

World view



By Tobias Müller

People of faith are allies to stall climate change

Together, religious groups and scientists can be a powerful force for a liveable planet.

I am used to sceptical looks when I talk to scientists about my work with religious communities. They have reason to see science as under threat from zealots: examples abound, from the treatment of Galileo Galilei to vaccine aversion. But faith communities can feel the same way about scientists. Even if they disagree on important topics, it's both possible and essential to collaborate on urgent issues, such as the fact that large parts of Earth are becoming uninhabitable. In my view, this Easter, Passover or Ramadan is the perfect time to start.

I'm a political scientist who studies how religious groups respond to problems, from environmental crises to domestic violence to racism. Since 2013, I have worked with other researchers, some religious and some not, to explore climate science with communities of faith.

I've seen the power of this approach: some 1,200 institutions have committed to divest from fossil-fuel companies, totalling US\$14.5 trillion. One-third are faith-based organizations. Many, such as Operation Noah, include scientists in leadership roles. Similarly, the group Extinction Rebellion Muslims has built a transnational network with scientists and activists in Kenya, Gambia, the United Kingdom and beyond; they host "Green Ramadan" seminars. Their efforts stalled plans for a luxury tourist resort that would have destroyed parts of the Nairobi National Park in Kenya. A co-campaigner, Maasai leader Nkamunu Patita, has been appointed to a government task force that will map wildlife-migration routes and be consulted in future development plans.

Time and again, I see chances to connect falter because of wrong assumptions and miscommunication. As a result, I've developed strategies, such as a common framing, that help to strengthen these opportunities.

I grew up in a conservative Christian community in which concern for the environment came well behind the need to prepare for the Lord's second coming. Going to university and learning how climate change was destroying thousands of peoples' livelihoods left me heartbroken. How was it that we Christians, for whom love for neighbour is a sacred duty, were contributing to the destruction of God's creation?

When I learnt that two scientists in my church had founded the Creation Care Initiative to link science, biblical teachings and stewardship, I immediately signed up. Our small-group workshops led to an invitation to co-design the sustainability strategy for an international youth convention with an expected attendance of 40,000.

Alas, the organizers rejected most of our proposals. I think they would have been more accepting had we framed the science to encompass Christian views. Instead of

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confronting church leaders with 'radical' solutions, such as serving only vegetarian food, we should have collaborated with church members who were already enduring desertification, flooding and other effects of climate change.

This framing would work for most faith communities, because many of their fellow believers are severely affected by climate change: in South Asia, for example, where many Muslims and Hindus live, and in sub-Saharan Africa, where many Christians live. Indeed, Indigenous beliefs and local faith groups have been central to Earth stewardship.

Now I'm working to get scientists to at last take religious groups seriously as allies in the fight against climate change. Last November, I organized a conference (see go.nature.com/3tp2) on religion and climate change with the Woolf Institute, an interfaith research centre in Cambridge, UK. Some 250 people from more than 20 countries showed up. Scientists from the conference have been invited to speak in religious communities. The University of Cambridge's Faculty of Divinity is now working with Cambridge Zero, the university's umbrella organization for climate research – as well as with faith groups across the world – to organize a faith-and-science summit at the United Nations' COP26 climate conference, to be held this November in Glasgow, UK.

Along the way, we've learnt about what works.

- **Collaborate with religious scientists and local leaders.** Even the most conservative faith communities hold scientists who advocate climate action. Find them, learn their arguments, and cite scripture passages that will resonate with their communities. Include these in your talks.
 - **Stories speak louder than graphs.** Numbers alone won't make your case. Focus on the congregation and its fellow believers in regions most affected by climate change. Stories of ruinous droughts abound in sacred texts. Show how these pale in comparison to what climate change will bring.
 - **Talk about what matters to you and your audience.** Many religious people feel that science threatens deeply held values. Be ready to hear religious counterarguments, and avoid science-versus-religion debates. Instead, talk about what you both care deeply about: the well-being of your community, the world that your children will grow up in. I have found that the question of how to be a good ancestor opens up surprising expanses of common ground.
- If you are religious, go to your pastor, imam, rabbi or other local leader and ask them whether you can give a talk on climate change. Otherwise, Easter, Passover and Ramadan are good times to visit a local church, synagogue or mosque. Wish those there a happy holiday, invite them for tea, and ask whether they would like to explore together what the climate crisis means for your community.

We could build an alliance powerful enough to rewrite history.

Correction

This World View erroneously implied that the Operation Noah initiative is led by scientists. In fact, the programme has scientists in leadership roles.