

Theology and Interreligious Studies

THEOLOGY AND INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BERN

Theology – literally, “the teaching of God” – critically reflects on matters of faith. Faiths are linked to issues of environmental and social sustainability at various levels, and these are cross-cutting themes in many theological subjects. The [Faculty of Theology](#) at the University of Bern places particular emphasis on identifying and pointing up the connections between matters of faith and sustainability.

How are theology and interreligious studies linked to sustainable development, and how has this influenced practice?

Theology and interreligious studies analyse the power of religion to shape society as a whole. To this end, they not only examine the relationship of people to God, but also place people in relation to the Creation and the world as conceived by God. In practically all myths and religions, stories of Creation connect people with god(s) and deities, ancestors, fellow human beings, animals, and nature. Religions have the potential to shape, but also to criticize, social order. Engaged theology can thus make an important contribution to global justice – and therefore to sustainability.

Theology includes discourses on sustainability. One such discourse focuses on the ambivalent effects of how humans are positioned in the First Account of Creation (*dominium terrae*, or “subdue the earth”), which apparently places them above nature. The discussion around this anthropocentric ethos of the Bible is an important problem indicator. Furthermore, the study of theology can help to activate and expand the potential of religious traditions and practices to support sustainable development. This is done particularly in the context of religious actions and ethical convictions that advocate the protection of or respect for nature as well as social responsibility towards fellow human beings, including future generations. The concept of “responsibility for Creation” – in terms of responsibility for the environment, with a view to promoting solidarity in the present and enabling a future for life overall – is gaining particular relevance for sustainable development [1].

Furthermore, issues of social and ecological justice are becoming ever more important in theological work. Many theologians are highly committed to addressing the social inequalities driving poverty, hunger, and environmental degradation, and strive to generally have an emancipatory impact. Theology – and this is emphasized at the University of Bern – also advocates a positive consideration of *otherness*, including recognition of sexual and gender diversity and criticism of discrimination. In addition, religion-related subjects analyse phenomena, ethical areas of conflict, and development potential. Research of this kind is accompanied by learning processes which, in turn, can strengthen sustainability awareness within communities of faith [2].

Example: A model for conflict-sensitive analysis in dealing with religious conflicts

Conflicts shape our lives as individuals, in social groups, or in society as a whole. They are a necessary driver of personal and social change. But when conflicts escalate, they can quickly become destructive. Peaceful coexistence is therefore a core element of religions, and peace, according to the 2030 Agenda, is one of the five overarching principles of sustainable development. And still, religious conflicts and religious wars seem omnipresent and nearly impossible to overcome. Dealing more constructively with conflicts is the focus of the [Interfaculty Research Cooperation Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies](#) at the University of Bern. Its context-sensitive analysis model helps to uncover the complex socio-economic causes of conflicts that are often only ostensibly religiously motivated, and to design coping strategies [3]. This promotes peace and justice. A religion-based perspective on sustainability particularly reduces conflict-related poverty (**SDG 1**), integrates perspectives and voices of women and marginalized groups (**SDGs 4 and 5**), and strengthens peaceful, inclusive societies (**SDG 16**) as well as the global partnership for sustainable development (**SDG 17**).



How does the University of Bern's Faculty of Theology incorporate the topic of sustainability into research and teaching?

Links between theology and sustainable development – of which there are many – are examined in the courses offered by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Bern. The compulsory contents of all courses of the Faculty's various denominational and *interreligious study* programmes are highly relevant to sustainability. Aspects of sustainable development are discussed on the basis of reflection on current social problems and interfaces of religious cultures, for example in the *Interreligious Studies course* or in the *Interfaculty Research Cooperation Religious Conflicts and Coping Strategies*, which investigates historical and current conflicts for peacebuilding [4]. Moreover, research findings and courses on ethical and practical theological issues increasingly examine questions of social sustainability. Particular attention is paid to sustainable shaping of the relationship between the sexes, a topic that the faculty at the University of Bern has been working on for a long time amid continuously arising new challenges. In addition, during acute social crises, representatives of the Faculty of Theology discuss the conditions of a "good common life", not only in their teaching, but also with the public.

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Further Reading

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