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Paper

Education for Sustainable Development and Human Rights Education. Spiritual Dimensions.

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Abstract

Planetary environmental crises are without doubt a human rights issue. This is mirrored in official UN documents and decisions. They range from the Ksentini Report on Human Rights and Environment (1994) to the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on the right to a clean and healthy environment (2012) and the explicit recognition of this right in resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council (2021) and the UN General Assembly (2022). In 2021, the Human Rights Council appointed a Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change. Also, a large number of academic articles and books deal with the connection between “human rights and the environment” (e.g. Knox and Pejan 2005, Shelton 2011; Kaime 2018, Barber and May 2023, Lupin 2023) and “human rights and climate change” (e.g. Wewerike-Singh 2019, Jegede and Adejonwo 2022, Nordlander 2023; see also the Journal of Human Rights and Environment, since 2010).

One major topic in this discussion centers on human rights anthropocentrism and the call for recognizing the rights of animals (e.g. Ladwig 2020) or nature (e.g. Boyd 2017) or at least for a kind of “enlightened anthropocentrism” in the sense of which human rights are based on the necessary assumption of a comprehensive responsibility that can only be shared among humans, but whose scope also includes non-human living beings and ecosystems (Bielefeldt 2021).

This lively and controversial debate implies theological and spiritual aspects (e.g. Linzey 2009; Phelps 2002; Rollin 2010) and has only recently come into the focus of educational research and discussion (e.g. Fritzsche 2017; Savić 2017). The paper will offer conceptual perspectives on how to fruitfully correlate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Human Rights Education (HRE) and will show how this correlation can be supported by theological perspective and spiritual practice. It will demonstrate that ESD as well as HRE can be enhanced by the spiritual attitude that humans share a common stewardship and responsibility for each other as well as for animals and the non-human creation – which is more than just an “environment” but has a dignity of its own.

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