

On Why Religion Has an Essential Role in Addressing Environmental Concerns

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Abstract

The urgent need for action and collaboration among diverse stakeholders is evident in the global environmental crisis. Religion, with its lasting presence and influence on human beliefs, holds a crucial role in addressing environmental issues. Despite facing skepticism and resistance, religious actors possess the power to mobilize communities, inspire moral conduct, and offer distinct perspectives that contribute significantly to environmental stewardship. Addressing environmental challenges requires moving beyond scientific knowledge and technology, and embracing ethical conduct rooted in religious beliefs and values. By working together with religious communities, humanity can pave the way towards a sustainable future that safeguards nature's integrity and the well-being of all living beings.

Keywords: *environmental crisis, religious environmentalism, ecology, religion*

1. Introduction

Environmental disasters have been a natural part of the Earth's processes, but the current environmental crisis is distinctively a result of the Anthropocene era – the Age of Humans. In this unofficial geological epoch, humans have become a force of nature, capable of influencing and altering natural processes, leading to an escalating global environmental crisis. This crisis poses a threat to the progress humanity has achieved in economic and social development, and risks leaving future generations with a depleted and weakened planet. It is a dilemma that cannot be addressed by a single sector of society, politicians, or scientific experts alone. The global consensus is that an effective solution to ecological concerns requires an interdisciplinary, dialectical, and dialogical approach that engages the collaborative minds and hearts of a diverse group of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions.

The gravity of the situation demands urgent action. As Rachel Carson prophetically asserted towards the end of her classic 1962 book *Silent Spring*, “We stand where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost’s familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one ‘less traveled by’ – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth.”¹ The choices we make in the coming years will determine whether we leave behind a legacy of destruction or take bold steps towards a more sustainable future. It is time for us to rise to the challenge and safeguard the earth not only for future generations but for the very integrity of nature

¹ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

itself. To tackle this crisis, scientific and technological knowledge must be applied to social, economic, and legal policies. However, this must also be accompanied by political will, ethical awareness, and personal and religious commitment to act in the best interests of the environment. Only by bringing together a wide range of perspectives and expertise can we hope to find a sustainable solution to the environmental challenges we face. From this perspective, religion has an indispensable role to play in contributing to the discourse and collaborative actions needed to address one of the most difficult dilemmas of our time.

2. Enduring Presence of Religion in the World

Religious belief remains one of the most persistent and enduring aspects of human life in today's globalized world. A major study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015 revealed that an overwhelming majority (84 percent) of the world's population still maintains a religious affiliation.² In 2023, the World Population Review also published similar statistics with 85 percent of the world's inhabitants adhering to a faith tradition.³ According to Pew, while 16 percent of the population reported no religious affiliation, many of them acknowledged holding religious or spiritual beliefs, such as belief in God or some transcendent powers. Despite this, the study suggests that the global population of religiously unaffiliated people is declining, with only around 10% of the world's newborns between 2010 and 2015 born to unaffiliated mothers, even though they make up 16% of the global population.⁴ In contrast, Muslims are experiencing a "baby boom," and are expected to have nearly caught up to Christians by 2050.⁵ While social scientists have been forecasting the decline of religion due to increasing secularization, this prediction has not played out as expected. While secularization has been on the rise in Western Europe, North America, and various countries undergoing modernization,⁶ religion has grown in prominence and number of adherents in other parts of the world.⁷ While secularization is not an impossibility in various societies, the current and future state of religious life in the world indicates that there is no sign that the *homo religiosus* will disappear anytime soon.

The evidence gathered through empirical studies points to an undeniable fact: religion has been an integral part of every human society, regardless of its technological progress or historical era. The unyielding presence of religion in our collective history is a testament to the enduring human quest for social, cultural, and spiritual advancement, alongside other dimensions of our existence. Frederick Streng, an American scholar of religion with a focus on East Asian religions, particularly Buddhism, refers to this pursuit as the "ultimate transformation." This transformation involves a comprehensive metamorphosis that extends beyond personal growth, encompassing

² Pew, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape," April 5, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

³ World Population Review, "Religion by Country 2023," <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country> (accessed June 7, 2023).

⁴ Pew, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape."

⁵ World Population Review, "Religion by Country 2023."

⁶ Cf. Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun, *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York: SUNY Press, 2023). The authors argue that the modernization process in countries around the world has led to an increase in secularization.

⁷ Christine Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 10.

social, political, and even cosmic dimensions. It is a profound change that alters the very essence of what it means to be human. 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.⁸

The Protestant German-American theologian and philosopher, Paul Tillich, posits that religion is characterized by being seized by an "ultimate concern." Tillich states that "religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. And ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit."⁹ As human beings, we are constantly driven by a deep desire to comprehend the purpose of our existence and achieve a state of ultimate transformation. This profound aspiration motivates us to evaluate our current circumstances and seek opportunities for personal growth. Religious traditions, with their rich history and teachings, offer valuable guidance and resources to support this journey of self-cultivation. They have the potential to address individual and communal concerns, including the pressing need for environmental care and safeguarding in contemporary society. Therefore, it is pertinent for religious institutions to actively engage in this critical issue, and work towards sustainable solutions for the betterment of all.

3. Resistance to Religious Actors

Regrettably, the valuable role of religion or faith actors in promoting communal development has often been overlooked, oftentimes due to false or inaccurate assumptions. Instead, the spotlight is frequently cast on the conflicts that arise from religious differences and intolerance, with religious violence being cited as a major impediment to progress.¹⁰ The destructive impact of extremist religious organizations such as the Islamic State (IS), as well as fundamentalist factions within Hinduism and Christianity, has reinforced the notion in society and academia that religion is inherently prone to violence.¹¹ Charles Kimball, an ordained Baptist minister and expert in Comparative Religion commented, "It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history."¹²

Another perception of faith actors is that they have a hidden agenda of proselytization and would instrumentalize their development work to convert people.¹³ Consequently, development institutions and agencies tend to prefer religious partners who are perceived as being more liberal

⁸ Frederick Streng, *Understanding Religious Life* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co, 1984), 2.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7-8.

¹⁰ J. Ogbonnaya, *African Catholicism and Hermeneutics of Culture: Essays in the Light of African Synod II* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 55.

¹¹ W.T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

¹² Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002), 1.

¹³ Nora Khalaf-Elledge, "'It's a Tricky One' – Development Practicioners' Attitudes Towards Religion," *Development in Practice* 30, no. 5 (2020): 660.

and humanistic in their outlook, rather than strictly adhering to creeds and codes. In his book *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*, Roger S. Gottlieb listed and refuted the common points against religion's involvement in social and political spheres, namely: (1) Religion, in essence is undemocratic and oppressive; (2) Religious beliefs are irrational or at best nonrational, and thus have no place in the organization of society; (3) Religious values are, at best, peripheral to environmentalism, which should be shaped by science, not faith; (4) Involvement in politics is bad for religion; and (5) Religion has become increasingly irrelevant to modern life, so a religious environmentalism is not needed and will make no real contribution.

While the scope of this essay prevents a thorough examination of Gottlieb's arguments, it suffices to note that he refuted these positions because of the fundamental fact that “environmental problems can *only* be solved collectively”¹⁴ – which means that religion cannot be simply ignored. To effectively tackle environmental issues (as well as other glocal concerns), it is crucial for all stakeholders to acquire religious literacy which enables the acknowledgement that religious institutions have a vital role to play in the public sphere.¹⁵ After all, most religions have a vested interest in the well-being of humanity and view the contribution of the religious perspective to social development as an integral aspect of their mandate. An exemplary case in point is Catholic social teaching, which has been a powerful voice in advocating for social justice and promoting integral human development. Pope Francis, in his 2014 World Day of Peace Message, stated that authentic development is not about “mere technical know-how bereft of ideals and unconcerned with the transcendent dimension of man.”¹⁶ Thus, it is time to do away with the Western mindset focused on a post-religious world where faith actors are refused a place in the public arena.

Despite the lack of awareness or disinterest on the part of secular organizations, over the past few decades, there has been a surge in religious engagement with environmental concerns, as people have come to recognize the intrinsic link between environmental flourishing and human well-being. The involvement of religions in these issues is especially beneficial, as their contribution is both unique and valuable. According to Hans Küng, religious teachings possess an absolute nature that is essential for encouraging commitment to solving environmental problems. Küng argued that the authoritative voice of religion can impel its followers to follow prescribed norms unconditionally, even in cases where doing so may be contrary to their own interests.¹⁷ One of the advantages of religion in this context is its ability to propose a “categorical ought” that extends beyond the finite conditions of human existence, human urgencies, and even the survival of humanity itself.¹⁸ Moreover, religion serves as a guiding force, a compass for our moral and ethical compass, a source of inspiration for our communities, and a deep well of spiritual motivation. Throughout history, religion has been a powerful voice for social justice, driving movements that challenge inequality and oppression. From the Christian churches’ role in

¹⁴ Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford: University Press, 2006), 59

¹⁵ Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs*, 15.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, “World Day of Peace Message 2014,” http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html

¹⁷ Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 52.

¹⁸ Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 53.

promoting social healing in post-genocide Rwanda¹⁹ to the tireless efforts of religious women and men across traditions to promote environmental consciousness and stewardship, religion has been a vital force for inspiring social change.

Through its teachings and practices, religion underscores the interconnectedness of all life, emphasizing the need to promote the well-being of others. This call to action provides a compelling framework for tackling the most pressing social issues of our time, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Religious communities offer a sense of belonging, an anchor of support and a place to draw strength, and a network of like-minded individuals committed to social justice. The power of faith is undeniable in shaping attitudes and perspectives, driving individuals and communities towards meaningful and lasting social change. Religion provides a language of morality, hope, and compassion that can inspire and unite people to work together towards creating a more just and equitable world.

4. Religion's Potential in Addressing Environmental Concerns

With regards to environmental concerns, historian Lynn White Jr. asserted that people's actions toward their ecology are influenced by their beliefs about themselves and their relationship to their surroundings. White suggested that religion plays a crucial role in shaping these beliefs, stating that "human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny."²⁰ Our interpretation of our own story and destiny, as well as our relationships with others and nature, are all informed by our religious beliefs.

Religious beliefs hold a fundamental role in human life, as they offer primordial, all-encompassing, and unique worldviews. As a result, they possess the power to mobilize the human will and effort to achieve desired transformations.²¹ Traditional societies that have succeeded in managing resources over time have done so in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management.²² The Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr pointed out that the vast majority of people in the world live within a religiously bound universe. For this reason, religious ethics remain the most practical vehicle for solving the environmental crisis. Rational arguments or scientific reasons in many contexts are less likely to influence individuals to adopt ethical values or change behaviors than the guidance of respected religious leaders.²³

Nasr's assertion is supported by the results of a 2020 Afrobarometer survey conducted in 34 African countries to gauge the level of trust given to key public officials by the people. The results indicated that religious leaders ranked first with 69 percent. Political leaders ranked significantly lower with trust for the president at 52 percent and trust for parliaments at 43

¹⁹ Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs*, 14.

²⁰ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205.

²¹ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "Series foreword," in *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. M.E. Tucker and D.R. Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), xi-xii.

²² Quoted in Tucker and Grim, "Series," xviii.

²³ Seyyed H. Nasr, "Religion and the Environmental Crisis," in *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. W.C. Chittick (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc., 2007), 31.

percent.²⁴ While it is true that public trust in religious leaders has declined over time due to multiple factors including various scandals involving religious institutions, overall, these leaders and faith actors are still held in high esteem by many.

This is primarily attributed to the perception that their work is not driven by self-serving interests, but rather by a genuine commitment to serving others. Additionally, the trust people have in religious leaders is often reinforced by their firsthand experiences with the valuable services offered by religious organizations.²⁵ Thus, the above-mentioned arguments suggest that religious beliefs play a vital role in shaping individuals' perceptions of their environment and the actions they take towards it. These perspectives highlight the importance of considering religious beliefs in environmental policy and management decisions.

While there has been a significant effort to raise awareness of the environmental crisis, intellectual and scientific knowledge alone is not sufficient to address this issue.²⁶ On the other hand, religious involvement has been seen to be effective in promoting environmental agenda in many places. In Bhutan for example, religion has played a significant role in the country's standard for happiness, which includes environmental conservation. Although religious belief and environmental practice may contradict each other in a reductionist viewpoint, they work together in Bhutan, a country in the eastern Himalayas, to conserve the environment. The country's government reports emphasize that Bhutan's distinctive sacred cosmology, which merges Animism, Bön, and Vajrayana Buddhism, has helped preserve its natural surroundings. Consequently, approximately two-thirds of Bhutan is still covered by forests.²⁷

Bhutan's unwavering dedication to the conservation of the environment is one of the four pillars of its Gross National Happiness philosophy. As enshrined in its constitution, the country preserves an impressive 60 percent of its land under forest cover and has triumphantly safeguarded over 51 percent of its land – the highest proportion of any Asian nation. The fruits of this noble pursuit are readily apparent through the country's vast network of protected areas, which allow native wildlife to roam freely, and the thriving industry of ecotourism. The benefits of Bhutan's conservation efforts are not only limited to the kingdom itself but extend to the world, as this region provides water to a fifth of the global population, is situated at the heart of a region replete with biodiversity, and acts as a vital agent in absorbing carbon dioxide to combat climate change.²⁸

Scholars have noted that Bhutan's environmental policy is integrally intertwined to its cultural and religious worldview, in particular the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy of peace, friendship, and harmony. This philosophy is combined with the concept of sustainable

²⁴ Brian Howard, *Religion in Africa: Tolerance and Trust in Leaders Are High, But Many Would Allow Regulation of Religious Speech*, Afrobarometer Dispatch 339, January 28, 2020, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf.

²⁵ Tsjearh Bouta et al., *Faith-Based Peace-Building: Mapping and Analysis of Christian, Muslim, and Faith-Based Actors* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2005).

²⁶ M. Palmer and V. Finlay, *Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religion and the Environment* (Washington D.C., World Bank, 2003), xiv-xv.

²⁷ Elizabeth A. Allision, "Spirits and Nature: The Intertwining of Sacred Cosmologies and Environmental Conservation in Bhutan," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 11, no. 2 (June 2017): 197-226.

²⁸ World Wildlife Fund, "Bhutan: Committed to Conservation," accessed April 21, 2023, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/projects/bhutan-committed-to-conservation>.

development to promote Gross National Happiness, which is a prominent feature of Bhutan's development. The Bhutanese government has integrated this philosophy into its policies, which is markedly different from other developing countries.²⁹

Religious authorities have also influenced environmental discourse and action by issuing formal declarations. For instance, in August 2015, a group of Islamic scholars from various countries launched a collective call to combat climate change, based on both Islamic teachings and scientific evidence.³⁰ They urged all people of goodwill, especially Muslims, to protect the environment and the rights of all living beings.³¹ They also called for well-funded and coordinated efforts to adopt a green economy and lifestyle, phase out greenhouse gas emissions, and switch to 100 percent renewable energy. Some Muslim countries and organizations followed their lead and invested in eco-friendly practices and renewable energy sources. The declaration also highlighted the plight of vulnerable populations affected by climate change, such as those in developing countries and marginalized communities, and demanded increased financial support from wealthy nations to help them cope and adapt. The declaration challenged Muslims to act individually and collectively, and to advocate for eco-friendly policies and practices. However, it also acknowledged that many Muslim nations have yet to live up to its aspirations.

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis, released in 2015, has been a major force in the environmental movement by highlighting the moral and ethical issues of climate change and advocating for the most vulnerable groups who are affected by it. The Pope consulted with leading experts in climate science and development economics, and his efforts in 2015 inspired global collaboration that led to important international agreements, such as the UN General Assembly's ratification of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change. The Pope's contributions to the discourse on global environmental challenges and solutions were significant in fostering cooperation among nations.³²

The encyclical calls for urgent action to address environmental issues, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life and the need to care for the planet and its inhabitants. Since the release of *Laudato Si'*, there has been increased attention on environmental issues within the Catholic Church and among other religious communities. The document has sparked dialogue and debate about the role of religion in environmental stewardship and has inspired many individuals and organizations to act on climate change and environmental degradation.³³ *Laudato Si'* has also had an impact beyond the religious community, influencing public discourse and policy debates on environmental issues. Furthermore, *Laudato Si'* has helped to shift the narrative around climate change and environmental degradation from a purely scientific and economic issue to one that

²⁹ Suppawit Kaewkhunok, "Environmental Conservation in Bhutan: Organization and Policy," *Asian Review* 31, no. 2 (2018): 43-56, esp. 54.

³⁰ Christopher Lamb, "The Francis Effect? Islamic Leaders Issue Statement on Climate Change," *America Magazine*, September 2, 2015, <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/francis-effect-islamic-leaders-issue-statement-climate-change>

³¹ Noor Al-Hussein, "Islam, Faith, and Climate Change," Project Syndicate, September 22, 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/islam-faith-climate-change-by-noor-al-hussein-2015-09>

³² Irene Burke, *The Impact of Laudato Si' on the Paris Climate Agreement*. LISD White Paper, No. 3 August 2018. https://dataspace.princeton.edu/bitstream/88435/dsp013b591c298/1/WhitePaper_No.3%28Burke%29.pdf

³³ For example, the Laudato Si' Movement based in the Philippines, <https://laudatosimovement.org/>.

includes moral and ethical dimensions. The document asserts the importance of caring for the planet as a moral obligation and calls on individuals, governments, and institutions to take responsibility for their impact on the environment.

The aforementioned examples affirm that religion is not just an optional factor in addressing the environmental crisis, but a crucial one. The neglect of religion as an essential contributor to the global discourse on various issues constitutes a “misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world.”³⁴ Fortunately, as religious leaders and other faith actors increasingly engage themselves in environmental matters, the presence of religion in the conversation has garnered more attention than before. Even in communist China, there has been a resurgence of public interest in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism and how these traditions can affect the course of national development.³⁵ While China is officially an atheist country, these belief systems traditionally have had a significant role in shaping Chinese culture and are often seen as a source of moral guidance. Thus, facing contemporary social concerns, people within the Chinese society have advocated for returning to this source of wisdom for answers. In 2016, China's State Council released guidelines for promoting the "ecological civilization" in which many of the environmental values delineated in the document were observed to be consistent with traditional Confucian values.³⁶

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing the global environmental crisis demands a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach that engages individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions from all sectors of society. Religion, with its enduring presence and deep-rooted influence on human beliefs and values, has a crucial role to play in this endeavor. Despite the negative perceptions and resistance faced by religious actors, their potential to mobilize communities, inspire moral action, and provide unique worldviews makes them invaluable partners in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable practices.

Religious teachings and practices underscore the interconnectedness of all life, emphasizing the need to care for the environment for the well-being of present and future generations. Examples like Bhutan's integration of Buddhist philosophy into environmental policy and Islamic scholars' collective call to combat climate change demonstrate the positive impact that religious engagement can have on environmental issues. Additionally, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* and its influence on global policy and public discourse illustrate how religion can elevate environmental concerns beyond scientific and economic considerations to include moral and ethical dimensions.

³⁴ M.L. Stackhouse, *God and Globalization: Volume 4 (Globalization and Grace)* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2007), 57.

³⁵ J. Sawyer, “Introduction,” in *Ecological Civilization*, ed. J. Sawyer and D. Jin (Beijing: Pulitzer Center, 2015), Kindle edition.

³⁶ Yuan Shuai, “Confucianism and Ecological Civilization: A Comparative Study,” *Culture Mandala: Bulletin of the Centre for East West Cultural and Economic Studies* 12, no. 2 (December 2017):1-8.

As the world grapples with the urgent need to safeguard the planet, it is essential to recognize religion's potential to foster meaningful change. Efforts to address environmental challenges must go beyond scientific knowledge and technology; they must encompass a broader perspective that considers ethical behavior based on religious beliefs and values. By embracing the diverse perspectives and expertise of religious communities and collaborating with faith actors, humanity can aspire to a more sustainable future that preserves the integrity of nature and ensures the well-being of all living beings. Now is the time for us to choose the road less traveled, forging a path of environmental care, social justice, and global harmony to secure a better world for generations to come.