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## **Fiery Climate Change Introduces Fresh Environmental Stewards**

*By Alan Chong and Tamara Nair*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Recent unseasonably high heat sparked fires and dried soil, lakes and rivers leading to the premature death of crops, cattle and marine food. Earth's planetary health is facing severe threat under anthropogenic pressures. Humanity needs to commit new levels of energy and a sense of urgency to secure its future. How to mobilise new champions to mitigate climate change? Religious conscience and responsible tourism are two possibilities for strategic consideration.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Men and women live amongst beasts and natural vegetation on earth with the understanding that both the latter ought to be nurtured and cared for in order to sustain humanity's needs for nourishment and survival. Recent incidents of extreme heat in Italy, and also in the rest of western Europe, China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Canada and large parts of the USA, made media headlines. They are scientifically linked to global warming.

Is it not the case that being faithful to one's religion means acting in an environmentally responsible manner? Both religious and secular tourism – whose dollars keep economies afloat and historical and architectural preservation financially viable – cannot remain a bystander when summer heatwaves undermine, damage or devour pristine forests and historical landmarks.

### **Loss of Religious Icons**

In the last days of July 2023, media reports described a hellish nightmare of climate induced wildfires in southern Italy caused by a combination of extreme heat and gale force winds. One popular holiday spot affected was Sicily. This was the high season

of summer tourism, but the island's visitors had to be hastily evacuated when flights were allowed through Sicily's main Palermo airport.

More importantly, the fires burned historic sites such as the [church of Santa Maria di Gesù](#). Interred within the church was the incorrupt body of [St Benedict of Palermo](#), a figure revered by generations of Latin American Catholics and Catholics of African descent from both the Americas. Another hallowed casualty in the same church was the body of the architect who built Santa Maria di Gesù in 1426, Blessed Mateo Guimerà.

For Catholic Christians, the good omen portended by these luminaries, cannot be underestimated. Religion channelled through charismatic persons has always inspired the faithful. And in Catholicism, the burial of a figure that has attained sainthood marks a biblical promise that the Church venerates charitable sacrifices on earth. Additionally, the fiery destruction of any object or body with divine status raises huge symbolic red flags: did the stewards or custodians of religious bodies do enough?

### **Religion Aiding Preservation of Ecology**

Italy's civil protection minister, Nello Musumeci, reacted to the events of late July with these [observations](#): "Climate change is not just a contingency and Italy must realise that it now has a tropical climate. On the one hand, we are paying the price of climate change, to which we should have paid more attention several years ago, and on the other, of infrastructure that does not seem to be totally adequate for the new context".

What is this inadequacy vis-a-vis the "new context"? Christianity, whether under the label of Catholicism or Protestantism, has always narrated humankind's presence on earth in terms of stewardship. It is not only the Christian faiths that behove humankind to be proper stewards and responsible fellow beings in the wider scheme of nature and what is natural. Almost all major religions in the world do likewise.

Hinduism seeks to see the divine in all life forms and elements of nature – including rivers, forests and mountains, which can be sacred places for Hindus – as abodes of God or as transmitters and evidence of God's benevolence. A similar philosophy can be found in Buddhism, where [nature and humankind are in harmony](#) and the interdependence between them is acknowledged. Islam, too, speaks of [humankind's stewardship over nature](#), and where nature's beauty and perfection are seen as evidence of God's existence and majesty.

It is possible then to invoke religiously inspired environmental stewardship – expressed as "caring for nature as divine responsibility" – when one discusses climate change. And along with that, to enlist the help of tourists who visit sites of religious significance, as environmental actors to manage the climate crisis. They can energise policy efforts to preserve eco systems across national boundaries and support the work of government and non-government organisations. A heightened sense of urgency in mitigating climate change is essential going forward.

### **Tourists as Environmental Actors**

Many tourists in Sicily tried to help the locals blunt the rapid advance of the wildfires

using pails, utensils and hoses. This is commendable, but there were also those seeking the safety of evacuation flights and depending on the locals to nurse their heat exhaustion and other temperature-linked ailments.

In the case of the fires on Maui Island in Hawaii, tourists behaved indifferently towards the locals who lost their homes and businesses in the great fire that destroyed the coastal town of Lahaina. Many affected Mauians escaped with meagre possessions and sought refuge in the nearest “safe” hotel facilities. Instead of finding humanitarian solidarity amidst the disaster, media reports suggested the Mauians were left very much on their own while some tourists were still making the most of their snorkelling jaunts.

Clearly, if these incidents are to be reprised at every holiday destination, then UN resolution 17/178, adopted on 14 December 2022, on the interdependence between sustainable development, environmental protection, and responsible tourism, is not being heeded. How is the spirit of environmental stewardship to be built up?

One practical step is for the authorities in the respective touristic destinations to encourage visitors to imbibe briefings by local guides as to how climate change can degrade the visitors’ experience of local landmarks. Thereafter, the visitors should tread with care around the relevant sites and develop empathy with the noble cause of preserving local history and its attendant local lifestyles.

Additionally, local communities can impose a tourism environmental surcharge to defray the cost of maintaining local landmarks whether these are religious or secular attractions, and to provide for emergency requisition on an *ad hoc* basis for basic humanitarian relief. This can be categorised as an extension of existing tourist taxes on hotel rooms as in Malaysia, aviation fuel levy covered within airline taxes, or non-resident service fees/admission tickets for entry into museums and facilities as already practised in various European cities. All these can be justified in terms of protection against damage from climate change and ecological preservation. Through such measures, a culture of practical environmental stewardship can be developed.

### **Human Security via Religion and Tourism**

Human insecurity is alas upon us whether we encounter it via mosques, churches, or temples, or even hotels and resorts. Fires burn the inheritance of countless human generations without mercy. Fires can count as potential signals of Providential disfavour. And ultimately, life on Planet Earth cannot be defined against the ideal of hedonistic mass tourism and consumption without acknowledging any moral interdependence with the locals in a world with porous borders.

It is thus with a mixture of admonition and hope that the fires of the northern summer of 2023 should be remembered as a call for all to act on our collective conscience, and to become responsible travellers in what should be a “world without strangers”, as one popular garment label once dubbed the “globalisation” of the human condition.

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