

Religious Environmentalism and Environmental Sustainability in Asia

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Abstract The phase of the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations at the beginning of 2000 has given way to the program of seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) ratified in 2015, to be implemented until 2030. While the number of SDGs is more than twice that of MDGs and more comprehensive in outlook, examination of the individual goals indicates that most if not all of the SDGs are either directly related to environmental sustainability or indirectly concerned with the quality of the environment. This is not surprising because nations have realized, if somewhat late, that human well-being cannot be dissociated from the quality of ecosystems. The escalating global environmental crisis threatens economic and social stability and makes the innate human desire for happiness even more difficult to attain. The issue, moreover, has grown into something that cannot be confined to a single or even a few sectors of society, or that can be adequately addressed by politicians or scientists alone. Rather, achieving environmental sustainability, which is an essential component of the SDGs program, requires an interdisciplinary, dialectical, and dialogical approach involving a diverse collection of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. Political will, social and economic reforms, scientific and technological know-how, and religious and personal commitment are all part of the effort to address the environmental woes of the modern era. The role and contribution of religious systems and traditions for the achievement of SDGs, particularly in Asia, is the focus of this chapter. This chapter aims to present the following: (1) stating the reasons why religion is essential to the aspirations of the SDGs in Asia and (2) exploring how the major religions in Asia can contribute to promoting environmental sustainability by providing a framework for (a) assessing the root cause of environmental destruction; (b) envisioning a religious-based approach to how human beings could relate to the natural environment; and (c) presenting how religion promotes harmonious human-nature relationship through a program of

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self-cultivation and self-transformation. This chapter hopes to demonstrate that the task of achieving the SDGs in Asia is tied with the concern of religion and progress depends greatly on the improved state of human moral and spiritual well-being that religion aims to promote.

Keyword Religion · Environmentalism · Asian cultures · Inter-religious dialogue

Abbreviations

A	Aṅguttara
D	Dīgha Nikāya
Dp	Dhammapada
J	Jātaka
M	Majjhima Nikāya
S	Saṃyutta Nikāya

1 The Relevance of Religion to the Achievement of the SDGs in Asia

In 2010, Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life published the result of its study of the global religious landscape and declared that 84 % of the world population at that time (6.9 billion) had a religious affiliation.¹ The demographic study, which analyzed data from over 2500 censuses in more than 230 countries and territories, found that Christians made up about a third of the world population and Muslims constituted nearly a quarter (1.6 billion). Hindus and Buddhists together almost equaled the number of Muslims (1 billion and 500 million, respectively). In addition to the major religions, more than 400 million people practiced folk religions found in the various continents and regions around the world. While the study found that approximately 16 % (about 1.1 billion) declared to not have religious affiliation, meaning that they did not identify with any particular faith, many of them indicated that they held religious or spiritual beliefs such as in God or some transcendent powers.²

The Pew Research Center also implemented other studies specifically focused on Asia and found quite interesting results. The organization estimates that by 2050, the number of Hindus which constitutes the largest religious group in the Asia-Pacific region will expand to nearly 1.4 billion. Nonetheless, Muslims which presently rank second will eventually overtake Hindus by the middle of the century and number close to 1.5 billion. The vast majority of the Buddhists in the world will

¹Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life (2016a, b),

²Ibid.

still hail from Asia even though the number will slightly drop as time goes on. On the other hand, by mid-century, Christians are expected to grow from 287 million in 2010 to 381 million. At the same time, the number of Asians identifying themselves as belonging to a folk religion will be slightly less than that of Christians. Despite the fluctuations in the rankings, the study projects that by mid-century, the number of Asians who claim a religious affiliation will not have declined. Instead, the size of the religiously unaffiliated group is expected to decrease from 860 million to about 838 million.³

The Asian context, however, warrants some commentary regarding the statistic stating that over 21.2 % of the people on this continent are classified as religiously unaffiliated. No doubt among the hundreds of millions of people who belong to this category are those who live in the hugely populated countries of China, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea and practice different degrees of what in the West is known as Confucianism and Taoism (Daoism). Although the modern-day discipline of religious studies in the West usually classifies the non-theistic traditions of Confucianism and Taoism as religions, people from these cultures often do not. According to Randall L. Nadeau, people in China, home to Confucianism and Taoism, are very likely to deny that they are Confucianist or Taoist and that these are religions at all.⁴ For East Asians, the concept of religion is a relatively new phenomenon, having been imported from the West. The word “religion” itself was first translated into Japanese (*shukyo*) only in the nineteenth century and then later adopted by Chinese scholars in the form of the Mandarin word *zongjiao*.⁵ East Asians often identify themselves as non-religious because they understand religion in the manner transmitted to them to literally mean “institutional teaching” or “school of instruction.” These words conjure up images of something sectarian and organizational.⁶ Nadeau writes, “Since Confucianism is pervasive and diffused—it is the air that Chinese and Japanese breathe, as opposed to a ‘church’ that one joins—Chinese and Japanese do not see Confucianism as a religious entity.”⁷ The other well-known tradition from China, Taoism, is considered by Chinese throughout history to be complementary to Confucianism. They interpenetrate each other so much that these two religious and philosophical systems may be considered two aspects of a single religious tradition.⁸ The fact that there are two distinct traditions called Confucianism and Taoism more reflects the Western classification than something inherently present in the Chinese religious and cultural milieu. Moreover, the fact that Chinese may not readily identify themselves as belonging to a religion called Confucianism or Taoism or to admit that these are religions at all

³Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life (2016a, b).

⁴Nadeau (2014, 21).

⁵The Vietnamese whose culture was profoundly affected by Chinese culture subsequently “Vietnamized” the Chinese word to derive the term “*tôn giáo*.”

⁶Nadeau, *Asian Religions*, 21.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 60.

does not mean that these traditions are not important in their lives. Most Chinese carry out family-oriented rituals rooted in Confucianism and Taoism such as making regular offerings to ancestors even if they do not regard themselves as Confucian or Taoist.⁹ Thus, even though modern scholarly understanding of religion is broad enough to include systems that do not have beliefs in God or gods common in the West, so that various Asian traditions also fall under the category of religion, many Asians may not interpret their beliefs and practices in these ways. The Asian cultural understanding of religion and self-identification may affect the result presented by the Pew survey. In reality, the number of Asians who would be considered “religious adherents” could be much greater than what the census results suggest. Nonetheless, even without these considerations, we see that not only religions continue to be an important part of the life of people all over the world, but also they become increasingly important in the life of people on the continent of Asia, whose population is slightly over 60 % of the entire world.¹⁰

Despite unceasing scientific and technological progress coupled with secularization which prompted many to predict that religion will eventually be wiped out globally, the *homo religiosus* (religious man) of Mircea Eliade still makes up the majority of the world in the first century of the third millennium. While it is uncertain whether neurobiologists will ever definitively discover a “religious gene” that causes human beings to be religious by nature, empirical and historical evidence seems to point to the fundamental and universal nature of religion. No society in the past or present—even the most technologically advanced—is without the presence of religion.¹¹ Religion continues to be important to humanity because human beings always strive to achieve change and transformation in all the dimensions of their life. Scientific and technological advancement reflects transformation at the social and material level. However, the *homo religiosus* does not only seek these types of transformation but aspires to what Frederick Streng calls “ultimate transformation” encompassing the personal, social, political, and the cosmic transformation that changes the very core of the human being. According to Streng, religion serves as the means to this kind of transformation. He writes:

An ultimate transformation is a fundamental change from being caught up in the troubles of common existence (sin, ignorance) to living in such a way that one can cope at the deepest level with those troubles. That capacity for living allows one to experience the most authentic or deepest reality—the ultimate.¹²

⁹Ibid., 4.

¹⁰World Population, accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/world_population.htm.

¹¹One may argue that even in societies where conventional religion is greatly diminished, much of the internalized values essential to the community are those rooted in religion. In other instances, conventional religions are replaced by other ideologies such as nationalism that arguably have some of the same characteristics as religion, such as transcendence and ritual.

¹²Streng (1984, 2).

One might argue that the kind of human transformation facilitated by religion is precisely what is needed in the face of the environmental crisis that threatens to hinder the achievement of the SDGs in Asia. However, religion is not always perceived in this manner. Oftentimes, emphasis is placed on the conflicts that stem from religious differences and intolerance, and how religious violence is the cause for the failure of particular development projects.¹³ The havoc caused by the likes of the Islamic State (IS), Hindu, and Christian fundamentalists has fueled the thinking in the general population and even among academics of various disciplines that religion is particularly violence-prone.¹⁴ Development institutions and agencies, when choosing religious partners, prefer those that are seen as having humanistic leanings without strict creeds and codes.¹⁵ Nonetheless, as religions come in all stripes and forms and play a major part in the lives of the vast majority of the people in the world, on the practical level, they cannot be excluded from an effort such as solving the environmental crisis and promoting environmental sustainability. Religions, as particularly reflected in Catholic social teaching, often emphasize integral development. Pope Francis, for example, states in his 2014 World Day of Peace Message that authentic development is not about “mere technical know-how bereft of ideals and unconcerned with the transcendent dimension of man.”¹⁶ In some ways, religions are well suited for contributing to promoting environmental sustainability because of a number of reasons. The historian Lynn White Jr sees the relevance of religion in addressing the crisis because what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.¹⁷ According to White, “Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.”¹⁸ How we interpret our own story and our destiny and how we relate to other human beings and to nature are all informed by our religious belief.¹⁹ Because of the fundamental role of religious beliefs in human life as “primordial, all-encompassing, and unique” worldviews, they have the ability to mobilize the human will and effort in order to achieve desired transformations.²⁰ E.N. Anderson asserts that “All traditional societies that have succeeded in managing resources well, over time, have done it in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management.”²¹ The Muslim scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, points out that the reality of the vast

¹³Ogbonnaya (2014, 55).

¹⁴Cavanaugh (2009, 4). Although this view of religion is more prevalent in the West, globalization facilitates its transmission to Asia so that Asians may come to view religion and even themselves in a manner previously unthought of.

¹⁵Ogbonnaya *African Catholicism*, 55.

¹⁶Pope Francis (2014).

¹⁷White (1967: 1206).

¹⁸Ibid., 1205.

¹⁹Tucker and Grim (1997, xvi).

²⁰Ibid., xi–xii.

²¹Ibid., xviii.

majority of the peoples of the world still living within a religiously bound universe means that religious ethics remain the most practical vehicle for solving the environmental crisis. Nasr writes:

The fact remains that the vast majority of people in the world do not accept any ethics which does not have a religious foundation. This means in practical terms that if a religious figure, let us say, a *mulla* or a *brahmin* in India or Pakistan, goes to a village and tells the villagers that from the point of view of the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) or the Law of Manu (Hindu law) they are forbidden to cut this tree, many people would accept. But if some graduate from the University of Delhi or Karachi, who is a government official, comes and says, for rational reasons, philosophical and scientific reasons, that it is better not to cut this tree, few would heed his advice.²²

Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay, in a book published by the World Bank, reiterate that intellectual awareness and scientific know-how are not enough to solve the problem. In the decades following a major gathering of representatives of governments, scientific and social institutions, and major nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Stockholm in 1972, much has been done to publicize the truth of the crisis. However, the problem remains and the world is not yet heading out of the dangers.²³ The authors recount that in this first United Nations meeting, scientists made powerful presentations about the consequences of destruction of rain forests by countries who were selling their resources out of poverty and opportunism. The presentations, instead of contributing to assuaging the problem, actually gave ideas to politicians and business people in a number of countries about ways to make money previously unknown to them. After this particular event, the world actually witnessed a jump in forest depletion.²⁴ On the other hand, religious involvement has been seen to be effective in promoting environmental agenda throughout the world. In Tanzania, for example, fishermen on an island off the country's coast changed their fishing methods to a more sustainable habit after they were instructed by their imam that the method they were presently using was destructive to the environment and went against the teaching of the Qur'an. The Muslim religious leader was able to do what government officials and international groups for years tried to accomplish without success.²⁵ The case of the fishermen in Tanzania and many other cases of effective religious intervention in addressing the issues of justice, peace, and environmental sustainability demonstrate that the role of religion cannot be excluded from the discourse on the analysis on globalization and sustainable human and environmental development. Max Stackhouse opines that "The neglect of religion as an ordering, uniting and dividing factor in a number of influential interpretations of globalization is a major cause of misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world."²⁶ As most of the

²²Nasr (2007, 31).

²³Palmer and Finlay (2003, xiv).

²⁴Ibid., xvi.

²⁵Barclay (2007)

²⁶Stackhouse (2007, 57).

major world religions have their origins in Asia, and religion continues to play a vital role in the life of Asians, excluding religious involvement from the effort of achieving the SDGs on the continent is unwise and shortsighted. Fortunately, as religious leaders have begun to take more proactive roles in involving themselves in the environmental discourse, the presence of religion in the conversation has garnered more attention than before. Even in Communist China, there is a resurgence of public interest in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism and how these traditions can affect the course of national development.²⁷ Certainly, the role of religion is not over and against the secular disciplines; rather, religion serves as part of the dialogical and collaborative effort aimed toward devising a multidimensional and effective program of action on behalf of the environment.

2 Religious Framework for Environmental Sustainability in Asia

Religious contribution to promoting environmental sustainability in Asia means that the approach must take into account spiritual and transcendental dimensions inherent to the religious worldview. Religions do not simply address sociological, psychological, scientific, or ethical questions of the matter but attempt to delve into the deepest aspects of human reality in order to uncover areas of darkness, sin, and ignorance that lead to behavior that is both self-destructive and harmful toward others. Religions provide a framework for assessing actions in light of not only our mundane goals and purposes but in the context of our ultimate and long-term desire for authentic happiness whether in this world or in the world beyond. Thus, in the face of contemporary issues, millennia-old religious systems must be examined with creative eyes for fresh insights in order to address the situation. The challenge is to be able to use the religious teachings as an effective resource for promoting environmental sustainability without compromising the integrity of the tradition. As the scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi states:

If any great religion is to acquire a new relevance it must negotiate some very delicate, very difficult balances. It must strike a happy balance between remaining faithful to the seminal insights of its Founder and ancient masters and acquiring the skill and flexibility to formulate these insights in ways that directly link up with the pressing existential demands of old-age. It is only too easy to veer towards one of these extremes at the expense of the other: either to adhere tenaciously to ancient formulas at the expense of present relevance, or to bend fundamental principles so freely that one drains them of their deep spiritual vitality. Above all, I think any religion today must bear in mind an important lesson impressed on us so painfully by past history: the task of religion is to liberate, not to enslave. Its purpose should be to enable its adherents to move towards the realization of the Ultimate Good and to bring the power of this realization to bear upon life in the world.²⁸

²⁷Sawyer (2015): Kindle edition.

²⁸Bhikkhu (1994).

While each religion has its own framework appropriate to its philosophical, spiritual, and, depending on the tradition, theological outlook, in this part of the essay, I would like to propose three functions of religion that can uniquely contribute to the discourse. These include the three points already laid out in the beginning paragraphs of this chapter. This section is not meant to provide an in-depth or a comparative examination of the approach of each religious tradition, rather to illustrate how different religious traditions in Asia can respond to the proposed religious-based framework. The hope is that this cursory investigation demonstrates that the inclusion of religion into the development discourse is not only practical but also foundationally crucial to the present reality.

2.1 Assessment of the Root Cause of the Environmental Crisis

Among the various approaches to diagnosing the environmental crisis, one that is proposed by many environmental ethicists points to the underlying problem as the existence of a militant or strong anthropocentrism leading to a conflict between human beings and nature, ultimately resulting in nature's destruction and demise. On the surface, anthropocentrism sounds harmless enough as it literally means "human-centredness." Eugene Hargrove advocates this particular take on anthropocentrism. Epistemologically, anthropocentrism is unavoidable because the world can only be perceived through the human locatedness.²⁹ Few scholars would argue to the contrary because we cannot perceive any other way. We may try to imagine what it is like to view the world through the eyes of a chimpanzee or a bird as a stimulating intellectual or spiritual exercise, but ultimately, the only reference that we can be confident of is our own; but even with that, there are already plenty of disagreements because points of view among us often fail to coincide. However, environmental ethicists do not take issue with epistemological anthropocentrism so much as ontological anthropocentrism in which human beings are seen as at the center of the universe or at the zenith of all creation. This attitude, environmentalists charge, dangerously leads to normative anthropocentrism in which human beings claim intrinsic value for ourselves, while the rest of nature only has instrumental value. Despite its various nuances, the popular understanding of anthropocentrism, as Katie McShane states, is "the view that the nonhuman world has value only because, and insofar as, it directly or indirectly serves human interests."³⁰ Thus, when the interest of human beings conflicts with that of non-human entities, priority is given to the former at the cost of the latter. This charge was made by Richard Routley in 1973 in his "last man" thought experiment in which the last surviving human being in the world would not be judged as committing any ethical violations

²⁹Hargrove (2003, 175).

³⁰McShane (2007: 170).

if he went about destroying all other living species in order to protect his own survival.³¹

The environmental crisis from this particular perspective stems from the fact that human beings perceive ourselves as ontologically superior to nature and act based upon this understanding. This attitude arises out of a mind-set that separates human beings and nature into an unequal duality and confers on human beings the right to dominate nature and make it subservient to human needs.³² When we turn to religion for an explanation, the analysis differs remarkably from the philosophical approach. Religious traditions tend not to interpret the environmental crisis through a philosophical understanding of the position of human beings vis-à-vis other entities in the world, but through an examination of the internal human psychological and spiritual reality and its impact on external social problems and challenges. Buddhism, for example, divides the human situation into two states: wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*).³³ The root causes of these unwholesome states are greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), while the root causes of the wholesome states are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. All animate life is impelled by these universal forces on an individual as well as collective basis. They are the motive forces behind our thoughts, words, and deeds. Introspection tells us that the unwholesome roots also known as the poisons lead to actions that result in suffering for ourselves and others in a way that contradicts with our inner desire for happiness.³⁴

In basic sense, greed is that mental state in which one is constantly preoccupied with a feeling of need and want because he feels there is a lack in his life, and since his appetite is insatiable, even when he obtains what he has desired, he continues to feel the desire for lasting satisfaction. Hatred, which in the Buddhist sense includes other negative emotions such as disappointment, despair, anxiety, and dejection, also has internal origins representing dissatisfaction toward oneself and others. Finally, delusion can be seen in the form of ignorance (*avijjā*) that leads to confusion and lack of directions. It can also lead to false views that result in ideological dogmatism and fanaticism. These three unwholesome roots manifest themselves in various degrees from mild to extreme. For example, greed may be expressed in a simple wish or in something more serious such as craving and self-indulgence. Similarly, hatred can take the form of mere dislike to something much more serious such as vengefulness and wrath. Delusion can range anywhere from dullness to conceit and ideological dogmatism.³⁵ These three roots are not independent of one another, but are intertwined with one another and may serve as the force to impel one another. According to Buddhism, these three poisons are found in individual mental states. However, the negative consequences are not simply confined to the

³¹Minteer (2008, 60).

³²Servaes (2014)

³³D.III.275.

³⁴Thera (2008, 4).

³⁵Ibid., 5.

individual, but play out on the collective level as well. A person's sense of hatred for another could lead to tribal violence and international wars. A company executive's greed could impel him to carry out business practices that promote overconsumption and materialism among the general population. This is not so difficult to see with the bombardment of advertisements every time we turn on the television, go online, or drive down the street. This situation is not limited to any particular socio-religio-cultural context. Whether in Western capitalist New York or Eastern Buddhist Bangkok, the consumer culture is strong and is the engine that makes the world goes round.

Personal and social problems in the Buddhist perspective, therefore, all have their root causes in ignorance stemming from greed, hatred, and delusion. The root cause of the environmental crisis, then, must also be considered in this Buddhist approach that diagnoses the problem from a human ethical and spiritual outlook. Pragati Sahni contends that:

As long as the mind is influenced by the three unwholesome principles of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha* or greed, hatred and delusion the human race will be stricken by environmental and other forms of exploitation, as well as selfish actions, greedy consumer cultures, dissatisfaction and other attitudes that can be looked upon as vices.³⁶

Likewise, the late Thai monk Buddhadasa would remark that climate change and other imbalances in nature being experienced at this time is a result of an internal human moral degeneration that affects the external dimension of the world.³⁷ The breakdown in human-nature relationship is reflected in the actions and activities motivated by the three poisons that promote one-sided interests without due consideration for the well-being of others, whether it is fellow human beings or the natural environment. Philip Cafaro identifies three ways that greed brings about detrimental effects to the environment.³⁸ First, environmental standards are breeched when businesses have greed as their driving motivation. In order to maximize profit, businesses can easily refuse to spend money on methods and instruments to safely eliminate chemicals and wastes that are produced by their factories so as not to pollute the lakes, rivers, and air that serve the needs of human beings, animals, and plants. Second, greed can undermine the democratic process. This is most clearly seen when government leaders, in order to reap personal gains, engage in acts of corruption such as instituting laws and policies that grant privileges to entities that are in the business of making money through environmentally destructive means. Third, greed is the engine that drives overconsumption. Although overconsumption is by no means a modern phenomenon having been observed since the prehistoric era, its intensification and acceleration are notable in

³⁶Sahni (2007, 165).

³⁷Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's ideas come from a number of works (Bhikkhu 2003, 2012) that have been compiled and translated by Grant A. Olson. Olson gives the title of his translation "A Notion of Buddhist Ecology." In addition to the negative effect on nature, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu asserts that internal degeneration hinders spiritual progress.

³⁸Cafaro (2005, 148–149).

the twentieth century due to multiple factors including scientific advancements alongside drastically changed social and spiritual values.³⁹ Due to the desire for many things, people try obtain possessions that they do not really need. Companies try to maximize their profit by selling as much of a product as possible. In order to make even more profit, these same companies have to continually put out new products and they will try to convince consumers that they must have these, even though what they have been using previously is perfectly good. At the same time, competing companies also release similar products, and again consumers are told that these are better than the other ones, either in quality or in price. Overconsumption harms nature severely because in order to produce all the things that supposedly satisfy human needs, an exorbitant quantity of non-renewable natural resources must be used.

The environment can also be harmed equally by hatred that human individuals and groups display when they institute aggressive policies that aim to protect selfish economic interests. A country or organization may employ imperialistic or oppressive tactics in order to acquire control or monopoly of natural resources to which they will exploit for economic gains. As a result, entire oil fields can be depleted and entire forests can be laid barren so that company executives and government officials can line their pockets with vast sums of money. While hatred in this militant form is obvious, there are also more subtle forms of hatred, which may not readily be perceived as such. An example of a subtle form of hatred is apathy. Even though when people are told of the immanent dangers to the environment which witnesses the rapid loss of species, the depletion of forests, and the pollution of rivers and the air, they display superficial concern but do little to change their own behavior which contributes to this destruction in the first place. In a sense, apathy could be considered a passive form of hatred that collectively contributes to environmental destruction no less than the militant expressions of hatred. In addition to apathy, one can point to negligence or simply a lack of concern as manifestations of hatred, because these attitudes also express a negative disposition toward the other. While militancy may be limited to notorious individuals, groups, organizations, or governments, apathy, negligence, and lack of concern are prevalent in the great majority of the people. This makes all people susceptible to blame when it comes to the root cause of the environmental crisis.

Delusion in the Buddhist framework is certainly a driving force behind the environmental crisis since it is the foundation for the other two unwholesome states. Sometimes referred to as ignorance or possessing false views, this is a condition where people become attached to material things, thinking that they will bring about lasting happiness for them, not realizing that all things are impermanent. Ignorance is also seen in how people with expensive possessions such as cars, homes, and mobile phones are accorded higher social status. This phenomenon, then, becomes the model for how individuals in society behave and serves as the goal that all should attain to. Thus, armed with this delusion, we keep on hoarding

³⁹Meinhold (2011, 1186).

and seeking without ever attaining the satisfaction that we long for, and the search goes on. Delusion or ignorance is also played out on a social level when it is believed that in real development, economic growth is the measure of national good, that high levels of production and consumption signify higher well-being, and that the importance of unceasing GDP growth trumps sustainability.⁴⁰ Delusion in the form of having false views can also be manifested in other ways when it comes to the environmental crisis. For example, individuals and groups do not have adequate knowledge of the problem or misunderstand the issues due to absorbing one-sided information from governmental agencies or interest groups. Ignorance can be a result of denial of the magnitude of the problem based on shortsighted empirical experiences that one has without considering the larger scope of what is going on. Just because one experiences a colder-than-normal winter in a particular year, it does not mean that one has adequate evidence to reject the claim that global warming is in fact taking place. Delusion can result from ideological notions supporting the stance that human beings can exercise absolute dominion over nature according to some sort of divine ordination. Likewise, delusion can be the thinking that problems will eventually be fixed if scientists can think of clever ways to solve issues. While science does indeed play an important role in rectifying the situation, scientific solutions are only part of the overall program of action. Ultimately, it depends on everyone's commitment to change their ways and habits for the better.

The religious framework for assessing the environmental crisis as demonstrated through the approach of Buddhism, therefore, looks into the deeper reality of human moral and spiritual degeneration. The state of ignorance emphasized in traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism finds its equivalence in the state of sin in Christianity and Islam. This state of ignorance and sin manifests itself in our relational lives with others, including the natural environment. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew stated:

For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life—these are sins.⁴¹

The environmental sins which Bartholomew mentioned reflect part of what Pope John Paul II continually emphasized throughout his papacy—the culture of death. For Pope John Paul II, the culture of death includes not only the lack of respect for human life in all its stages but also the lack of respect for nature. In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, he writes:

Nature itself, from being “mater” (mother), is now reduced to being “matter”, and is subjected to every kind of manipulation. This is the direction in which a certain technical and scientific way of thinking, prevalent in present-day culture, appears to be leading when

⁴⁰Ives (2013: 546).

⁴¹Quoted in Pope Francis (2015, 8).

it rejects the very idea that there is a truth of creation which must be acknowledged, or a plan of God for life which must be respected.⁴²

Catholic social teaching as presented by Pope John Paul II asserts that those factors that contribute to the lack of peace are not just regional conflicts, abortion, poverty, and the like but also the “*lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources.*”⁴³ Similar to the other social problems, the ecological crisis, says the Pope, is a moral issue reflecting a disharmonious relationship between humanity and God. “If man is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace.”⁴⁴ Addressing the environmental crisis and issues of sustainability in the Christian framework, as in other religious systems, therefore, must first and foremost begin with realizing human spiritual failures before devising ways to rectify this situation such as implementing ecological education, taking international action, and instituting structural reforms. Only when human spiritual issues have been addressed, do the means provided by the disciplines of science, politics, economics, etc., can be wisely employed to achieve the desired results for the well-being of humanity and the environment.

2.2 *Paradigm of Human-Nature Relationship in Religious Approach*

In the previous section, normative anthropocentrism was blamed for the modern-day environmental crisis. In this anthropocentric worldview, human beings see themselves as the loci of value and perception, while all other things, including other life forms, only have value relative to how they serve the interest of human beings.⁴⁵ On the individual level, anthropocentrism is comparable with an ego-centric nature, which makes one self-centered, narrow-minded, and inequitable.⁴⁶ When human beings act strongly anthropocentric, their actions can become the cause for ill-treatment of animals and wanton destruction of nature to satisfy their own needs. Even when human beings attempt to control their decision-making process by carefully examining their felt and considered preferences taking into account a worldview derived from sound aesthetic and moral ideals, and sound scientific theories, as well as a metaphysical framework that interprets these theories,⁴⁷ there is no guarantee that when push comes to shove, nature will not lose out to the interest of human beings. A natural and seemingly reasonable reaction to the potentially destructive anthropocentrism is a paradigm that helps humans to see

⁴²Pope John Paul II (2016)

⁴³Pope John Paul II (1990).

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Callicott (1984: 299).

⁴⁶Sahni (2007, 80).

⁴⁷Norton (1984: 134).

themselves not as being above, apart, or removed from nature, rather as one of the entities in nature, existing within nature in an egalitarian interrelatedness. In this worldview, nature itself has intrinsic value independent of human beings' valuation and regardless of whether it can serve their needs and interests. Deep ecology, and ecophilosophy advanced by Arne Naess, represents the holistic ecocentric perspective. Based on this ecophilosophy, human beings are encouraged to attain self-realization, a state in which they understand that they are not autonomous individuals, but fully aware that they are self-in-Self, the capital Self being nature, and the human person is but a node in the intricate web of nature.⁴⁸ The ethical imperative is that human beings must accord respect to nature and must not interfere in the workings of nature or upset its ecological equilibrium. Not only is Naess' ecophilosophy an attempt to break away from anthropocentric tendencies, but other philosophies that lean toward naturalism also set out to do the same.

These two positions present a conflict of interest because the ecocentric worldview attempts to take human beings out of the position of superiority and dominance over nature which they have been well accustomed to with continual advancement in human technological capability. Nonetheless, human beings are not always willing to simply be a small branch on the gigantic tree of existence. The result is a dichotomy between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. The former places human beings in direct opposition to the natural world, while the latter reduces human beings to simply one among equals. Needless to say, not all adherents to religion accept the latter approach. The question worth considering is whether rejecting ecocentrism necessarily means default acceptance of extreme anthropocentrism, which condones oppression and destruction. Religious perspectives assert that there need not be a dichotomy between anthropocentric egotism and radical ecocentric egalitarianism. Scholars from the Abrahamic traditions comprising of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe the resources available to these traditions make it possible to envision a different kind of human-nature relationship paradigm. It must be noted, as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has done, that if one were to choose to speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition instead of considering each tradition independently, then one must also include Islam since these three make up the Abrahamic family.⁴⁹ The mentioned dichotomy can be averted by considering human-nature relationship not in isolation but also in view of their relationship with God. The paradigm that replaces the two-term metaphysics (human being vs. nature) with a three-term one comprising of human beings, nature, and God is neither anthropocentric nor ecocentric, but theocentric. In this three-term metaphysics, it is not a matter of man subject nature object or vice versa, but it is God over human being and God over nature, with the two objects of human being and nature in a mutual relationship subjected to God as the creator.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Choi (2009: 168).

⁴⁹Nasr (1992, 96).

⁵⁰Hoffman and Sandelands (2005: 150).

The basis for this tree-term metaphysics is derived from the Book of Genesis (canonical to both Judaism and Christianity), affirming that it was God who created both human being and nature and pronounced them to be good. The first creation myth relates that God created everything in the physical universe, including human beings, in the span of six days. In this theocentric paradigm, human beings and nature are no longer placed in positions of one over the other, but are both placed under mutual relationship enjoined together by the same creator. Like the other two Abrahamic traditions, Islam considers only the power of Allah to be absolute because he is the sole creator of the universe.

God is the One Who raised the heavens without a pillar as you can see. Then He established his control over the realm and made the sun and moon subservient to Him. Each of them will remain in motion for an appointed time. He regulates all affairs and explains the evidence (of His existence so that perhaps you will be certain of your meeting with your Lord. (Qur'an 12:2)

This kind of understanding allows for perception of nature no longer as something to be dominated over, to be investigated and exploited, and to be made to serve the interest of human beings at any cost. Rather, the relationship between human being and nature becomes one of sibling belonging to the same father. The appreciation of this fraternal relationship could be seen in the way St. Francis of Assisi related to the natural entities around him. In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, he reworked the symbolic images from Psalm 148 and Daniel 3:57–88 to paint a cosmological picture in which aspects of nature—sun, moon, water, air, and so forth—are joined with human beings in intimate brotherly and sisterly relationships all in praise of God. For Francis, before God, human beings and nature were not antagonists but members in a harmonious community of God's creatures. In *The Life of St. Francis*, Bonaventure wrote:

When he considered the primordial source of all things, he was filled with even more abundant piety, calling creatures, no matter how small, by the name of brother or sister, because he knew they had the same source as himself.⁵¹

Francis and the Franciscan tradition has always held creation to be of moral, theological, and religious significance because not only creation reflects God, communicates God, and can help human beings to understand God, but it can also praise God independent of human beings.⁵² The praising of God by his creatures is not particular to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Qur'an also depicts God's creatures as not just inanimate objects but filled with spirit and purpose.⁵³ Verse 17:44 states:

The seven heavens, the earth, and whatever is between them all glorify Him. There is nothing that does not glorify Him and always praise him, but you do not understand their praise and glorification. He is All-forgiving and All-forgiving.

⁵¹Bonaventure (1978, 250).

⁵²Warner (2001: 154).

⁵³Jusoff and Samah (2011: 46).

The goodness in nature which finds affirmation in the holy books of the Abrahamic traditions is also developed in the Catholic patristic tradition. Ecotheologian Jame Schaeffer has done a thorough examination of writings by patristic and medieval theologians and found abundant materials that affirm the goodness of God's creation.⁵⁴ According to Schaeffer, Christian theologians taught that all the animate and inanimate things in the universe which God created were deemed to have goodness and value. For example, in his *Nature of the Good*, Augustine of Hippo recognized "generic good things to be found in all that God has created, whether spirit or body." As for Chrysostom, reflecting on Genesis 1, he argued that since God has already deemed each type of creature to be good, no one could conclude otherwise. Thomas Aquinas likewise argued for the goodness of creatures because they had God as their ultimate source of existence.

The adoption of this perception of nature requires a cognitive shift that replaces the old paradigms of "man and nature" or "man in nature" to "man and nature in God."⁵⁵ Human engagement with nature ceases to be antagonistic and instead carried out as act of collaboration with God on behalf of nature with which human destiny is intertwined. The ethic of stewardship has its starting point in this paradigm shift. The canonical support for stewardship ethic comes from examining the two creation stories in Genesis.⁵⁶ In the first story, human is depicted as being created in God's image and allowed "have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (ESV Genesis 1:26–27). However, in the second creation story (Genesis 2:7), God created human being by molding the dust of the earth. The Lord God formed a man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being. Having created human being from dust, God then gave the command to "cultivate" and "care" for the land (Gen 2:15), the same land from which human being was molded.

From these two creation stories, one in which human being is depicted as created in the image of God, and the other in which human being originated from the ground, Philip Hufner developed the notion of "the created co-creator."⁵⁷ The term "the created" points to the position of human being as a creation of God, who also created all of nature. Being "the created" and molded from dust, human being is interconnected with nature. In fact, in Genesis, human beings are reminded that they will return to the ground from which they arose. "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (ESV Genesis 3:19).

On the other hand, human beings, being made *imago dei* is also the "co-creator," not in the sense that they are in a position to dominate nature and exploit it however they please, but that they are charged with the responsibility to care for the

⁵⁴Schaefer (2005: 786–803).

⁵⁵Hoffman and Sandelands (2005, 153).

⁵⁶Huyn, "Interreligious Dialogue," 182.

⁵⁷Ibid, 183.

environment on behalf of God. Biblical scholars assert the terms “image” (*selem*) and “likeness” (*demut*) of God in the creation story refer to the role of human beings as reminders of God’s presence in the world so as to command respect for God’s authority. As mere symbols of God’s presence, any notion of subjugation (*kabash*) or dominion over (*radah*) the earth in Genesis 1:28 can only be interpreted as relative rather than absolute power. The mandate of dominion over nature, therefore, is not a license to exercise unrestricted domination over creation. Rather, human beings play a role more like stewards in the household of God. Douglas Hall defines the steward as the “one who has been given the responsibility for the management and service of something belonging to another, and his office presupposes a particular kind of trust on the part of the owner or master.”⁵⁸ The steward assumes his role and responsibility with an attitude of living out a vocation of representing God in the world in order to care for the earth in a relation of kinship.

In the Islamic tradition, the notion of stewardship finds its equivalence in the principle of Khalifa or trusteeship. The Khalifa is a position of vicegerency or stewardship on earth entrusted by God.⁵⁹ The establishment of this trusteeship is stated in the Qur’an, “Ah lo! Your Sustainer said to the angels: Behold, I am about to establish upon earth a Khalifa” (2:30). In verse 6:167, Allah pronounces: “It is He Who appointed you Khalifs on this earth.” In the Qur’an, the word Khalifa and its plural form are referred to nine times. Of these, seven times made references to the relationship between a person, people, or human kind in general and the earth or the planet.⁶⁰

The Islamic conception of vicegerency is applied to all the dimensions of human life in which human beings are judged on how they exercise authority over those things entrusted to their stewardship.⁶¹ Muslim environmental scholars assert that stewardship of nature falls within this responsibility. Similar to Christian stewardship, the principle of Khalifa does not condone dictatorial attitudes toward the other or the use of natural resources that are wasteful and not in harmony with the will of the creator.⁶² As Nasr declares, “In Islamic eyes, only the Absolute is absolute.”⁶³ Rather, implementation of the responsibility requires creativity and perseverance.⁶⁴ In Islam, it is said that after Allah created the world, various creatures were asked to take on the position of trusteeship. However, none of them accepted the offer because it was seen to be too burdensome. Human beings, however, accepted Allah’s request for someone to take on the onerous task.

⁵⁸Cited in Butkus (2002: 20).

⁵⁹Gada (2014: 134).

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Nasr, “Islam,” 95.

⁶⁴Jusoff and Sahman (2011, 57).

Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Lo! he hath proved a tyrant and a fool (33:72).

The theocentric paradigm of the Abrahamic traditions, therefore, contributes to the formulation of a practical environmental ethic by forswearing the dichotomy between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. It is no longer a question of whether human is over nature or nature is over human, but a question of how the integrity of nature can be preserved through the effort of humanity to carry out the mandates of God. Human awareness of this mandate is the basis for the ethic of stewardship to respond to the question of ultimately who is responsible for environmental sustainability. In the end, it must be humanity that takes action on behalf of nature if environmental concerns are to be resolved. This ethical responsibility, moreover, is not grounded in human will but in the demand of God, which ensures that it will be taken seriously by adherents of the religion. As Hans Küng points out, the absolute nature of religious teachings is an essential factor in encouraging commitment to solving social problems. The authoritativeness that religion exerts on its followers is able to impel them to follow espoused “norms unconditionally, i.e. in every case and everywhere—even where they run quite contrary to [their] own interest.”⁶⁵ An advantage of religion is that it is able to propose a “categorical ought” that goes beyond the finite conditions of human existence, human urgencies, and even the need for the survival of humanity.⁶⁶

The theocentric paradigm proposed by the Abrahamic tradition represents a particularly useful way that religion frames human-nature relationship that appeals to the authority of the transcendent. Religious traditions demonstrate that a viable environmental ethic may be derived from an anthropocentric epistemology. When imbued with the proper value and standards, a human-centered epistemology does not have to descend into egocentrism and exploitation. This is the same way as one’s personal worldview does not automatically lead to selfishness and egotism. Confucianism, for example, is concerned self-cultivation in order to become a fully realized person (*chun tzu*), one who is imbued with a sense of empathy/sympathy (*hsin*) for others. However, in order to develop the fullest extent of this character, the person aspiring to be a *chun tzu* must continually expand his boundary of concern until it encompasses all of humanity.⁶⁷ Huston Smith writes:

In shifting the center of one’s empathic concern from oneself to one’s family one transcends selfishness. The move from family to community transcends nepotism. The move from community to nation overcomes parochialism, and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism.⁶⁸

⁶⁵Küng (2004, 52).

⁶⁶Ibid., 53.

⁶⁷Smith (2009, 182).

⁶⁸Ibid.

Scholar of Confucianism Tu Weiming asserts that the concentric circles that make up Confucianism's vision of human flourishing do not begin with the self and expand to just the world but to the entire cosmos. He writes, "We are inspired by human flourishing, but we must endeavor not to be confined by anthropocentrism, for the full meaning of humanity is anthropocosmic rather than anthropocentric."⁶⁹ For Weiming, the anthropocosmic spirit is characterized by "communication between self and community, harmony between human species and nature, and mutuality between humanity and Heaven."⁷⁰ Confucianism, therefore, like Christianity, Islam, and other traditions found in Asia can envision human flourishing in ways that promote mutuality and harmony. The SDGs in Asia are ultimately concerned with human concerns for themselves and for the world. Since religions share these concerns not only in a temporal manner but even beyond, it is imperative that the various religions dialogue with one another as well as with the other disciplines in order to move discussions on environmental sustainability from mere perception to praxis.

2.3 Religious Methods and Spiritual Motivation for Promoting Environmental Sustainability

It has been observed in many parts of the world that the religious voice continues to be able to command the attention of the people in ways that politicians and scientists cannot. While this may not be true in every case, when the religious voice is balanced, authoritative, and insightful, it can influence not only the lay public but even the experts and politicians themselves. This was evidenced by the release of Pope Francis' groundbreaking encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015 which addressed the issue of climate change and the urgent need to protect our "common home." Although it will take years to adequately assess the encyclical's impact,⁷¹ its immediate impression on the discourse was clearly seen. Not only did it garner worldwide interest before the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) taking place near the end of 2015, but also it proved to be a major talking point at the United Nations-sponsored event where the encyclical was referred to numerous times by world leaders in their remarks.⁷² What Pope Francis has shown is that religion can make the important connections between temporal issues and essential spiritual

⁶⁹Weiming (1998, 17).

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹There has already been quite a few panel discussions organized in academic as well as religious institutions to examine the impact that the encyclical has made on the issue of climate change.

⁷²*The Tablet*, "Laudato Si' a major talking point at climate change talks in Paris," accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/2885/0/cop21-laudato-si-a-major-talking-point-at-climate-change-talks-in-paris>.

values that resonate with the deepest human aspirations for personal transformation and happiness.

Ultimate transformation for people of religious faith is intimately connected to goals that are immediate to their present earthly life, but, oftentimes, includes real implications for the uncertain future after death. Religion responds to the innate human desire for eternal happiness by proposing and modeling the process of self-cultivation for adherents. Promoting environmental sustainability advocated by politicians may at times come across as a necessary strategy to get re-elected or gain power. Promoting environmental awareness by scientists may fall on deaf ears of people who have seen how experts often argue among themselves about whether there is or is not an environmental problem, global warming, or climate change. The conclusion can fall either way depending on how one looks at the situation, carries out a particular study, or interprets the data. Even Donald Trump once tweeted, “Global warming is based on faulty science and manipulated data.”⁷³ The reality and extent of climate change may find much disagreement among experts and non-experts alike. However, when a religious leader speaks to people about the environment and makes relevant connection between human relationship to nature and their moral obligations, they are accorded a degree of credibility and respect. Even if there was no urgent environmental crisis, a religious environmentalism which promotes human-nature harmony and environmental sustainability still retains its social and spiritual value and benefit.

The religious approach to social issues, as we have seen, does not simply dwell on economic and political policies or emphasize scientific and technological fixes, but addresses the deeper dimensions of human reality. It attempts to demonstrate the intimate connection between temporal problems and moral failures that manifest themselves in particularly destructive ways on both personal and communal levels. The consequences of these failures, however, are not confined to mundane phenomena but carry their impact upon ultimate human destiny and opportunity for authentic happiness. In the field of religion, the matter of ultimate destiny of the human person is found in the area of soteriology, which occupies a central position in many world religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Soteriology is fundamentally the study of salvation in a particular religious system. According to Steven Collins, soteriology is an “attempt to find a reflective, rationalized ordering of life, and death, as a conceptual and imaginative whole, and to prescribe some means of definitively...escaping suffering and death, and achieving a ‘final’ happiness.”⁷⁴ In Christianity, the basis for its soteriology is the Christ event comprising of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven of Jesus Christ. Through these acts, Jesus becomes the only and perfect mediator between God and humanity and serves as the path through which humanity receives salvation from the state of sin and its effects. Buddhist soteriology, on the other hand, is concerned with helping human beings attain emancipation and freedom from the experience of

⁷³onforb.es/rDpyGO.

⁷⁴Collins (1998, 22).

suffering in *samsāra*. The ultimate state of liberation is the attainment of *nibbāna*, in which one is completely liberated from the wheel of rebirth and any suffering or cravings associated with mundane existence. When one has attained *nibbāna*, all the five aggregates that make up the person are destroyed, and he is free from suffering and in a state of perfect happiness.⁷⁵ For Buddhism of the Theravada tradition, however, achievement of complete emancipation does not have to take place in a single lifetime, but over hundreds even thousands of lifetimes.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, there are other higher, albeit temporary, felicities that Buddhists aim for such as one of the various levels of heaven,⁷⁷ or even a better state of earthly life.⁷⁸

The Hindu tradition which precedes Buddhism also upholds emancipation (*moksha*) from the wheel of rebirth (*samsāra*) as the ultimate goal for all beings. Hindu religious texts teach that there is oneness and unity of oneself with every other being in the universe. The idea that there is a unique self that one “possesses” as “my” self is an illusion. Attachment to this separate ego self causes one to be blind to the true nature of the universe, which is the unity of all things. For Hindus, liberation takes place when one’s true self (*atman*) is freed from attachment to mundane and unsatisfying desires that cause it to be individuated and becomes reabsorbed into pure spirit called Brahman. When liberated, the spiritual essence (*jiva*) that underlies the ego self is united to the Brahman like a drop of water that has been finally immersed into the vast ocean. The liberated soul, no longer hampered by ignorance, now realizes that Atman is in fact Brahman, the soul of God, and that he does not have a self that exists outside of this one unified self. In its liberated form, the soul which has reincarnated over innumerable lifetimes now exists as part of a greater reality freed from difference, multiplicity, and individuation. Huston Smith describes the Hindu *moksha* as a “release from the finitude that restricts us from the limitless being, consciousness, and bliss our hearts desire.”⁷⁹ As in Buddhism, Hindu spiritual awakening that leads to liberation from embodied existence is a possibility for all people. However, the task is not necessarily for everyone all at once. People do so over countless lifetimes, which see them advancing (as well as regressing) through different states of life. Though long and arduous, the faithful Hindu will do his best to strive on in persistence.

While the centrality of soteriology in Buddhism and Hinduism is obvious, as it is in the Abrahamic traditions, soteriology may not be evident in the East Asian traditions such as Confucianism. In fact, some scholars even deny that

⁷⁵Kalupahana (1976, 81).

⁷⁶Even the historical Buddha lived through numerous lifetimes before achieving enlightenment.

⁷⁷Even in the lowest of the *devas* world, *Cātummahārājika Devas*, beings live an equivalent of 9000 human years. The beings in the highest levels of the *Devas* sphere live for tens of eons where they enjoy a myriad of sensual pleasures.

⁷⁸Someone who is a beggar in his present life may aim to be reborn with higher social status such as a doctor or businessman.

⁷⁹Smith (2009, 21).

Confucianism has a soteriology.⁸⁰ This denial stems from the greater emphasis by classical Chinese moral theories on social harmony than on individual redemption.⁸¹ Nonetheless, while Confucianism does not focus on transcendence as a delivery from without, it is concerned with human destiny, moral quality, and social progress. In a utopia, the society is well ordered and individuals live in harmony with heaven and earth.⁸² In order to achieve such a state of well-being, Confucianism recognizes the way of heaven as the absolute and provides for the ultimate transformation of humanity.⁸³ Post-Buddhist Neo-Confucianism, moreover, introduced a more individualistic concept by advocating the achievement of sagehood that manifests personal moral wisdom, perfection, and fulfillment that could be seen as similar to Buddhist enlightenment.⁸⁴ Such progress could be achieved by anyone (even women in later interpretations) through education and personal effort at self-cultivation. Thus, “salvation” does not necessarily have to be a postmortem phenomenon, but can also be found individually as well as communally in this earthly existence.⁸⁵

Whether it is for attaining of social harmony (Confucianism), *nibbāna* (Buddhism), *moksha* (Hinduism), *Jannah* paradise (Islam), or heaven (Christianity), religious systems not only present a vision of the future, but also lay out a path for the achievement of these states of transformed life. It should be noted that the Chinese word “*dao*” which Westerners use to name the tradition of “Daoism” is simply a generic term, meaning the “way” or “path.” Achieving soteriological aims may depend on the effort of the individual or of a group. It may involve different types of lifestyles and adhering to the teachings and moral codes of the particular religious system. It may require submitting oneself to divine power as well as receiving spiritual intervention from others such as supernatural beings (gods, angels, bodhisattvas, etc.). Achieving soteriological aims may also depend on ethical actions inspired by beliefs that are specific to a particular religion. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss in detail the different ways that religious systems support their adherents in this endeavor. However, we can turn to Early Buddhism for an example of how one may carry out self-cultivation in order to gain a transformed state of life.

For Buddhism, the path that leads to emancipation is called the Noble Eightfold Path which combines moral virtues (*sila*) with development of concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom or insight (*pañña*) in order to attain freedom. In the *Nidāna Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta*, the Buddha extolled the Noble Eightfold Path as the “ancient

⁸⁰Taylor (1990, 133).

⁸¹Hansen (2010, 27).

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Taylor, *Confucianism*, 133.

⁸⁴Hansen (2010, 27).

⁸⁵Ellwood and Alles (2007, 405).

road travelled by the Perfectly Enlightened Ones of the past” which leads to cessation of aging and death, volitional formations.⁸⁶ It leads to “suffering’s appeasement,”⁸⁷ cessation of form, feeling, perception, consciousness, clinging,⁸⁸ and cessation of *kamma*.⁸⁹ It is the raft that takes one to “the further shore, which is safe and free from danger.”⁹⁰ Of course, this further shore is none other than *nibbāna* itself. The *Sila* group consists of right speech, right action, and right living. The *Samadhi* group includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The *Pañña* group consists of right view and right thought. These three groups represent the three stages of moral training aiming to achieve higher moral discipline, higher consciousness, and higher wisdom. The ultimate goal of the training is to attain wisdom in order to directly oppose to ignorance which serves as the cause for human suffering. However, in the process of training to achieve wisdom in order to perceive things “as they really are,” the path first evolves through the training of the moral discipline, which serves as the foundation for training of concentration, which subsequently serves as the foundation for training of higher wisdom. This path of self-cultivation, says Damien Keown, “is only linear in the metaphorical sense: it does not list stages which are to be passed through and left behind so much as describe the dimensions of human good and the technique for their cultivation.”⁹¹ The end of this process of cultivation of moral and intellectual virtue is *nibbāna*, where perfection has been achieved.

One may raise the question, “How does the achievement of spiritual transformation contribute to environmental sustainability?” The answer lies in the fact that one’s soteriological aims can in profound ways dictate the way one conducts his life and behaves toward the people and things around him.⁹² Even in religious traditions where salvation is individualistic, the path that leads to salvation is certainly not. In the Gospel of Matthew (25:31–46), Jesus told the parable of the Day of Judgment in which those who were denied entry into the heavenly kingdom were those who did not feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit those who are imprisoned. On the other hand, those people who did these things were welcomed into eternal life by the Judge because “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Thus, spiritual goals and aspirations always involve our relational life with others. Acts that do not display care and concern for the well-being of others in many faith traditions are considered as sins deserving condemnation. The environmental crisis has also brought the environment into view as part of the moral other that must also be included in our web of relationships.

⁸⁶S.II.12.

⁸⁷S.II.15.

⁸⁸S.III.22.

⁸⁹S.IV.35.

⁹⁰S.IV.35.

⁹¹Keown (2001, 102).

⁹²Le Duc (2015, 42).

Thus, achieving spiritual progress whether through self-cultivation, through group effort, or by any means afforded by the religious tradition must ultimately form individuals who are able to enter into healthy and harmonious relationship with other people and things around them. These individuals realize ultimately that their well-being is inextricably connected to the well-being and the flourishing of others around them. As the Buddha taught in the sutras of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, there are four types of people in the world: those who act on behalf of oneself but not others, those who act on behalf of others but not oneself, those who act neither on behalf of oneself nor of others, and those who act both on behalf of oneself and on behalf of others. Of these four, the last type of person is considered to be “the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four.”⁹³

Religious traditions, in the face of serious environmental concerns, must set out to form individuals and inculcate into them virtues that not only benefit their own spiritual well-being but also contribute to environmental well-being and sustainability. In the introduction to an anthology on Confucianism and the ecology, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong write, “The ethics of self-cultivation and the nurturing of virtue in the Confucian tradition provide a broad framework for harmonizing with the natural world and completing one’s role in the triad [with Heaven and Earth].”⁹⁴ Regarding Buddhism, Damien Keown writes:

One only needs to read the *Dhammapada* to see that the Buddhist ideal of human perfection is defined in terms of the virtues exercised by an individual who treats all beings with kindness and compassion, lives honestly and righteously, controls his sensual desires, speaks the truth and lives a sober upright life, diligently fulfilling his duties, such as service to parents, to his immediate family and to those recluses and Brahmans who depend on the laity for their maintenance.... A Buddhist ecology, then, coincides with these teachings and simply calls for the orientation of traditional virtues towards a new set of problems concerned with the environment.⁹⁵

What is true regarding Confucian and Buddhist virtues vis-à-vis the environment also finds resonance in other religious systems such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Louke Van Wensveen states clearly, ecological transformation “involves millions of Christians learning to cultivate ecological virtues as a conscious and integrated part of their Christian identity, both personal and communal.”⁹⁶ What is necessary is that the original intention of the traditional virtues must be re-examined and reformulated in such a way that makes them relevant to the contemporary situation. Therefore, the exercise of the Confucian virtue of benevolence (*jen*) must not only be aimed at achieving harmony envisioned in purely social terms but also be expanded to include the all-encompassing reality of the cosmos. Similarly, the virtue of responsibility is to be upheld in view of the stewardship ethics promoted by Islam and Christianity which see human beings as

⁹³A 4:95.

⁹⁴Tucker and Berthrong (1998, xxxviii).

⁹⁵Keown (2007: 109–110).

⁹⁶Van Wensveen (2000, 167).

custodians rather than masters of the environment. The virtues of compassion, mercy, and loving kindness are found in both Western and Eastern religious traditions and reflect a selfless disposition toward the other. A truly compassionate person does display this virtue not only to his kinfolks but also to all—human beings, animals, plants, and even abiotic entities such as mountains, sand dunes and caves. If a person is kind and merciful toward fellow human beings and even animals, but wreaks havoc on rivers and forests, he could hardly be said to be truly compassionate. The list of virtues which contribute to environmental sustainability are as numerous as the list of virtues that help promote human development, self-transformation, and, ultimately, salvation. In other words, virtues that are deemed socially beneficial are equally ecologically relevant when the environment is intentionally made the object of one’s virtuous behavior. This explains why when the exercise of certain virtues is lacking, imbalances not only are witnessed on a personal or social level, but also can be seen ecologically.⁹⁷ As Pope Francis asserts, “It is no longer enough to speak only of the integrity of ecosystems. We have to dare to speak of the integrity of human life, of the need to promote and unify all the great values.”⁹⁸ Religion’s task is to call attention to this unity of values as well as to persistently urge for the cultivation and exercise of these values in the daily life of the adherents.

3 Conclusion

In this chapter, it was proposed that religion is not only important but necessary to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals in Asia. Asia is a vast continent and the home of many world religions. All indications show that the people on this continent of Asia are still religious, and will continue to be more so in the future. What is considered as “religion” is a controversial academic debate that, depending on the definition, leads to the inclusion or exclusion of certain traditions in Asia (Shinto in Japan, Confucianism in China, etc.). Nonetheless, if what is considered “religious” is seen as something opposed to be purely social, secular, or humanist, then we can argue that the overwhelming majority of Asians fall into this category. As such the exclusion of these traditions from having a role in the SDGs program means turning a blind eye on the potential impact that these traditions can exert on the people. This chapter outlined a general religious framework for promoting environmental sustainability that includes assessing the root of the environmental crisis, re-envisioning the true nature of human-nature relationship, and cultivating virtues that are beneficial to human happiness as well as environmental sustainability. This chapter was not meant to present a study of how each religion coheres to this framework since this would be far beyond the scope and length of

⁹⁷Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 224.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

what a short essay can achieve. Such a task, however, is achievable if adequate effort is put in. What has been done in a cursory manner is to show that religions add a unique dimension to the discourse with their worldviews and approaches. Admittedly, in Asia, the home to many of the world religions and where all the traditions mentioned in this chapter are either playing or increasingly playing important roles in people's lives, environmental devastation has taken place as much if not more than in other places of the world. This is not reason to either place the blame for the environmental crisis on religious teachings or discount the potential of religion to contribute to addressing the situation. The environmental crisis is an opportunity and a challenge for these traditions to re-examine themselves with creative and sincere minds in order to formulate a relevant and timely response to this global problem. Certainly, the method of religion cannot replace those from science and the social disciplines; however, it can help move the discourse beyond what these disciplines can do by themselves. Thus, the achievement of the SDGs in Asia demands the collective wisdom that is available through the intervention of all human institutions and traditions.

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