



G20 Religion Forum (R20) Plenary Session 6:

Spiritual Ecology: Fostering Balance within Nature and Society

“A creation-inflected spirituality means that we celebrate the divine presence within all of God’s creatures, however we spell out the details of that presence. A sense of spirituality is precisely that which brings us closer to an appreciation of nature and a sense of awe before its wonders.”

~ Keynote Address by Rabbi Arthur Green

BALI, Indonesia — On the afternoon of 3 November 2022, Nahdlatul Ulama religious leaders announced the launch of the Spiritual Ecology movement during Plenary Session 6 of the R20 Summit. The opening speaker was Kyai Haji Jadul Maula, Chairman of the Institute of Indonesian Muslim Cultural Artists, or Lesbumi — an autonomous branch of the world’s largest Muslim organization.

Established in 1962, Lesbumi was originally intended to safeguard and strengthen traditional artistic communities that were threatened by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), whose “People’s Cultural Institute” (Lekra) sought to harness all artistic expression in the service of an atheistic, Marxist-Leninist agenda.

In recent decades, Lesbumi has vigorously defended traditional artistic communities threatened by the spread of Wahhabi/Muslim Brotherhood ideology, which demonizes the diverse cultural expressions of [Islam Nusantara](#) (“East Indies Islam”).

The symbol of Lesbumi is based on the *gunungan* (“mountain”, a.k.a. *kayon*, or “tree”), which constitutes an essential element of Javanese shadow puppet theater, or *wayang kulit*. Its shape reminiscent of a “fire mountain,” or volcano, the *gunungan* symbolizes the universe. Surrounded by wild animals, the *kayon* symbolizes the “cosmic tree,” which emerges from the Void (“*suwung*”) of the “Divine Being that encompasses all things” (“*Hyang Maha Segalanya*”).

Wayang culture is a legacy of the [ancient Indianized civilizational sphere](#) (or “Indosphere”) that once encompassed much of present-day South and Southeast Asia. It continues to animate Indonesian society, which is traditionally characterized by a pluralistic, tolerant, and profoundly spiritual worldview.

Kyai Jadul and Ibu Lelyana Meilani of Lesbumi described the launch of the Spiritual Ecology movement at a [tree planting ceremony](#) held on 31 October 2022 at Puja Mandala on the island of Bali. The ceremony was performed by Balinese Hindu priests, who purified and blessed twenty trees considered sacred within Hindu, and traditional Javanese, cosmology. The ceremony and tree planting are believed to enliven the spiritual unity that connects all of creation and thereby secure harmony and balance between the seen and unseen worlds.

Mahamahopadhyay Bhadreshdas Swami, an ordained Hindu monk of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), and H.E. Shaykh Mohammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, Secretary General of the Mecca-based Muslim World League and co-chair of the R20 Summit in Bali, also participated in the tree planting ceremony and launch of the Spiritual Ecology movement.

Lesbumi, which arranged and coordinated the tree planting ceremony, screened a [brief film](#) at the sixth plenary session of the R20 Summit, documenting the event. The film's soundtrack includes the voice of Ibu Lelyana reciting her poem, "From God the Most Merciful, greetings of peace conveyed by trees."

Since the launch of the Spiritual Ecology movement at the R20 Summit in Bali, Lesbumi, Nahdlatul Ulama, and the Center for Shared Civilizational Values have begun to network with like-minded religious leaders and organizations world-wide. Their objective is to re-enliven indigenous and ancient "wisdom traditions" essential to respecting and preserving the environment in a holistic manner that fosters balance within nature and society.

On 2 - 3 December 2022, Lesbumi held a national work meeting (*rakernas*) centered around the theme "[The Tree of Life](#)." At this conference, held just weeks after the R20 Summit in Bali, Lesbumi introduced the Spiritual Ecology agenda to traditional artists and cultural leaders from throughout the vast Malay Archipelago. One of the initiatives adopted by Lesbumi at its recent meeting is a "Movement to Plant Sacred Trees" in regions throughout Indonesia.

This communiqué provides extensive excerpts from addresses delivered on the afternoon of Thursday, 3 November 2022, during the sixth plenary session of the R20 Summit. These excerpts are intended to allow readers — including religious leaders, policy makers, scholars, journalists, and other interested parties — to readily access and understand the substantive nature of the R20's agenda and of the presentations delivered by prominent religious leaders at the R20 Summit in Bali, including their exploration of spiritual ecology from a variety of perspectives.

Following the presentation by Lesbumi, a panel of four speakers discussed the subject of spiritual ecology, each from the perspective of his own religious tradition:

- Keynote speaker: Imam Yahya Pallavicini, Chairman, EULEMA, European Council of Ulema and Vice President of the Islamic Religious Community of Italy (COREIS)
- Moderator: Canon Dr. Christopher Sugden, Church of England and Oxford Centre for Religion & Public Life (United Kingdom): "[Our Spiritual Responsibility to Act as Stewards of God's Creation](#)"
- Swami Mitrananda, All India Chinmaya Yuva Kendra (India): "*The Cosmic Order as Viewed by Hinduism*"

- Rabbi Arthur Green, Hebrew College (USA): “[Creation: Awakening to God’s World](#)”
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Imam Yahya Pallavacini delivered a keynote address titled “*Islam Rahmatan li al-‘Alamin: Islam as a Source of Universal Love and Compassion.*” Excerpts from that speech, edited for publication, appear below.

So coming to Islam’s contribution to spiritual ecology, I would stress four points, or doctrinal terms of reference. The first is rahmatan li-l-amin. This comes from a verse of the holy Qur’an in which God Almighty describes the Seal of the Prophets (Muhammad) as a mercy “to the worlds”: li-l-amin. Not simply for this world, nor for the superior spiritual, primordial world. Rather to serve as a link between this world and the eternal, absolute, transcendental world. So the key to interpreting this Qur’anic verse about rahmah — of which prophecy is a symbol and the Seal of the Prophets, the Messenger of Islam, Muhammad, is a manifestation — is to understand rahmah as a metaphysical orientation, and not simply as a worldly phenomenon. In essence, it is a mode of behavior in this world that results from an orientation towards, and inspiration derived from, the other world.

In other words, the manifestation of rahmah is not merely a question of horizontal behavior. It is a question of our seeking to convey — and actually become instruments of — His care, His kindness, His mercy, and His love, so that we are truly merciful to others and among ourselves [as Muslims].

The second point of reference, or relevant term, within Islamic doctrine is fitrah, which refers to the primordial, or true, nature of mankind. And what is the primordial nature of mankind? It is the sacred dimension of human existence. Every human being is capable of discovering his or her true nature by recognizing the Lord of creation, Who breathed life into Adam and thereby endowed human beings with a spiritual nature.

This leads us to an alternate way to conceptualize spiritual ecology. It entails far more than planting trees, because that alone will not solve the world’s ecological crisis. Spiritual ecology requires reframing the identity of mankind, and re-orienting human hearts, to serve as vice-gerents of God on earth (khalifat fi il-ard) — recognizing His nature in the multitudinous signs of nature that surround us.

The third point of reference, or relevant term, is embedded within the teachings of many spiritual masters, including Shaykh Ibn ‘Arabi and Shaykh Abdul Karim al-Jili. It concerns the universal identity of man. Within the Islamic tradition, of course, this coincides with the sanctity of the final Prophet, whom these masters describe as a symbol of insan al-kamil (the perfect, or universal, man) — as a ray of pre-eternal light, or Nur Muhammad. So the manifestation of perfection in humanity is a consequence of attaining to spiritual light, or enlightenment.

And this brings me to a core issue in regard to spiritual ecology: i.e., sacred knowledge. The discipline of spiritual ecology is not just about worldly competence, skills, organization, or pragmatism. It requires participating in the renewal of a spiritual or intellectual enlightenment, as brothers and sisters of different faiths, or of the same religious community, exercising responsibility in managing ourselves, humanity, and the environment at large. It entails spiritual research and a quest for truth. And through this research, we may be inspired to contribute to the perfection and transformation of ourselves and the world around us.

The harmony that lies at the heart of spiritual ecology is not an intellectual construct or emotional feeling. It is His harmony, that was established at the birth of creation, of mankind and of the universe, of the land and the seas and all they contain. In order to preserve or renew ecological harmony, we must return to the Source of harmony, to the Lord of harmony. According to Sunnah Muhammadiyah (the example of the Prophet Muhammad) and the teachings of our masters, this is integral to our engaging in the remembrance of God. So to remember our Lord and practice this remembrance is to participate in His blessing.

By practicing the remembrance of God and engaging in dynamic activity in the world, we may contribute to reestablishing harmony in nature and society, as opposed to a merely inner personal harmony. This is a very delicate process, for sometimes — even within religious communities — we find selfish and emotional persons who wish to impose their personal notions of harmony upon others. This, of course, does not lead to any true, shared harmony. It simply adds to the collective disorder, which is the natural product of countless individuals acting from selfishness.

In conclusion, engagement in spiritual ecology requires the consistent practice of “jihad al-akbar” — the greater jihad or spiritual endeavor — so that holiness may overcome your individual “soul temptations.” And this is the only way. Once you have established this priority, you are contributing to a more universal harmony, that is shared by other brothers and sisters around you.

This means linking that which is particular to that which is universal; the field of immanence to transcendence; and imbuing every single field of our responsibility with a vision of “enlightened science.” And this is how the microcosm reflects the macrocosm. This is the doctrine that our holy traditions teach us regarding how to fulfill our responsibilities in this world, linking “the science of creation” with the essence of our Lord.

I would suggest that this is the only way to have an authentic spiritual ecology. If we succeed in this endeavor, the result will be the establishment of a new civilization. Because we will discover that the essential nature (fitrah) of every human being is fundamentally spiritual, or holy, imbued with the presence of the Divine.

This divine presence is generally concealed and forgotten within the human heart. When awakened, it is directly connected to the brain, so that one’s thoughts, words, and deeds become holy thoughts, words, and deeds, manifesting the enlightened presence of the Spirit. This is how we can build a spiritual ecology movement together: by re-discovering the primordial nature that lies within every human being

and, if I may say so, manifesting the sacred dimension of brotherhood and fulfilling our responsibility to re-enliven spiritual ecology in this time and place.

So again, I insist, the key to spiritual ecology is a consistent reference to holiness, to sanctity, to reverence for all that is sacred. Amid so many crises and so much disorder throughout the world, and widespread forgetfulness of life's spiritual dimension, it is quite significant that here in Indonesia and next year in India, Islam and Hinduism are cooperating in the search for genuine solutions, founded upon a very deep, sensitive, spiritual reference to the primordial and transcendental dimension of life.

Canon Dr. Christopher Sugden delivered remarks on spiritual ecology based on a close reading of the Biblical book of Genesis. An excerpt of Canon Sugden's speech may be read below.

The Book of Genesis is a scripture revered in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, and many of its narratives are referenced by the Qur'an as well. It has a profound message relevant to our concerns for God's creation and ecology.

According to the first chapter of Genesis, God said:

"Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1: 26-27).

Genesis says that humanity is made in the image of God.

Ancient rulers set up images, or statues of themselves in their realms, and especially in regions they had conquered, to impress on people who was in charge, especially if the ruler himself was many hundreds of miles away and could not be seen. These images were also placed in temples to represent the ruler before the presence of God. And these temples were usually situated within gardens.

The first man and the first woman were placed in the temple of the universe to look after its garden, referred to as the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis.

So Genesis teaches us that humanity is the representative of the Ruler Who is not seen. This applies to all human beings. We are all God's representatives — just as a statue or image was erected, in the ancient Middle East, to represent an absentee king or landlord. Except that in the case of humanity, we are living, breathing, moving representatives of God: i.e. stewards of His creation. We are here to manage, cultivate, and nurture the earth and all its creatures.

We are to rule over the earth and its creatures. These words of Genesis have often been misread and misinterpreted to justify rapacious dominion. However, understood in the light of Scriptural teachings regarding the nature of God, such rule is to reflect the true face of the Ruler, Who governs with mercy and compassion, and is often

referred to in the Bible as a shepherd, or, the “Good Shepherd.” Humanity is to care for and nurture creation like a shepherd. And in my own Christian tradition, Jesus is spoken of as the express image of God. He provides the model of how we are to care for creation.

But the Bible does recognize that such rule can turn into misrule – exploiting, disrupting, and even destroying the fragile order of creation.

Thus, according to the Bible, being made in the image of God signifies two things. First, we are accountable to God. This means we will be held responsible for how we exercise this stewardship.

Second, we are the representatives of God. This means we are to look after the earth, in a way that reflects God’s infinite mercy and compassion for all creation. This responsibility applies to all people, and that is why we believe in the equality and dignity of all human beings. I understand that this parallels Nahdlatul Ulama’s own belief that the primary message of Islam is tauhid, or “Divine Oneness,” and rahmah, or universal love and compassion.

Swami Mitrananda — a spiritual teacher and leader of the All India Chinmaya Yuva Kendra — delivered an address on the theme of “*The Cosmic Order as Viewed by Hinduism.*” Excerpts of his remarks, edited for publication, may be read below.

What does Hinduism say about ecology? That both the created and the creator are divine. This is one of the primary principles of Hinduism. The universe is composed of countless galaxies, and all of them are pervaded by the divine principle.

If this idea is really understood, then we will start worshiping and respecting the earth, because the created is divine and the creator is divine. The cause and the effect are not separate; they are one and the same.

Just as water manifests in diverse forms such as waves, bubbles, and icebergs while retaining the essential underlying substance of water, so the universe is nothing but the expression of the Lord. Once we bring this devotional feeling to the earth, our approach would be, “Let us worship, let us protect.” The feeling of “Let’s exploit the earth” would disappear.

Other religions have similar ideas such as stewardship of the earth and protecting the earth. Islam also teaches this principle.

In the Bhagavad Gita there is a brilliant verse in which Lord Krishna says, “The Creator created this beautiful universe along with the spirit of togetherness.” Whatever you seek, let it happen through the spirit of togetherness. In this spirit, let us pursue our lofty goals.

In the next verse Lord Krishna says, in effect, “You take care of the dewas [forces of nature] and the dewas, in turn, will take care of you.” You take care of nature; nature

in turn will take care of you. You nourish nature; nature in turn will nourish you. Nurturing and nourishing each other, may you attain the highest good.

In the last verse Lord Krishna says that those who fail to respect nature, although blessed by nature, are simply thieves. But if you treat nature with respect, then nature in turn will respond like a servant coming and offering service to the master. This is the relationship between nature and man. “Jiwa,” the embodied individual soul, “Jagath,” the universe, and “Ishwara,” the Supreme Lord, are all one.

Rabbi Prof. Arthur Green — an American scholar of Jewish mysticism, Neo-Hasidic theologian, and one of the most respected and influential Jewish intellectuals of his generation — prepared a keynote address for the R20 Summit titled “Creation: Awakening to God’s World.” As he was unable to travel to Bali to deliver his remarks in person, Dr. Timothy Shah read Rabbi Green’s address at the conclusion of Plenary Session 6.

AS A PERSON PRIVILEGED to be entering his ninth decade on this beloved planet, I am able to take a somewhat long view of contemporary history. I was raised in the mid-twentieth century, the child of a fully secularized and rather militantly atheist household, like those of many American Jews in that era. Of course, my atheist father was himself the grandchild of pious hasidic Jews, but that belonged to the distant and mostly forgotten past. Religion itself, as a force in human affairs, was seen as a thing of another era. Jews coming out of eastern Europe, rushed headlong into the modern world, thought of religion as an ultra-conservative force on the world stage; its image was that of the Russian church in the latter days of the czar, or of the hapless rabbis who stayed behind in old-world small towns and with their values, as thousands of young people moved off to cities and to new continents, engaging the bold new world of the twentieth century. Secularization was seen as a constant and unstoppable process.

*No one, looking ahead from the mid-twentieth century, would have predicted the tremendous role that religion would play in the twenty-first. No one, that is, except the embattled people of faith. To everyone’s surprise but their own, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and others fill the front pages of contemporary newspapers, which document us as a tremendous — and sometimes, indeed, frightening — force in world affairs. The question before us is whether we can make this be **good** news, even redemptive news, for the history of human civilization. As a religious person who does not anticipate the direct interference of a divine hand in history to save us from ourselves, I have come to ask the question of such salvation differently. Will the resurgence of faith in God, or a rebirth of religion, bring about the deliverance of our so urgently threatened planet?*

Needless to say, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. We have recently seen Buddhists slaughtering Muslims in Myanmar, and Muslims slaughtering Christians and Yazidis on the battlefields of Syria. But it was not so long ago that we heard of Christians slaughtering Muslims in the refugee camps of Lebanon, and of a certain Jew, cheered on by others, who did the same to Palestinian Muslims, thereby desecrating the holy grave of our shared ancestors. All this hate and slaughter keeps

these so-called religious folks too busy to confront the truly most serious challenge of our age, the environmental crisis that threatens to overwhelm us all, exacerbating every other crisis as it rains down death and destruction upon everyone, without distinction. But is there also a good, possibly even salvific, side to this new power of religion, one that might lead us to face together, rather than ignore, that challenge? How do we bring such a committed and shared religiosity to birth?

Let me propose another way of asking the question. We humans are the first species to have the ability to destroy our biosphere as a fit habitat for all higher forms of life. But we are also the first to be equipped with the moral conscience and perspective that might prevent us from doing so. Is that more than coincidence? Religions, despite all their limitations and narrowness of vision, serve humanity as the great vehicle for that moral conscience. To say it in classical Western theological language: might it be that the rebirth of religion is emerging from a divine call that is welling up within us, stirring us to repent of our collective abuse of this planet, and of one another, before it is too late? Is God seeking to protect that last shred of moral conscience in humanity? Is religion itself being given the gift of this awareness and power as a new chance to stir conscience? Is the One we worship sending us a call to awaken humanity from its dangerous self-serving slumber before the earth is pillaged to the point of utter destruction?....

*We people of faith need each other, my friends, and the world needs us to realize how much we need each other. We have to show that we can stand together in awareness of the miracle of our own existence. We need to share and give expression to a sense of divinity that penetrates every moment of our lives, enlightening even their darkest corners. We need together to form the core of a new **resistance** to the brutalization of humanity in our era, to the disregard for the sacred quality of each human life, and to the rapacious destruction of the created world. In the growing strength of religion as a factor in human affairs, we have been given a great gift, a salvific opportunity that we cannot allow to slip between our fingers....*

*The contemporary religion we articulate will need to be based upon an understanding that the bio-history of our planet is a great sacred story, one that we all share. It will be a fully nature-embracing spirituality, one that sees the natural **as** the supernatural, the divine presence embodied throughout the physical world. This can be hosted by a great variety of theological views within all of our traditions. But we Westerners must move away from the legacy of Platonism, distinguishing between a “true” spiritual world and the “merely” physical. A creation-inflected spirituality means that we celebrate the divine presence **within** all of God’s creatures, however we spell out the details of that presence. A sense of spirituality is precisely that which brings us closer to an appreciation of nature and a sense of awe before its wonders.*

*That awakening of wonder and its renewal is the most important message that we religious folk — all of us — have to bring to the postmodern world. My chief mentor in recent years is the Rabbi of Chernobyl in Ukraine, who died in 1797. I have recently completed a translation of his great book of homilies, *The Light of the Eyes*. (Chernobyl was once known for a very different kind of bright light than that for which it is remembered in recent history!) That is our job as religious teachers, putting light into people’s eyes, helping them to wake up! In speaking of the Exodus from Egypt, he says that **our** Exodus has already taken place. The real enslavement of Israel in*

Egypt was that of mind and spirit, leaving its victims unaware of the reality of God. Unlike the enslaved Israelites of old, we have our faith; we are aware of the divine presence that fills all the world. The challenge now, he says, is how to make our actions, our moral selves, live up to our spiritual awareness.

Our situation is a bit different. We, too, live in a certain “bondage” of mind and spirit. In our case, it is the secularized consciousness of our society, along with too much pursuit of success and comfort, that blinds us to the wondrous quality of existence that surrounds us in each moment. As the hasidic master knew so well, the first task of religion is the liberation of the spirit. As we attain that freedom and reawaken our souls, we need also to act, both individually and as a collective force, in ways that fulfill our sacred vision.

We religious folk represent a tremendous potency for change in our world. Religion is still the language that moves the hearts and minds of most of humanity. We religious leaders of the West need to find a way to reach out to our counterparts throughout the world, including Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists, and others. We need to make common cause in defense of a truth that we all share, however varied our nuances in ways of expressing it. All that exists contains the power or presence of the One who created it, or who is it. Therefore, we must walk through this world with love and reverence, doing all we can to preserve its glory for future generations. This shared vision needs to be translated into real political action, both within national voting campaigns and in international forums, perhaps new ones that we should create together. The salvation of this planet depends upon our ability to awake the conscience of humanity.

The great power of religious faith in our world must be seen as a divine gift and a sacred opportunity. In it may lie humanity’s greatest hope for liberation from self-destructive forces that will cause terrible harm in times already upon us, both to our own offspring and those of all the other species that depend upon us for survival. But what we do with this gift is in our hands, especially those of our religious leaders. Only in working together, embracing this earth as embodied divine Creation, will we be able to move forward. Humanity awaits our shared message.

[View Plenary Session 6.](#)