

Freedom to Be

***Dialogues on Freedom of Religion
or Belief for Indigenous Peoples***



**Center for
Earth Ethics**

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ON THE COVER: Grandmother Mona Polacca, Havasupai, Hopi and Tewa elder, at Havasu Falls.
Photo courtesy of Mona Polacca/Grandmother Wisdom Project.



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Lastly, but not least, thank you to all the co-sponsors of the Freedom to Be Dialogues, whose presence, contributions and support made this program series a great success including the American Indian Law Alliance, Union Theological Seminary, United Nations Special Procedures, NGO Committee on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Inclusive Conservation Academy, Project Access Indigenous Partnership, United Confederation of Taíno People, Tribal Link Foundation and Climate Heritage.

Introduction

ON OCTOBER 26, 2022, the Center for Earth Ethics convened an event at our home at Union Theological Seminary in New York about an extraordinary United Nations report. The then UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, and his extraordinary team marshalled their expertise, talent and resources toward an inquiry into how that particular concept and mandate—freedom of religion or belief—applies to the world’s Indigenous Peoples. The result is a powerful piece of work that conveys profound insights about the social constructs of “religion” and “belief” themselves, as well as the witness and insights of Indigenous communities who have endured genocide, oppression, discrimination and disrespect of their ways of life. It makes clear that within these Indigenous spiritualities and lifeways are means through which they are guardians of the natural world and the health of the planet we all share.

One reason why we were so honored to provide a platform for this ongoing conversation is that its themes are essential to our founding purpose. The cornerstone of the Center for Earth Ethics was laid in September 2014, when Indigenous communities brought messages to “Religions for the Earth,” a conference at Union Theological Seminary. The conference’s goal was to “reframe climate change as a moral issue and galvanize faith-based action to confront” it.^[1] We learned from Indigenous Peoples to look deeper into the root causes of climate change and fearlessly follow the truth. Founded in the wake of that conference, CEE “works to change the prevailing value system from one based on short term monetary gain—no matter the pollution, depletion and inequity that results—to one based on the long term health of the whole community of life.”^[2] We explore the moral and spiritual dimensions of the ecological crisis. We are committed to honor, learn from and support Indigenous Peoples, including uplifting their spiritual and cultural traditions and helping to defend their rights.

The first “Freedom to Be” convening was in person at Union Theological Seminary in the ancestral territory of Lenape Peoples. In addition to remarks from Professor Shaheed and the incoming Special Rapporteur, Nazila Ghanea, it featured voices from the four directions of what is known as Turtle Island. We quickly understood that the topic is so rich that we decided to make it into a series, which eventually featured voices from more than 15 different Indigenous communities across the world.

I want to give special acknowledgment to the moderator for the three virtual sessions, who is also CEE strategic advisor, Roberto Múkaró Borrero of the Guainía (Gwy-nia) Taíno Tribe, an Indigenous People whose traditional homelands extend through the Greater & Lesser Antilles to the Southern tip of Florida in the U.S.

As we close the dialogue process, we recognize it is also a beginning. This work is now in a new phase in which the epic legacies of colonization and empire are coming to the fore, with reactionary force and modern scale. This is a time in which values are being examined and discerned in their most raw form. It is not clear whether human beings will come to an understanding about our place in relation to the rest of the natural world, but it is clear that the stakes are high. There is, now more than ever, a need for what many Indigenous Peoples call the “Original Instructions.” This is not least because they have the power to break through political polarization and help us remember how to be in harmony with the life-support system of this planet. And it is only then that we will be truly free.



The Special Rapporteur's Report

On October 25, 2022, Ahmed Shaheed, who had just completed his term as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, presented the UN General Assembly with “Indigenous Peoples and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief,” a report that highlighted the significant challenges that Indigenous Peoples face globally in practicing their traditional spiritualities. The report cited “historical and ongoing experiences of discrimination, violence, and hostility, even threatening their spiritual, cultural, and physical survival,” often stemming from forced displacement, destruction of sacred sites, and restrictions on traditional ceremonies and languages.^[3] The report emphasized the need for nations to protect and promote the right to exercise Indigenous beliefs freely, acknowledging that Indigenous Peoples’ land and ways of life are deeply intertwined in their spiritual traditions.



A group of women Ifugaos wearing traditional clothes, Banaue, Ifugao, Philippines. (Mavid Studio/Shutterstock)

The report highlighted several key findings:

- **Systematic discrimination:**

Indigenous Peoples face severe, systematic marginalization that impacts their ability to practice their religions freely, including restrictions on sacred rituals, language use and transmission of traditional knowledge.

- **Forced assimilation and displacement:**

Historical and ongoing policies of forced assimilation and displacement from ancestral lands significantly disrupt Indigenous religious practices and connection to sacred sites.

- **Environmental destruction:**

Destruction of natural environments that Indigenous communities consider sacred further infringes on their religious freedom.

- **Violence against defenders:**

Indigenous environmental and human rights defenders often face violence when advocating for the protection of sacred sites and cultural practices.

- **Importance of recognition:**

The international community must recognize the distinctive nature of Indigenous spirituality and respect Indigenous Peoples’ unique religious practices.

- **Interconnectedness of Rights:**

Freedom of religion or belief is deeply interconnected with other human rights, including the right to culture, land and self-determination.

The Report's Recommendations

- **Legal protections:**

Nations should enact and enforce laws explicitly protecting the religious freedom of Indigenous Peoples.

- **Consultation with Indigenous Peoples:**

Meaningful consultation with Indigenous Peoples' communities should be prioritized in decision-making regarding land use and development projects impacting sacred sites.

- **Education and raising awareness:**

Public awareness campaigns should be implemented to educate society about Indigenous religions and the importance of respecting their beliefs.

“Severe, systematic, and systemic discrimination and marginalization affects Indigenous Peoples' ability to survive, let alone thrive—by exercising their innermost religious or belief convictions.”

—AHMED SHAHEED, *former Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, presentation to the United Nations General Assembly*

The Report's Conclusions

The report concludes that historical and ongoing discrimination and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples severely infringes their ability to practice and fully enjoy their spirituality, culture and traditional knowledge. “Systematic and systemic discrimination makes it difficult for Indigenous Peoples to live, let alone live consistently, with their spirituality,” the report warns.^[4]

In addition, the report recognizes that “the protection of Indigenous Peoples' freedom of religion or belief must take into consideration their distinctive spiritual needs, practices and beliefs through a consultative approach.”^[5] This process must take into account past exclusion and inequality, systematic and systemic discrimination, forced displacement and sedentarization, and, crucially, the use of land.

In all, the report is a call to action for a renewed commitment to protecting Indigenous Peoples' rights, including their freedom of religion or belief, and for nations to take concrete measures to address the challenges Indigenous Peoples face.



An Udege hunter stands at the edge of the ice on the river and tries its strength with a cane. (Alexander Khitrov/Shutterstock)



Dialogues & Findings

Dialogue 1: The 2022 UN Report: Perspectives from the Four Directions of Turtle Island

OCTOBER 26, 2022 – UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, NEW YORK

One day after he presented his report to the UN General Assembly, Professor Shaheed visited Union Theological Seminary to discuss it with an audience that included members of Indigenous communities, seminary faculty, students and other guests. Haudenosaunee Tadodaho Sid Hill^[6] opened the program with a traditional greeting, which included acknowledgement of the Munsee Lenape Peoples, who were present. Frederick Davie, Senior Executive Vice President for Public Theology and Civic Engagement at Union Theological Seminary, who was at the time also a commissioner in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, welcomed the group.

The world needs “a sustained conversation between advocates of freedom of religion or belief and advocates of the rights of Indigenous Peoples,”^[7] said Shaheed, who teaches international law at University of Essex in the U.K. and had just completed his term as special rapporteur of religion or belief. State and non-state actors, he noted, “lack understanding” of Indigenous Peoples, who face unique challenges. “Given the inextricable relationship between the land and the

sacred for many Indigenous Peoples, many believe that restricting access and use of their territories is tantamount to prohibiting spiritual experiences,” he noted.

“Protecting the environment is an important aspect of protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples,” he said. “Indigenous Peoples are often disproportionately vulnerable to environmental crises including climate change, [and] many are uniquely positioned as traditional custodians to use their spiritual and traditional knowledge to sustain nature.”

“The best way to protect nature is to protect the lives of those living there,” he said.

Representatives from North American Indigenous Peoples—from the four directions of Turtle Island—responded and offered reactions to the report.

Betty Lyons (Onondaga Nation, Haudenosaunee Confederacy), president and executive director of the American Indian Law Alliance, found the report “refreshing and maybe very hopeful.” She commended the report’s framing of “how we define and practice” what is called freedom of belief.^[8]

“It is important to understand that the notions of religion and belief are two areas external to us as Indigenous Peoples,” said

Lyons, a former co-chair of CEE’s Advisory Board. “It is not the belief, but our sacred relationships to the natural world, as we breathe in oxygen in our lungs that came from the trees outside.”

Lyons also praised the report’s critique of the Doctrine of Discovery, which has been used to justify the dispossession and destruction of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas.

Bernadette Demientieff (Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich’in), executive director of the Gwich’in Steering Committee, drew a harsh contrast between Indigenous Peoples’ plight in Alaska and what their spirituality calls for. The land is more than a set of resources to be extracted—it is “the place Creator blessed us with,” she said. Yet it is “being turned into an oil field.”

It is imperative to treat the land with the respect it deserves: “You need Nature, you need trees, even dirt... Leave some of the world in the way the Creator wants it,” she said. “Respect our spirituality. We deserve the same respect everyone else has.”

Grandmother Mona Polacca (Havasupai, Hopi and Tewa), a CEE senior fellow, emphasized fundamental aspects of her cosmovision of relationship and



Speakers and participants gathered in James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

reciprocity. “The Original Instructions are our way of life,” she said. “In our sacred relationships, we must always remember that there is a balance that we must maintain.” The “practice of reciprocity” is central. “Give before you take. We take only what we need; we leave some for the rest.”

“Our challenge is what to continue to hold on to, and what are we going to embrace from Western society,” she said. “We have the responsibility as Indigenous Peoples to be the gentle reminder” to the rest of the world.

Former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Francisco Calí Tzay (Maya Kaqchikel, Guatemala) echoed Shaheed’s condemnation of the impacts of “colonization, forced assimilation and dispossession.” And he criticized the “stigmatization or restriction”

of Indigenous spiritual practices and the ongoing refusals to return “ceremonial objects and remains.” “Learning from Indigenous knowledge systems” is imperative, he said.

Nazila Ghanea, a professor of international human rights law at Oxford University who succeeded Shaheed as special rapporteur, described her mandate to protect “the realm of conscience and the freedom that it offers.” She noted that this “is the first time there’s been a stand alone report” on Indigenous Peoples. Now “it’s on the record and in the mandate,” she said.

“The [UN] mandate is being enriched by this [report’s] perspective,” Ghanea said. ■

DIALOGUE 1 SPEAKERS

Frederick A. Davie

Senior Executive Vice President for Public Theology and Civic Engagement, Union Theological Seminary

Bernadette Demientieff

Executive Director, Gwich’in Steering Committee

Nazila Ghanea

UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Professor, University of Oxford

Karenna Gore

Executive Director, Center for Earth Ethics

Tadodaho Sid Hill

Haudenosaunee Confederacy

Betty Lyons

President and Executive Director, American Indian Law Alliance

Mona Polacca

Havasupai, Hopi and Tewa elder

Ahmed Shaheed

Former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Professor, University of Essex Law School

Francisco Calí Tzay

Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Dialogue 2: The Role of Indigenous Spiritualities in Averting Climate Catastrophe

APRIL 25, 2023 – ONLINE

“Why do I have to compartmentalize my Indigenous spirituality?”^[9]

Community organizer and youth leader Carson Kiburo asked this question at “Freedom to Be: The Role of Indigenous Spiritualities in Averting Climate Catastrophe and Safeguarding Planetary Health,” a CEE forum on April 25, 2023. The online meeting, an official side event for the April 2023 meeting in New York of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, explored how traditional Indigenous beliefs relate to ecologically sound cultural practices. The dialogue emphasized the challenges that Indigenous Peoples face in practicing their belief systems and lifeways.

The speakers highlighted the central place of spirituality in the Indigenous experience and worldviews. Anthropologist and activist Qivioq Løvstrøm, who chairs the Human Rights Council of Greenland, pointed out that Indigenous spirituality is “something that we do in our whole body.” There is an “ongoing theme of spirituality in our whole life,” she said.

Indigenous spirituality is a “spiritual and social system,”

agreed Kiburo, who is the executive director of Jamii Asilia Centre in Kenya. Foreign religion “steps away from a sense of belonging,” he said.

The legacy of colonialism is a persistent threat. “I have seen how our Indigenous spirituality has been supplanted by foreign religion that has destroyed our culture and our environment,” said Donato Bumacas, executive director of Kalinga Mission for Indigenous Children and Youth in the Philippines. In the

Philippines, he noted, imposition of Catholicism by the Spanish, Protestantism by Americans, and the rise of new religious groups has profoundly damaged Indigenous Peoples.

In Kenya, Kiburo said, “colonists left about 60 years ago, but the effects are still felt today.” Løvstrøm noted that Indigenous Peoples constitute most of Greenland’s population, and they are “trying to decolonize our history.”

Roberto Múkaro Borrero, *kasike* (chief) of the Guainía Taíno Tribe



Men in ceremony in Kenya, courtesy of the Jamii Asilia Centre.

DIALOGUE 2 SPEAKERS

Roberto Múkaro Borrero

Kasike of the Guainía Taíno Tribe, Strategic Advisor to Center for Earth Ethics

Donato Bumacas

Executive Director, Kalinga Mission for Indigenous Children and Youth (Philippines)

Karenn Gore

Founder and Executive Director, Center for Earth Ethics

Carson Kiburo

Executive Director, Jamii Asilia Centre (Kenya)

Qivioq Løvstrøm

Professor, University of Greenland

“[In Kenya] colonists left about 60 years ago, but the effects are still felt today.”

—CARSON KIBURO, Executive Director, Jamii Asilia Centre



Speakers for Dialogue 2

and a strategic advisor at CEE, noted that Indigenous spiritualities are “tainted by legacies of religions being used as weapons.” “Many Indigenous Peoples report that their original spiritualities are viewed as superstition or witchcraft,” he said. That kind of rhetoric is used to depict Indigenous Peoples as ‘lesser’ and justify oppression and violations of their rights.

In the 2022 report, the Special Rapporteur noted that “spirituality” is the preferred term used by many Indigenous Peoples to characterize their religion or belief. This reflects a lack of an equivalent translation for “religion,” or a delineation between their spirituality and organized religions like Christianity or Islam. Moreover, many Indigenous Peoples face the ongoing traumas of organized

religions being used by colonizers to inflict gross violations against their communities.

Damage to the environment has been another inevitable outcome. “Foreign religions...distanced our religion from the environment,” said Bumacas. “Loss of our culture led to catastrophic deforestation” in the Philippines.

A similar dynamic occurred in Greenland because “Christianity is pretty okay with taking advantage of nature,” said Løvstrøm.

CEE Executive Director Karenn Gore emphasized that state and non-state actors must respond to the challenges and injustices highlighted in the panel by “honoring, learning from and supporting Indigenous Peoples, including uplifting their spiritual and cultural traditions and fighting for their rights.” ■

Dialogue 3: The Role of Culture on Freedom of Religion or Belief for Indigenous Peoples

DECEMBER 6, 2023 – ONLINE

“It is not the form of what we do and how we do it, but the essence that matters. The real importance is in our relationships, our humility, our love and our connection.”^[10]

Laulani Teale of the Kanaka Maoli People in Hawai’i offered this crucial observation during “Freedom to Be: Perspectives on the 2022 UN Report on Indigenous Peoples and the Concept of Freedom of Religion or Belief,” a discussion organized by CEE on December 6, 2023.

Roberto Múkaró Borrero drew upon a key insight in the Special Rapporteur’s report, namely the complexities of the categories of religion and spirituality in relation to Indigenous lifeways. Unlike many Western religions, Indigenous spiritualities are deeply interwoven with cultural traditions and the land itself, rather than being distinct or discrete cultural spheres. Indigenous spirituality “is so much embedded that we might not even ourselves sometimes recognize it as being a manifestation of our spirituality,” said Åsa Larsson Blind of the Sámi Peoples in Sweden. “It’s how we see the world and how we approach our surroundings.”

Pavel Sulyandziga, of the Udege People in Russia, echoed this sentiment. Indigenous spiritual



Udege children gathered, courtesy of Pavel Sulyandziga.

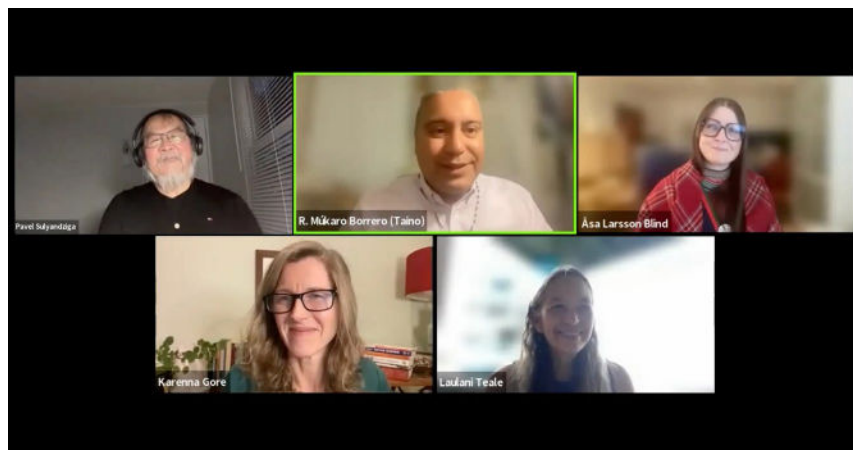
Indigenous spiritualities are not relics of the past, but vital, living traditions that hold the key to ensuring the continued survival of humanity and the species with which we share the planet.

traditions are “very vast, and actually go beyond how we understand the word ‘religion’ today.” As a result, Indigenous spiritualities are often not given the legal protections afforded to the category of “religion.”

This is especially true when it comes to protecting sacred sites, which for many Indigenous communities include the land itself. Panelists shared examples from

their communities of their sacred sites being disrespected and desecrated, often by governmental agencies or extractive industries, with little or no legal recourse.

Traditional ways of protecting sacred sites have not only served a “religious” function for Indigenous communities, but have also aided in safeguarding natural systems that support human and non-human life. Accordingly, the



Speakers for Dialogue 3

desecration of sacred sites often results in grave disruptions not only to sacred ways of life but also to ecosystems.

In reflecting on the Lahaina fires of August 2023, Teale noted that the disaster was fueled by climate change interacting with land mismanagement to create a “tinder-box” of dry non-native grasses. But much deeper spiritual dynamics also were at play. “Lahaina is traditionally a sacred wetland,” she noted, and “the home to a freshwater deity”—Kihawahine. The waters of this sacred wetland were diverted to “fuel golf courses and hotels,” and the fires that resulted were a direct result of the “massive exploitation and desecration of [Kihawahine’s] sacred waters.”

Larsson Blind highlighted Indigenous-led resistance to a proposed solar radiation geo-engineering testing site in Sámi territories. The Sámi opposed this project not just because of this testing’s impact on local ecologies. On a deeper level, the Sámi reject

the assumptions underlying such efforts, namely that “humans are above nature, and are entitled to do as they please, and that they can alter anything to suit modern society.” This is fundamentally the ethos that “has gotten us into the climate crisis and has gotten us into the biodiversity crisis,” she said.

Underpinning all of the comments is the clear schism between Indigenous Peoples and the ambitions of states. Sulyandziga described the Udege People’s long battle to reclaim and protect their traditional homelands of taiga forest in the Bikin River Valley from the Russian government. This effort was ultimately victorious, but there was an “absurd” irony in that money from a foreign bank was used to pay for the Udege buying their land back from Russia for the purpose of carbon sequestration.

Although each speaker came from a vastly different context, a powerful throughline emerged: Indigenous spiritualities are not

DIALOGUE 3 SPEAKERS

Åsa Larsson Blind

Vice president, Saami Council (Sweden)

Roberto Múkaró Borrero

Kasike of the Guainía Taino Tribe, Strategic Advisor to Center for Earth Ethics

Karenni Gore

Founder and Executive Director, Center for Earth Ethics

Pavel Sulyandziga

Indigenous rights activist of the Udege People (Russia)

Laulani Teale

Project Coordinator and Peacemaker, Ho’opae Peace Project (Hawai’i)

relics of the past, but vital, living traditions that hold the key to ensuring the continued survival of humanity and the species with which we share the planet. As Teale noted, “these easily-dismissed practices, deities, and other religious and spiritual elements are the key to turning the tide for humanity, for the care of the earth, for the balance of land, people, animals, plants, waters—all that is sacred, all that is life.” ■

Dialogue 4: Indigenous Perspectives on How the Mainstream Development Model Affects Their Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief

APRIL 24, 2024 – ONLINE

“For me, true development would be the sovereignty to practice our own spirituality, beliefs and rituals. And when we get back these practices, I think we will have the development that we want.”^[1]

Taily Terena (Terena Nation), a land defender, climate advocate and anthropologist of the Brazilian wetlands, offered this counter-narrative to the development model during “Freedom to Be: Indigenous Perspectives on How the Mainstream Development Model Affects Their Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief,” a discussion organized by the Center for Earth Ethics on April 24, 2024.

Terena was in dialogue with Yolanda Teran, a specialist on education, language and biodiversity of the Kichwa Nation of Ecuador, and Roberto Múkaró Borrero, who moderated.

The panelists focused on the inherent disconnect between the Western construct of “religion” and the spiritual lifeways of Indigenous Peoples—a recurring theme throughout the whole Freedom to Be series. “My religion is my culture,” Terena poignantly stated.

Indigenous spiritualities transcend the confines of simple religious doctrine. “Our elders say that every single act that you do in your life is your spirituality,” said Teran.

Further, many Indigenous communities associate “religion” with the traumatic legacy of settler colonial violence. Terena recounted how governmental authorities colluded with Christian missionaries to forbid her community from practicing their culture and spirituality. This suppression was often violent and brutal: in many instances, shamans were burned alive in their own homes. Against this backdrop of violence, stigmatization and alienation, both panelists spoke about the importance of reclaiming and reviving ancestral traditions through intergenerational dialogue.

The destructive impact of mainstream development on Indigenous lands and spiritual practices was central to the discussion. “We don’t recognize this so-called development as sustainable or development,” said Terena. “It is actually invading your lands, poisoning our waters, poisoning the air that we breathe—and this is a barrier for us to practice our spirituality.”

Outside developers, often hiding under a banner of “sustainability,” “don’t pay attention to the people living there, to the animals, to the plants, to the whole ecosystem,” said Teran. “Now, as always, we say: everything is

interconnected—is interrelated. So if you destroy something, even a small thing, you are going to destroy the harmony, the balance.”

Multinational development actors rarely take into account the spiritual and cultural connections that Indigenous communities have with the natural world. They also tend to ignore the existential threat that development poses to Indigenous ways of life.

Terena illustrated this point with a poignant story about Enó Uné, a water deity revered by her community. Due to agro-industrial development and the climate crisis, the lagoon that is Enó Uné’s home is drying up. “We cannot do our practices to honor Enó Uné—because there is no more water to honor her,” she said. “If this lagoon gets totally dry, Enó Uné is not coming anymore—*our spiritual entity is not coming anymore*. So how could you put a price on this?” Enó Uné’s absence is a vivid reminder of the devastation wrought by environmental exploitation in the name of development.

Meanwhile, governments and corporations that designate lands for carbon offsets and sequestration often bar Indigenous Peoples from their ancestral territories in the process. Teran described the



Speakers for Dialogue 4

“suffering” that results from this displacement. “They have denied access to our sacred places,” she said, “to the places where we need to go for praying, for meditating, for crying, for telling Mother Earth what is going on in our lives.”

The spiritual and psychological dimensions of this displacement are compounded when Indigenous Peoples also are cut off from their “ancestral pharmacy.” The UN report alludes to the important physical and spiritual relationships that Indigenous communities have with particular plants. Indigenous beliefs, says the report, are “holistic” and “encompass ‘spiritual ceremonies, but also activities such as hunting, fishing, herding and gathering plants, medicines and foods....’” Furthermore, the report states that “by restricting access to spiritually significant plants, including those with psychoactive properties, Indigenous interlocutors claim that States and international organizations have limited their spiritual practices.”^[12]

Although both panelists emphasized protecting Indigenous relationships with plants, the UN report does not include specific recommendations on how to safeguard these relationships. Further reports from the Special Rapporteur should explore this crucial nexus.

The panelists recommended other ways to strengthen the 2022 report. Terena highlighted the urgent need to address mental health impacts stemming from cultural suppression and the importance of halting cultural appropriation from outsiders who “just steal our knowledge to promote themselves.” Teran called for strengthening international frameworks to protect the “collective rights of Indigenous Peoples and the rights of Mother Earth.”

This event was a powerful reminder that genuine development must transcend narrow metrics of economic growth to preserve cultural and ecological integrity. The resilience and wisdom of Indigenous Peoples—all

DIALOGUE 4 SPEAKERS

Roberto Múkaró Borrero
Kasike of the Guainía Taino Tribe, Strategic Advisor to Center for Earth Ethics

Karenni Gore
Founder and Executive Director, Center for Earth Ethics

Taily Terena
Terena Nation, land defender, climate advocate and anthropologist of the Brazilian wetlands

Yolanda Teran
A specialist on education, language and biodiversity of the Kichwa Nation of Ecuador

too often marginalized, suppressed and ignored in global discussions—are essential in shaping a just future for all.

“How can you put a price on something that is not only related to the land, but to our spiritual practices?” concluded Terena. “How do you put a price on something that is not only damaging my life right now, but will damage the relationship and the connection to spirituality for many generations?” ■



Key Findings from the Dialogues

- 1. Most modern notions of “religion” are inadequate to understand Indigenous spiritualities, which occupy a central place in Indigenous experiences, cultures and worldviews.**
- 2. Indigenous spiritualities are not relics of the past, but vital, living traditions worthy of respect and protection.**
- 3. Indigenous spiritualities and lifeways are excluded from international legal instruments, limiting Indigenous Peoples’ freedom of religion and belief.**
- 4. Both the legacy of colonialism and modern development models threaten to destroy Indigenous spiritualities and lifeways.**
- 5. A return to Indigenous spiritual practices, which often focus on land, has the potential to restore balance and improve life on Earth for everyone.**

A close-up photograph showing a person's hand, with a red and white striped pattern on the sleeve, holding a bundle of green herbs. Below the hand is a wooden bowl containing a smoldering fire. The word "Recommendations" is overlaid in white text on a dark red background.

Recommendations

Elena Pochesneva/Stockphoto

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the “Freedom to Be” series, the participating Indigenous Peoples representatives clearly welcomed and supported the Special Rapporteur’s report, including its recommendations for various stakeholders. The participating Indigenous Peoples resonated with the report’s primary call for holistic, human rights-based solutions to face challenges related to freedom of religion or belief. Most speakers agreed that the term “spirituality” best described what non-Indigenous people might refer to as “religion.” While many noted the challenges associated with producing a report applicable to such a diverse range of traditions, participants recognized that the Special Rapporteur had to speak in generalizations because of the report’s expansive geographic scope.

The Indigenous participants also noted what they perceive to be gaps in the report, proposing recommendations for areas that they felt needed more attention.

Recommendation 1. Build trust between Indigenous Peoples and other actors.

Several participants noted that the report should have emphasized the need to build trust between Indigenous Peoples and other state and non-state actors, including governments, the United Nations, civil society, religious organizations, the private sector, media outlets, museums and cultural centers. Due to past and ongoing injustices, many Indigenous Peoples are reluctant to share details about spiritual practices, sacred sites, or community leaders. Strengthening trust is essential to fostering open dialogue and meaningful collaboration.

“It comes down to trust, because we are colonized people. And speaking from Sámi perspective, we don’t really have trust in revealing our internal, most sacred, parts of our Indigenous communities and our internal societal structure, that we have been able to preserve for us and that hasn’t been broken through colonization.”

—ÅSA LARSSON BLIND, Sámi Peoples

Recommendation 2. Create dedicated funding mechanisms.

Some participants noted that there was a lack of dedicated funding resources or mechanisms to address violations of freedom of religion or belief for Indigenous Peoples. This stands in contrast to the avenues of protection afforded by mainstream religions. Funding can, for example, be used for initiatives to promote religious and interreligious education, support organizations that advocate for religious freedom, and aid individuals facing persecution. It can also fund research into the causes and implications of religious intolerance. Participants strongly supported reparations and restitution from governments, private enterprises, religious institutions, museums and cultural organizations responsible for past harms. While the Special Rapporteur

RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

addressed some of these issues, many felt the report should have used stronger language and further explored mechanisms for accountability given the scale of violations.

Recommendation 3. Recognize and compensate Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous participants emphasized that museums and cultural institutions should acknowledge how they acquired their collections and provide royalties or other support to the communities with whom the objects belong. This idea should be further developed alongside the right to free, prior, and informed consent and efforts to repatriate sacred and spiritually significant items to their communities of origin.^[13] While the Special Rapporteur recommended actions for the private sector, participants called for greater focus on cultural appropriation and commercialization of Indigenous iconography, art and spiritual practices. They also highlighted benefit-sharing as a key area for future discussion.

“On one hand, it was forbidden for us to practice in our own culture, our own spirituality, but on another hand, now with the cultural appropriation of our spiritual practices, many of our practices are now like a hipster thing...”

—DONATO BUMACAS, *Kalinga People*

Recommendation 4. Recognize cultural sovereignty and differences.

Participants acknowledged that some recommendations would be harder to implement in certain countries, reinforcing that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach for Indigenous Peoples. The importance of interreligious dialogue emerged as a common theme, with several participants noting that interfaith convenings are still not a global practice. Many felt that in their homelands, Indigenous leaders were rarely included in these dialogues—and when

they were, it often felt tokenistic. Additionally, one participant called for a “full study on the Doctrine of Discovery” as an important prerequisite for meaningful interreligious dialogue.^[14]

Participants called for the inclusion of the term “cultural sovereignty” in future reports and further exploration of Indigenous Peoples’ collective rights. One participant noted that some of these rights are now enshrined in Ecuador’s constitution, which could serve as a criterion.^[15] They also emphasized the need for capacity building and education for local and national authorities. The lack of formal recognition for many Indigenous groups was highlighted as a critical issue, as it negatively impacts many communities worldwide.

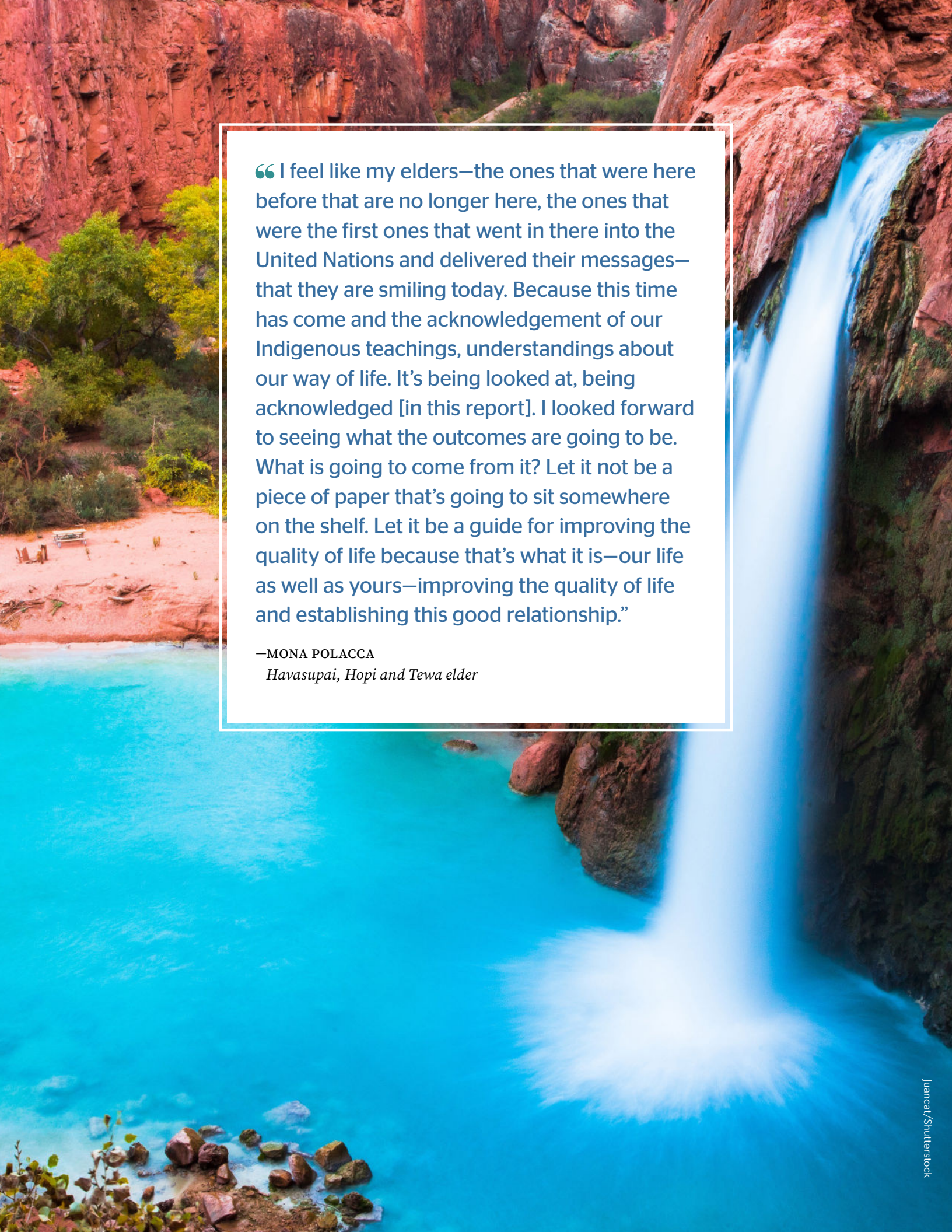
Participants also suggested that “Indigenous Peoples” should be a distinct category in the recommendation section of the report. They emphasized the importance of sharing best practices among Indigenous Peoples’ communities and strengthening Indigenous-to-Indigenous support networks.

Recommendation 5. Expand the conversation to other priorities.

Water insecurity and mental health were identified as key areas for future discussion. Many Indigenous Peoples face significant challenges in accessing potable water, which is deeply connected to spiritual ceremonies and thus infringes on many Indigenous communities’ ability to practice important ceremonies. Likewise, participants noted that restrictions on practicing Indigenous spiritualities contribute to adverse mental health outcomes.

“It would be great if we try and understand how this [report] could be implemented. How can this report be put into practice? In some countries maybe it’s already an ongoing process, if we learn about such actions, it could be a very good lesson for us.”

—PAVEL SULYANDZIGA, *Udege People*



“I feel like my elders—the ones that were here before that are no longer here, the ones that were the first ones that went in there into the United Nations and delivered their messages—that they are smiling today. Because this time has come and the acknowledgement of our Indigenous teachings, understandings about our way of life. It’s being looked at, being acknowledged [in this report]. I looked forward to seeing what the outcomes are going to be. What is going to come from it? Let it not be a piece of paper that’s going to sit somewhere on the shelf. Let it be a guide for improving the quality of life because that’s what it is—our life as well as yours—improving the quality of life and establishing this good relationship.”

—MONA POLACCA

Havasupai, Hopi and Tewa elder

Conclusion

CEE IS DEEPLY GRATEFUL to the Special Rapporteur for advancing this critical conversation. The report is a vital tool for continued advocacy, rendered all the more indispensable in this time of tumultuous political and civic upheaval. The report initiates an overdue discourse within the United Nations system and beyond on “obstacles and opportunities that Indigenous Peoples face in exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief.”^[6] CEE supports its ongoing review, promotion and implementation. This will not only benefit Indigenous Peoples, but—as stated by the Special Rapporteur—will “allow a broader appreciation of what a fuller realization of freedom of religion or belief for all entails.”

Based on our longstanding engagement with Indigenous leaders globally, CEE concurs with the Special Rapporteur that many Indigenous Peoples are routinely excluded from international law instruments that affect them. This dynamic includes, but is not limited to, the right to freedom of religion or belief. Our dialogue participants and audience members echoed the report’s findings of ongoing discrimination, intolerance, invisibility and lack of support mechanisms at various levels. These obstacles hinder Indigenous Peoples’ ability to exercise their basic rights. CEE remains interested in how these barriers intersect with the worsening impacts of environmental destruction and the broader struggle to address the climate crisis.

CEE notes that the esteemed Indigenous participants throughout the “Freedom to Be” series overwhelmingly welcomed and supported the insights and recommendations contained in the Special Rapporteur’s report. CEE joins with our Indigenous partners in supporting the Special Rapporteur’s recommendations and commits to:

1. Promote and encourage interfaith dialogue that includes and centers Indigenous voices wherever possible. This not only redresses a longstanding exclusion, but also provides vital knowledge that is helpful to facing and overcoming ecological issues, such as biodiversity loss, water mismanagement and climate change.
2. Continue supporting advocacy, monitoring and reporting with the aim of holding states and non-state actors accountable for violations of rights of Indigenous Peoples.
3. Support legislative and policy reform focused on restoring Indigenous Peoples’ stewardship of their sacred sites.
4. Promote the Special Rapporteur’s report and engage with UN “special procedures” to ensure attention to this issue. This includes exploring partnerships with Indigenous leaders and collaborating with UN bodies such as the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.
5. Continue to explore specific and tangible ways in which we can support the freedom of religion and belief of Indigenous Peoples—for example, in supporting efforts to protect sacred sites, sacred and ceremonial plants and language traditions.
6. Adopt and consult the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a guide for the Center’s work, including its provisions relating to Indigenous spirituality.

Endnotes

- [1] Quoted in “The Climate Crisis is a Matter of the Spirit: A Conversation with Karenni Gore,” Union Theological Seminary, nd. <https://utsnyc.edu/blog/2022/08/29/alum-spotlight-karenni-gore/>
- [2] “Statement of Purpose,” Center for Earth Ethics, nd. <https://centerforearthethics.org/about-us-3/statement-of-purpose/>
- [3] *Indigenous Peoples and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the Commissioner, October 10, 2022. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/514>, pg. 2
- [4] *Ibid.*, pg. 26
- [5] *Ibid.*, pg. 26
- [6] [Tadodaho] is a position given to a chief of the Onondaga Nation who is the spiritual leader of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also known as the Iroquois Nations. The Tadodaho can also call together a grand council of the confederacy and confirm its decisions. See “Meet Tadodaho Sid Hill,” 55+, October/November 2015, <https://www.cnyhistory.org/wp-content/themes/oha/press/2015-10-11-55-SH.pdf>.
- [7] Quoted in Timothy Cross, “Our Sacred Relationships to the Natural World: Indigenous Leaders Discuss UN Report on Freedom of Religion or Belief,” Center for Earth Ethics, November 11, 2022. Quotes in this section appear in this summary, which also contains a link to a video recording of the convening. <https://centerforearthethics.org/blog/our-sacred-relationships-to-the-natural-world-indigenous-leaders-discuss-un-report-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief/>
- [8] Lyons’ full remarks are available at “Freedom of Religion or Belief: Betty Lyons’ Remarks on the UN Special Rapporteur’s Report,” Center for Earth Ethics, November 11, 2023. <https://centerforearthethics.org/blog/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-the-thanksgiving-address-and-doctrine-of-discovery-betty-lyons-delivers-remarks-following-the-un-special-rapporteur-report/>
- [9] Quoted in Timothy Cross, “A Spiritual and Social System: Indigenous Leaders Explore Spiritualities, Colonization and the Environment at CEE Forum,” Center for Earth Ethics, May 24, 2023. Quotes in this section appear in this summary, which also contains a link to a video recording of the webinar. <https://centerforearthethics.org/blog/a-spiritual-and-social-system-indigenous-leaders-explore-spiritualities-colonization-and-the-environment-at-cee-forum/>
- [10] Quoted in Ned Joyner, “Spirit and Respect: Indigenous Leaders Explore the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Center for Earth Ethics, December 18, 2023. Quotes in this section appear in this summary, which also contains a link to a video recording of the webinar. <https://centerforearthethics.org/blog/spirit-and-respect-indigenous-leaders-explore-the-right-to-freedom-of-religion-or-belief/>
- [11] Quoted in Ned Joyner, “Beyond Development: ‘Freedom to Be’ Presents Indigenous Perspectives on Spirituality and Progress,” Center for Earth Ethics, May 19, 2024. Quotes in this section appear in this summary, which also contains a link to a video recording of the webinar. <https://centerforearthethics.org/blog/beyond-development-freedom-to-be-presents-indigenous-perspectives-on-spirituality-and-progress/>
- [12] *Indigenous Peoples and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the Commissioner, October 10, 2022. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/514>, pg. 15
- [13] See the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act for some context in the North American region. <https://www.bia.gov/service/nagpra>
- [14] The Doctrine of Discovery is a set of international legal principles, largely developed during the 15th and 16th centuries, that asserted European nations could acquire territory and sovereignty over lands “discovered” by them, provided those lands were unknown to Europeans, unoccupied by Christian princes, or inhabited by people considered “uncivilized”.
- [15] See Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution integrates indigenous values on equality, diversity, reciprocity, and sustainability. Amanda Lenhardt, “Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution Integrates Indigenous Values on Equality, Diversity, Reciprocity, and Sustainability, Pathfinders,” June 6, 2023. <https://www.sdg16.plus/policies/ecuadors-2008-constitution-integrates-indigenous-values-on-equality-diversity-reciprocity-and-sustainability/>
- [16] *Indigenous Peoples and the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief*, Interim report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Human Rights, Office of the Commissioner, October 10, 2022. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/77/514>, pg. 26

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The Center for Earth Ethics (CEE) works at the intersection of values, ethics and ecology to confront the climate crisis. CEE works to change the dominant value system from one based on short-term material gain—no matter the pollution, depletion and inequity that result—to one based on the long-term health of the whole community of life. Through education, convening and advocacy, we engage individuals and communities to raise public consciousness as well as shift policy and culture.

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Indigenous People from all parts of Brazil descend on the capital to protest unjust laws from the government on August 26, 2021.



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