

Indigenous Spirituality and Sustainable Development

Frans Wijsen & Jorge Castillo Guerra
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Since 2002 the Chair of World Christianity and Interreligious Relations has taught a course on Indigenous Spirituality and Sustainable Development annually. After a clarification of the key concepts in the first session, the relation between indigenous spirituality and sustainable development is explored in five case studies of two sessions each (instruction by a lecturer and feed-back by the students). The case studies are:

- Indigenous spirituality and law
- Indigenous spirituality and business
- Indigenous spirituality and medicine
- Indigenous spirituality and agriculture
- Indigenous spirituality and governance.

During the last session we draw conclusions concerning the relation between indigenous spirituality and sustainable development. The conclusions thus far are:

- Most students start with the presumption that indigenous spiritualities revive in the global world as alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation. They come to understand that there is not only a resurgence of indigenous spirituality, but to a large extent an ‘invention’ of it.
- Most students start with the conviction that indigenous spirituality is a source for sustainable development. They take for granted that indigenous spirituality is cosmic, integral, and holistic, that primal religions are man- and nature-friendly. During the module they come to understand that indigenous spirituality is an ambiguous reality that has possibilities but also constraints in view of sustainable development. Case studies show that one cannot generalize.
- Students come to understand that indigenous spiritualities operate at the micro level of society. However, most attacks on sustainability come from global trends. Therefore, actions on the micro level of society, e.g. promoting indigenous spiritualities for environmental care, are not enough to make a difference. There must be a dialectical relation between local level (micro) and global level (macro) strategies.
- Last but not least students come to understand that promoting sustainable development requires an integrated approach. In most non-Western cultures religion is not a separate domain but goes through all life-spheres: health care, land rights, social (e.g. gender) relations, management and governance. Strategies to promote sustainable development are most effective when all these spheres of life are taken into account.