visible in evangelical communities, where environmental engagement is often perceived as a political stance rather than a theological imperative. This results in uneven support for climate action, limiting collective mobilization.

Another layer of complexity involves the **negotiation of legitimacy in secular public spheres.** Faith actors are frequently required to "translate" their theological motivations into secular language to gain credibility in policy arenas or academic circles (Casanova, 1994). While this enables dialogue, it may also dilute the distinctiveness of religious contributions or marginalize non-Western spiritualities – particularly those of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, whose cosmologies are often deemed non-scientific or "folkloric" in dominant discourses (Krenak, 2020).

Moreover, religious institutions must navigate the **risk of co-optation** by political agendas. As seen in recent Brazilian administrations, religious symbols and affiliations have been used to legitimize anti-environmental policies, stigmatize human rights defenders, or reinforce patriarchal values. This not only undermines the credibility of engaged religious actors but also deepens mistrust between faith-based organizations and civil society groups (Freston, 2019; Machado, 2006).

There is also the challenge of sustainability and institutional capacity. Many grassroots religious initiatives operate with limited financial and technical resources (Clarke, 2006; Tomalin, 2013). Unlike large NGOs or government programs, they depend heavily on volunteerism, informal networks, and community trust. While these assets foster strong local engagement, they are also vulnerable to burnout and discontinuity, particularly under conditions of political repression or environmental crises (Adogame, 2018; UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, 2021).

Finally, there is a conceptual tension between universal ethical claims and plural cultural realities. While religious frameworks often propose global moral principles – such as the sanctity of life, care for creation, or the dignity of all beings, these principles are interpreted and lived differently across cultural and theological contexts (Panikkar, 1999; Küng, 1997). Navigating this diversity without falling into relativism or moral imposition remains a challenge for interfaith and transnational cooperation (Benhabib, 2002).

In light of these contradictions, it is essential to adopt a critical yet constructive approach to the role of faith institutions. Their contributions to climate justice and peace are neither automatic nor unproblematic (Appleby, 2000). However, their deep embeddedness in social life, moral authority, and capacity to articulate long-term visions make them indispensable actors in navigating the complexities of our time (Adogame, 2018; Clarke, 2006).

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

As the global community grapples with escalating climate disruptions and entrenched social inequalities, faith institutions offer vital, though often underrecognized, contributions to ethical engagement, collective resilience, and systemic transformation (Appleby, 2000; Clarke, 2006). Drawing on spiritual teachings, moral authority, and deeply rooted community ties, these institutions function not only as advocates but as lived expressions of climate justice and peacebuilding (Boff, 1997; UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, 2021).

This article has examined the multifaceted roles of faith institutions in Brazil, illustrating how their practices, whether in Catholic advocacy for land and environmental rights, Afro-Brazilian ecological cosmologies, or Evangelical community engagement, translate moral imperatives into concrete interventions. These practices resonate with and enrich global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2016), and the UN's culture of peace agenda (UNESCO, 1999).

The discussion also acknowledged the complex terrain faith institutions must navigate. Internally, they face theological fragmentation, resource limitations, and generational divides (Gebara, 1999). Externally, they contend with political co-optation (Pierucci & Prandi, 1996), epistemic marginalization (Santos, 2007), and the challenges of interfaith cooperation across cultural and doctrinal boundaries (Casanova, 1994; Santos, 2007). These contradictions, however, do not negate their relevance. Rather, they underscore the need for greater critical engagement, capacity-building, and support for religious actors working at the intersection of justice, environment, and peace.

The case of Brazil demonstrates the potential of religious communities to connect local struggles with global agendas, thereby contributing to what Boff (1997) calls "an integral ethic of care." Whether by defending traditional territories, safeguarding water sources, mobilizing youth for climate advocacy, or participating in international forums, faith institutions serve as agents of transformation grounded in values of dignity, solidarity, and relational responsibility (Santos, 2007).

To foster this potential, it is imperative that international institutions, academic communities, and civil society organizations recognize the legitimacy and specificity of religious knowledge systems. Rather than viewing them as peripheral or outdated, they must be engaged as strategic partners in crafting inclusive, ethical, and resilient pathways toward a just and sustainable future (UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, 2021).

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