



## Religion and ESD in the Context of Burkina Faso

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The new understanding of stewardship of the earth both from the biblical and scientific perspectives has led to serious commitment by African Churches to environmental concerns, and promotion of sustainable development practices.

The case of Burkina Faso is representative of the overall situation in West Africa, where members of the same family will live together and practice at least two or three different religions in the same home. These religions include Islam, Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), and Animism. To show how faith and education for sustainable development (ESD) intersect in Burkina Faso, we interviewed leaders from each of these traditions. This article presents the positions they articulated, as well as the ways in which these different traditions have found common ground around preserving the Earth.

### Traditional Religions / Animism

The tribal authorities (representing traditional religions, or Animism) who answered the questionnaire showed us their existing principles and rules, which are set up to organize the management of nature and to ensure sustainability. Supervision for these rules is collective, and all members of the community have a sense of the common good. The traditional vision, which contributes to the preservation and protection of natural resources,

is that each resource being used by individuals is made of and/or shelters supernatural forces, and thus deserves man's respect while using them. This vision for sustainable development is passed down through: (a) experience, (b) contacts between generations, (c) interdictions, and (d) the sacralization of objects.

As part of this, each person who offends an element of nature, through such acts as cutting a tree down or causing a wildfire, will systematically denounce himself out of a fear of being punished by invisible forces. Some of these rules include:

**Fruit trees:** the harvest period for the fruit of some trees is well-defined by a calendar, and all harvesting outside of that time period is prohibited. This applies to every member of the community. A period of time is also determined for the consumption of the fruit, and one person is given the authority to make that decision. This allows for the fruit to mature well, and preserves the species by allowing the seeds to grow again naturally. Thus, the natural regeneration of plant species is guaranteed.

**Sacred woods:** these constitute actual groves which are considered so holy that, in some cases, even dead wood gathered there cannot be used in making a fire. Every village has one or more of these sacred

woods, which represent a strategy for conserving biodiversity. In particular, these sites contribute to the protection of endemic and endangered species.

**Water:** traditional water management deals with the many ways in which it is used. This resource is part of both the economy and the social life of humans through its availability as a drink for the living and dead; its role in agricultural production; and as a fishery. One of the ways in which traditional religions manage this resource is by limiting pond fishing to a collective activity, done only once or twice a year. Outside of this time period, fishing is not permitted. This allows for the renewal of species and ensuring the sustainability of resources.

This vision is undergirded by values of the respect of nature, a sense of the common good, and the need for self-regulation. In line with this, traditional religions place an emphasis on using natural resources for the purposes of consumption needs, and not for individual financial gain.

This presents a number of challenges in contemporary society, however. For one, there is a standardization of concepts and lifestyles which does not fit with the more local, specific, and diverse responses to sustainable development that exist in traditional religions. Many of the rules and principles that were protecting nature can no longer be applied because of the changing context of their societies. Finally, the community spirit that is so important for these rules has been replaced by a spirit of individualism. In order to meet these challenges from the perspective of traditional religion, ESD must use (a) local charters, (b) identify messages inciting to reduce the pressure on natural resources, (c) develop modules on environmental education for adults focusing on their hobbies, (d) implement environmental education in the children's scholar programme (e) and develop traditional ways at the same time.

## Revealed Religions: Islam and Christianity

The vision of sustainable development, in both Islam and Christianity, is passed down through the revelation of God in the texts of the Bible and the Koran. Referring to the Bible and the Koran, Christian and Muslim leaders both declared that God created humanity and installed him in the Garden (world) so that he can maintain it and ensure that it blossoms completely. There is an obligation, in both religions, to respect nature as well as the Creator. God gives human beings the opportunity to rule and subdue the Earth, with the task of guarding and watching over this environment and guaranteeing its sustainability. man is the keeper of the garden, rather than its master. He must take care of what is present around him. He must, thereby, make use of the totality of his potential so that the Earth will bloom and he will meet the expectations of his Creator.

For these revealed religions, their contribution to ESD focuses on (a) environmental awareness, (b) waste reduction through a rational management of resources, (c) preservation of the people's health, and (d) maintaining a hygienic living environment. Each of these religions also contributes its own specific principles and values.

### Islam

The Koran outlines five specific principles related to ESD:

- Election: God chose Earth to be the place of residence of humanity. God's election means that everything is under His control;
- Responsibility: human beings are in charge of the organization and the management of everything on Earth because he is the Khalifa (vicar, lieutenant) of God on Earth;
- Preservation: human beings must preserve Earth and not corrupt it, through deterioration, pollution, or in other ways, after God made it inhabitable;

- Corruption: human beings' actions on land and sea must not corrupt them. The original divine ecology must be preserved;
- Perfection: human beings must always be concerned, and responsible, for the perfection of the Earth.

Of these, one of the most important is preservation, as it directly leads to conservation and sustainability. In addition to these, there are a number of other important beliefs which lead to participation in ESD. For one, Muslims believe that religion must be the conscience of the world. In particular, it must be part of establishing a morality for the use of technology without creating a restraint on it; Man's technological aspirations must be oriented and channeled properly. Also, according to Islam, the morality of the prophets is used as an example for the behavior to adopt with regards to all nature – including the land, water, plants, and animals.

## Christianity

For Christians, sustainable development is based on respect for life, which implies a respect for everything that guarantees and protects life. This includes, according to the Bible, submission to and respect for the rules which have been established by God. Especially in the Catholic Church, with its social teaching, these rules are meant to help develop humans in every aspect of his life, and ensuring sustainable outcomes from his actions. For this transition to a sustainable world to happen, however, there must be a change in the man's heart. For many Christians, social organizations seem impervious to the message of God. The contribution of religion in the efforts for ESD around the world thus must come primarily through the transformation of Man's heart, because he is not capable of bringing change if he does not seek God's help. Thus, their goal is that humans would recognize his position in the world and assume the role God entrusted to him, according to the laws set out in the Bible.

## Coming Together: The Three Faiths and the Earth Charter

All three communities could easily agree that the Earth Charter can be an important part of ESD. For this to happen, we must:

- Implement the principles and rules above mentioned in educational programmes;
- Commit leaders to coordinating their actions;
- Communicate through religious and tribal leaders.

The consensus around these three points is a response to the fact that today, transmission of values comes through a wide variety of channels: formal and informal education, the media, and many others. Religious leaders must work within these communication channels – Friday prayers, Sunday offices, TV, radio, and others – to make sure that these values are being communicated. With consistent communication of these faith values, there is the possibility of a transition to a sustainable world.