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# Deforestation and Religious Collaboration

*Approaching Environmental Issues through Interreligious Dialogue*

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Master's Thesis in Religion and Diversity: Conflict and Coexistence  
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## Foreword

The development and completion of this study has been a long and difficult journey. While I at times have been certain of the ingenuity and importance of my project, many times it has felt like a never-ending mountain to climb. With the arrival of Covid-19, I had to rethink several aspects of my work. The pandemic naturally also affected my life, as most days were now spent at home. This certainly affected my motivation and effectiveness. As such, handing the thesis in feels like an enormous victory, of which I am immensely proud. A few words of thanks are due, as I could not have achieved this accomplishment all on my own.

First and foremost, I must express how grateful I am to my supervisor, Oddbjørn. From day one, you believed in my project and my vision. You were enthusiastic about the subject, encouraging, and concrete in your feedback. You pushed me to be structured and effective, while also giving me room to set my own goals and devise my own plan. I could not have finished the thesis this semester without your support and guidance. Thank you for reassuring me every guidance-session that there is, in fact, something of value in my writing and my research.

Secondly, I owe a great deal of thanks to my parents. Thank you for putting up with me this last year. You have cheered me on, had unending belief in me and my ability to write this thesis (which at times was frustrating), and supported me through highs and lows. I am so grateful for your love and support, always.

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Any errors, omissions, or shortcomings in this thesis are mine alone.

Karen Veslemøy Lemvik

*Oslo, spring 2021*

## Abstract

This master's thesis looks at the connection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues. The aim of the study is to look at three elements, namely: 1) religion in ecological contexts, 2) models of interreligious dialogue in a specific environmental context, and 3) what contribution religion has to environmental issues. These elements are embedded in the research question of the thesis, which is: "how can one approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue?".

To answer this, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from the global initiative 'Interfaith Rainforest Initiative'. By identifying reoccurring themes in the interviews, four main dimensions of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative were discovered: reach, inclusivity, action-orientation, and religion. Through discussing the main findings in light of existing theory on interreligious dialogue, and religion and ecology, three main observations are made. Firstly, the connection between religion and spirituality is somewhat unclear, and the division of the two terms causes challenges. This calls for a revision of the terms. Secondly, a revision of the terms should include a dimension of religions' relation to the natural world, as the connection between religion and ecology is central in the intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues. Thirdly, new understandings of interreligious dialogue are required. While the specific example in this study is an example of a dialogue in the form of social action, existing action-oriented models of interreligious dialogue fails to speak to the width of activities and goals of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.

The study discovers several ways in which one can approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue. The interreligious profile opens for the participation of a variety of religions and actors, and through this has the potential to reach numerous people in multiple contexts. This dialogue also brings a variety of language, traditions, values, and narratives into an environmental context. These elements function to elevate environmental issues from practical issues to ethical issues, and as such opens for the mobilization of people on both an ethical and a spiritual level.

## Abbreviations

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ARRCC | Australian Religious Response to Climate Change  |
| IRI   | Interfaith Rainforest Initiative   |
| FFF   | Faiths For Forests   |
| NICFI | Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative   |
| RFN   | Rainforest Foundation Norway   |
| RFP   | Religions for Peace  |
| SDG   | Sustainable Development Goals  |
| STL   | Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livssynssamfunn (Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities) |
| UN    | United Nations   |
| UNEP  | United Nations Environment Program   |
| WCC   | World Council of Churches  |

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*“We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”*

- Pope Francis

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Context

We are living in an ‘Age of Global Dialogue’ (Swidler, 2017, p. 487). Due to increased migration, globalization, and the development of the digital world, there has never before been such extensive communication across local and national borders. In addition, Leonard Swidler brings to light that while the world has always needed dialogue, there has been a growing realization of this in newer times. He connects this to global events such as the ‘Fall of the Wall’ in 1989 and 9/11 in 2001 (Swidler, 2013, p. 3). In the aftermath of threats and crises such as these, it seems people realize the need for opening channels for dialogue so that history will not repeat itself, and so that future divisions and tragedies can be avoided.

Arguably, one of the most pressing crises of our time, is the environmental crisis. The scale and risks of this crisis is unprecedented, with catastrophic effects on environment and human life as the result. In realizing the extent and probable results of this crisis, it seems natural for people to open channels for dialogue to work on solutions to the environmental issues. Mary Evelyn Tucker brings to light that during the last two decades, there have been movements that show the growing commitment of religions to respond to and work on solutions regarding the environmental crisis (Tucker, 2009, p. 823). This commitment has also been shared and acted upon by religious leaders, such as Pope Francis. In his encyclical letter from 2015, the Pope saw it necessary to draft an official response to the climate crisis, speaking on behalf of the Catholic Church. Considering the link between global events and crises and the impulse for dialogue, perhaps this growing commitment is a response to a new, global threat.

### 1.2 Personal motivation

In deciding what area of research to focus on in this thesis, the area of interreligious dialogue was of interest from the very beginning. Having grown up in two different cultures, namely in Norway and Ethiopia, how to relate to people of different cultures and religions have always been a central aspect of my life. In the bigger picture, I see dialogue as an essential tool for achieving peace and coexistence. Religion needs to be part of the bigger conversations, as the world is largely religious. Instead of changing each other’s convictions, or leaving the religious aspect out altogether, it seems productive to find ways to cooperate despite different

values, beliefs, and practices. The question then becomes: is an effective dialogue possible, and if so, which elements does it contain?

Over the last couple of decades, the climate crisis has continuously taken up more space in the news- and research platforms, as well as in the global conversations. For me, the documentary ‘An inconvenient truth’ from 2006 led to my first realization of the world heading for an environmental crisis. There is an ongoing conversation on how much damage humans inflict on the earth, and what consequences this will have in the long run. When starting the master’s program at the Faculty of Theology, I knew little about how the environmental focus played out in the different religious contexts. However, discovering the ARRCC<sup>1</sup> through a group project, this sparked my interest. As I am interested in what role religions play in the public sphere, naturally I got interested in their presence in efforts and conversations on environmental issues. The ARRCC being a multifaith effort, I wondered whether other such efforts existed. A quick google-search led me to what later became my case of study: the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI). This initiative is an embodiment of the combination of interreligious dialogue, and religion and ecology, which became the two fields of focus for this study.

Early in my research I discovered that the combination of the fields of interreligious dialogue and religion and ecology is a rather new and emerging phenomenon. Due to this, I hope this master’s degree can in some way contribute to this emerging field and be a part of developing new theory. I believe the findings of this study gives new and interesting insights into the intersection of interreligious dialogue, and religion and ecology. By drawing on the case of IRI and combining literature on the two fields of study, my hope is that new principles for interreligious dialogue with environmental issues as the focal point can be deduced.

### 1.3 Objectives and research questions

This thesis is a qualitative research study conducted in between spring of 2020 and spring of 2021. The aim of this study can be divided into three core elements. The first is to discover how religion appears in ecological contexts. Secondly, which kinds of interreligious dialogue can be applied in a specific environmental context will be looked at. Lastly, through these

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<sup>1</sup> The ARRCC, Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, is a multifaith network in Australia, committed to action on climate change. Their efforts include trying to halt new coal and gas projects through gathering religious leaders and getting the attention of the prime minister by drafting an open letter.

elements I hope to better understand in what ways religion can contribute to new understandings of environmental issues. The way in which these elements are researched, is by looking at one specific case that embodies the intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI).

The fundamental research question of this study is:

### **How can we approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue?**

To answer this question, the following sub-questions will be discussed:

- 1) How does religion appear in ecological contexts?
- 2) Which models for interreligious dialogue can be applied in a specific environmental context?
- 3) In what ways can religion contribute to new understandings of environmental issues?

#### **1.4 Outline of the project**

To provide a clear image of the thesis, a short outline of the project is here presented. Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter, where the study, its context, my position and personal motivation, objectives, and research question, as well as an outline is presented.

Chapter 2 is the background chapter, where important historical and contemporary contexts of the fields of religion and ecology and interreligious dialogue is introduced. Furthermore, the environmental issue of deforestation will be presented, as well as an introduction to the case of study for this thesis, IRI. This chapter creates the frame for the study.

Chapter 3 introduces the central theories in the fields of both religion and ecology and interreligious dialogue that this study draws on. In this chapter, the important terms of religion, spirituality, secularization theory, and interreligious dialogue will be introduced and defined.

Chapter 4 is the methodology chapter. This chapter places the study within qualitative research and introduces the research method of the study. This method's strengths, weaknesses, as well as the results' validity is discussed. The limitations and ethical

considerations of the study will also be touched upon. In addition, the tool for analyzing the results and how this was done is presented.

Chapter 5 presents the main findings of the study. These are presented through four sections, where each section represents a dimension discovered in IRI. These dimensions were discovered through the interviews conducted, and each theme relating to them is presented by referencing quotes from the interviews.

Chapter 6 makes for the discussion of the study. Here, the findings are discussed and analyzed in relation to the theoretical perspectives introduced in chapter 3. This chapter is split into two sections, namely: religion and ecology, and models of interreligious dialogue. Under these sections, several aspects connected to them will be presented and discussed.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion of the study. Here, the core findings of the study in relation to the research question is presented, and through them, a conclusion is drawn.

## Chapter 2: Background, context, and actors

This chapter will present the context of the study, starting with a brief history of interreligious dialogue. An overview of the contemporary interreligious scene is introduced, followed by a history of the academic field of religion and ecology. In order to understand the background of the chosen case, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), the environmental issue of deforestation will be introduced. Lastly, IRI itself will be presented, with a brief history, its structure and goals, and an overview of the central actors that make for its partners and main contributors.

### 2.1 Interreligious dialogue: a brief history

Historically speaking, interreligious dialogue is a relatively new concept. While many efforts could have been included in an overview of the history, I will restrict the contents here to three main points of interest: a symbolic starting point; the change of attitudes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and the ecumenical<sup>2</sup> backdrop of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A common view of a starting point for interreligious dialogue is the World Fair in Chicago in 1893. The fair was a celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “discovery” of America by Christopher Columbus. Included in this fair was a ‘World Parliament of Religions’, - the first of its kind. While the fair did not succeed in gathering all the intended participants, around 400 representatives of different religions chose to participate (Moyaert, 2013, p. 193). Critics have later brought up the clear majority of Christian people and representatives, and as such doubting its ‘interreligious’ nature. Despite this uneven representation, the fair was still a breakthrough; the first of its kind, and a representation of a shift towards dialogue. While this event might be the symbolic beginning of interreligious dialogue, the actual development and practice of such dialogues has been a lengthy process that, in many ways, is still ongoing.

Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, engagement between different religious traditions was limited to geography and restricted by language; one largely encountered the religions that surrounded one’s vicinity (Cornille, 2013, p. xvi). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a surge in interreligious encounters and dialogue. This was due to many factors, the first, and perhaps most important, of which was the increasing globalization. With more people on the move,

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<sup>2</sup> Ecumenical refers to dialogue and collaboration across different Christian denominations.

the 'religious other' was no longer a distant idea, but became a person of everyday encounter (Moyaert, 2013, p. 198). Sallie B. King (2010, p. 103) also brings to light that with the end of World War 2, empires disbanded, national identity became central, and Christianity became a minority presence in many countries instead of the majority religion. At the same time, there was a shift in Western attitudes towards other countries and cultures. Where there before had been an attitude of superiority, there was now a curiosity and interest in other cultures and their way of life (King, 2010, p. 103).

The third important factor in the development of interreligious dialogue, was the ecumenical dialogue that emerged and developed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Moyaert, 2013, p. 196). The efforts to meet and communicate across different Christian denominations resulted in several large ecumenical gatherings in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with the launch of the Christian Ecumenical Movement in 1910 in Edinburgh, and the Movement for Life and Work in 1914. These two efforts were later merged to form the organization called the World Council of Churches, which is one of the largest ecumenical movements today (Swidler, 2013, pp. 4-5). In addition, there was a change in attitudes and practices of the Catholic Church. The Vatican Council II (1962-1965) passed three declarations; 1) a declaration claiming that religious freedom is a part of the Catholic teaching; 2) a declaration encouraging Catholics to engage in ecumenical dialogue, and; 3) a declaration on the relation between the Church and non-Christian religions. These declarations resulted in the development of secretariats focused on dialogue around the world (Swidler, 2013, pp. 7-8). While these efforts were originally not interreligious of nature, they lay the foundation for an attitude and a turn towards dialogue, which then developed from being solely ecumenical to later becoming interreligious.

## 2.2 Contemporary interreligious scene

After the early efforts of bringing together different denominations and faiths, interreligious work has grown to continually take up more space locally, nationally, and globally. Today, there are efforts all over the world to open channels for dialogue between religions on a number of subjects, and to join efforts in solving pressing issues together. Following is a brief overview of some of the prominent efforts, initiatives, and organizations working with interreligious dialogue. This is included to contextualize the climate and scene of interreligious dialogue from which IRI arose.

There are innumerable interreligious efforts, initiatives, and organizations worldwide today. There are also many interreligious organizations, collaborations, and initiatives on the local and national levels of different countries. These are by no means unimportant, and IRI are working with such efforts in the local contexts of the countries. In addition, local religious leaders have been and are still important in mobilizing their congregations and speaking out on the issues at hand. However, due to the size of this study, the efforts included here are a selection from the global level and from the Norwegian context. These two contexts are included due to their relevance for IRI.

### 2.2.1 Global perspective

The modern starting point for interreligious dialogue is the World Fair in Chicago in 1893, and this is also the start for what later became the Parliament of the World's Religions. The Parliament hosted its second conference in Chicago in 1993, where the signature document of the organization, "Towards a Global Ethic", was drafted. The Parliament has since hosted six international modern parliaments that has included people of faith from all over the world (Parliament of the World's Religions, n.d.-b). The Parliament of the World's Religions focuses on "cultivating harmony between the world's spiritual and religious communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions to address the critical issues in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world" (Parliament of the World's Religions, n.d.-a).

The World Council of Churches' (WCC) roots are from student and lay movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (World Council of Churches, n.d.-a). The Christian Ecumenical Movement in 1910 in Edinburgh was one of the efforts from which WCC arose, and the Movement for Life and Work in 1914 another. These efforts led to leaders from more than 100 churches voting to found a world council of churches in 1937-38, but due to the Second World War the effort was halted. WCC had its first assembly in 1948, with 147 member churches (World Council of Churches, n.d.-a). Today, the WCC is one of the leading organizations for ecumenical dialogue, with the expressed goal of achieving Christian unity (World Council of Churches, n.d.-c). The WCC is primarily focused on ecumenical dialogue, but the turn towards dialogue has affected interfaith relations as well. This has resulted in the establishment of an office in the WCC dedicated to interreligious dialogue and cooperation, and the WCC partaking in a number of bilateral, multilateral, and global dialogues and efforts (World Council of Churches, n.d.-b).



In 1970, the World Conference on Religion and Peace was founded in Kyoto, Japan (Swidler, 2013, p. 15). This was a starting point for the organization Religions for Peace (RFP), which now has a presence all over the world with 90 national and 6 regional Interreligious Councils (IRCs). RFP is not only an organization, but a global movement centered around a view of religions being more powerful, inspiring, and impactful when working together (Religions for Peace, n.d.-b). The expressed goal of the organization and movement is for the religions of the world to cooperate in different efforts to promote peace. They are working to achieve this by focusing on six key points: 1) peaceful, just societies; 2) gender equality; 3) the environment; 4) freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; 5) interreligious education; and 6) global partnerships (Religions for Peace, n.d.-a). Apart from taking part in multiple efforts, the organization also hosts an international conference every five years (Swidler, 2013, p. 15).

Paris, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1948 saw the declaration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly. The declaration of Human Rights has become an important standard through which we see the world. Article 18 of the declaration states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (United Nations, n.d.)

In 2008, this article made the basis of a new focus to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace by the UN. This point was further developed in 2010 with the establishment of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.-c). In other words, interreligious dialogue became an explicit point of interest for the United Nations, and this has resulted in the UN partnering on several initiatives and conventions with faith-based organizations. Following this, the ‘Faith For Earth Initiative’ was launched in 2017. This initiative works specifically with engaging and partnering with faith-based organizations in efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.-c).

### 2.2.2 Norway

The first interreligious effort from the Norwegian contemporary context, is the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (STL), established in 1996. This umbrella organization has the two expressed goals of: 1) promoting equal treatment of religious and life stance communities in Norway; and 2) promoting respect and understanding among religious and life stance communities through dialogue. The organization is involved with work on ethical issues, such as environmental issues, gender equality, biotechnology, and refugee rights (Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livssynssamfunn, n.d.).

The second interreligious effort that serves as an example from the Norwegian contemporary context, is the Interfaith Climate Network. According to Einar Tjelle (2020, p. 3), this network was established in 2014 and consists of representatives from several religious communities. The aim of the network is expressed through two core goals: 1) to learn from each other; and 2) to act together. This means that representatives from the different communities meet, talk, eat together, share experiences, and share and learn from each other's resources on environmental spirituality and ethics. In addition, concrete joint actions are planned, an example being green interfaith pilgrimages (Tjelle, 2020, p. 3).

The Hope Cathedral (Håpets Katedral) is a project focused on preserving the oceans through highlighting the damage of plastic waste. This project was originally initiated by a Norwegian diocese in the Church of Norway in 2018, but it has always had a clear interfaith profile, not least due to one of its partners being the Interfaith Climate Network (Tjelle, 2020, p. 4). Today, it has over 45 different collaborators, many of which are Norwegian organizations and institutions (Hope Cathedral, n.d.).

## 2.3 Religion and ecology

Historically, the attitudes towards and values regarding nature have been largely influenced by different religions (Tucker, 2009, p. 820). As such, the link between religion and ecology is well established. The academic field on the area, however, has emerged during the last decades along with the growing realization of human impact on nature and the climate during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been people advocating for the religious involvement in the world of ecology, amongst others the theologians Joseph Sittler and John Cobb, historian Lynn White, and Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Still, it was first in the 1990s that scientists issued two documents calling on religions to collaborate

with them on working towards a sustainable future, which was a part of inspiring new work and thought on the matter (Tucker, 2009, p. 822).

There have been several gatherings of religious and interreligious nature concerning the environment hosted by different actors in the last few decades; the World Wildlife Fund (1984), the Vatican (1986), the Parliament of World's Religions (1993, 1999), and the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders (1988, 1990, 1992, 1993) (Tucker, 2009, p. 823). The intersection between religion and ecology was also visible during the UN Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in August of 2000, where the environment was one of the main issues on the agenda (Tucker, 2009, p. 823). More recently, the United Nations Paris Climate Conference (COP21) of 2015 stands out as an important event. COP21 was the event that saw the drafting of the treaty on climate change - the Paris agreement. In addition to this, beforehand, ACT Alliance, the Global Catholic Climate Movement, Our Voices, and Religions for Peace had gathered 1.8 million signatures from religious people to a petition on climate justice which they presented to the UN. This showed the broad engagement of religious peoples to the cause (Pedersen, 2016, p. 64).

The awareness of and collaboration on the intersection of religion and ecology has also been strengthened and encouraged by the involvement and engagement of profiled religious leaders around the world. The Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhist leader, has been actively speaking on the importance of caring for the environment and the natural world for decades. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has also long been advocating for care for environment and all the world's beings. In the Christian world there are numerous Church leaders advocating for the environment, such as former Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew. The latter has sponsored a series of symposia on sea, highlighting protections of the seas and the problems this faces, where the convenings have brought together people from multiple parts of society: scientists, religious leaders, civil servants, and journalists (Tucker, 2009, p. 823). His engagement with environmental issues has earned him the title of the 'Green patriarch'. A fifth contributor that has had an enormous impact on engagement for the environment globally in the last decade, is Pope Francis. Publishing his encyclical 'Laudato Si': on care for our common home' in 2015, he stirred engagement and inspired conversation on the intersection between religion and ecology. This encyclical was timed to be released in relation to the UN Paris conference, and was entirely dedicated to the environment (Pedersen, 2016, p. 68).

## 2.4 Tropical deforestation

The world is facing a climate crisis. The crisis is multifaceted, with several issues affecting the world and each other to result in a catastrophic effect on the environment. These developments lead to the world gradually heating up, with massive amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere trapping solar energy that should normally bounce back to space (Seymour & Busch, 2016, p. 32). It has gotten to the point where there is no one simple solution to solely fix the rising temperatures and the consequences this will bring. Different actors focus on different issues, - whether it is the burning of fossil fuels, the protection of biodiversity, the protection of the oceans, or the development of clean energy. With the backdrop of recognizing that this is a multifaceted problem, I will present *one* of the environmental challenges faced today, namely deforestation and its consequences. This is due to deforestation being the issue from which IRI arose as a response. Understanding the context from which the initiative rose is key to understanding the initiative itself and its goals. While whole books could be, and have been, written on this issue, I will limit it down to a few brief main points.

Deforestation literally means the removal of forests to convert the lands to non-forest use (Dk & Juniper, 2019, p. 256). Today, forests cover around 37 % of the earth's land area. The ecosystems of the forests are important both in providing food and medicine, and in the fact that they are home to a large percentage of the world's biodiversity (United Nations Development Programme & Religions, 2020, p. 79). While the link between deforestation and the climate crisis is not as widely understood as the burning of fossil fuels' impact on the climate, the two are actually closely connected. Firstly, a fact to consider is that the extent of forests being cut down globally each minute, is estimated to be the size of 27 soccer fields. The two main actors and reasons for this deforestation are subsistence farmers and commercial interests, with urban development, logging, mining, and acquiring firewood as other contributors (Dk & Juniper, 2019, p. 33). Deforestation is, in other words, happening at an alarmingly fast pace.

The consequences of deforestation are many. Firstly, it poses a severe threat to biodiversity, with an estimate of two-thirds of the world's plants and animals living in the rainforests of the world (Dk & Juniper, 2019, pp. 257-258). Secondly, forests act like sponges to the carbon dioxide released in the world. Around a quarter of the carbon dioxide emissions are being sucked up by the forests, due to photosynthesis (Seymour & Busch, 2016, p. 33). Thirdly, with deforestation, the world both loses one of its buffers against carbon dioxide

emissions, and the emissions also increase, as stored up carbon in the forests is released into the atmosphere. Through the burning down of forests both carbon and other strong greenhouse gases, such as methane and nitrous oxide, are released (Seymour & Busch, 2016, p. 33). This means that deforestation not only causes a larger emission of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere from other sources, it adds to it, making the emission rate much higher much faster. Adding to this, the cleared forest spaces are often used for purposes that also produce carbon dioxide; farming, grazing animals, and mining (Seymour & Busch, 2016, p. 34).

The rainforests are key. Not only are they the homes of a large numbers of animals, plants, and groups of Indigenous peoples, they protect the areas around them from heavy waterfalls. When cut down or burnt, the soil can be drained for its nutrients, making it impossible to regrow plants (Dk & Juniper, 2019, p. 258). The rainforests also generate clouds, which helps cool the areas around them by reflecting sun rays back to space (Seymour & Busch, 2016, pp. 38-39). This in turn means that one potentially cannot plant anything in the cleared spaces drained of nutrients, and the settlements in and around the forests will suffer harsher weather conditions as they are no longer protected by the forests. As such, deforestation of the tropical rainforests will result in the planet getting warmer both through not being able to shield areas from the sun, as well as through increasing the emissions of carbon dioxide. This means that to actually stop the global temperature from rising more than two degrees Celsius, the maximum upper limit set during the Paris climate summit in 2015, putting a stop to deforestation is crucial (Seymour & Busch, 2016, p. 6). Combining this with the fact that when cut down, tropical rainforests will not grow back, one is left with the fact that stopping the rapid deforestation is key to halting the climate crisis.

## 2.5 Interfaith Rainforest Initiative

In the following section, the case chosen to research for this study, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), will be introduced. I will briefly present the history of the initiative, its structure, goals, areas of work, and its main contributors. As this is a relatively new initiative that is still developing, the information given in this study relates to the state of the initiative between the spring of 2020 to the spring of 2021.

### 2.5.1 History

IRI is an international, multi-faith alliance launched in Oslo, Norway in June of 2017. Gunnar Stålsett (2020, p. 342) explains how the initiative began as an idea between Lars Løvold of the Rainforest Foundation Norway and Simon Rye of the Norwegian International Climate and Forest Initiative, after a visit to the Vatican in November of 2016. They attended a seminar in connection to the encyclical ‘Laudato Si’: on care for our common home’ by Pope Francis from 2015. Inspired by the seminar, their idea was to see if they could somehow bring religious actors on board in working towards stopping deforestation and protecting Indigenous peoples in and around the forests. Bringing this idea back to Norway, they presented it to the minister for climate and environment, Vidar Helgesen, who took to the idea (Stålsett, 2020, p. 342). A process then began to get an overview over the interreligious networks, and key organizations and people. Gunnar Stålsett, theologian, politician, and former bishop of Oslo, was asked to assist with this. Through working with Religions for Peace (RFP), Stålsett had widespread connections, and quickly got RFP’s then General Secretary, dr. William Vendley, on board. A Norwegian taskforce of sorts was assembled, consisting of people with knowledge of the field of interreligious work, along with the initiators already mentioned. Through their work, and the work and connections of partners included along the way, eight organizations came together as the partnering organizations of IRI (Stålsett, 2020, pp. 344, 347).

The efforts of maneuvering in the field, gathering organizations and planning out a structure resulted in a big scale launch of the initiative at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, June of 2017. The event gathered scientists, religious leaders, and leaders of Indigenous peoples in the common spirit of protecting the rainforests. In all, 21 countries were represented (Rainforest Foundation Norway, 2017). The representatives ended up agreeing on a shared statement, in which they acknowledged being one human family and pledged to work together to put an end to deforestation (Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, 2017). This marked the beginning of IRI, which has grown to become a large global initiative with a working presence in the five biggest rainforest countries of the world.

### 2.5.2 Structure

There are multiple layers of IRI. At the global level, there is a council called the ‘Global Steering Committee’, on which representatives of the eight partnering organizations sit. This committee’s role is primarily to advise and discuss the strategies and work of the initiative.

Furthermore, IRI consists of National Advisory Councils, headed by a National Coordinator. These National Advisory Councils consist of interfaith groups, Indigenous representation, and scientists. Lastly, IRI develops local chapters of the initiative, which are present in the smaller, local contexts of the countries.

### 2.5.3 Goals

The initiative has several goals, which are listed and specified on the website:

- **Build consensus**  
Facilitate dialogue across religions about the shared moral, ethical and spiritual responsibility to protect rainforests.
- **Make the case**  
Create opportunities for religious leaders, scientists, and Indigenous peoples to speak in concert about the case for ending tropical deforestation.
- **Facilitate learning**  
Equip religious and spiritual leaders with the science, training, and tools they need to become effective advocates for protecting rainforests.
- **Mobilize commitment**  
Mobilize religious and spiritual leaders to make ending tropical deforestation an ethical priority and create space for them to advocate for policies that protect rainforests and those that serve as their guardians.
- **Raise awareness**  
Increase the profile and visibility of the deforestation crisis, and the fundamental role that rainforests play in addressing climate change, achieving sustainable development, and surviving as a planet.
- **Influence policy**  
Serve as a moral force for change to influence governments and companies to adopt, fulfill and expand upon commitments to protect rainforests.
- **Build coalitions**  
Facilitate new partnerships among religious and faith leaders, Indigenous peoples, and other sectors – government, business, and civil society – to anchor global commitment to protecting rainforest in on-the-ground action in rainforest countries.

- **Inspire action**

Create a worldwide movement for rainforest protection that is grounded in the values, ethics, and moral guidance of faith communities.

(Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.-a)

#### 2.5.4 Work

As of today, the initiative supports work in Brazil, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, and Peru. Together, these countries account for 70 % of the remaining rainforests of the world (Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, n.d.-b). The work in the countries center around the eight stated goals, and the countries themselves develop concrete plans of action on how to achieve these goals in their national and local contexts. The work in the five countries are at different developmental stages at this point in time, with Colombia and Peru having come the furthest in establishing working national and local chapters of the initiative.

#### 2.5.5 Main actors

The initiative consists of eight partners globally, which make for the Global Steering Committee. Following is a brief presentation of the eight actors, their goals, and their work.

The Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN) is a Norwegian non-governmental organization and is one of the world's leading organizations in the field of rights-based rainforest protection. RFN's mission can be expressed in two parts that are intersected; 1) environmental protection; and 2) human rights. These goals are, concretely, to halt the deforestation of the rainforests, as well as supporting and protecting the Indigenous peoples inhabiting these rainforests. Today, RFN collaborates with more than 60 local and national environmental, Indigenous and human rights organizations in 8 countries (Rainforest Foundation Norway, n.d.).

Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) was launched by the Norwegian government in 2008 to be an initiative focused on mitigating climate change through protecting the rainforests of the world. NICFI is administered by the Ministry of Climate and the Environment in collaboration with The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative, n.d.-a). NICFI works in seven strategic areas to achieve the goal of contributing to the reduction and reversal of the



tropical forest loss. These are: 1) land use policies; 2) rights of Indigenous peoples; 3) carbon markets and international support structures; 4) transparency; 5) deforestation-free commodity markets; 6) deforestation-free financial markets; and 7) international forest crime (Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative, n.d.-b).

GreenFaith is an interfaith coalition founded in 1992. It is focused on building a worldwide, multi-faith climate and environmental movement. The coalition's mission is to inspire, educate and mobilize people of diverse religious backgrounds for environmental leadership. GreenFaith believes in addressing environmental issues holistically, and wants to be a storage of resources and tools which religious institutions can draw from to engage environmental issues and become religious-environmental leaders (innoFaith, n.d.). The community is centered around six principles for the work, namely: 1) it is rooted in spirituality; 2) it is moved by compassion; 3) it is passionate for justice; 4) it is inclusive by nature; 5) it is responsible in practice; and 6) it is bold for good (GreenFaith, n.d.).

Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology is a forum that originated with senior lecturers and research scholars Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim at Yale University, Connecticut. The aim of the Forum is to inform and inspire people to preserve, protect, and restore the earth. The Forum seeks to identify the perspectives of ecology and justice in the religions of the world, and through building on these, identifying solutions to the global environmental crisis. The Forum cultivates dialogue within religious/spiritual communities and in partnership with scientists and policy makers. Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology sends out newsletters, highlights projects from around the world, publicizes books and articles, and convenes interdisciplinary conferences and workshop, amongst other efforts (Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, n.d.).

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is a branch of the UN, focused on the environmental issues the world faces. Its goals are to: 1) set the global environmental agenda; 2) promote the coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of sustainable development within the UN system; and 3) serve as an authoritative advocate for the global environment (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.-a). UNEP's work includes assessing global, national, and regional environmental conditions and trends, developing international and national environmental instruments, and strengthening institutions. Furthermore, they categorize their work into seven areas: 1) climate change; 2) disasters and conflicts; 3) ecosystem management; 4) environmental governance;

5) chemicals and waste; 6) resource efficiency; and 7) environment under review (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.-b).

In addition, Religions for Peace (RFP), the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the Parliament of the World's Religions, all introduced in chapter 2.2.1, are partners in IRI, and sit in the Global Steering Committee.

## 2.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the context of the study, through giving a framework of the disciplines of interreligious dialogue, and religion and ecology.

A brief history of interreligious dialogue has been presented, with particular focus on three important backdrops; a symbolic starting point; the change of attitudes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and the ecumenical backdrop of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From the history of interreligious dialogue, a turn was made towards the contemporary interreligious scene, with particular focus on the global context and the Norwegian context given their relevance for IRI. Interreligious efforts of special importance are the Parliament of the World's Religions, WCC, RFP, and the emerging role of religion in the UN.

Thirdly, the academic field of religion and ecology has been presented. A point was made of how this field has emerged in the last decades, with a focus on global gatherings and the advocacy of religious leaders. Of special importance for the development of IRI is Pope Francis' contribution, with his encyclical letter 'Laudato Si'' from 2015.

The environmental issue of deforestation was introduced, given its central role for IRI. The consequences deforestation has on climate change, such as threatening biodiversity and the people inhabiting the forests, and the rainforest's role in collecting carbon dioxide has been presented. In addition, the rainforest's importance for halting the climate crisis was underlined.

Lastly, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative has been introduced, along with its history, structure, goals, work, and main actors. This presents the journey of the initiative from its beginning as an idea during a conference in the Vatican in 2016, to becoming a global initiative with eight partnering organizations, focused on ending deforestation and safeguarding Indigenous peoples.

## Chapter 3: Definitions, theory, and literature

To be able to discuss the findings later, an introduction to relevant theory and defining important terms is necessary. The intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues is fairly new and unexplored. The separate areas of interreligious dialogue and religion and ecology are, however, not new, and have longstanding research and theories. In this chapter, I will define the central terms of religion, spirituality, secularization theory, dialogue, and interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, theories in the academic field of religion and ecology will be presented. Lastly, I will introduce perspectives in relation to existing models of interreligious dialogue. There are a great number of models and theories that could have been included. The ones included here are therefore but a selection, based on my subjective regard as to what is central, relevant, and important.

### 3.1 Religion and secularization

When talking about the *interreligious*, the term of *religion* is explicitly connected to it. As such, to discuss one, an understanding of the other and what this understanding implies must be clarified. The term *spirituality* will also be introduced, as the lines between what religion and what spirituality is can come across as somewhat blurry. From these terms, a turn will then be made to look at the bigger picture of religion's role in the public sphere, where secularization theory is the central element.

#### 3.1.1 Religion

In all studies concerning religion, the researcher is left with the difficult task of providing a definition. Finding or producing an all-encompassing definition seems an impossible task, and the different definitions often focus on or emphasize one of the many aspects of religion. For example, scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx have all focused on the functionality of religion. In their view, there is something basic and fundamental underlying religion, that fully account for all religions and religious expressions of the world (Pals, 2015, p. 143).

From a social science perspective, American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition and understanding of religion was long widely relied upon. He understood religions as cultural systems, and highlighted the symbols, moods, motivations, and conceptions

connected to religion. As Bruce Lincoln (2003, p.1) brings to light, a main critique of this definition has been its emphasis on the interiority of the religious as the core of religion. This definition, in other words, describes quite well religious affiliations such as Protestantism, but fails to incorporate religious affiliations more connected to practice, discipline and community (Lincoln, 2003, p. 1). Lincoln himself produces a new definition in four parts, which reads that religion is:

1) A discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status [...]; 2) A set of practices whose goal is to produce a proper world and/or proper human subjects, as defined by a religious discourse to which these practices are connected [...]; 3) A community whose members construct their identity with reference to a religious discourse and its attendant practices [...]; 4) An institution that regulates religious discourse, practices, and community, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendental value (Lincoln, 2003, pp. 5-7).

In other words, this definition states that there are four ‘domains’ that make for what is called a religion: discourse, practice, community, and institution.

### 3.1.2 Spirituality

Though there are a vast array of definitions of religion, there will still be groups that do not necessarily find themselves defined by any of them. Roger S. Gottlieb (2013, p. 80) brings to light that many people will not define themselves as religious, but rather spiritual. Gottlieb further gives the examples that one can both not adhere any religion and have a belief in God, and one can be spiritual and not believe in one particular God but find inspiration and truth in sacred scriptures across the different traditions (Gottlieb, 2013, p. 82). The relationship between religion and spirituality is important to discuss. Gottlieb defines spirituality by introducing what he understands as spiritual values. These are mindfulness, acceptance, gratitude, compassion, and a loving connection to other people, nature, and God. He goes on to explain that spirituality, then, is a belief that these virtues are: “the only way in which to achieve enduring contentment and goodness in the face of life’s challenges and that they will benefit both the person who manifests them and everyone around her” (Gottlieb, 2013, pp. 8-9).

In terms of Indigenous spirituality or religion, John Grim (2009) suggests that it is closely connected to lifeways. These lifeways express a close link between: “the individual

person (or embodied self), the native society, the larger community of life in a region (nature or ecology), and the powerful cosmological beings typically present in ritual actions and mythic narratives” (Grim, 2006, p. 288). In other words, the spirituality, or religion, is expressed through lifeways, which we can understand as a fourfold embodiment where each embodiment is intimately connected to the other embodiments. He further argues that Indigenous knowledge is tied directly to the natural world. In terms of stories of Creation, for example, these are: “heard as lived, embodied relationships with environments” (Grim, 2006, p. 284). As such, we can understand Indigenous spirituality or religion to be closely connected to the environment, as all knowledge is tied to the natural world.

### 3.1.3 Secularization theory

Having provided understandings of both religion and spirituality, a turn can be made towards religion’s position in society. As the age of modernity developed in Europe, a body of literature called the ‘theory of secularization’ rose to fame within the social sciences. The theory central in this body of literature proposed a correlation between the rise of modernity and the ‘secular’, and the decline of ‘the religious’ in the institutional sphere (Casanova, 2009, p. 1050). In other words, the process of modernization and development of the ‘secular’ was seen as necessarily causing the ‘religious’ to lose its significance. This speaks to a decline in visibility and importance of the religious in the public sphere.

However, this theory has not played out in the way that was first assumed. Casanova (1994, p. 3) points out that religion in the 1980’s re-entered the public sphere, seen exemplified through the four developments of: “the Islamic revolution in Islam; the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland [...]; the role of Catholicism in the Sandinista revolution; and the public reemergence of Protestant fundamentalism as a force in American politics” (Casanova, 1994, p. 3). However, he argues that this was not a development of new religions, nor was it a return of the sacred. Casanova understands this to be a reformation and revitalization of religious traditions, in connection to these traditions assuming public roles. While the secularization theories had assumed religions would become more privatized and irrelevant along with the developing modern world, they rather took up a new space in the public picture (Casanova, 1994, p. 225). Furthermore, he understands a condition for the re-emergence of religions in the public picture to be a crisis of secularity. As he sees it: “when secular ideologies appear to have failed or lost much of their force, religion returns to the

public arena as a mobilizing or integrating normative force” (Casanova, 1994, p. 227). Whatever the reason might be, we see today that religion still assumes a public role.

A contemporary example of religion’s presence in the public, is the rather newfound emphasis of it by the United Nations. In 2010, the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development was established (Karam, 2016, p. 367). As noted earlier, the UN later launched other initiatives such as the Faith For Earth Initiative, centered on engaging religion and religious actors in connection to different global issues (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d.-c). Azza Karam shows how the realization of why religious actors needed to be included was connected to an understanding of the role they could play in achieving goals linked to sustainable development, peace and security, and human rights (Karam, 2016, p. 366). Initiatives such as the ones launched by the UN provides examples on how religion’s presence in the public sphere is not on the decline. On the contrary, it seems to be included to a somewhat larger degree.

## 3.2. Religion and ecology

The connection between religion and ecology is not new. Historically, many have turned towards religions for answers to questions on how to understand the natural world and humans’ position and role in it. The academic field of religion and ecology is, in comparison, very new. It can be seen to have emerged over the last couple of decades (Tucker, 2009, p. 824). In this section, some contemporary approaches to the field of religion and ecology and theories on this connection will be introduced. In addition, a key critique and response to religion’s part in the ecological crisis will be looked at through the perspectives of Lynn White and Pope Francis.

### 3.2.1 Three methodological approaches

Mary Evelyn Tucker argues how, even though there are challenges, scientists have since the early 1990’s come to realize that religions are uniquely positioned to contribute to re-visioning a sustainable future (Tucker, 2009, pp. 821-822). Tucker furthermore, alongside John Grim, defines *religious ecologies* as: “ways of orienting and grounding whereby humans undertake specific practices of nurturing and transforming self and community in a particular cosmological context that regards nature as inherently valuable.” (Tucker & Grim, 2017, p. 8) Tucker and Grim additionally argues that in order to properly address the ecological problems

the world faces, there needs to be a dialogue between religious and spiritual leaders, laypeople, academics, and scientists, environmentalists, economists, businesspeople, politicians, and educators (Tucker & Grim, 2017, p. 7). They bring to light three methodological approaches in the study of religion and ecology: retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. Retrieval entails clarification of religious perspectives on the human-earth relation through scholarly investigation of scriptural and commentarial sources. Reevaluation means an evaluation of the relevancy of traditional teachings in relation to the contemporary society and circumstances. Reconstruction is an approach that suggests an adaptation of religious teachings to current circumstances (Tucker & Grim, 2017, pp. 7-8).

### 3.2.2 Religion and ecology – connection and problems

Willis Jenkins (2017) explains how the field of religion and ecology is: “part of a broader intellectual collaboration of culture-focused approaches to environmental topics, many which gather under the rubric of ‘environmental humanities’” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 22). He seeks to problematize the field of religion and ecology based on the many existing phenomena and methods used to understand and explain these two terms both individually and together. Ecology, for example, can be referred to in five ways: 1) as the scientific study of organisms in relation to their environment; 2) as an ethical worldview about appropriate human relations to their environment; 3) as a political movement for adaptive social change; 4) as a metaphor of interconnectedness; and 5) as a materialist research frame for interpreting religious phenomena (Jenkins, 2017, p. 28). In relation to religion, he raises the question of whose religion is really referred to. This is due to the category of ‘religion’ being of much debate and encompassing much difference (Jenkins, 2017, p. 24). Still, these two terms are connected. Jenkins argues they are irreducibly entangled. As he explains it: “ecological questions have become entangled with questions about what it means to be human and how to live well, about where the living world has come from and where it is going, and why” (Jenkins, 2017, p. 31). So, while religion and ecology as a field necessarily faces problems connected to defining phenomena and which methodology to rely on, the two fields are unquestionably linked to each other.

### 3.2.3 Climate change

In looking at climate change, Mike Hulme (2017) argues that it is a hybrid physical-cultural phenomenon. This means that it should: “be studied not just by meteorologists, ecologists and economists [...] but also by sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers and, importantly, by theologians and religious scholars” (Hulme, 2017, pp. 240-241). He goes on to argue that religion is being recognized for providing a broader picture of how people understand and make sense of climate change and the different responses to the challenges that are raised. Furthermore, Hulme presents religious actors as: “... key contributors to political discourses at local, national and international levels and prominent climate activists regularly cite the importance of religious participation in international climate negotiations” (Hulme, 2017, p. 241). On a practical note, he brings to light that religions have a substantial mobilizing power, as well as having institutional, economic, and political power (Hulme, 2017, p. 241). In this way, not only do religions contribute with a moral view of understanding and making sense of the climate crisis - they have a unique position in battling the crisis in terms of reach and resources.

### 3.2.4 Lynn White

In his influential essay from 1967, Lynn White (p. 1205) defined Western Christianity as one of the most anthropocentric religions of the world. His arguments were linked to the story of Creation in Genesis 1, where man is made in the image of God, and all the world is *subdued* to his rule. White presents the story told in Genesis 1 as intending no other purpose for all that God had created but to be of use to man. Based on this, White argues, humanity has understood there to be a duality between man and nature. This also meant a view of exploiting nature to benefit humans as, in fact, the will of God (White, 1967, p. 1205). The anthropocentric worldview of Western Christianity in combination with the 19<sup>th</sup> century blend of science and technology has resulted in the state of the modern Western world. Included in this state, is the ecological crisis. White, as such, ascribes blame to Western Christianity for in part causing the ecological crisis (Whitney, 2015, p. 397). Although his essay has been thoroughly criticized since its publishing in 1967, not the least for oversimplifying complex topics, it still represents an important starting point in examining the relationship between religion and attitudes towards nature.



### 3.2.5 Laudato Si'

In 2015, Pope Francis came with his encyclical, titled 'Laudato Si': on care for our common home', which was to be a response from the Catholic Church on the pressing issue of the climate crisis. The encyclical takes us through six chapters, from: 1) what is happening to our common home, to; 2) the gospel of creation, to; 3) the human roots of the ecological crisis, to; 4) integral ecology, to; 5) lines of approach and action, to; 6) ecological education and spirituality. In other words, Pope Francis tries to respond to the different facets of the ecological crisis, and advocates for a change in thought and behavior (Hanvey, 2018, p. 1022).

Followingly, three of the Pope's perspectives relating to the climate crisis will be introduced. Firstly, the Pope addresses the anthropocentric view held by many:

2. [...] We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Rom 8:22). (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 3)

Pope Francis claims that humans' mandate to dominate the earth, as is conveyed in Genesis 1, was ruptured with the Fall of Man. Instead, we are to 'till it and keep it' as described in Genesis 2. In living harmoniously with the earth and its creatures as seen through the example of Saint Francis, this rupture is somewhat healed (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 48). The Pope as such tries to move away from an anthropocentric view that favors humans, to a view of the natural world and its creatures being of equal value.

Furthermore, Pope Francis urges towards dialogue and working together to halt the climate changes. The severity of the state of the environment demands of us to adopt an attitude of patience, self-discipline, and generosity in engaging in dialogue with others:

201. [...] The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which requires patience, self-discipline and generosity, always keeping in mind that "realities are greater than ideas". (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 148)

This dialogue should be amongst and between religious people, people in science, and the different ecological movements (Pope Francis, 2015, pp. 147-148). As such, Pope Francis can

be seen to encourage interreligious and interdisciplinary dialogue on the environmental issues the world is facing.

Lastly, Pope Francis (2015, p. 109) recognizes that environmental exploitation often results in the exhaustion of resources needed by local communities, the undoing of social structures, and the loss of cultures. In this regard, the Pope highlights the importance of safeguarding Indigenous peoples, and including them in the dialogues:

146. In this sense, it is essential to show special care for Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed.  
(Pope Francis, 2015, pp. 109-110)

The Indigenous peoples living in and of the forests are those who know how to care for it best. Furthermore, they need to be able to interact with their sacred spaces in these lands in order to preserve their identities and values (Pope Francis, 2015, p. 110). As such, they should be included as essential partners in the dialogues centered on their lands.

### 3.3 Interreligious dialogue

As seen through chapter 2.2, there are several examples of interreligious dialogue permeating the public sphere today. These vary in structure, goals, and practice, but are all examples of what we can understand to be interreligious dialogue. Dealing with an example of such a dialogue in this study, an understanding of what is embedded in the term of *interreligious dialogue* and a look at models for such a dialogue is necessary.

#### 3.3.1 Definitions

Defining interreligious dialogue includes several parts. Firstly, an understanding of dialogue and what that entails will be presented. Following this, the distinction between interreligious and interfaith will be looked at, as the choice of words can yield different understandings. Thirdly, interreligious dialogue as a term will be defined.

## *Dialogue*

The term dialogue comes from the Greek word *dia-logos*, and is a conjunction of the prefix ‘dia’, meaning ‘through’, ‘between’, ‘across’, or ‘throughout’, and ‘logos’, which can translate into ‘to speak’. A dialogue must naturally include at least two people, who through conducting dialogue engages in a relationship of ‘I’ and ‘You’, or in other words become a ‘Self’ and an ‘Other’ (Moyaert, 2013, p. 205). Sallie B. King brings to light that dialogue at its base is similar to hermeneutics, in that it involves in a process of coming to understand the other (King, 2010, p. 107). The space in which the dialogue happens is never neutral, - people will necessarily bring their understanding of themselves, the other, and the situation to the table.

## *Interreligious vs. interfaith*

In the field of interreligious work, a number of different terms are used. These include ‘interreligious’, ‘interfaith’, and ‘multifaith’, to name a few. Of these, ‘interreligious’ and ‘interfaith’ are perhaps most widely used. With the same prefix of ‘inter’, meaning ‘between’ or ‘among’, what separates the two is the use of ‘religion’ vs. ‘faith’. Of the two, ‘interreligious’ was used first, with ‘interfaith’ emerging towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Swidler, 2014b, p. 186). The choice between the two terms seems primarily a subjective regard as whether to use ‘religion’ or ‘faith’ about the groups of the actors participating in the dialogue. Either way, the term one chooses will be limiting to some degree (Swidler, 2014a, p. 373). While the case of study for this thesis, IRI, uses the term of ‘interfaith’, the choice for this study is ‘interreligious’. This is partly due to the understanding of the term ‘religion’ introduced earlier, and partly due to relating it to the area of research at the University of Oslo called ‘interreligious studies’<sup>3</sup>.

## *Interreligious dialogue*

There are several existing understandings of interreligious dialogue. As Catherine Cornille (2013) brings to light, the term *dialogue* can be used to describe a number of activities, not just verbal communication. In a religious context, it can cover activities from everyday interactions, to large-scale debates, to interreligious activism on social issues, to name a few.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.tf.uio.no/english/research/groups/interreli>

The term interreligious dialogue according to Cornille, then, entails all such activities where there is: “any form or degree of constructive engagement between religious traditions” (Cornille, 2013, p. xii). This is the understanding of the term interreligious dialogue that lays the foundation for this thesis.

### 3.3.2 Four perspectives

In this section, four perspectives connected to interreligious dialogue will be introduced. The first of these, is the distinction between spiritual and necessary dialogues. Secondly, a model for how to understand the ‘religious other’ and what this implicates for dialogue and collaboration will be presented. Following this, the connection between interreligious dialogue and social action will be looked at. Lastly, the question of which language is relied upon in an interreligious setting will be introduced.

#### *Spiritual versus necessary dialogues*

Oddbjørn Leirvik (2014, pp. 17-18) makes a distinction between ‘spiritual’ and ‘necessary’ dialogues. Spiritual dialogues are dialogues based on personal motivation, and an expectation or wish to learn from, or somehow be enriched by the other. Necessary dialogue, however, is: “driven by a sociopolitical need to prevent or reduce religion-related conflict in society, by fostering peaceful interaction between representatives of different religious groups” (Leirvik, 2014, pp. 17-18). He also brings to light that it is important to look at whether initiatives are government-initiated ‘dialogues’ or civil society initiatives – or dialogue at the levels of state and society respectively. This is because of the imbalances in power this necessarily yields (Leirvik, 2014, p. 18). Critical studies on interreligious dialogue between faith communities has shown that there is indeed a difference in discursive power held by the majority representatives (Leirvik, 2014, p. 23).

#### *The mutuality model and its bridges*

Today, there are a multitude of religious and spiritual understandings co-existing in our modern societies. A question arises of how to deal with the existence of other religions than that of oneself, and in what way to view and understand them. This is commonly referred to as ‘theology of religions’ (Knitter, 2002, p. 2). In examining how Christianity relates to other religions, Paul Knitter (2002) divides the responses into four models: 1) the replacement

model, where there is only one true religion; 2) the fulfillment model, where one religion fulfills the many; 3) the mutuality model, where many true religions are called to dialogue; and 4) the acceptance model, where one makes peace with the existence of many true religions. Under the third model, the mutuality model, he further explains how there are three different ‘bridges’ over which Christians can cross in exploring other religions (Knitter, 2002, p. 112). The first of these is the philosophical-historical bridge, where one opens for the possibility of one Divine Reality being behind and within all religions. The second is the religious-mystical bridge, where the Divine is both more than what any one religion can convey yet is somehow also present in the mystical experience in all of them. Thirdly, the ethical-practical bridge emphasizes the needs and sufferings affecting all of humanity and the earth as a common concern (Knitter, 2002, pp. 112-113). These make for three different ways of how religions, in Knitter’s case Christianity, meet and relate to the ‘religious other’, and what is emphasized.

#### *Interreligious dialogue and social action*

Paul Knitter (2013), while acknowledging that all types of interreligious dialogue is in its own way necessary, makes the claim that social action and interreligious dialogue are dependent on each other. Without one, the other will miss a crucial piece. He defines interreligious social action as “any activity with which human beings seek to resolve what obstructs and promote what advances, human and environmental flourishing” (Knitter, 2013, p. 133). According to Knitter, interreligious dialogue needs social action to not just see, but also meet and respond to the human and planetary suffering of the world. If the other types of dialogue are there, but social action is lacking, then religion becomes that which Marxists and humanists have critiqued it to be – a shelter that provides an escape but not a solution (Knitter, 2013, p. 139). Turning the tables, social action needs interreligious dialogue because of the global status of religion. The fact is that the majority of the world’s population is still religious. This means that people’s worldviews and ethics are affected by religion, and as such, to motivate and reason for social action one must appeal to religious views and values (Knitter, 2013, p. 140).

#### *‘Secular’ and religious language*

Oddbjørn Leirvik (2014, p. 37) argues that secularity, understood as a shared sociocultural condition, is a starting point for interreligious dialogue. In this shared ‘space’, Leirvik argues

that a common language for interreligious dialogue is found in language centered around human values instead of special religious interests. Such language could be understood to be 'secular', as it is expressed in terms of human-rights, and as it: "seeks to articulate our common humanity and our obligations in a common life-world" (Leirvik, 2014, p. 44). In other words, interreligious dialogue can be seen to draw on secular language to express the common concerns and obligations of our collective humanity. While each religious actor has their own language to talk about these concerns and obligations in, the secular 'space' and language is a meeting-point in relation to other religious actors. This 'secular' language, in Leirvik's words, illustrates the "'secular' orientation of interreligious dialogue towards a common, ethical language" (Leirvik, 2014, p. 50).

### 3.3.3 Models of interreligious dialogue

Having looked closely at the term of interreligious dialogue and presented four perspectives connected to this, concrete models for such a dialogue can be introduced. While there are several models for interreligious dialogue, a small selection will be presented here. The selection of models chosen are included based on my perception of their relevance for the case of IRI.

#### *Diapraxis*

In 1988, Danish Doctor of Theology Lissi Rasmussen proposed a new term for a more practical focused dialogue; *diapraxis*. She developed the term based on her experiences with Christian-Muslim relations in Africa and Europe. Where dialogue is focused on speech, *diapraxis* is focused on action. Rasmussen proposed that *diapraxis* does not involve an application of dialogue, but that the dialogue is the action itself. From this *diapraxis*, then, deeper dialogue can emerge (Rasmussen, 1988, p. 279). Sigvard von Sicard explains how *diapraxis* has also been referred to as the 'dialogue of life' or 'dialogue in community'. However, he argues that *diapraxis* is more than just casual conversations and collaborations in civic or humanitarian fields between Christians and Muslims, it is a living process, a way of both co-existing and championing pro-existence (Sicard, 2003, p. 131).

Swedish professor Ulf Zackariasson furthermore explains how *diapraxis*, or *diapractice* as he calls it, typically occurs at the grassroot level, where people belonging to different religious traditions come together, sharing experiences and acting together with the

aim of solving a common issue (Zackariasson, 2019, p. 27). He goes on to explain how focusing on common issues – practical problems – has the effect of people focusing on what they have in common, rather than what separates them (Zackariasson, 2019, p. 28). Furthermore, he presents three outcomes of diapraxis: 1) people of different religious traditions learn to take responsibility for their own views; 2) cooperation between religious and secular ‘others’ encourages listening to one another, which can result in finding commonalities; and 3) meliorism<sup>4</sup>, a shared motivation of improving society, is the motor behind it. This means, Zackariasson argues, that diapraxis will occur naturally as a consequence of this motivation (Zackariasson, 2019, p. 32).

Einar Tjelle (2020) argues that there in the last decade has been a shift from *dialogue* to *diapraxis* in interreligious relations, which has also been visible in ecumenical efforts. He continues to say that diapraxis, more concretely *green* diapraxis, has the potential to be unifying in a time of polarization (Tjelle, 2020, p. 4). This green diapraxis has developed as an extension, or as a part of what Tjelle calls the *green multi-faith decade*. This term relates to the last decade after the early 2000s, where environmental issues came to take up increasing space in media and made their way onto the political agenda. Parallel to this, Tjelle notes that environmental issues also came to take up more space in faith communities (Tjelle, 2020, p. 2). As such, Tjelle argues that not only has the last decade brought a shift from dialogue to diapraxis in interreligious collaboration, but also a shift towards *green* diapraxis.

#### *Five models of interreligious dialogue*

In David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas’ (eds.) ‘Understanding Interreligious Relations’ from 2013, doctor and professor at the Vrije University, Amsterdam, Marianne Moyaert has written a chapter on interreligious dialogue. In the chapter, she identifies five models of interreligious dialogue: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action (practical), interreligious theological dialogue, spiritual dialogue, and diplomatic interreligious dialogue. These vary in structure, participants, and goal (Moyaert, 2013, p. 202).

The dialogue of life is mostly found in the daily dialogue and encounters between regular religious laypeople belonging to different religious traditions. The second model, the dialogue of action, is an interreligious dialogue that can be found in collaborations in humanitarian, social, economic, or political fields. The uniting issue is one of external

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<sup>4</sup> Meliorism means, in short, the belief that human effort can better the world (Zackariasson, 2019, p. 26)

character, meaning an issue that affects all people regardless of religious affiliation. Such a dialogue plays into the idea of some issues being a ‘shared responsibility’, where religions have to be part of the action (Moyaert, 2013, p. 203). The third model of dialogue, interreligious theological dialogue, is occupied with dialogue on doctrines and theology. The goal in this type of dialogue is to arrive at some form of *truth*, whether this is found in one’s own tradition or another’s. Spiritual dialogue is the fourth model of dialogue identified by Moyaert. This dialogue opens up for learning from one another through prayer and meditation. Spiritual experience is key in these dialogues (Moyaert, 2013, p. 203). Finally, diplomatic interreligious dialogue is carried out by religious leaders of different traditions. Here, contemporary society and common ethical issues are not the backdrop against which the dialogue takes place. Rather, the religious communities themselves are the horizon for the dialogue. While this encounter is more formal and as such might not produce any big doctrinal changes, it is an important symbolic form of encounter (Moyaert, 2013, p. 204).

#### *Women in interreligious dialogue*

In Catherine Cornille’s (ed.) ‘The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue’ (2013), Jeannine Hill Fletcher, feminist theologian and professor at Fordham University, New York, has written a chapter on women in interreligious dialogue. In her chapter, she examines three models of dialogue and women’s practices in them. The three models of interreligious dialogue are the parliament model of dialogue, the activist model of dialogue, and the storytelling model of dialogue. In the parliament model, expert representatives of the different traditions gather to discuss, explain, and defend their own traditions. As such, one person is required to represent a whole tradition. This form focuses primarily on doctrines or beliefs, and the goal is to better understand the different religions and compare them (Fletcher, 2013, p. 170). As she explains, this model has posed a challenge for women in that in representing a tradition, the focus is often on male experiences. This means that even if a woman acts as the expert representative, she might repeat this androcentric perspective based on it being the norm from which she was trained (Fletcher, 2013, p. 172).

The activist model can be said to be both embedded in the parliament model of interreligious dialogue, as well as being a model of its own. In the activist model, the focus is to transform the world and religions themselves (Fletcher, 2013, p. 174). What comes across in this model of dialogue, is that the reality of ‘religion’ necessarily is intertwined with economic, social, political, and material realities. Here, the everyday human life is included



into the dialogue. In addition, due to religion's intertwinement with other spheres, religion is understood as something that is constantly changing (Fletcher, 2013, pp. 175-176). Fletcher argues that the interreligious dialogue that takes place in the activist model is not simply about 'religion' and its contents, but about the role it plays in maintaining or threatening human wellbeing. Regarding women's participation in the activist model of dialogue, Fletcher argues that women trained in feminist methodologies will bring activist methods into settings of other models of dialogue, such as a dialogue framed in a parliament fashion (Fletcher, 2013, p. 176).

Being excluded from leadership roles and being trained in feminist activism, women in inter-religious dialogue have found alternatives to what Fletcher calls *malestream* inter-religious dialogues (Fletcher, 2013, p. 177). One such alternative is found in the storytelling model of dialogue. In the storytelling model of dialogue, individuals function as representatives for their respective tradition through the filter of their own biography. This makes for religious identities entangled in and impacted by other aspects of people's lives, such as economics, gender, social relations, material conditions, and so on. A single representative from any given tradition only holds part of that tradition's story, which makes for endless possibilities of dialogue (Fletcher, 2013, p. 179).

### 3.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, understandings of the important terms of religion, spirituality, and secularization theory has been presented. The somewhat blurry lines between religion and spirituality were emphasized. The definitions have been included to provide basic understandings of these central concepts, which function as a framework for the thesis.

Furthermore, a selection of central theories in the field of religion and ecology has been introduced. These include the three methodological approaches to the field introduced by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim: retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. Furthermore, the link between religion and ecology has been looked at through Willis Jenkins' problematization of the two terms. Their apparent connection in providing answers to existential questions was underlined. In looking at climate change, Mike Hulme's argument of religion as providing a bigger picture of how to understand and respond to this was presented. Included in Hulme's argument was religions' unique mobilization power through their reach and resources. In addition, two perspectives, one critique and one response, on Christianity's

part in causing and solving the climate crisis was introduced through the works of Lynn White (1967) and Pope Francis (2015).

Lastly, perspectives and models from the field of interreligious dialogue was presented. The terms of dialogue and interreligious dialogue was defined, as well as highlighting the distinction and choice between the terms interreligious and interfaith. Following this, four perspectives on interreligious dialogue were introduced. These revolve around two different types of dialogue (Leirvik), ways of relating to the 'religious other' (Knitter), the connection between and inter-dependence of interreligious dialogue and social action (Knitter), and the language of interreligious dialogue (Leirvik). The model of diapraxis, coined by Rasmussen, was introduced, as well as two sets of models for interreligious dialogue defined by respectively Marianne Moyaert and Jeannine Hill Fletcher.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter will give an overview of the approach and aim of the study, introduce the research method and analytical perspective used, and discuss their limitations as well as their advantages. In addition, the circumstances, challenges, and limitations of the study will be presented and discussed.

### 4.1 Aim and approach

The aim of this study is to explore how one can approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue. To better understand interreligious dialogue and its connection to environmental issues, it seems natural to seek out instances where these two meet and work together. Getting access to the real-life stories, facts, observations, philosophies, and reflections of people working in these areas provide a unique insight. Therefore, I would argue that an empirical qualitative study is a good choice to research the subject at hand.

The Interreligious Rainforest Initiative, being of interreligious nature and concerned with putting an end to tropical deforestation, emerges as a natural case as it is a synergy between the two fields. Furthermore, seeing as dialogue and collaboration in all forms deals with relations in one way or another, talking with people actually working in this setting seems a natural route to take to gain a clearer understanding of how interreligious dialogue and environmental issues interact, work together, and what they produce.

#### 4.1.1 Qualitative research

This study is situated within qualitative research. Qualitative research is often characterized as being occupied with words, as opposed to quantitative research dealing with numbers (Bryman, 2016, p. 375). There are debates on the nature of this kind of research, as well as its validity and reliability, which will be discussed later. However, situating the study in a research tradition is helpful for characterizing the nature of the study, as well as in deciding on a research method. Furthermore, the study is occupied with exploring the social world as people understand it, and how they act accordingly. Thus, it takes on an interpretivist epistemological position. What this means, is that rather than looking for explanations for human behavior, interpretivist research will instead try to understand it (Bryman, 2016, p. 26).

Secondly, this study takes a constructionist ontological position. In the term ‘constructionism’ lies the understanding of social phenomena as being produced through

social interaction, as well as constantly undergoing change (Bryman, 2016, p. 29). What this in turn means, is that the individuals in a given social reality are active in creating and influencing it. However, this does not mean that I neglect the influence of actors and premises outside of the reality of the study. For example, I recognize how the political, geographical, religious, and social realities in the different contexts impact the nature and development of IRI. Still, I would take up a constructionist position in that the individuals making up the social reality of the initiative are the primary influencers for how it is created and develops.

In addition, in the term ‘constructionism’ there lies a reflection of how the researcher presents one version of a social reality, and as such, the knowledge produced is not definitive (Bryman, 2016, p. 30). In my case, this means that the knowledge I produce from studying the social reality of the intersection between environmental issues and interreligious dialogue is one version of this reality, but not the whole picture. Therefore, the knowledge apprehended should be seen as suggestive rather than definitive.

#### 4.1.2 Inductive approach

This study takes an inductive approach. Oddbjørn Leirvik (2014, p. 71) explains how an inductive approach in the setting of interreligious dialogue starts from one context and later formulates concrete responses on an interreligious basis. This is a sort of ‘dialogue from below’ and can be a useful tool in analyzing who lays the premise for concrete dialogue initiatives (Leirvik, 2014, p. 71). What this means in practice, is that the implications of the findings of the study are used to essentially create new theory or revise existing theory. This approach is commonly associated with qualitative research such as this study. Still, as Bryman brings to light, this does not mean that theory is not used as background for qualitative research (Bryman, 2016, p. 24). As such, existing theory also lays the groundwork for this study. However, it takes an inductive approach through starting with my own data from the case of IRI. From this, what can be understood about interreligious dialogue will then be discussed, where models of dialogue and existing theory will be drawn upon.

#### 4.2 Research method

Given that interreligious dialogue deals with relations in one way or another, to talk with people dealing with such relations seemed a natural route to take. As such, the use of interviews emerged as a good method to get a sense of how people working with

interreligious work understand such work, as well as how they understand the environmental perspective in the case chosen. The method I chose to research the subject at hand, was semi-structured interviews. In this section, I will present the method, the extent to which it was used, as well as why I deemed it a fitting research method for this study.

#### 4.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are fairly unstructured, which means that they have main areas of focus/interest, but are open to take other routes depending on the way in which the conversation goes (Bremborg, 2011, p. 310). This seemed a good fit for this study, as the landscape of the intersection between environmental issues and interreligious dialogue is somewhat new and emerging. As such, the interviews could be open enough for the interviewees to steer the conversation to aspects of the intersection I had not thought of. This was a good route to take to get a nuanced picture of the interplay between environmental issues and interreligious dialogue in the initiative. Still, in semi-structured interviews there are a set of premeditated questions and follow-ups that the researcher has available, called an interview guide<sup>5</sup> (Bremborg, 2011, p. 312). My interview guide was developed with certain themes and areas of interest in mind, yet the method allowed for me to vary which questions to ask and the order in which they were asked. It also allowed for follow-up questions and new questions that emerged from the answers of the interviewees. The questions were divided into three main categories: ‘basic background info’, ‘Interfaith Rainforest Initiative’, and ‘interreligious dialogue’. I conducted eight semi-structured interviews, with somewhat varying lengths. These were all recorded and transcribed in the language in which they were conducted<sup>6</sup>.

#### *Sampling*

To carry out interviews, one needs to decide on a sample of interviewees that is somehow representative of that which one studies (King et al., 2019, p. 56). Studying IRI, interviewing as many of the partnering organizations as possible then seemed a natural route to take to get a clear image of how this initiative works and how it was developed. I was initially unsure

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<sup>5</sup> The interview guide is found in appendix 1. This guide was the starting point for each interview, but as I progressed in the process, the order was changed, as well as which questions were asked. This was due to certain areas being fully covered in early interviews, and so other areas were prioritized. In addition, the interviews changed direction somewhat with the answers given by the interviewees. According to King et.al. this is not only allowed; it is advisable (King et al., 2019, p. 66). As such, the interviews were not identical, but similar.

<sup>6</sup> Four of the interviews were conducted in Norwegian and four were conducted in English.

whether I would be able to recruit enough people to carry out the research in the way that I wanted to. However, using the people in Oslo as a starting point, getting in touch with most of the other organizations turned out to be easier than expected. All the eight partnering organizations of the initiative were contacted and given the opportunity to participate in the study, as well as a few key people active in the developing phase. The selection presented are the people and organizations that responded to the request in time and wanted to take part in the research. In qualitative semi-structured interviews, the aim is not to get yes/no-answers to locked questions, nor to produce some form of statistics from participants' answers. What I sought after, was an in-depth understanding of how the structure, work and philosophical background of the initiative is understood by the different partners, and why. As the interviewees are representatives from the partnering organizations of the initiative, it takes the form of an 'expert interview', which means the interview is executed with key persons in the field of study (Bremborg, 2011, p. 312).

IRI is an initiative that works on several levels: locally, nationally, and globally. As such, I would have liked to include people from all levels. This would also have given a greater diversity in terms of gender, as well as religious affiliation and nationality. However, as the initiative is relatively new and still developing, I chose to focus on the global level, as it is on this level it was first developed and where it first worked from. This was also to limit the number of interviewees, in order to be able to have more in-depth interviews. While the number of interviewees could be seen as relatively low, multiple researchers view this as an advantage, given that the interviews are well prepared and thoroughly analyzed (Bremborg, 2011, p. 314). In addition, I knew that language would become an obstacle in the local levels of the different countries. Therefore, I would argue that the sample chosen was the most logical choice to apprehend information on the initiative, as well as the most achievable one in terms of executing the interviews. The sample of interviewees therefore ended up including (name, organization):

- Einar Tjelle, Church of Norway
- Lars Løvold, Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN)
- Simon Rye, Norway's International Climate and Forest initiative (NICFI)
- Marianne Bruusgaard, Norway's International Climate and Forest initiative (NICFI)
- Mary Evelyn Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology
- Charles McNeill, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- Kusumita Pedersen, Parliament of the World's Religions

- An informant from one of the partnering organizations who chose to be anonymous.

In addition, Gunnar Stålsett, formerly of Religions for Peace (RFP) and instrumental in the developing phase of the initiative, was contacted. He referred me to an article on IRI, which he had just written in the December edition 2020 of the journal 'Kirke og Kultur' (Church and Culture). Seeing how this article covered many of the themes of interest, it was used as a replacement for an interview.

### 4.3 Data analysis

Having conducted the research, I was left with a lot of data. To make sense of the data, it needed to be coded and analyzed. The analytical tool of choice for this study, was a thematic analysis. In this section, I will present how I coded the data and the method of thematic analysis. Furthermore, I will discuss why this method of analysis was chosen, its limitations, and challenges.

#### 4.3.1 Coding of data

To conduct an analysis, coding is the starting point. King et al. (2019, pp. 203, 204, 209) divides this process into three parts: descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and defining themes. Descriptive coding means identifying the parts of one's data that initially seem relevant in relation to one's research question. After this is done, interpretive coding is the next step. Here, the point is to code according to one's own interpretation of the meaning behind the codes found through descriptive coding. In other words, the codes can be grouped together or categorized according to their meaning. In both steps, the codes will necessarily be revised and redefined along the way, as one looks at the data from the interviews in relation to each other. When the two first parts of the coding are done, one can start defining overarching themes based on the codes identified. (King et al., 2019, pp. 203, 204, 209)

To code the transcripts into different themes and topics, I used the program NVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis software offered through the University of Oslo. In this program, one can upload files in the form of audio recordings, pictures, video recordings or text. This program is secure to use, as one's files are encrypted and only the account owner can access the data. I decided to upload all the interviews in the form of transcriptions, or text files. After uploading them, I could then read through each interview, select interesting parts, and sort them into different nodes. These nodes could then be looked at in the bigger picture,

where I could label them in relation to each other, as well as identify overarching and underlying nodes. I could then go into each node and see the excerpts from the different interviews relating to that node. In this way, the program helped shorten down a lengthy process of coding the data, as it made it easy to sort the information into categories with just a few clicks. I followed the three-part process as described and ended up with several themes identified through the data, which I could then analyze.

#### 4.3.2 Thematic analysis

To analyze the findings and discuss the research question, the choice fell upon the analytical approach of thematic analysis. A thematic analysis includes identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning (Lapadat, 2009, p. 925). The definition of what a theme is understood to be, varies to a great degree. Bryman (2016) gives a definition in four parts:

1) a category that is identified by the researcher through her data; 2) the categories identified relates to her research focus; 3) the categories build on codes that she has identified in transcripts and/or field notes; and 4) the categories provide her with the basis for a theoretical understanding of her data, which lets her make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the focus of the research. (Bryman, 2016, p. 584)

In other words, data is being analyzed to: “discover commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles” (Lapadat, 2009, p. 926). By the means of transcribing interviews and coding them, I could identify reoccurring themes, topics, and relationships. As different themes emerged from the interviews, principles for interreligious dialogue and religion and ecology could be discovered, and how one can approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue could be discussed.

This method of analysis was chosen because it enabled me to see the interviews in relation to each other in terms of reoccurring themes. In identifying reoccurring themes, a case could then be made for these themes being of central nature in the bigger field of interreligious dialogue. However, it is important to note that the themes will necessarily be a product of the researcher’s subjective regard as to what is important and not. After identifying relevant themes, they become distinct cases. In thematic analysis, a challenge is found in balancing between within-case and cross-case. This is because the cases/themes both need to be analyzed separately as their own entities, but also in relation to each other (King et al., 2019, p. 201). As such, the themes I found needed to be seen in light of the background and



context of the different interviewees, but also seen in the light of the big picture of the data as a whole.

#### 4.4 Circumstances, challenges and limitations

In defining a field of research, there are limitations to consider. In this section, I will present the main challenges I faced in conducting this study, as well as their impact on the research. The circumstances of the study and the interviews will be presented, as well as the limitations of the study. My position in relation to the field of research will be touched upon, as well as ethical considerations, and reliability and validity.

##### 4.4.1 Circumstances and the interviews

Conducting my research in 2020/2021, Covid-19 had implications for both myself and this project. Practically, it limited the opportunities for travelling abroad, which was originally part of the plan. One of the partnering organizations in New York initially proposed an internship. This would have given me the opportunity to work with and study the initiative up close. Conducting field work would have given an extra dimension to this project, as I could have studied the actual work in addition to talking to the people involved. This would have given other interview situations, as I could have met more of the people participating in the study face-to-face.

Due to the situation, six out of eight interviews were conducted online, using Zoom. This presents its own set of challenges, one of which is sound quality. While the recordings I made were fine throughout most of the interviews, at times when my or the interviewee's internet connection was poor, this affected the sound, making it harder to make out what was being said. In one interview, the connection was lost for a minute or so, crippling the flow of the conversation. The use of remote interviewing can also be challenging if the interviewees do not have access to the technology needed or the skills to get the technology working properly (King et al., 2019, p. 122). Luckily, the participants of this study were well versed in having meetings online, making setting up and implementing such interviews easy. The use of remote interviewing also enabled me to interview people living on the other side of the world, and thereby giving me a chance to interview people I perhaps would not have gotten to talk to otherwise.

Even though Zoom offers a possibility for recording the meeting directly, I chose to record the interviews on an external recording device. This was done to better follow the guidelines of storing the data, as all the interviews could be stored on the device itself, in addition to on an encrypted external unit. Though information had already been given out in a letter of information sent out beforehand, the recording device was shown to the interviewees at the beginning of the interview, giving them insight into how the interview would be recorded and information about how the data would be stored. I wanted the interview situation to be as similar as possible for the interviews conducted face-to-face and the remote interviews. Recording just the audio and not the video contributed to this. However, both me and the interviewees had the camera on during the interview. This was an important step in building relations between me and the interviewees. Meeting in person will, no matter what, be a different experience than meeting online. Face-to-face meetings gives one a whole other reading of the other person, as one not only sees their face and hear their words, - one can also see their body-language. While this was bound to be different in the interviews I conducted, having the camera on during the interview contributed to a sense of meeting in person. In addition, as recommended by King et.al. (2019), I had e-mail contact with the interviewees before the interviews to help establish a connection (King et al., 2019, p. 121).

#### 4.4.2 Informant bias

There is always a risk of informant bias when conducting interviews. People might want to appear or present information a certain way, which in turn can make the information one collects untrustworthy to some degree. In addition, they might leave out important information, or even have incomplete memories of people and events that have taken place (Bremborg, 2011, p. 319). While this is always a possibility, a lot of the information given by the interviewees in this study are dates and events that are of official nature and documented through multiple sources. In addition, the interviewees represent different organizations, and as such there is no one collective place of work that they would want to represent in a certain way. Coming from different organizations, they represent multiple actors of society with distinct views and diverse methods and areas of work. This gives for a more nuanced picture. The information given could also be checked by comparing it to the information given by the other interviewees. As such, a clear picture of events, people, the work conducted, and the philosophy/mindset of the initiative could be acquired and be deemed reliable.

#### 4.4.3 Positioning

Nina Hoel (2013) brings to light the danger of relating too much to the people one studies. While there are advantages to discovering shared identity traits with the field and people one encounters, this is not to be confused with shared views or experiences. Nor does this remove underlying relations of power (Hoel, 2013, p. 32). What this essentially means, is that even if one builds good relationships while conducting field studies or doing interviews, this does not mean one automatically shares and understands the experiences, contexts, situations, and the world as the people one encounters do. Multiple views are always present, and one's own interpretation of a situation is not necessarily the correct one. Therefore, being aware of one's own position, its effect on how one views the field of study, and the difference in power between oneself and the interviewees, is important.

In researching IRI, I am an outsider in many ways. In several of the interview settings, I was an outsider linguistically, culturally, and academically. The people I interviewed have worked in their field of expertise for several years, and therefore have a different understanding than I do of this initiative, the circumstances surrounding it, its workings, and its place in the world of global initiatives/collaborations. Therefore, there is a risk of me misinterpreting their meanings, understandings, and actions to some degree.

#### 4.4.4 Time scope and range

IRI was launched in 2017, meaning it had only been up and running for three years when I began my research. As such, there are aspects of the initiative that have not yet fully developed, and aspects that will probably change during the time of this study and in the coming months and years. The interviews and data provided in this research project is, in other words, conditioned by the stage the initiative is at in this point in time. The interviews were also conducted over a relatively short period of time in the fall of 2020. This limits the understanding acquired, and ideally, a much longer period of studying the initiative would have given a more profound picture. Still, I would argue that to be able to look at such an initiative from an early stage on is a strength in that one gets a unique insight into the philosophy and ideas that made it happen in the first place. In addition, one gets to look at the process of the development of a working collaboration, and which factors that affect and challenge how, where, and when it is established.

This research project is rather small, and the results can therefore not count as more than suggestions for further research. Interviewing some of the people involved in the

initiative does not give me a complete picture of it, nor a full understanding of its workings and background. Nor does it provide me with a detailed view of the field of interreligious dialogue and collaboration on environmental issues. Ideally, more organizations and actors in this field would have been included and interviewed. Because of the size of the project, this was not done. This helped narrow down the thesis and gave me a chance to get a better understanding of the one initiative chosen.

#### 4.4.5 Language

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian or English. They were all transcribed in the language in which they were conducted. For my Norwegian interviews, the only parts translated into English were the quotes I ended up including in the thesis. English is my second language, and though I consider myself a fluent speaker there is a possibility when translating that the words chosen are not the most accurate ones. Therefore, the emphasis is not put on specific words, but rather the perceived meaning of what has been said.

#### 4.4.6 Ethical considerations

When conducting interviews, there is always a challenge in deciding on which questions to ask. As I draw on the semi-structured interview, the questions I developed were not as 'set in stone' as in other types of interviews. Still, to prepare questions that cover the areas of interest, while also considering how they might affect the interview subjects is important. Bryman brings to light that in social research there are four issues one needs to be aware of. These are 1) whether there is any harm to the participants; 2) whether there is a lack of informed consent; 3) whether there is any invasion of privacy; and 4) whether deception is involved (Bryman, 2016, p. 125). Taking these into consideration is crucial when studying real people in real contexts.

Before conducting the interviews, letters of information and consent were sent out. These contained thorough information on how to access data about the project and quotes given. The letter contained information about what was to be researched, who else is involved, and the purpose of the research<sup>7</sup>. It was also made clear that the interviewees could at any point withdraw their consent or ask to see their information and quotes. Information on who to contact and how to get in touch was listed. In this way, the criteria of deception were

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<sup>7</sup> The letter of information is found in Appendix 2

met. A couple of times, interviewees gave quotes they described as off the record. These quotes were not shared, nor taken into the thesis in any way. Some interviewees asked to see the questions before the interview. In those cases, the interview guide was sent to them, along with a reminder that the interview was to be semi-structured, and as such, that the interview guide was merely a guide, suggesting themes for the conversation. This was a way to ensure that the criteria of informed consent were met.

As the interview subjects in this study function as expert representatives, they do not represent themselves as private people to a large degree. As such, the harm that might occur is if the organizations or foundations the interview subjects represent are not satisfied with the way in which their work is represented. Harm could also occur if the interviewees were to criticize other organizations, partners of the initiative, religious attitudes, governmental practices of other countries, or the work of one another. To assure the interviewees of which quotes were used, their quotes were sent to them to approve or retract before including them in the final product. In this way, they could consider whether they wanted to edit or retract any of them. They were also given the opportunity to retract their name. Through this, the criteria of limiting potential harm was met.

All of the recordings, information and data for this research project has been stored confidentially, with restricted access. This was also conveyed to the interviewees before the interviews began. Furthermore, the project has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data<sup>8</sup> (NSD).

#### 4.4.7 Reliability and validity

Validity and reliability are contested terms in qualitative research. This is much due to them implying some sort of ‘measurement’, and as such being more connected to quantitative research. Validity indicates whether a measure of a concept actually does measure this concept. Reliability relates to the consistency of this measure (Bryman, 2016, pp. 157, 158, 383). In other words, these terms say something about whether one’s data is representative, and if one’s results could be reproduced in another setting. It is easier to assess whether a set of statistics are reliable or valid, than principles deduced through a small selection of interviews. However, there are procedures qualitative researchers can do to assess the quality of their research. One such, is the use of thick descriptions. King et al. describes thick

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 3

descriptions as: “[...] detailed descriptions of the phenomena they study and their context” (King et al., 2019, p. 217). Through giving thick descriptions, one can give the reader the possibility to assess if the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions make sense. This study relies on such a procedure to assess quality. By describing the context and phenomena of the field of study, I mean to help the reader understand why I have interpreted the findings in the way that I have, and why I have arrived at my conclusions. However, as mentioned, due to the size and scope of this study, it should be seen as suggestive rather than definitive.

#### 4.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have stated the aim and approach of the study. I have situated the study within the research tradition of qualitative research and stated the inductive approach of the study. The research method of choice, semi-structured interviews, has been introduced, along with the reasons for choosing this method. The process of sampling has been presented, along with the list of interviewees selected for this study.

Furthermore, the process of coding the data in three parts has been introduced. The method for analyzing the data, thematic analysis, has been thoroughly described with its strengths and weaknesses. The circumstances, challenges, and limitations of the study has been introduced. These include the special situation of Covid-19, the risk of informant bias, my positioning in relation to the interviewees and subject at hand, the time scope and range of the study, and the potential challenge with language and translation.

The ethical considerations when executing such research has been presented and discussed through the four issues of concern as presented by Bryman (2016). How these were met in this study has been explained, along with information on how the data has been handled and stored. Finally, the reliability and validity of the study has been discussed, where the problematic relationship these concepts have with qualitative research in general was touched upon. The use of thick descriptions for reliability was introduced, and the point that this study is to be seen as suggestive rather than definitive was underlined.

## Chapter 5: Findings

In this chapter, I will present the main findings of this study relating to the research question: “how can one approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue?”. The findings are based on interviews conducted with representatives from the partnering organizations of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI). This means that IRI is the case in point for relating interreligious dialogue to environmental issues. My aim throughout the interviews was to discover different areas where aspects of IRI speaks to the bigger picture of interreligious dialogue on environmental issues, - in this case deforestation. During my coding of the interviews, several themes of interest emerged. In the coding process, these were marked, and looked at through overarching relationships. Along the way, four main dimensions of the initiative were discovered, namely: reach, action-orientation, inclusivity, and religion. The dimensions are overarching, and under each of these, the underlying themes discovered will be presented. Lastly, the challenges the initiative faces will be presented.

As the findings are based on the interviews, several quotes will be included throughout the chapter. Quotes from the Norwegian interviewees are included in the translated English version. The translations are based on my own understanding of what the interviewees sought to convey.

### 5.1 Reach

The first dimension of which several findings will be presented, is the dimension of ‘reach’. The understanding of ‘reach’ in this study is in terms of the initiative’s extent or range. While aspects of the dimension of ‘reach’ were expected and surfaced early during the interviews, this dimension turned out to be multi-layered to a larger degree than first assumed. As such, the dimension of ‘reach’ relating to IRI will be presented through the four themes of practical reach, religious reach, political reach, and interdisciplinary reach.

#### 5.1.1 Practical reach

One way that the interreligious dialogue of IRI creates opportunities for approaching environmental issues, is through practical reach. The fact that the population of the world is largely religious means that one, through using religious platforms, has a unique possibility to

mobilize people (Hulme, 2017, p. 241). This was also brought to light by Lars Løvold of the Rainforest Foundation Norway.

A reflection Vidar Helgesen [former Minister of Climate and the Environment] made upon being brought out in the field, was that the presence of the government is quite minimal in a country such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, there were churches and prayer houses and religious actors that were present. (Løvold, RFN)

When asked about why it mattered to bring the religious actors into the fold, he replied:

In terms of impact, these are very influential and powerful actors. If you ask people in the Congo ‘do you trust the politician or do you trust the priest’, there is a very big difference in trust. Plus, nearly all schools and hospitals are run by religious actors; they are everywhere. The state’s presence is limited and there is a lot of corruption on that level. Those who, in a way, ‘deliver’, are the religious actors. So, if/when they engage in forest protection, or find ways to handle the issues locally, that has the potential to be a huge breakthrough. (Løvold, RFN)

From a practical point of view, then, bringing religious actors into the fold on the issue gives the potential to mobilize larger groups of people, in addition to *reaching* a larger group of people due to religions’ pre-existing presence in different countries. On a general level, this will necessarily vary from country to country, as religion’s presence in society will differ. However, the practical reach of religious actors throughout the world cannot be overstated. Løvold here also points to the difference in trust found in countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where corruption is widespread, and the government’s reliability is questioned. In such cases, Løvold suggests that religious actors can provide a level of trust and authority that governments and actors of the state cannot.

IRI has a unique structure in that the initiative has a presence globally, nationally, and locally. What this in turn means, is that the structure opens up for a potential for information to flow through the levels. On explaining the initiative’s structure, Simon Rye said the following:

This Global Steering Committee is not only developed to be a governing body, but also to be an advisory forum. It is also a listening post, in a way. The founding partner organizations represent organizations that have a presence in many countries, and that makes them an important channel for informational access. (Rye, NICFI)



Similarly, Marianne Bruusgaard explained further the underlying thought of the relationship between the different levels:

The country networks operate in their different country contexts. IRI has this intention that the inspiration and incentives should be communicated two ways; the work at the country level should inspire and inform the work at the global level, and the activities at the global level should reinforce the incentives at the country level. (Bruusgaard, NICFI)

What this can result in, is an awareness and inspiration flowing through the different levels of the initiative. While the country networks are the ones deciding on what to work on and how in the different contexts, this work can inspire and inform the Global Steering Committee. Similarly, the work done at the global level can reinforce and inspire the work at the country level. Simon Rye furthermore explains how the national chapters of IRI have access to the Global Steering Committee:

The interfaith organizations in the Global Steering Committee represent organizations in the national IRI-groups, and through this I believe the local IRI-groups feel that they have access to the Global Steering Committee, and the other way around. (Rye, NICFI)

The fact that national chapters of the IRI have access to the Global Steering Committee through the partnering organizations, creates a natural flow of information between the national and the global level, and opens up for transparency. This plays into the practical reach of the initiative. As the initiative has a presence on all levels of society, it has a unique possibility to reach people on all these levels, in addition to information being accessible through all the levels of the initiative.

### 5.1.2 Religious reach

In each of the countries where IRI is working, there are different religions that are the majority religions and have a presence and representation. Still, IRI has put weight on the initiative being ‘interreligious’, or ‘interfaith’, instead of just ‘religious’. Speaking on the emphasis put on ‘interfaith’, Charles McNeill said:

Martín von Hildebrand asked the question during the first IRI event in Oslo, ‘why take an interfaith approach when in each of these countries there is a dominant religion?’. The reason is that this issue can get the Evangelicals, the Catholics, the Muslims, the Jews, the Hindus, the Buddhists, and other faiths to all sit together. It is an issue where their differences diminish because they are focused on this one cause

that they can agree on. The strategy in emphasizing the interfaith approach is that it allows religious groups to come together to cooperate when they might not agree to sit around the same table in any other circumstance. (McNeill, UNEP)

In other words, through defining the initiative as interfaith, or interreligious, there is a potential for an extensive religious reach. If one simply chose to focus on one or two of the religions present in each country, including and reaching other religious groups would prove more difficult. Similarly, Lars Løvold emphasizes the interfaith perspective:

Quite a lot of weight is put on it not being just the two big religions, but a true interfaith initiative on the national level as well. And that is also enriching, I think, for the dialogue and the approach. (Løvold, RFN)

Furthermore, he brought into the conversation why the actors chosen as partners globally and nationally are interreligious ones:

The point of it being the interreligious actors that are a part of the steering groups, is that they represent, per definition, all sorts of religions. (Løvold, RFN)

Through this, a clear intention behind naming the initiative ‘interfaith’ can be seen, as this opens for a larger religious representation and inclusivity. In addition, the focus on having interreligious organizations as partners and hosts in the different countries gives the potential for including a larger diversity of religions, as all the local religions are welcomed into its fold. This makes for an extensive religious reach, as every religion has the potential to feel included and represented and get a seat at the table through the local, national, and global interfaith organizations and partners working in IRI.

### 5.1.3 Political reach

In addition to providing an extensive practical and religious reach, IRI also lays the groundwork for acquiring a potentially influential political role. This is through diplomacy, and it speaks to IRI’s goal of ‘influencing policy’. Charles McNeill explains how the initiative has been invited into the political sphere, where they have been able to meet politicians and leaders of state to speak their case:

The way diplomacy is happening through IRI is by engaging directly with members of the parliament or congress, as well as directly with ministers of the national government, and even directly with the president or vice-president or prime minister. This is happening in Peru, Colombia, DRC and Indonesia where IRI leaders have often been invited to speak with these leaders, individually or even collectively to the parliament, subsets of parliament, or certain committees of parliament. (McNeill, UNEP)

Similarly, Lars Løvold gives a concrete example of the IRI's presence in the political sphere from one of the countries:

In Colombia, they had meetings with the candidates for governor positions, and got them to promise that if they were elected, they were to have such-and-such forestry programs. They were even invited into those kinds of advisory groups for the governors after they won. (Løvold, RFN)

In other words, IRI reaches people in power, and can both influence policy and put pressure on the governments to get the issue of deforestation on the political agenda. Through both reaching religious actors, who are often the groups with actual power and reach in the countries, and reaching the actual leaders of state, IRI can be understood to have a unique political reach.

#### 5.1.4 Interdisciplinary reach

While IRI is an interreligious initiative, a focus is also for it to be interdisciplinary. What this means, is that outside of the religious actors, multiple actors of society are invited in as partners and co-contributors. Regarding this interdisciplinary focus of IRI compared to other initiatives, Mary Evelyn Tucker of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology reflects:

I take IRI to be rather special because it is truly interdisciplinary. It is linked to major governments and government funding from Norway, the UN, policy people, and interreligious groups. This is quite unusual – the combination of the interdisciplinary character of it. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

This focus and aspect of the initiative was present from the very beginning. As Kusumita Pedersen of the Parliament of the World's Religions tells it, it was regarded as one reason for the initiative's success in the first place:

People said, one of the reasons for the success of the launch in Oslo, was that there were the three groups: scientists, Indigenous peoples, and members of religious communities. (Pedersen, Parliament of the World's Religions)

In other words, there are government actors, scientists, NGO's, global international organizations, religious groups, interreligious organizations, and Indigenous actors that are working together in the initiative. A point of uniqueness for the initiative - it also creates the possibility for a reach that spans across disciplines and layers of society. In addition, the interdisciplinary focus creates a unique possibility for information, knowledge, and assessments of the different actors regarding the issue at hand to be shared with each other. Through this, IRI has the possibility to form a response and develop strategies for the work based on information from multiple sources.

## 5.2 Inclusivity

The second main dimension I want to bring into the conversation on interreligious dialogue and environmental issues in IRI, is inclusivity. By this, I mean that there are several areas where IRI tries to create a space for everybody to be welcome and have a seat at the table. Four of the ways in which this is apparent in the initiative will be presented followingly.

### 5.2.1 Indigenous focus

A clear and stated goal of IRI is to safeguard the Indigenous peoples that live in and care for the forests. As Gunnar Stålsett explains in his article (2020), this was always a part of the aim and goals for the initiative:

The collaboration had to be tied to Indigenous peoples' rights. It was not supposed to just 'take care of indigenous peoples', but to have Indigenous peoples as equal partners. Furthermore, no religion should have preferential rights, regardless of national dominance (Stålsett, 2020, p. 343).

Through this, Indigenous peoples' rights can be understood to be central for the initiative. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples should be partners on an equal level as the other partners. In relation to this, Stålsett also brings in the interreligious nature of the initiative, with all religions being on the same level, no one preferred over the other. It seems he is suggesting Indigenous peoples are also religious actors of the initiative. Kusumita Pedersen was a part of the launch in Oslo, and explains that this aspect was already present at this initial stage:

You had invited the people who really are the key people that have something to say and knows how to interact with other people. They were there, and the Indigenous leaders were on an equal footing with the others— there was no tokenism. (Pedersen, Parliament of the World's Religions)

As such, this can be understood to have been important from the very beginning, and to be a central principle for the initiative. This principle of equality between the partners of the initiative, and the focus on Indigenous peoples' rights is also highlighted by Lars Løvold:

It has been mandatory that Indigenous peoples should be treated with equal status, should sit around the same table, should be a part of the steering committee, and so on. (Løvold, RFN)

While it might be natural to understand how this plays out at bigger events and as theoretical principles, this has also been central when developing the structure of the initiative on the national levels. On talking about whether the initiative relies on a specific model of dialogue, Løvold touched up on what the initiative looks like in the national contexts of the countries:

In the model for the national boards, or national advisory councils, there is always representation from Indigenous peoples, environmental organizations, and at least one or two from science. It has to do with integration. The religious actors can easily respond to the issue of respect and care for the creation, but at the same time they know little about forests and often very little about Indigenous peoples and related issues. (Løvold, RFN)

In other words, the principle of equality is central both in the bigger, global contexts, and as part of the actual working groups of the national contexts. This does not seem to be a matter of certain partners being in charge, and deciding to 'include' marginalized groups, this seems to be a view of definite equality, where every partner should hold the same power and sit around the same table.

### 5.2.2 Genuineness

When people of different nationalities, religious affiliations, and political opinions meet, there are bound to be some difficulties with the dialogue, especially when it comes to sensitive matters. As such, a main point in the interviews was to learn how the interviewees understood which principles are central for a productive dialogue. Answering a question of which values are central for the dialogue to be productive in an interreligious context, the anonymous informant from one of the partnering organizations said:

I think that people involved need to have a genuine curiosity about teachings of different religions, so that they view the other religion as something to be respected and cherished and learned from, not as something that is 'wrong'. (Informant, one of the partnering organizations)

The informant brings in the value of genuine curiosity, a wish to learn about, and an attitude of respect towards, other religions. That one can learn from each other, despite being of different opinions and faiths, is central. Elaborating on the importance of differences, the informant further said:

I find interreligious dialogue that seeks only to identify commonalities to be very boring. I think finding a way to celebrate and engage seriously around the distinctiveness of each religion's approach is really important. (Informant, one of the partnering organizations)

The informant does not seem to mean that one is to give up one's own position. It is rather an encouragement to acknowledge differences between the participants, and celebrate them, - a form of genuine curiosity and willingness to listen and discuss. Relating to this, Simon Rye answered the following on how to develop a fruitful dialogue in an interreligious setting:

And then there is good will. That one enters into this with a good will, which perhaps sounds a bit naïve, but which is not immaterial. The attitude one enters this with is connected to the degree to which one recognizes the importance of what one is trying to achieve, as a 'greater good' if you will. (Rye, NICFI)

Rye brings in that to have productive dialogues, there needs to be good will; a genuine attitude of wishing the other participants well and recognizing the reason and goal for meeting. Both Rye's and the informant's answers connect to an attitude of genuineness, - a genuine interest in and good will towards the other participants of the dialogue. Rye furthermore connects this with a genuine understanding of why one meets and the importance of this. The attitude of genuineness seems a central element in the interreligious dialogue of IRI.

### 5.2.3 Open space

The question of how to create dialogue that is productive and fruitful in an interreligious context produced several interesting answers. One point that multiple of the interviewees

brought up, was the thought of creating a different space for the dialogue to happen in. This was already a thought predating the launch in Oslo, as Lars Løvold explains:

It was a sort of prerequisite for the foundation meeting at Lysebu, that there should be a very open dialogue, so it was okay to be angry. (Løvold, RFN)

Løvold talks about creating a space where the dialogue can be open, - where one can be honest about opinions and feelings. In an interreligious context consisting of both actors from the major religions and Indigenous peoples this is interesting, as there are several grievances from the past between one or more of these. Charles McNeill shared some thoughts on what the effects of establishing such a space are:

I believe it to be almost automatic that when a safe space is created for authentic dialogue among divergent groups and the truth is told, a kind of natural healing and reconciliation can happen. This is what we are seeing in the five IRI countries among religious leaders and Indigenous leaders. (McNeill, UNEP)

In other words, McNeill argues that in establishing a safe, open space, one creates potential for the healing of relations. In fact, he sees this as coming naturally in opening such a space, and that this is already happening in the five countries IRI works in. Einar Tjelle was one of the other interviewees that spoke of establishing a different room for the dialogue to take place in, and he characterizes this space as following:

When conducting interreligious dialogue, it is important to establish a 'sacred space', or a 'safe space'. Creating a place where one can establish trust. In addition, it is important for people to define their own views, that they do not define for others. All dialogue is best when one is honest about where one stands. (Tjelle, Church of Norway)

According to Tjelle, what characterizes the room one establishes is that it is safe, there is trust, and there is honesty. It is a space where one can be honest about one's own position and stand, and trust others to be honest with theirs. In addition, one can trust people not to define the position of other actors based on their own understanding.

#### 5.2.4 Women

In the context of interreligious work and trying to mobilize religious people to engage in work on environmental issues, a question arises of who to include and which groups to focus on. None of my questions initially centered around the inclusivity of gender. However, an interesting point that came to light in a couple of the interviews was how one usually in these settings tend to focus on religious leaders, and what this implies. As Kusumita Pedersen explains, this was a concern of hers from the beginning, in talking about the launch and development of the initiative:

And at that time, there was a bit of emphasis on, ‘We are going to gather religious leaders and have a summit of religious leaders in Brazil’. And I was very skeptical about this, because I had heard this kind of thing for decades – that if religious leaders of the world stand together and say “we are for...” – fill in whatever cause it is – that somehow things will change, and I think it is kind of an archetype of our time. People who suggest this often do not know that it has already happened a number of times. (Pedersen, Parliament of the World’s Religions)

In other words, a gathering of religious leaders would not necessarily produce anything new, due to it being done several times in the past. To get religious leaders to gather and make a statement is simply not enough, argues Pedersen. Furthermore, she problematizes the inclusivity of this approach:

And if you give importance to “religious leaders”, what happens, historically? You lose your gender balance, just like that. (Pedersen, Parliament of the World’s Religions)

Focusing on gathering religious leaders will then result in a lack of representativity in terms of gender, Pedersen argues. Mary Evelyn Tucker adds to this perspective, as she talks about what is needed to make interreligious dialogue effective and productive:

What is needed is for religious people to develop an ecological understanding of the connection between ecosystems, and their global importance. This is not only true for religious leaders, but also laity and communities. Religious leaders are often male and not necessarily well trained, certainly not in ecology, and they are not trained in environment as an issue that they should be concerned about. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

Not only are religious leaders often male, Tucker says, they are also seldom trained in ecology, and unaware that these issues are issues they should be concerned about. Developing an initiative that not only focuses on religious leaders, seems a main concern of the partners.



As seen throughout this study, the initiative works on multiple levels of society, and is in no way only concerned with hosting global summits of religious leaders. Looking at inclusivity in terms of gender, there are several women in the different layers of the initiative, three of which are included here as interviewees from the Global Steering Committee. Furthermore, Charles McNeill brings in the country facilitator of Colombia as an example of a central figure in the work and embodiment of the spirit of IRI:

Blanca Echeverry, who is the national facilitator for IRI Colombia, has embodied the intent and spirit of IRI very clearly. She is literally running with it at the speed of light. It is very impressive and inspiring to see how someone can mobilize the interfaith community in such a way. (McNeill, UNEP)

Furthermore, women are present and active from the Indigenous side as well. Lars Løvold mentions Sonia Guajajara, coordinator of the association of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, as central for the launch of the faith-for-forests (FFF) campaign and statement:

There was this World Assembly that Religions for Peace had in Lindau in Germany, and the IRI had quite a large presence there. They adopted a Faiths for Forests statement, and Sonia Guajajara, who is an outstanding leader for the national Indigenous organization in Brazil, made a speech and read the statement together with Gunnar Stålsett. (Løvold, RFN)

As such, IRI can be understood to have an inclusive focus, where working on several platforms opens for a wider representation in terms of gender. However, it seems this focus is not only important in terms of gender, but also in terms of trying to reach the laity of the different religions, and not just the leaders.

### 5.3 Action-orientation

There were several aspects tied to an action-oriented dimension that emerged in the interviews as being central for the initiative. The main findings concerning the action-oriented dimension of the initiative will be presented through four themes, namely: dialogue as social action, plan of action, narrow focus, and education.

#### 5.3.1 Dialogue as social action

In developing the initiative, some of the key partners and people were not from the religious sphere. Due to this, it makes sense that the initiative would be marked by the non-religious

actors to a large degree. The anonymous informant from one of the partnering organizations elaborates on their understanding of the initial model for the initiative:

I think the fact that Pope Francis had taken leadership in the way that he did made it possible for the Norwegians and the United Nations to see a possibility of engaging with religious groups in a way that they were familiar with doing, which was very much through what I would call a traditional intergovernmental diplomatic model of engagement. (Informant, one of the partnering organizations)

In other words, some of the partners seem to recognize a model of engagement underlying the initiative that is not primarily based on a religious understanding, but an existing diplomatic model. Placing this in an interreligious context, however, means recognizing the dialogue of the initiative to revolve around social action:

I think that what we are talking about in IRI is a thematic dialogue, or diapraxis. Diapraxis focuses on having a shared passion, and concrete plans of cooperation. Working on a concrete thematic together can make the dialogue fruitful, by having the conversations in retrospect. In this setting you can meet and work for the rainforest together, you can sweat together, and then the spiritual conversation, the dialogue, can come afterwards. This can make for a better interaction. (Tjelle, Church of Norway)

Einar Tjelle places the initiative under the model for dialogue called ‘diapraxis’. This is due to the dialogue revolving around a specific theme and that the focus is practical work. The theme(s) of this context is naturally rainforests and Indigenous peoples, and the goal is to make concrete changes concerning these. As such, the dialogue is more of a collective social action than it is a theological dialogue. Kusumita Pedersen elaborates on this:

The conventional distinction is between coming together to work on an issue that is of common concern, in this case rainforests, though it could be all kinds of things in the community. That is conventionally called cooperation. So, there is the dialogue of life, theological dialogue, and cooperation on issues, and some people will call all of this “dialogue”, which I think is very confusing. Cooperation on issues of common concern does not necessarily involve formal theological dialogue. (Pedersen, Parliament of the World’s Religions)

In other words, Pedersen distinguishes the dialogue of IRI from any sort of formal theological dialogue. She emphasizes that it is rather a cooperation on issues of common concern, in this case the rainforest issue. Through these examples, the dialogue of the initiative can be understood to be centered around a form of cooperation, or social action, - on common issues that transcend the religious, political, and national borders.

### 5.3.2 Plan of action

Throughout the interviews, a point of interest was to discover how the initiative was structured and the way in which it worked. What emerged as central, was the fact that IRI has concrete plans of action in the different national contexts. On the question of whether there is something unique about this initiative, Einar Tjelle answered:

A point of uniqueness of IRI is how it has developed in just three years. There are a lot of flops, where you might have a conference, an idea, and then nothing came of it in the end. In comparison, this is growing and has very concrete plans of action. It has created a sense of pride, and theology is changing, attitudes are changing. (Tjelle, Church of Norway)

Tjelle here partly attributes the rapid growth and success of establishing IRI to the fact that they have developed concrete plans of action. While there are many ideas, launches, and conferences centered on different issues, IRI has managed to grow beyond this initial phase. Lars Løvold further concretized the parts of the plan of action, which has been applied in all the five countries IRI is working in:

We have a kind of template for activities in IRI. Part one is education, that is within the religious and interreligious networks, on forests and Indigenous peoples. Then there is the awareness-raising for the population at large. Thirdly, there is the issue of influencing policies in these countries to become as beneficial as possible for the forests and Indigenous peoples. Lastly, there is engaging with the private actors that perhaps make money on or destroy the forests. Those elements are part of a kind of plan of action, which is presented as valid for all the countries, and upon which there has been little controversy. (Løvold, RFN)

As such, it seems the plan of action is divided into four parts; 1) education; 2) awareness raising; 3) influencing policies; and 4) influencing the private sector. Another part, establishing local chapters, was included in this plan of action by Charles McNeill:

A third point in the plan of action is establishing local chapters. We realized that what happens in the capitals is important, - that is where political and religious power often is located. However, where things are happening or not happening is undoubtedly in the local provinces. Therefore, setting up local chapters in the areas of highest deforestation by undertaking a process of consultation, engagement, and education, like was done in Oslo at the launching of IRI, is a priority. (McNeill, UNEP)

Løvold and McNeill explains how the initiative operates with a plan of action through four (five) explicit areas of work. In Løvold's words, there has been little controversy on the plan

of action, and it was applicable in all the five national contexts. As such, it emerges as an example of the practical dimension of the initiative. McNeill further elaborates:

In every country, the Advisory Councils - composed of the major religious and Indigenous leaders in the country, scientists, NGOs, the UN, etc. – are now well-established and they meet periodically and decide what to do in the five areas of the plan of action. (McNeill, UNEP)

McNeill explains that the plan of action has been introduced to all the five countries. While they are in various stages of how far they have come, the plan of action has been applied. The Advisory Councils of the countries can discuss and plan for how to best further the work and which point to focus on going forward.

### 5.3.3 Narrow focus

Bringing people of different opinions together, there must be some sort of cause to gather around. In the case of IRI, the rainforests and Indigenous peoples of the world are such a cause. The issue of rainforests, though big in terms of actual space the rainforests take up, can be understood to be quite narrow and concrete. Charles McNeill explains how he finds this cause to be uniting:

One thing I noticed early on in this initiative, is that the forest and climate issues are ones that bring all these faiths together. It is one thing they all can agree on. (McNeill, UNEP)

It seems IRI has defined a narrow enough focus for people to gather around. This perspective of having a concrete, narrow issue to gather around is also emphasized by Lars Løvold:

Something about that science-related focus on a very narrow issue, but with huge perspectives, may have contributed to it having come this far in such a relatively short amount of time. (Løvold, RFN)

In other words, Løvold points to a correlation between the growth of the initiative so far and having a narrow focus. From this issue, there are multiple bigger perspectives to draw on, but Løvold emphasizes the narrowness of the issue in itself as a positive aspect of IRI. Simon Rye brings in another dimension of having a concrete focus in terms of results:

The climate and forest agenda is more concrete than much else in climate policy, which is literally airier. It is very concrete, it is grounded, and it is about observable, concrete efforts. There is a difference between the forests being there or not, and whether the people living in them have a place to live or not. So, these are concrete things that the religious actors can engage in and see the results of. (Rye, NICFI)

Having a concrete issue to work on, makes it easier to see the results of the labor, according to Rye. This again functions to motivate, as it makes it easier to grasp why the work is important. It seems Rye is suggesting that if the focus had been a wider one, such as stopping climate change in general, the results would have been more difficult to spot, and motivation based on results more difficult to produce. Having such a narrow, concrete focus, then, is a practical aspect of IRI that functions to bring people of different faiths, opinions, and from different parts of society together. It motivates them based on results, and it opens for building on wider perspectives the different actors contribute with from their respective points of view.

#### 5.3.4 Education

Another point that emerged as a practical aspect of the initiative, was education. When asked how to concretely get people of different opinions together, Mary Evelyn Tucker said:

I think education is a big part of it. (Tucker, Yale forum on Religion and Ecology)

Education in this context would function as a channel for bringing people of different positions together. A goal from the very beginning from the initiative's side, was to get the religious actors on board by educating them in rainforests and the rainforests' impact on the climate. Simon Rye tells how this need for education was met in connection to the launch:

There was a job to be done in connecting the religious groups to the thematic of deforestation. So, we pulled some very good people into it, who have worked internationally with climate and rainforests for a long time. And we developed a course that we had in connection with the launch, call it 'rainforest for clergy'. Like a type of 'crash course', and it was amazing. (Rye, NICFI)

Having such a 'crash course' would practically function to motivate people to get involved based on a new understanding of the forests' importance for halting climate change. However, as Mary Evelyn Tucker points out, the goal is not for the education to be one-sided:

On the religious side, laity, communities, and leaders need to develop more ecological understandings of the profound connection of ecosystems such as forests, and the profound global import of them. On the other hand, the scientists and ecologists need to understand that this will not be solved without the cultural piece and the ethics piece. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

As such, the focus on education can be seen as a practical means of bringing both religious actors into the fold of environmental activism, but also to make scientists and ecologists understand that there is more to the issues than just the science. The education is to go both ways, and functions to bring people of different areas of society together. This focus on education is also present in the local contexts of the work, as McNeill explains:

Each IRI country developed a plan of action with five areas of work. One of these areas, was educating constituencies about forests and Indigenous peoples. In every country, the religious groups have educational channels, which are immense and sometimes more extensive than the governments'. They are now using these channels to educate their constituencies. (McNeill, UNEP)

Bringing in the plan of action once again, education is stated as one of the main points. This makes it a core element of the work of IRI in the local contexts. McNeill brings in how the local actors are to use the educational channels of the constituencies in the countries, which often have a wider range and the power to reach more people than the governments' channels. As such, the educational perspective makes use of existing channels to teach the importance of rainforests and their impact on the climate.

## 5.4 Religion

There were several themes that emerged that were tied to a religious dimension of sorts in IRI. The following four themes of 'nature as a place of spirituality', 'climate crisis as moral issue', 'language' and 'use of holy scriptures' were prominent in the interviews. As such, they are grouped together under 'religion, and all represent a religious dimension of the initiative.

### 5.4.1 Nature as a place of spirituality

Firstly, a theme that became apparent through the interviews, is an understanding of nature itself as a place of spirituality. This understanding of nature is that it somehow brings in or represents a spiritual dimension for people. In talking about the environmental movement, Kusumita Pedersen argued that in all religious traditions, nature can be seen to hold a special place:

We have been observing that from the beginning of the environmental movement. In all of the different faith traditions, the natural world is valued. Value is given to the natural world, and it is not only there to serve human needs. And that is true for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. (Pedersen, Parliament of the World's Religions)

According to this, then, there is a fundamental understanding of the natural world having value in all the religious traditions of the world. Nature is given a place in holy scriptures and traditions. However, Pedersen argues that the experience of nature as containing something 'sacred' is not only tied to religions and religious people:

There is a lineup of the points that the traditions agree on in environmental ethics, but also the experience of the sacred in nature. I believe, and I am not the only one of course, it is a universal experience. (Pedersen, Parliament of the World's Religions)

According to Pedersen, the experience of nature as something sacred or as a place of an experience of the sacred is universal. In that case, this sacredness of nature is accessible to all people, regardless of religious affiliation. Mary Evelyn Tucker talks similarly about the experience of the sacred in nature, and names it the 'numinous':

There is a word called the 'numinous'. Rudolf Otto, a German theologian, wrote a book called 'The idea of the Holy'. His idea is that the numinous is that which is both attractive and fearful, awe-inspiring and somewhat intimidating. Look at the Norwegians going to the North Pole, and other expeditions. It is a huge impulse in the human, which I think is interwoven with a sense of the sacred. Let us name it as that, why not. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

In other words, she connects human impulses to a sense of the sacred in nature. What this could mean, then, is that nature somehow holds a special place in terms of a universal experience of something sacred, something beyond human perception. Naming this experience as sacred means giving nature another dimension, - rather than just being a part of the known reality, there is transcendent dimension to it. Whether named religious or spiritual, it is somehow connected to a sense of the 'sacred'.

#### 5.4.2 Climate crisis as moral issue

The understanding of environmental issues underlying the initiative that became apparent throughout the interviews, was that they are *more* than just practical issues, they have an ethical side to them. In multiple interviews, the issue of deforestation was presented as a

moral issue, where working to put an end to it should be a matter of religious duty:

A key concept in IRI, as I understand it, is that it should be, a religious duty to defend this part of creation and those that live in and have historically guarded this creation. (Løvold, RFN)

In this quote, Løvold refers to the forests by using religious language, - as a central part of *creation*, which is to be defended and looked after. He also argues for the people living in the forests to be defended, as they are the ones who have lived in and tended for these forests through history. McNeill further drives the point that the ethical perspective is the one through which IRI wants to mobilize people:

Rather than mobilizing people based only on political activism or personal commitment, the intent was to mobilize people on a spiritual, moral, and ethical level. Working on these issues from that perspective motivates the activism from a powerful sense of justice and what is right. (McNeill, UNEP)

This means that while there are certainly other motivations for caring about the environment and working to protect it, the perspective of deforestation as a moral, ethical issue is the one that IRI emphasizes. In McNeill's words, working on deforestation and environmental issues is, in fact, a case of justice; what is right. Tucker elaborates on this point, as she explains the consequences of defining the issue as an ethical one:

There is nothing abstract about the issue at hand, nor is it negative. The deforestation is, but if we can elevate the spiritual dimension of the forest, then we have this possibility of, I like to say: a change of consciousness and conscience. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

What comes across, then, is that IRI's understanding of deforestation is that it is a moral, ethical issue. When this is conveyed, it creates opportunities to mobilize people on a religious or spiritual level. The understanding of environmental issues, and more concretely deforestation, as moral issues will necessarily result in a change in consciousness and conscience, where it becomes a matter of right and wrong.



### 5.4.3 Religious and secular language

I specifically asked the interviewees about the language of the initiative<sup>9</sup>. Defining and naming this initiative as interfaith with definitive focus on the religious aspect, language is central. On answering whether there was a perceived separation between the ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ actors of the initiative, Marianne Bruusgaard added about language:

The initiative wants to pull at the religious and spiritual narratives of the "wonder of nature" and the urgency for humankind to preserve the remaining rainforests (*The Creation*), rather than pulling the religious actors into the political narratives. (Bruusgaard, NICFI)

In other words, IRI is interested in using religious language to define the issue as an ethical one, and to mobilize people. As Bruusgaard expresses, the religious narratives are the point of focus. She herself refers to the natural world as *The Creation* in this context. While it would be easy to ‘fall into’ existing scientific and political narratives, much focus is put on avoiding this, and creating a new, religious platform. However, this does not mean that the language is strictly religious. On the language of the initiative, Einar Tjelle said:

I think the initiative is multilingualistic. The language varies with the theme and setting. When we have our work-related meetings, the language is perhaps more human rights related, with environmental jargon. However, one of the main points here is to make use of the resources that the different religious and Indigenous groupings have, and those are often very spiritual and religious. (Tjelle, Church of Norway)

While the language might be situation-based and vary depending on who is present and what the agenda is, the religious focus and language is still central for the initiative and manifests itself throughout the levels. For example, while the agenda for the Global Steering Committee might be more on the political side of things, - discussing strategies, advising countries, and so forth, there is room for the religious as well. Marianne Bruusgaard gives an example:

Global Steering Committee meetings often begin with one of the members holding a prayer from a faith tradition. This gives the interreligious aspect depth as well as adding a sense of a more spiritual purpose. (Bruusgaard, NICFI)

As seen through Bruusgaard’s example, religion being the focus when initiating the meetings serves to give it a spiritual purpose. When talking about interreligious dialogue, Simon Rye

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<sup>9</sup> See question 10 under ‘Interfaith Rainforest Initiative’ in the interview guide, Appendix 1

explains how he has perceived the communication to be at its best is when the different languages of the participants meet at a ‘deeper level’:

Part of what I think has been completely fascinating in some of these contexts, is that where the communication seems to work well is in moments of an almost “deep-ecological”, common recognition. This is given representation and language in different ways by the participants, but there is a sense of meeting in the deep end. (Rye, NICFI)

This demonstrates the central place of language, as well as the link between language and ecology. This once again speaks to the environment as having an ethical/moral dimension, expressed differently through the languages of the actors. Despite expressed through different languages, there is according to Rye, a ‘deeper level’ of common recognition, where people can communicate and understand one another.

#### 5.4.4 Use of holy scriptures

One of the clearest expressed religious aspects of IRI, is the online resources in the form of ‘toolkits’<sup>10</sup> for different religions. These ‘toolkits’ function as resources for the religious actors, to explain how one can understand the environment, and forests, in the traditions and holy scriptures of the different religions. Einar Tjelle explains how using the different resources of religions can motivate to care for the environment:

One of the main points of the initiative is to make use of the resources that the different religious and Indigenous groupings have. These are often very spiritual and religious. If you visit the website you will find ‘toolkits’, and those are precisely religiously rooted. For example, they focus on how a Buddhist could get guidance to reflect on forest preservation, which stories from their tradition are usable. (Tjelle, Church of Norway)

As such, different stories from the different religions can speak on the same subject, somehow tell a similar tale, and harvest a collective response from the different groups. GreenFaith played a central role in developing these ‘toolkits’, and the anonymous informant from one of the partnering organizations explains how these were developed to mobilize religious groups:

GreenFaith played a very large role in developing the resources, because they know and believe that to get religious groups involved, you need to give them some spiritual and religious tools and language to work with. They were developed by consulting within their own team and with experts and partners in

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/faith-toolkits/>

several different regions. The content was assembled, reviewed, and edited. (Informant, one of the partnering organizations)

The informant mentions consulting with experts and partners to develop the online resources. One of the partners involved in developing them, was Yale forum on Religion and Ecology. Mary Evelyn Tucker explains how their longstanding research on religion and Indigenous spirituality helped them in contributing to the resources:

GreenFaith led the work in collecting the material for the ‘toolkits’, but we were very much involved in overseeing it and contributing to them, as we have been doing a lot of publishing in this area for many years. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

This shows the substance behind the development of the ‘toolkits’. The kits being developed by people and organizations that have researched, worked with, and consist of the different religious actors for years, testifies to a substantial expertise. Gunnar Stålsett furthermore goes into detail about the magnitude of the resources and their intended purpose:

In collaboration with professionals in many countries, manuals, pedagogical literature for guidance, and resources for priests, imams and other relevant religious leaders have been produced for educational purposes and preaching. All of this in the main languages of the different countries (Stålsett, 2020, p. 347).

Producing the resources in the languages of the different countries, makes them more available to the people living and working in these countries. As Stålsett explains, the purpose is an educational one. This is not only meant for an education in environmental issues, but also an education in the scriptures of the different traditions, what they say about the environment, and how one can interpret this.

## 5.5 Challenges

A fifth point of interest in the case of IRI, is the challenges the initiative faces. There were several challenges brought to light by the interviewees, and they have here been divided into two main categories: religious challenges and practical challenges. These are challenges that the initiative has faced already, and that the interviewees predict it will face in the future.

### 5.5.1 Religious challenges

There were several challenges relating to the religious dimension of the initiative. These revolved around which groups are included, how they are included, how to define groups and terms, how to avoid bringing in other agendas, and who really owns the initiative. The challenges relating to the religious dimension will be presented through six themes followingly.

#### *Diversity*

One of the challenges that was introduced in the interviews, was a challenge relating to diversity. A problem with trying to include all, is to find a language that speaks to all the different religions and actors. There is a difficulty in managing to be inclusive, as the groups will vary in beliefs, opinions, and political stands. Charles McNeill brings in an example from Brazil:

Brazil has countless evangelical groups, which span the political spectrum from very progressive to very conservative. IRI needs to locate itself somewhere in the middle so that we do not lose the support and engagement of the progressives or the conservatives. (McNeill, UNEP)

McNeill talks about the struggle of positioning the initiative so that it is able to reach not only certain groups, but all. To find a middle ground in between roads that diverge to a large degree. Building on this, Lars Løvold further elaborates on the challenge of diversity in terms of including groups that are not necessarily interfaith:

There is a challenge in engaging churches that are not *interfaith*, but *faith*. This is something we have started to discuss in the steering committee; how can episcopal churches, or church denominations that act purely as church denominations, but that are inspired by this thematic, how can they get a meaningful role. (Løvold, RFN)

In other words, there is an ongoing discussion in IRI on how to open for church denominations who do not share the interreligious focus, but who share an interest in the thematic. If the position of IRI is to be fully inclusive, this discussion is important in terms of aiming broad enough to reach the groups that are not centered around the middle. In addition, Lars Løvold brings in that the challenge is also for the initiative to find a way to expand the work to other interested parties:

A positive challenge is that we have been approached by people from Papua New-Guinea and Myanmar that wants to join. There are not enough resources in the system right now for more than the five pilot countries, which cover around 70 %, of the total remaining rainforest. Yet it is still clear that it is a positive challenge that more people want to join. (Løvold, RFN)

So, it would seem the challenge in terms of diversity is multifaceted: how to find a middle ground to be relevant for groups spanning the political spectrum; how to engage the church denominations that are preoccupied with *faith* rather than *interfaith*; and how to expand the initiative to include interested groups and people from other contexts into the work.

### *Equality*

While a central goal of IRI is to have Indigenous peoples participate on equal terms with the other religious actors, the interviews revealed that this is, and has been, a challenge. Gunnar Stålsett (2020) explains how this was present from the very beginning:

The unstable factor which was there beneath the surface, and which would follow us through the next two years in the establishment of the national structures, was the religious leaders' skepticism to recognize the religious identity of the Indigenous peoples. (Stålsett, 2020, p. 346)

In other words, the Indigenous peoples were not understood to be equal in terms of religious identity. Lars Løvold elaborates on this unequal view of spirituality and religion with a concrete example from Indonesia:

Along the way, a difficult point has been the recognition of the spirituality of Indigenous peoples as equal to religion, that is, equal to the recognized or accepted or official religions. This is something we have encountered particularly in Indonesia, where you have these officially recognized religions, and where it is no easy task to recognize these forest peoples' "paganism" as an equal religion. (Løvold, RFN)

In this example, the struggle to accept Indigenous spirituality is also linked to politics, as there are a restricted number of religions that are officially recognized. While the previous two quotes are from the perspective of the religious leaders' point of view, with them not accepting the Indigenous peoples, the challenge has also been present from the Indigenous peoples' side. Bruusgaard explains:

Ensuring the full involvement of Indigenous peoples has been a challenge in several of the partner countries. We have seen a lack of trust between Indigenous groups and the religious actors, and the initiative has had to facilitate negotiations to ensure a trust between these actors. Nevertheless, it has turned out that the rainforest issue is perceived so important for both sides that it has been possible to set old lines of conflict on hold in order to enter into a dialogue and a cooperation on this issue. (Bruusgaard, NICFI)

In other words, there has also been a challenge of distrust from the Indigenous peoples' side on whether they really are included as equal partners or not. As such, the challenge of achieving true equality for IRI is two-sided; 1) getting Indigenous spirituality recognized as equal to other religions; and 2) ensuring mutual trust between Indigenous peoples and the religious actors.

### *Religion versus spirituality*

Another challenge the initiative faces, is which terms to use, and how these are to be understood. Gunnar Stålsett (2020) explains how this was a discussion from the very beginning:

The term 'religion' also needed clarification. For some, it was more desirable to use the term 'faith'. (Stålsett, 2020, p. 346)

Which term to use is an important discussion to have in order for people to feel comfortable and included in the initiative. The fact that terms such as religion, faith, and spirituality have multiple existing definitions, makes it hard to choose a term that feels inclusive enough and that is widely understood in the same way. Kusumita Pedersen furthermore problematizes the divide between religion and Indigenous spirituality:

There is one problem that I have always seen in the way this all works, and I am not sure how to talk about it, or how to solve it. Because, when you have this kind of thinking: that you have scientists, you have religion, and then you have Indigenous people, it skews people's thinking. There is an idea that the Indigenous participation is not about their religion. But it is. You even start to have locutions like Indigenous "spirituality" instead of Indigenous "religion". (Pedersen, Parliament of the World's Religions)

In other words, having Indigenous peoples and their spirituality as a category of their own somehow creates a division between them and the other religious actors. For Pedersen, this is the wrong image to get across, as the Indigenous peoples' spirituality is not understood as

religion, which it should be. Mary Evelyn Tucker also touched up on the spirituality of Indigenous peoples, and added that this spirituality is not well understood by other actors:

I think there is probably a spectrum from political advocacy and more secular language, and what I would call a more spiritual ecology for Indigenous peoples. Their cosmology, their ecocosmology, and their worldviews. They infuse everything they do with the force in the forest and their lifeway in their forest. This particular ecocosmology is not well understood, even amongst the other religions in the different countries. I think this dimension that we would call the ecocosmology, especially of Indigenous peoples, is still not well understood by other religions. Perhaps it is not fully understood by the political groups either, much less the business groups. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

As such, there is a challenge in which terms to use, how to define them, how to include Indigenous spirituality as religion, and how to make the different groups understand this spirituality.

*'Extremists or fundamentalists' – drawing the line*

In having an inclusive agenda, where a goal is to speak to an as broad diversity of the world's religions as possible, there are several challenges to address. Charles McNeill explains how this is a point of discussion in IRI:

Serious violations of human rights and environmental laws are happening every day around the world, nationally and locally, so IRI needs to find an appropriate way to decide where, when and how to take a stand against these violations. IRI is exploring under what conditions must all the IRI Global Steering Committee members reach a full consensus before taking a stand and acting, and when can some members of the coalition take a position and intervene without necessarily bringing the whole group with them. (McNeill, UNEP)

In other words, while the partners of IRI might want to take a stand in certain cases and speak out on what they perceive as wrong, there is an issue with this happening through the platform of IRI. The question then becomes whether there is a way for some members to intervene from their own respective organizations, or, as the anonymous informant from one of the partnering organizations brings in, whether one should rethink the inclusive profile of the initiative:

My organization's theory of change is that you need to define a religiously progressive perspective and work to engage religious progressives and moderates around that, and then to find ways either to neutralize or to draw very clear distinctions with religious extremists or fundamentalists. Right up until now, IRI has tried to engage absolutely everybody, and I do not think you can do that. This is an understandable instinct. Nonetheless, I think the positioning of the initiative is very important. (Informant, one of the partnering organizations)

In other words, in dealing with extremists or fundamentalists, the informant argues the initiative should find a way to draw the line between the initiative and these groups. While the instinct to include everybody is natural, the informant questions whether this is doable in practice. Furthermore, they bring in how the environmental issues are particularly polarizing in facing these groups:

Around the world, religious extremists and fundamentalists are very powerful, and almost always opposed to strong action on climate change. They often also have strong relationships with extractive industries and authoritarian governments. In those cases, this initiative has the potential to be polarizing. I think that the UN, understandably, is working hard not to make it polarizing, but I think one must be honest and say that fundamentalist religious groups are a huge part of the problem. (Informant, one of the partnering organizations)

In other words, the problem with some of these fundamentalist groups is not only that one takes an issue with other opinions and practices that they might have, but that they in fact are often linked to businesses and governments that are part of the problem, causing deforestation. A challenge going forward is, as the informant expresses, to know where to draw the line and distance the initiative from certain groups and their practices.

#### *Other agendas*

The inclusion of diverse groups in the Advisory Councils opens for yet another challenge. This challenge is found in keeping deforestation and the concrete work the focus of the initiative. On this, Lars Løvold said:

One risk we have identified in the composition of the advisory councils is that if this becomes a very important religious matter, the engagement may also divert into its own separate path. And become, in our eyes, or perhaps objectively, in the long run, counterproductive. (Løvold, RFN)

In other words, Løvold raises a concern that if the religious aspect of the initiative takes up too much of the space, there is a challenge in the focus getting sidetracked somehow. If relying only on the religious aspect of, and religious actors in, this issue, other aspects and



important voices partaking might get pushed to the side. Another side to this challenge, is the initiative becoming a platform for the other ambitions and agendas of the groups involved.

Simon Rye explains:

There could be a question of the initiative becoming a platform for some of the religious actors' own agendas. This has not been a challenge so far, but it could possibly become a discussion at a later point. (Rye, NICFI)

Coming from different organizations and religious denominations, the groups involved are certain to differ when it comes to ambitions and goals. If these other ambitions are given too much space, there is a possibility for the issue at hand getting sidetracked. In addition, this could cause disagreement and quarrels internally in the initiative, as other groups will take an issue with some groups' ambitions taking up space and leading the initiative. Rye also brings in a last perspective on other agendas taking up space in IRI:

IRI could become a place for other grievances, which must be recognized and are also important, but which one cannot handle in this initiative. One must collectively try to decide on and recognize what can be handled here, and what cannot be handled here. (Rye, NICFI)

There is little doubt that the groups involved disagree with each other in other matters, both historically and present. Rye argues, then, that one must be careful not to bring in these grievances of the past in as a part of this initiative. There is only a certain number of issues the initiative is equipped to handle, and so for it to be effective on those, one must leave other issues at the door. According to Rye, there lies a challenge in deciding which grievances and issues to handle, so that it is explicit what can be brought into the platform, and what stays on the outside.

### *Ownership*

The last challenge the interviewees brought up regarding the religious aspects of the initiative, is the question of ownership. In the initiative, there are big, global actors, like the UN. While this creates a unique platform with greater opportunities, the goal of the initiative is not for the UN to be in charge. Charles McNeill elaborates:

In the next phase, I believe UNEP's job will be even more focused on providing secretariat functions, implementing the will of the Global Steering Committee. We have been more active in this pilot phase in terms of oversight and strategy, guided by the steering committee. This is something we are working on, shifting more and more responsibility to the interfaith partners. (McNeill, UNEP)

McNeill sees a challenge going forward in shifting the responsibility and leadership over to the interfaith partners of the initiative. While UNEP has had more of a leadership role thus far, this is not the goal going forward. This concern is also raised by Lars Løvold, who is eager for the religious actors to step up and take more responsibility:

Since it is an interreligious initiative, it is important that the religious actors are central. They should have the dominant voice; they are meant to be on the frontline. This is one of the things we are discussing now in connection with a renewed application for 2021-25. It has been a bit like this: they were deeply involved in the beginning and in the development of the idea, but then they have become more peripheral in the rollout of the initiative. What we discuss a lot is how to have a structure of government that actually anchors a lot of the discussion and decisions with the religious actors. (Løvold, RFN)

The clear goal, as expressed by Løvold, is for the religious actors to be on the frontline of the initiative. While Løvold calls for the religious actors to step up and claim leadership, he also brings to light that this must happen through a development of the structure of government in IRI. The challenge and question of ownership was also touched upon by Simon Rye, who said:

One other challenge of a more internal nature is the question of ownership. This is a UN-initiative and Norway is involved with financial support, but we are not supposed to run or own it. It has to be owned and run by the religious partners. There is a fine balance between the UN organization and brand on the one side, and the religious partners' ownership of the initiative on the other. (Rye, NICFI)

Through this, one can understand that there is an ongoing discussion when it comes to ownership, and how this is to play out in practice. While the funding lies with the Norwegian government for the time being, and the UN has provided a platform and leadership in the developmental phase, the goal is for the religious actors to run IRI. However, as Rye says, this is a fine balance, as the initiative will keep getting funds from Norway, and keep the UN brand and platform.

### 5.5.2 Practical challenges

In doing work in different countries, there are bound to be practical challenges. While there were several practical challenges raised in the interviews, a selection of three of these will be introduced here, namely: funding, political challenges, and challenges relating to the interdisciplinary work of the initiative. A noteworthy challenge that is not included below, is Covid-19. As the initiative works in five different countries, the prohibition of travelling, as well as meeting and building relationships digitally was raised as a challenge by several interviewees. However, seeing as this challenge is of a more temporary nature, it will not be further elaborated on here.

#### *Funding*

A challenge brought up by several of the interviewees, was funding. At this point, the funding of IRI comes solely from one place, as explained by Lars Løvold:

The funding comes solely from Norway. And, of course, we have talked about getting a broader funding base. (Løvold, RFN)

The fact that Norway is the only funder of the initiative so far is a challenge in two ways. Firstly, as Einar Tjelle brings up, there is the challenge of possible changes in government:

The funder is to a big degree Norway. I do not have the sums off the top of my head, but the sums are relatively large. This is a bit vulnerable considering any changes in government. (Tjelle, Church of Norway)

In other words, a change in government might mean a change in the sums of money supplied in funding this initiative and similar work. The initiative then becomes highly tied to which line of politics Norway assumes, which might vary with every change in government. However, the challenge of having only Norway as the funder could also be problematic because of its possible political implications. Marianne Bruusgaard explains:

There is an inherent risk of unwanted politicization due to the nature of this work, where religion meets politics. Religious and local ownership are important for the initiative's legitimacy, while at the same time the ownership of UN Environment must be maintained at a certain level to avoid any reputational problems for the international community and the donors. (Bruusgaard, NICFI)

In this way, actions that might take on a critical stand to the politics of different countries could be understood as a representation of the position of international communities and donors, and as such be damaging for international relations. Through these points, we understand funding to be a practical challenge of the initiative both from IRI's side and from the donor's side. Still, as Løvold brings to light, there are ongoing talks on how to acquire a broader base of funding.

### *Political*

Connected to the challenge on the issue of funding, is the political aspect. The political challenges IRI faces are multifaceted. On the one hand, the thematic of deforestation and Indigenous' rights are sensitive issues in some of the national contexts:

This thematic can be very sensitive in some countries, and there may be political circumstances that require sensitivity in planning and implementation. (Rye, NICFI)

As such, due to the thematic being of sensitive nature politically in some of the national contexts, there is a challenge for the initiative in how to plan and work. Another aspect of the political challenges IRI faces connected to political sensitivity, is being suspected of being involved in the politics of the different countries. Charles McNeill gives an example from one of the countries:

In Indonesia, a high-level public launch of IRI was organized but we encountered a political problem. There was a concern that certain religious leaders might use IRI for political purposes to oppose the government just before an election. As a result, we had to withdraw the formal association of IRI, the UN, and Norway at the last minute to avoid being suspected of intervening in the politics of the country. (McNeill, UNEP)

Seeing as religion in many of these contexts can be seen to be intertwined with the politics of the countries, there is a challenge in navigating through this intersection without getting too involved on the political side of things. Mary Evelyn Tucker elaborates on this, as she brings in the presence of politics as a constant factor, as well as the challenge in the initiative's connection to the UN and Norway:

I think there is so much politics, as there is everywhere. The unknown politics, the manifest and the unmanifest politics, or power-struggles and hierarchies, - that is always going to be there. That is true on the ground, and it is very much true at the UN, and how UNEP plays into this, how the Norwegians play into this. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

In other words, having actors from governments and intergovernmental organizations will affect how politics play into the initiative. In some ways, this complicates the picture, as these actors are bound by other rules and politics than the religious actors are. However, this also provides a larger platform for the initiative. In other words, there are politics present everywhere. A challenge is then found in navigating the politics of the countries, the politics and position of the initiative, and the actors' own agendas.

#### *Collaboration between religious and non-religious actors*

The interdisciplinary character of IRI is one of its unique attributes and gives room for a more extensive range. While this could be considered a strength of the initiative, there are also challenges connected to working across disciplines and organizations. Simon Rye elaborates:

Developing and working with this initiative, which is a bit 'outside the box' has required developing new working relationships. These are a group of actors we from the ministry of Climate and the Environment have not worked with before. This probably also goes for the Rainforest Foundation, as they had not worked with a lot of religious actors previously, apart from Indigenous groups. (Rye, NICFI)

Developing working relationships with a new group of actors will undoubtedly demand a good deal of work, and a willingness to step outside one's own professional comfort zone. This not only goes for how to structure the initiative, but also in what ways the work plays out. The anonymous informant explains:

My organization is accustomed to faith-based and multisector activism, where we identify what the goal of the campaign is, what the target is, and how we are going to put pressure on that target. That has not been the focus here to a large degree. It has been more about 'how do we show up and have a presence at this or that intergovernmental meeting'. That is what I mean when I say that the United Nations' culture has had a very substantial influence on the way that the meetings function. (Informant, one of the partnering organizations)

As such, the different ways the actors are used to working does not necessarily complement each other, and a challenge is found in agreeing on what kind of work to emphasize. The anonymous informant's answer leads us to understand that from some actors' side, the

branding of the United Nations is not necessarily only a strength, but also a challenge. In addition, there is a possible challenge in the sense of there not being mutual respect for each other's disciplines in this setting:

A lot of scientists have said, 'Mary Evelyn and John [Grim], bring onboard the religions, because we need them'. It is very instrumental and shows little respect for religions. For the most part, the science community and others have little understanding of religion, and now they want to bring them onboard because 'we scientists have the truth'. That is not mutual understanding, and it creates distrust and antagonism. (Tucker, Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology)

It is important to experience a sense of mutual respect and understanding in settings where actors from different disciplines are working together. There is something to be said for acknowledging the importance of what each actor brings to the table. If this is not experienced, as Tucker explains, this might lead the work to be contra productive, in that it results in distrust and antagonism. As such, the interdisciplinary nature of the initiative is not merely a strength, there are also possible challenges connected to it.

## 5.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the main findings of the interviews have been presented. These findings relate to the research question of 'how can one approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue'. The main findings were grouped together under four discovered dimensions of IRI, namely: reach, inclusivity, action-orientation, and religion.

Reach speaks to the range of the initiative, and presents itself through four themes: practical reach, religious reach, political reach, and interdisciplinary reach. Through these themes, one can understand IRI to reach people of various countries, religions, and disciplines, as well as having the possibility of influencing policy.

Inclusivity speaks to the dimension of IRI that centers around opening the initiative for all groups to take part. This dimension is visible through the clear Indigenous focus, the value of and focus on genuineness, the creation of an open space for authentic dialogue, and the inclusion of women and laity.

The action-oriented dimension of the initiative speaks to a clear focus on practical action and is visible through the expression of dialogue as social action, the development of a

plan of action to be applied in the context of the countries, the narrow and concrete focus of the initiative, and a focus on education.

Religion is clearly visible in IRI through four themes. These are: 1) the experience of the sacred in nature and its value in the different religions; 2) the expression of the climate crisis as a moral issue; 3) the language and narratives the initiative leans on, and; 4) the use of holy scriptures in the online ‘toolkits’.

Lastly, challenges the initiative has faced or possibly will face going forward has been presented. These have been grouped together in two categories, namely religious challenges, and practical challenges. The religious challenges include achieving diversity and equality, which terms to use and the implications of these, extreme groupings and how to deal with or relate to them, other agendas becoming the focus, and the question of ownership. Practical challenges include the question of funding, the political side of the initiative both internally and externally, and the challenge of establishing new working relationships between religious and non-religious actors.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

In this chapter, I will discuss the main findings of the study in relation to existing models of interreligious dialogue and theory on religion and ecology. My principal research question was:

*How can one approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue?*

Chapter 5 introduced four main dimensions of the initiative discovered; namely reach, action-orientation, inclusivity, and religion. These four dimensions represent different ways in which the initiative engages in interreligious dialogue and approaches the environmental issue of deforestation. My aim in this chapter is to discuss the connection between religion and ecology, and whether existing models for interreligious dialogue can be applied to the example of IRI.

Firstly, religion and ecology will be looked at. This entails the relationship between religion and spirituality in the context of nature and ecology, and the relationship between religion and nature, with examples of this discovered through the interviews. Secondly, models for interreligious dialogue will be discussed. This discussion will entail a look at the relationship with the ‘religious other’, what kind of conversation is found in IRI, the language of the initiative, and a discussion of the action-oriented models presented previously. In addition, the relationship and tension between collective action and activism will be introduced and discussed.

### 6.1 Religion and ecology

To be able to say something about the way in which one can approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue, it is natural to discuss the connection between religion and ecology. This will be done by firstly looking at the relationship between religion and spirituality. Following this, statements from the interviews that suggest some form of connection between religion and ecology will be discussed by leaning on the theory introduced in chapter 3.3. As this study is not primarily a theological discussion, the theological implications will only be surface-level observations and discussed in short, based on the included theoretical perspectives.



### 6.1.1 Religion and spirituality

Due to religious groups being vastly different in their beliefs and their ways of life, there is a problem with finding an all-encompassing definition of religion that speaks to them all. Some groups will relate to being called spiritual, but not religious. As in the case of religion, spirituality is equally difficult to define. In the case of IRI, Mary Evelyn Tucker brings in the lack of understanding of Indigenous spirituality and their ecocosmology. The ecocosmology Tucker references can be understood in terms of Grim's argument of Indigenous knowledge as being directly tied to the natural world (Grim, 2006, p. 284). The link between nature and spirituality is also included in Gottlieb's definition, in terms of a loving connection to the natural world (Gottlieb, 2013, p. 8). Through this, we understand Indigenous spirituality or religion to be closely connected to the environment. As seen through Kusumita Pedersen's interview, one can also understand nature to be valued and present in all of the religions of the world. However, the aspect of nature is seldom explicitly expressed in definitions on religion. As the connection between spirituality, religion, and nature seems to be of central importance in the intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues, it seems a revision of terms is needed.

However, understanding Indigenous spirituality and providing a definition of religion is not the only aspects of the problem in relation to these terms. We also encounter a problem when setting these up against each other, to represent different groups. As presented by Kusumita Pedersen in the interviews, the division between Indigenous peoples on the one hand and the religious actors on the other creates an image of the Indigenous participation not being about religion. As such, we see that defining one group as spiritual rather than religious can mean it not being recognized in the same manner as other religious groups. This could make for an unbalanced relation in power, as one category is given more significance than the other. In the case of IRI, this would mean that the expressed goal of having Indigenous peoples' as equal partners would be more difficult to achieve, seeing as they might not be perceived to be on the same level as other religious groups.

Yet, elevating spiritual groups into the term of religion would mean that providing a new definition is necessary. For instance, relying on a definition that includes an aspect of 'institution' will not be applicable for groups that are not organized or that gather in a specific location for worship. Defining the term of religion too narrowly and specific will be limiting in terms of which groups 'qualify', but defining the term too broadly will perhaps mean including groups that are, in theory, not religious at all. As the example from Gottlieb

presented earlier demonstrates, one can have a belief in God but not adhere to any specific religion. In addition, one can be spiritual and find inspiration and truth in sacred scriptures across the different traditions (Gottlieb, 2013, p. 82). It seems clear that these terms need to be further discussed and reconstructed based on the diversity of convictions and practices. Through looking at these issues, it seems to me that in the context of interreligious dialogue on environmental issues, a definition of religion which includes spiritual groups, Indigenous and others, is called for.

### 6.1.2 Religion and nature

While this study might not be able to provide new definitions of the two terms, it can bring to light and discuss three points of how religion appears in ecological challenges discovered through looking at the example of IRI. These are: 1) the experience of sacred in nature; 2) nature's inherent value; and 3) the role of holy scriptures.

#### *Experience of sacred in nature*

Throughout the interviews, there seemed to be an expressed consensus that religion and ecology has a natural connection through three main aspects. The first point is the experience of the sacred in nature. Mary Evelyn Tucker names this experience the 'numinous' and draws the connection between the human impulse to experience nature, and a sense of something sacred. This experience of something sacred seems to be a universal experience, regardless of whether one adheres to a religion or not. To be overwhelmed by nature and simultaneously experience a sense of something greater than humanity seems easy to place within the religious domain. As the religious domain is a place where one has the language for such an experience, and even an answer to what this something 'greater' is, the experience can be named as 'sacred'. This does not mean, however, that people will necessarily become religious after having such an experience of nature. This also does not mean people will even recognize their experience to be a religious one. The experience might be perceived as just a sense of how small man is in the bigger picture of the universe. However, it does point towards a connection between nature and a sense of 'something greater', which many again would name to be 'sacred' or religious.

### *Nature's inherent value*

While the experience of something sacred through nature might be universal and not necessarily explicitly religious, there is another side of this which is expressly connected to religion. This is the point of nature being ascribed value through the different religious traditions. In the theory chapter, the ascription of value to nature was connected to what we understand as *religious ecologies*. This is whereby humans undertake specific practices of nurturing and transforming self and community in a cosmological context that regards nature as inherently valuable (Tucker & Grim, 2017, p. 8). As mentioned, Kusumita Pedersen brought to light in her interview that through the environmental movement, one has observed that different traditions have, in fact, always ascribed a sense of value to the natural world. This expresses a view of nature as having a natural place of importance in the different religious traditions of the world, which provides a reason to care about the climate crisis and environmental issues.

While Pedersen connects the natural world to the ascription of value in religions, we have seen through the theory of Lynn White that this is not necessarily an established truth. Or rather, this sense of value can also be in terms of utility, - what the nature can provide humans with, regardless of what happens to nature itself. As such, it does not necessarily imply the view of nature being inherently valuable in itself. As expressed by the anonymous informant from one of the partnering organizations, some religious groupings, namely fundamentalists and extremists, are even the ones that pose a major challenge in terms of halting the deforestation and climate crisis. Through this, we understand that the connection between religion and ecology is not necessarily one that ascribes nature value in terms of it needing to be protected. Sometimes religious groups make for a large part of the problem when it comes to caring for and taking action on environmental issues. Perhaps the different understandings of religious groups can be seen to play into people's existing understandings of humanity's place in the world. However, as Willis Jenkins put it, "ecological questions have become entangled with questions about what it means to be human and how to live well, about where the living world has come from and where it is going, and why" (Jenkins, 2017, p. 31). Religion is still a domain to which people turn for answers to questions such as these. As such, ecological questions have become tied to a search for meaning, and through this we find a natural connection to religion and the religious sphere.

### *Holy Scriptures*

The final aspect of the connection between religion and ecology seen through the interviews, is nature's presence in the holy scriptures of different traditions. Drawing on this connection, IRI has developed 'toolkits' for several different religious traditions, where they ground care for the environment, more specifically forests, in holy scriptures, stories, traditions, and writings. Einar Tjelle introduced that the focus of these toolkits, is for people of different religions to be able to reflect on forest preservation based on stories from their religious traditions. In other words, there are stories, writings and values in the different religious traditions that can be understood to say something about the way in which humans should care for nature and forests. However, once again drawing on Lynn White's example from Genesis 1, we see that there are other competing stories, writings and values also found in scriptures of religious traditions that can be interpreted to promote more anthropocentric worldviews. Pope Francis in his Encyclical contests the anthropocentric understanding of Genesis 1 through both referencing other verses of the Bible, as well as through theologically explaining how humans' right to 'subdue' the earth was revoked after the Fall of Man.

Through this, we can understand there to be an ambiguity in holy scriptures in relation to the environment. Still, once again, the fact that environmental questions are linked to existential questions point in the direction of religion as a domain for answers. The fact that there are several stories and writings in the holy scriptures connected to nature to begin with, suggests that reflections on nature has always played an important part for humanity. Through this, the connection between religion and nature seems apparent, even if what this connection entails differs with positions and stands of religious groups and their interpretations of scripture in relation to the environment.

### **6.2 Models of interreligious dialogue**

To understand how one approaches environmental issues through the interreligious dialogue of IRI, one firstly must look at what kind of interreligious dialogue this is an example of. In this section, I want to discuss whether existing models of interreligious dialogue are applicable in the case of IRI. Firstly, the perspectives of how to relate to the 'religious other' and what type of conversation we find in IRI will be examined. Following this, the language of the initiative and what this implies will be looked at. Finally, a selection of the models seemingly most relevant for the case of IRI will be discussed in light of my findings.

Relying on Knitter’s definition of interreligious social action as “any activity with which human beings seek to resolve what obstructs and promote what advances, human and environmental flourishing” (Knitter, 2013, p. 133), we can understand IRI to practice such social action. As such, the models that speak to a dialogue in the form of action/social action are the ones that seemingly are most applicable. The action-oriented models introduced in chapter 3.2.2 are *diapaxis*, *the dialogue of action*, and *the activist model of dialogue*. These will be applied to the concrete examples and quotes from the interviews.

### 6.2.1 Relating to ‘the other’

In the question of how we can understand the religious partners of IRI to see the ‘religious other’ and their reasoning for partaking in dialogue, the ethical-practical bridge seems suitable. As introduced, the ethical-practical bridge emphasizes the needs and sufferings affecting all of humanity and the earth as a common concern (Knitter, 2002, pp. 112-113). Seeing as IRI arose as a response to the pressing issue of deforestation and safeguarding Indigenous peoples, the needs and sufferings of both humanity and the earth is laying the grounds for this dialogue. As we have seen through the interviews, this is emphasized as being of common concern, and more concretely of religious concern. Lars Løvold expressed that, in fact, the key concept of the initiative is that defending the forests and the people living in and of them should be a religious duty.

If the participants of the dialogue can be said to use an ethical-practical bridge in dealing with other religious actors, this would imply that the view of the ‘religious other’ in the initiative is a view of many true religions being called to dialogue. This would mean that no one religion is ‘more right’ than another, and the conversation is between actors of equal importance and truth. The way in which IRI focuses on an authentic, genuine conversation, where each actor can be open about their position, and where the focus is not on identifying commonalities, seem to play into this. The anonymous informant’s perspective of celebrating and engaging seriously around the distinctiveness of each religion’s approach implies each religion as having distinct and valuable inputs. As such, all of them can be seen to hold a piece of the ‘truth’ in relation to environmental issues and how to solve them. They are then called to dialogue, where their unique approaches are valued and celebrated in a common effort to end deforestation and safeguard Indigenous peoples.

### 6.2.2 Type of conversation

A question is further which type of dialogue IRI is an example of. As seen earlier, Leirvik (2014) distinguishes between spiritual dialogues and necessary dialogues. The distinction between these, can be seen in terms of motivation. While spiritual dialogues are based on personal motivation and an expectation or wish to learn from the other, necessary dialogue, is: “driven by a sociopolitical need to prevent or reduce religion-related conflict in society, by fostering peaceful interaction between representatives of different religious groups” (Leirvik, 2014, pp. 17-18). In other words, there is a question of whether the dialogue is inwardly or outwardly focused.

The common concern from which IRI developed seems to testify to its outwardly focus. While not explicitly focused on reducing religion-related conflict, IRI is focused on bringing representatives of religious groups together to face a common threat of external nature. Still, there is an element of personal motivation, wherein the religious actors involved in the dialogue have a wish to learn from each other. The anonymous informant brought in the need for a genuine curiosity about teachings of other religions as a core value of interreligious work. Furthermore, Einar Tjelle explained how the work of IRI already has created a sense of pride, along with changing theologies and attitudes. However, this ‘personal’ motivation is expressed more as part of the actual dialogue and its results, rather than the preliminary motivation for the dialogue. The preliminary motivation is, in this case, the shared concern of deforestation. As such, there can be said to be a span from a more outwardly relating dialogue to a more inwardly relating dialogue in IRI, where the dialogue focused on an external issue might be the starting point, but where learning from one another and changing one’s own theology is part of the result.

### 6.2.3 Language

Leirvik (2014) argues that the language in interreligious dialogues can be seen to be language centered around human values instead of special religious interests (Leirvik, 2014, p. 44). In other words, we see in interreligious dialogue a tendency to draw on ‘secular’ language to express common concerns. In IRI there seems to be a change in language depending on the situation. As Einar Tjelle brings to light, the initiative is multilingualistic in nature, due to both drawing on the religious language and narratives, but also drawing on a human-rights centered language and environmental jargon. According to Tjelle, the language varies with the situation and context. However, as Marianne Bruusgaard explained, there has been a clear

focus on pulling at spiritual and religious narratives, rather than pulling religious actors into a political narrative. Through this, we understand there to be a clear focus on the religious interests in this example of interreligious dialogue. Still, as Simon Rye brought to light, there *is* a sense of a common understanding on a deep-ecological level. While this is given different representations and language by the participants of the conversation, there is still a common recognition of what one is talking about. In a sense, this could illustrate the language of interreligious dialogue shifting towards a common, ethical language (Leirvik, 2014, p. 50). However, rather than drawing on secular language to express common concerns, there seems to be a focus on drawing on religious language to express such concerns. As such, it is through using *religious* language, a common, ethical understanding of a concern is developed.

#### 6.2.4 Action-oriented models

In the interreligious model called diapraxis, the dialogue is the action itself. The action is centered around a common issue or a practical problem to solve. This model was brought up by Einar Tjelle as a model of dialogue fitting the case of IRI. Tjelle states that the focus of such a model is a shared thematic, in this case deforestation, which one concretely works together on solving. This can then develop to become an actual dialogue at a later point in time. The focus on a shared common issue is very much the case in IRI. The expressed goal of the initiative is to put an end to tropical deforestation, as well as to safeguard the Indigenous peoples living in and around the forests. This issue is a pressing matter, as deforestation affects climate change, and losing the tropical rainforests will have dramatic consequences for the environment and for people living in and of the forests. The issue is also one that will affect all of humanity, regardless of religious affiliation. In addition, as seen throughout the findings chapter, there are several aspects of an action-oriented dimension in IRI that speak to dialogue as action being central. One of which is having concrete plans of action in the different countries.

While the expressed goals of the initiative might fit the description of being centered around social action, aspects of how the initiative works on reaching these goals do not. The action-oriented dimension is only one of the dimensions discovered in IRI. The dimension of inclusivity brings in other aspects of the initiative's dialogue that does not necessarily fit as easily under the model of diapraxis. The focus on Indigenous peoples' rights, for one, includes opening up for a dialogue that can mend relationships. Charles McNeill expresses a belief in almost a natural healing and reconciliation when opening a safe space for dialogue to

happen in. Creating a safe space for dialogue is an aspect where the dialogue is not social action, but rather centered around authentic conversations. These conversations are held in a form of safe, open space, where the involved parties can be honest about their positions, stands, and feelings. As expressed by Lars Løvold, the focus on having an open and honest dialogue was present from the very beginning, at the foundation meeting. This part of the dialogue seems centered around sharing one's positions and stands to help mend relationships and create understanding and trust. In these settings, the action does not come first and dialogue later, but rather the other way around. Seemingly, then, the dialogue precedes the action, or lays the foundation for it. In addition, as presented by Zackariasson, diapraxis often occurs at the grassroot level. As this initiative is one that exists on multiple levels, - from local contexts to the global committee, this is too narrow a description for IRI.

In the models for interreligious dialogue as presented by Marianne Moyaert, the dialogue of action is dialogue as practical collaboration in humanitarian, political, social, and economical fields. The dialogue is of external character, meaning it affects people of all religious affiliations, and the collaboration is based on a sense of *shared responsibility*. This sense of shared responsibility is brought up in several of the interviews, an example being Lars Løvold's quote that it should be a *religious duty* to protect the rainforests and the people inhabiting them. Through this, one can deduce that defending and tending to the forests should be a matter of responsibility, regardless of religious affiliation. As such, this duty is shared between all people, and serves as a motivational factor to support action on environmental issues.

The sense of a shared responsibility as the purpose for collaborating in the field of environment is seemingly a fitting description of IRI. In this model, the practical collaboration itself is the dialogue. Once again, the practical aspects of IRI fit well into this model. IRI is centered around doing practical work in the five countries they work in and have concrete plans of action for what this work should center around. The issue at hand, deforestation, is one of external character that affect all religions alike. At the same time, there are clear traces of what would be placed under other models of interreligious dialogue in Moyaert's overview. One example of this, is Marianne Bruusgaard's example of starting the meetings of the Global Steering Committee with a prayer. This talks to an aspect of a spiritual dialogue, where one, by participating in each other's religious rituals, learn from each other. This kind of dialogue also speaks to a deeper unity between the participants, in an experience of a deeper unity with the ultimate dimension of life (Moyaert, 2013, p. 203). This seemingly also fits with another



perspective brought in by Simon Rye, where he talks about a sense of meeting ‘in the deep’ in moments of a deep-ecological, common recognition. In other words, there is an aspect of spiritual dialogue present, where one speaks together and experiences a sort of unity. In Rye’s words, this is one of the areas of IRI where the dialogue functions at its best. Furthermore, an expressed goal of the initiative is to create opportunities for religious leaders, scientists, and Indigenous peoples to speak in concert about the case for ending tropical deforestation. This speaks to a more diplomatic form of interreligious dialogue, where spiritual leaders act as representatives for their traditions, put conflicts of the past behind them, and meet one another to shake hands and speak together about their religions’ stands and views.

In Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s three models of interreligious dialogue, the activist model of dialogue seemingly fits the case of IRI the best. In this model, the focus is to transform the world and religions themselves. What comes across in this model of dialogue, is that the reality of ‘religion’ necessarily is intertwined with economic, social, political, and material realities. This seems a good fit for IRI, where the interdisciplinary character of the initiative speaks to an intertwining of realities. Mary Evelyn Tucker finds this interdisciplinary character to be rather unique, as IRI is linked to actors such as major governments, the UN, policy people, and interreligious groups. Therefore, the interdisciplinary character of IRI speaks to religion as only one part of a variety of spheres working together on the issue at hand. What this entanglement of spheres in turn means, according to Hill Fletcher, is that it can become more difficult to define the dialogue as interreligious. Religion is present merely due to: “the role religions play in maintaining or threatening human wellbeing” (Fletcher, 2013, p. 176). This, however, is seemingly not an apt description of IRI. Bearing the name ‘interfaith’, the initiative has an expressed goal of religion being the central part of the initiative, both in terms of representation, and in terms of mobilization.

Charles McNeill brings to light that there is an expressed intent to mobilize people on a spiritual, moral, and ethical level. Rather than religion being one of many spheres entangled in the dialogue, religion is the central sphere of the dialogue. The intent and idea of the initiative is to mobilize people based on religion and religious reasoning for caring about the environment. A central part of how to mobilize religious people, is the development and use of the religious ‘toolkits’ and other literature for religious leaders to use. As Gunnar Stålsett writes, pedagogical literature for guidance, and resources for priests, imams and other relevant religious leaders have been produced for educational purposes and preaching (Stålsett, 2020, p. 347). There is, in other words, no question whether this initiative is interreligious, as the

religious dimension is expressed and evident. Still, the focus of the activist model is to transform both the world and religions themselves. This can be applied to IRI through its focus of changing the world by stopping deforestation and safeguarding Indigenous peoples. In addition, this applies to IRI through a focus on transforming religions by getting them to understand the link between religion and nature. As Mary Evelyn Tucker explains, elevating the spiritual dimension of the forest can lead to a change of consciousness and conscience. As such, the focus of the activist model of dialogue seems fitting in the case of IRI, while the clear interreligious profile of the initiative and religion's role in it does not.

#### 6.2.5 Action versus activism

Peter Millward and Shaminder Takhar, professors in sociology at respectively Liverpool John Moores University and London South Bank University, have written an article in the journal 'Sociology' called 'Social Movements, Collective Action, and Activism'. In the article (2019, p. NP1), they bring to light that the two practices of collective action and oppositional political activism are features of societies that pose a challenge to inequality, exclusion and injustice rooted in the oppression of people. Both can be used to challenge systems of oppression, which is often the motivation underlying such practices: "oppressive practices and exclusionary policies are often the catalyst for participation in collective action to generate a conscious move towards social, cultural and political change" (Millward & Takhar, 2019, p. NP1).

An issue raised in the terminology of the action-oriented models of interreligious dialogue, is the relationship between the two practices of collective action and activism. The two models of diapraxis and the dialogue of action are centered around some form of collective action, which can be defined as: "a process of cooperation between various stakeholders [...] Through such alliances of like-minded organizations the problem can be approached and resolved from multiple angles and the impact of individual action can be increased" (World Bank Institute, 2010, p. 1). Hill Fletcher's activist model of dialogue is centered on activism, which refers to "taking direct action in support of, or in opposition to, a social or political policy" (Marchetti, 2016, p. 4). In other words, activism is connected to a sense of taking a stand to a larger degree, either advocating for or challenging political policy. The unclear relationship between collective action and activism is mirrored in IRI, where there seems to be an internal tension on whether to focus on different forms of collective action or activism. The anonymous informant brings forth that their organization is

accustomed to multisector activism, while the focus of the initiative has been characterized by showing up and having a presence at intergovernmental meetings. There is, in other words, a difference in which methods the involved parties of the initiative want to make use of. Through this, we understand some of the involved parties to want a stronger focus on activism and putting pressure on specific targets. The involvement of the UN and the Norwegian government through funding might make an activist profile more difficult to achieve, given the political implications such activism might have. This tension of sorts was also elaborated on by Charles McNeill. McNeill explains how IRI is exploring which conditions require the entirety of the Global Steering Committee to reach consensus before taking a stand, and when some members of the coalition can take a position and intervene without bringing the whole group with them. As such, it seems yet to be decided how the relationship between taking collective action and doing activism should play out in the case of IRI.

### 6.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the connection between religion and ecology, and models of interreligious dialogue has been discussed. This has been done by drawing on theoretical perspectives introduced in chapter 3, as well as through perspectives and quotes from the interviews introduced in chapter 5.

Firstly, the terms of spirituality and religion, and the relationship between these terms was looked at in the context of religion and ecology. This included what the division between the terms might mean in practice, as well as the relation in power this yields. Possible shortcomings of the definitions were introduced and discussed.

Following this, the relationship between religion and nature was discussed through looking at three expressions of this relationship in IRI. This included the experience of the sacred in nature, nature's inherent value, and nature's place in holy scriptures.

Thirdly, models of interreligious dialogue were discussed in terms of their applicability in the example of IRI. This involved a look at how we can understand the initiative to view and relate to the 'religious other', what type of conversation this is an example of, and what kind of language is used. Furthermore, the three action-oriented models for interreligious dialogue, namely diapraxis, the dialogue of action, and the activist model of dialogue, were discussed by using concrete examples from IRI. Their applicability, as well as their shortcomings in the case of IRI were considered.

Lastly, the relationship and tension between the terms of collective action and activism were looked at in the context of the action-oriented models and in the context of IRI. The internal tension between these in IRI was highlighted.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

The aim of this study was expressed through three core elements. The first was to discover how religion appears in ecological contexts. Secondly, which kinds of interreligious dialogue can be applied in a specific environmental context was looked at. Lastly, through the two previous elements I hoped to discover ways in which religion can contribute to new understandings of environmental issues. This was researched by looking at one specific case that embodies the intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI). Interviews were carried out with representatives from IRI, which were analyzed and looked at through the lens of the following research- and sub-questions:

### **How can one approach environmental issues through interreligious dialogue?**

- 1) How does religion appear in ecological contexts?
- 2) Which models for interreligious dialogue can be applied in an environmental context?
- 3) In which ways can religion contribute to new understandings of environmental issues?

My findings are based on my understanding of the interviewees' experiences of and quotes on IRI. Their reflections have been discussed in light of theory on both interreligious dialogue, and religion and ecology. In this section, the main findings will be summarized in an attempt to conclude to the research-question.

#### *The power of terms*

As seen through this study, in the intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues we encounter a problem of terms. Firstly, this is in relation to which groups are included in the terms of religion and spirituality. Through constructing a separation between religious and spiritual groups, a skewed image of a perceived difference is created. In an environmental context, this implies that the motivations these groups have for caring and working for the environment is different, when they in fact play very much into the same religious or spiritual dimension.

Furthermore, a practical problem of this division of groups into separate terms is the difference it creates in perceived status and power. The Indigenous groups in IRI, for example, might not be understood to be on the same level as the religious groups due to them being separated into different categories. This leads me to two observations in the context of interreligious dialogue. Firstly, as the connection between spirituality, religion, and nature seems to be of central importance in the intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues, a revision of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ is needed. This is to reduce a difference in power, to clarify the perceived difference in motivation for the cause, and to include a larger diversity of groups. Secondly, such revisions should naturally also include a dimension of nature and ecology in new understandings of religion and spirituality.

#### *New understandings of interreligious dialogue*

In looking at the intersection between interreligious dialogue and environmental issues, a third observation is that new understandings of interreligious dialogue are required. This is, as mentioned, partly due to the need for new understandings of religion and spirituality.

However, this is also due to the split focus discovered. It is clear from the stated goals of IRI that the motivation for the dialogue is to end tropical deforestation and safeguard Indigenous peoples. As such, IRI works to gather religious actors to work on an issue of external nature, placing it under models centered around practical action. While there in the action-oriented models discussed seems to be solely a focus on collective action or activism as a practical form of dialogue, there is in IRI also a focus on creating space for authentic conversations, dialogue, and the healing of relations. There is both a common concern, deforestation, *and* there is an equally important focus on Indigenous rights and recognition. The focus on Indigenous rights and recognition is accomplished in part through authentic dialogues and their outcome. The action-oriented focus is, in other words, merely one of the components of the initiative.

In addition, there are elements of spiritual conversations, where one gathers in prayer, and there are elements of diplomatic conversations, where religious leaders meet and make declarations together. Through this, we understand there to be several models of dialogue at play in IRI. Relating the dimensions of IRI to the action-oriented models show that none of them quite manage to fully encompass the width of the initiative. In some ways, we can understand there in IRI to be a journey back and forth between a focus on action on a common concern, to authentic dialogues, to a healing of relationships and the elevation of

Indigenous groups. The authentic dialogues seem as important a focus as the practical work itself, and these two aspects seem to naturally affect and influence one another. The dialogues do not merely come as a result of the practical social action, as the model of diapraxis would suggest them to. They are rather a goal and focus in themselves, as they relate to IRI's emphasis on Indigenous rights and participation.

#### *Elevating environmental issues*

While there is still work to be done in developing all-encompassing terms, this study has seen several points of how religion plays out in an environmental context through the example of IRI. One of the points of uniqueness that religion brings into the work on environmental issues discovered, is providing new language to talk about them with. The issues can through this be recognized to be more than just practical, scientific ones, but to also be religious. This creates the opportunity for people to be mobilized on a spiritual level. This mobilization can also be achieved through leaning on traditions, values, narratives, and stories from the different religions. Through leaning on the authority of a divinity by the means of holy scriptures, religions can further argue for the importance of caring for the environment.

Language, values, traditions, narratives, and stories from different traditions as such contribute to environmental issues being recognized as *ethical issues*. For many, environmental issues are already recognized to be cases of conscience. Leaning on the elements from religion introduced will perhaps widen the number of people recognizing the ethical dimension of them. Rather than just being practical issues, they become matters of right and wrong. This plays into a practical aspect of interreligious dialogue in environmental contexts, namely the far-reaching range of religion. Interreligious dialogue, having the opportunity to lean on religious perspectives, and having the opportunity to include all religious groups, have a unique reach in terms of mobility and presence.

#### *Approaching environmental issues through interreligious dialogue*

As seen through this study, there are several points in which interreligious dialogue provides an approach to environmental issues. On a practical note, naming the dialogue interreligious opens for a reach spanning borders, religions, and politics. Giving it an interdisciplinary character provides a further possibility for influence, as more actors can be mobilized and contribute from their respective fields. Interreligious dialogue further creates room for an

inclusive dimension, where relations can be healed through authentic dialogues, and where laity and religious leaders both can play a part. Interreligious dialogue in the form of social action provides concrete plans of action on narrow topics, as well as leaving room for education on environmental issues, and education on different religions and traditions. In addition, the religious dimension contributes to elevating the environmental issues to become ethical ones, through their understanding of nature as valuable, through providing new language and narratives to talk about the issues, and through relating the issues to specific stories from the different holy scriptures. Religious language can be drawn upon to arrive at common, ethical understandings of shared concerns and issues, and as such function to bring people of different understandings together.

What seems clear, is that religious actors provide unique approaches to work on environmental issues. I would argue that the best way to include such religious actors in work on these issues, is through interreligious dialogue. In interreligious dialogue, the religious aspect is a point of focus, and as such opens for the various religions contributing with their unique insight, language, traditions, values, and narratives. Through naming dialogue as interreligious, one creates an inclusive focus, where every religion is invited to participate. The inclusion of religious actors and religious perspectives seems to be a growing trend in society today, with an increasing response by religious actors to the environmental crisis, and with organizations like the UN continuously focusing more on engaging religious actors in the bigger conversations. If we are to somehow solve environmental issues, such as deforestation, we need to engage as many people as possible. Seeing as the world is still very much a religious place, I would argue that to bring religious insight, language, traditions, values, perspectives, presence, and narratives into the conversation should be an increasing point of focus in working on environmental issues in the years to come.



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## Appendix 1: Interview guide

### Basic background info:

- Which organization do you represent?
- What kind of organization is this?
- Which areas of interest does your organization have/ main areas of work?
- Where does your organization work?
- What is the overarching purpose of your organization?

### Interfaith rainforest initiative

- How did this initiative develop?
- Why did it develop?
- What role does your organization play in the 'Interfaith Rainforest Initiative'?
- Why does your organization want to participate in this initiative?
- How does your organization understand the goals of this initiative?
- How does the initiative work, and where?
  - └ Structure, meetings, local, national, global scene
- Who else participates in this initiative?
- How was your organization asked to join the initiative?
  - └ How was the partnering organizations chosen in the first place – who decides which organizations are asked to participate and not?
- How does the initiative get funding?
- How does the partnering organizations meet and speak together?
  - └ Language: of religious nature, or based on secular 'human-rights' language?
- Is this initiative unique in nature – philosophy, structure, platform? If yes, - why?
  - └ Is the environmental scene especially equipped to connect people of different religions/beliefs? If yes, - why?
- Has the initiative been effective? If yes, how?
- What role does the religious aspect play in this kind of context?
  - └ What do you think about religious resources in the work?
  - └ How do the religious viewpoints, theology and faiths of the different organizations manifest in the initiative?
  - └ How is diversity of religions represented in the initiative?
- Which areas of the work could the initiative improve on?
  - └ Has it faced any obstacles – practical/theological? If so, how was it solved?

### Interreligious dialogue

- What emphasis does interreligious work have in your organization?
- Why is your organization preoccupied with interreligious work and dialogue?
  - └ Why and how is such a dialogue important?
- How does such dialogue become effective and productive?
  - └ Which components are essential?
- What effect does working with organizations of other religious/secular nature have on your organization?

## Appendix 2: Letter of information

### Invitation to participate in the research project “Deforestation and religious collaboration”

This is an invitation for you to participate in a research project where the purpose is to examine how environmental issues function as platforms where religious and secular organizations meet and collaborate. In this letter, you will receive information about the goal for the project and what participation will mean for you.

#### **Purpose**

*How can environmental issues facilitate collaboration between religious organizations?*

The big context of what I want to research, is that of interreligious dialogue and collaboration – how religions can communicate and come together on issues transcending their boundaries. Further concretizing it, I am interested in looking at the environment, or climate and the climate crisis, as such an area of collaboration. More precisely, if and how such issues can function as channels for collaboration between different religions, and how the religious contribution affects the work on these issues. This will be done by looking into one concrete initiative, the ‘Interfaith Rainforest Initiative’, where different religious and secular organizations meet and collaborate on an environmental cause, namely deforestation.

This is a master’s thesis, and the results my research harvests will only be used for the purpose of finishing this research project.

#### **Who is responsible?**

The Faculty of Theology at the University of Oslo is responsible for this project.



## **Why you are asked to participate**

You are asked to participate because of your/your organization's role in the initiative 'Interfaith Rainforest Initiative'. This invitation is sent out to the partnering organizations, as well as key people responsible for developing and launching the initiative. The selection is therefore rather small, and participation is highly appreciated.

## **What does participation mean for you?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you agree to be subjected to an interview. This interview will be semi-structured, which means that there are certain areas of interest, and not a set of standard questions. The length will therefore also vary, but at least 30 minutes is to be expected. The questions will be based on the initiative – background, structure, leadership, philosophy, vision, members and work. Your personal views will not be included, as it is the organization's views, philosophy and work that is of interest. As such, you will function as an expert representative for your organization/foundation. The interview will be conducted either in person (preferably), over the internet (on skype, zoom, etc.), or over e-mail.

## **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in this research project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can retract your consent at any time without giving a reason. All your personal information will be deleted. There will be no negative consequences for you if you do not want to participate or later choose to withdraw your participation.

## **Your privacy – how information is stored and used**

Your information will only be used for the purposes already stated in this letter. The information you give out will be treated confidentially and in line with privacy regulations and laws.

At the University of Oslo, student Karen Veslemøy Lemvik and supervisor Oddbjørn Birger Leirvik are those who will have access to your information. The information will be stored safely and separately, with restricted access.

In the master's thesis, you will be recognizable by being named as a representative for the organization/foundation you work for. Your statements may be included and quoted as yours.

### **What will happen to your information when the research project has ended?**

Your information will be kept until December 2021, six months after the project is due to be handed in. After this, your information will be deleted. The project will be published, and as such, the information and quotes included in the project will be publicly available even after December 2021.

### **Your rights**

As long as you can be identified in the data material, you have a right to:

- See which information is registered about you, and get a copy of the information
- Have information on you corrected
- Have information on you deleted, and
- Make a complaint to 'the Norwegian Data Protection Authority' about the treatment of your information

### **What gives us the right to treat personal information about you?**

We treat information about you based on your consent.

On behalf of the University of Oslo, the NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) has concluded that the treatment of personal information in this project satisfies the privacy regulations and laws.

### **Where can I learn more?**

If you have questions regarding the project, or wish to use your rights, contact:

- University of Oslo, faculty of Theology, student Karen Veslemøy Lemvik  
[karenv1@student.teologi.uio.no](mailto:karenv1@student.teologi.uio.no) / 0047 98 45 51 31

- University of Oslo, faculty of Theology, supervisor Oddbjørn Birger Leirvik  
[o.b.leirvik@teologi.uio.no](mailto:o.b.leirvik@teologi.uio.no)
- Privacy agency, faculty of Theology  
[personvernkontakt@teologi.uio.no](mailto:personvernkontakt@teologi.uio.no)

If you have questions regarding the NSD's assessment of this project, you can contact:

- NSD – Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS  
[personverntjenester@nsd.no](mailto:personverntjenester@nsd.no) / 0047 55 58 21 17.

Best regards

Oddbjørn Birger Leirvik  
*Project manager*  
(Supervisor)

Karen Veslemøy Lemvik  
*Student*  
(Researcher)

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## Declaration of consent

I have received and understood information on the project 'Deforestation and religious collaboration' and been given the opportunity to ask questions. I consent to:

- Participate in a semi-structured interview
- Information about my work and position being published
- Information about the initiative 'Interfaith Rainforest Initiative' and my workplace's participation in this being published
- My name and place of work being published
- My information being stored up until six months after the project has been handed in

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(Participant, date)

## Appendix 3: NSD

# NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

### **NSD sin vurdering**

### **Prosjekttittel**

Deforestation and religious collaboration

### **Referansenummer**

696974

### **Registrert**

05.06.2020 av Karen Veslemøy Lemvik - karenvl@uio.no

### **Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon**

Universitetet i Oslo / Det teologiske fakultet

### **Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)**

Oddbjørn Leirvik, o.b.leirvik@teologi.uio.no, tlf: 97173541

### **Type prosjekt**

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

### **Kontaktinformasjon, student**

Karen Veslemøy Lemvik, vlemvik@gmail.com, tlf: 98455131

### **Prosjektperiode**

10.08.2020 - 31.12.2021

## Status

10.06.2020 - Vurdert

## Vurdering (1)

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### 10.06.2020 – Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet den 10.06.2020 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

### MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: [https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld\\_prosjekt/meld\\_endringer.html](https://nsd.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html)

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

### TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om religion og filosofisk overbevisning, samt alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 31.12.2021.

### LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og art. 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a, jf. art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. §9 (2).

### PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personvernopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen

- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

## DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

## FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

Uninett Zoom er databehandler i prosjektet. NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29.

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

## OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Jørgen Wincentsen

Tlf. Personverntjenester: 55 58 21 17 (tast 1)

<https://meldeskjema.nsd.no/vurdering/5ec51cab-27ad-4d2d-ac0b-73be63d2a52c>