

The Irish Times – Saturday 9 April 2016

Is God green? Religion's role in saving the planet

Much of what green activists believe resonates with people of faith



Sylvia Thompson



Photograph: Kaan Tanman/E+/Getty

Most greens don't want to talk about religion, according to the former Green Party MEP Nuala Ahern, who has put together a new book on the subject, *Green Values, Religion and Secularism*. Yet when Ahern and her fellow editor, Erica Meijers, interviewed environmental activists across Europe for it they discovered that the activists had a great variety of feelings and thoughts about their political motivations, many of them resonating with religious values.

"We felt it was important to have a conversation about these issues with ourselves and with everyone who wishes to join in," says Ahern. "Many greens see religion as something that should have faded away when science and rationality developed in the 20th century. Yet that's not happening in the 21st century, because religion has become a hugely dominant theme across the world."

Their interviewees range from academics to ecological activists to Green Party politicians across Europe, including the former Green Party TDs Trevor Sargent and Mary White. "The book shows a diversity of religious inspiration across Europe and how valuable this can be as a resource for environmental action. Greens share with religious communities the idea that what's right for human beings should not be our sole measure of what's good," says Ahern.

Yet a tension remains between a religious ideology that human beings aren't in control of the world and the practical reality that we have so much control over the planet.

One of the crucial debates among greens, Ahern and Meijers write, is how much we trust technological innovation to create a "circular and sustainable economy", and whether climate change and biodiversity can be addressed by science and governments alone.

Inspiring young people to get involved in environmental activism is key. Ahern says: "One interviewee raised the issue that we're not teaching young people how to lead good lives, and when that youthful enthusiasm isn't catered for, it can become negative. Environmental activism comes from the same impulse that creates radicalisation of Islamic youth in Europe."

As well as discussing their personal motivations for environmental activism, interviewees say that Europe must embrace a wider understanding of Islam, as refugees risk their lives to reach the EU.

Ahern believes that mainstream faith groups don't engage enough with issues around environmental destruction and climate change. "Historically, religious groups have focused solely on personal morality, which is a disgrace," she says.

She does, however, acknowledge the Climate Justice movement and Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* as a "sea change" in religious involvement in environmental issues.

She says the popularity of pilgrimage walks across Europe, particularly in Spain, is because they offer people "a prayerful connection with something greater than themselves and a connection with nature".

"My own spirituality is more bound up with meditation than any particular religious affinity. I'm very connected with pilgrimage. Going out into nature gives us that sense of transcendence."

As well as working with the Dutch Green Party, Erica Meijers has preached in churches of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, of which she is a member.

"I see religion as a way to connect with something bigger than us and the recognition that human beings are not the centre of the universe. My political engagement is very much related to my Christian belief," she says.

Ahern is working on an Irish version of *Green Values, Religion and Secularism*. In it she will interview academics and theologians about the links between environment, religion and secularism. "I hope their views will provoke discussion and debate on the topic in Ireland," she says.



Sea change: the Climate Justice movement and Pope Francis's encyclical Laudato Si' represent new religious involvement in environmental issues, according to Nuala Ahern.

Photograph: Gabriel Bouys/AFP/Getty

EUROPEAN VIEW: WHAT MOTIVATES ACTIVISTS?

François Mandil, Catholic scout leader and ecological activist: "If you are a Christian you simply have to be an ecological activist. I do not believe that religion should be something only for the private realm. The nexus between religious and environmental movements is the respect for life and the feeling that we are a part of something bigger than us."

Noel Mamere, French journalist and author of *Change the System, Not the Climate*: "Contrary to what some believe in the green movement, nature is not very welcoming. Nature is hostile to humans, who from the outset have tried to tame it. Currently, the problem is not the taming of nature but taming the taming."

Adam Ostolski, co-chair of the Polish Green Party: "I think political ecology needs spirituality. Spirituality kicks in when we see that money and power alone will not solve all of our problems. Greens strongly combine ecology with social justice and activism, the critique of corporate rule and the global inequalities between the north and the south. We see a very green view of the ecological crisis in the Pope's encyclical *Laudato Si'*."

Yannis Paraskevopoulos, green activist in Greece: "The Greens have no party doctrine about religion and are open to activists regardless of their beliefs. In the early 2000s the green movement was the first to champion the dialogue of civilisations [between Muslims and Christians], and we have to keep building on this."

John Barry, professor of green political economy at Queen's University Belfast: "I am an unashamed Marxist, but I am also a humanist. Greens can find common ground with the religious belief – whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist – in stewardship, because greens also stand for stewardship; we believe in taking care of God's creation."

Sergey Lagodinsky, a leader of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, a Berlin research institute affiliated with the German Green Party: "It seems important to me that more people with a background in migration and members of minorities join the Green Party. The Christian ways of thinking have less legitimacy in the Green Party, as the secular liberal-democratic discourse has the upper hand. In the debate about the place of religion in society the Greens must learn to deal with the questions that minorities ask."

You can download Green Values, Religion and Secularism: Conversations with European Politicians and Activists at greenfoundationireland.ie.

*A debate on the topics it raises will be held on **Saturday 7 May 2016** at Queen's University Belfast; for further information, please contact info@greenfoundationireland.ie*