



## RELIGIOUS FAITH IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

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### Abstract

Since the beginning of time, humanity has been provided with nourishment by the various environmental elements that constitute nature. However, use of the diverse renewable and non-renewable resources emits greenhouse gases leading to the consequences of climatic change. The increasing build-up of the climatic catastrophe has led humanity to the reality that earth is, for the most part, a closed system and environmental protection is the means to a continued survival. Religion plays a great role in shaping attitude towards the natural world with the principles of ecological harmony established centuries ago to inculcate a system of ethical awareness and moral responsibility. World religions, each in their own way, offer a unique set of moral values and rules to guide human beings in their relationship with the environment. Though religious groups differ in their beliefs and practices, religious faith can be very influential in speaking out more about the environment. The United Nations thus recognise that faith-based organizations as key players in eradicating poverty, improving people's health, protecting the environment, and working toward sustainable development to fulfil the objectives of the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals. Spiritual leaders at all levels are critical to the success of the global solidarity for an ethical, moral and spiritual commitment to protect the environment and God's creation.

**Keywords:** climatic change, religious faith, world religions, environmental protection, faith-based organizations, Sustainable Development Goals

### 1. Introduction

“Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts may be natural, such as through variations in the solar cycle” - United Nations

Such phenomenon of these shifts is no longer natural through variations in the solar cycle but recognition of human activities has been the main driver since 1800s. This is primarily due to burning fossils fuels which include coal, oil and gas. The burning of fossil fuels generates greenhouse gases (GHG) mainly made up of carbon dioxide and methane. Clearing land and forests for social, industrial and agriculture sectors also release carbon dioxide. The livestock industry and landfills for garbage are a major source of methane emissions. In simple term, the GHG act like a blanket wrapped around the Earth being a closed system, trapping the sun's heat and raising temperatures. The consequences of climate change are what is happening today, the climatic catastrophe among others, intense droughts, water scarcity, severe fires, rising sea levels, flooding, melting polar ice, catastrophic storms and declining biodiversity (Fig. 1). As early as 1988 as recalled by Kemp et al. (2022), the landmark Toronto Conference declaration described the ultimate consequences of climate change as potentially “second only to a global nuclear war”.

Anthropogenic GHG emissions continue to increase despite 30 years of efforts and some progress under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The



current trajectory puts the world on track for a temperature rise between 2.1 °C and 3.9 °C by 2100 (Liu & Raftery, 2021). Citing UN Secretary-General António Guterres calling climate change an “existential threat,” Kemp et al. (2022) reviewed four key reasons to be concerned over potential of a global climate catastrophe:

1. Warnings from history – the collapse or transformation of numerous previous societies (Kohler, 2020) and each of the five mass extinction events in Phanerozoic Earth history (Brannen, 2017);
2. Direct trigger of other catastrophic risks such as international conflict or exacerbate infectious disease spread and spill over risk;
3. Exacerbation of vulnerabilities and causing multiple, indirect stresses such as economic damage, loss of land, and water and food insecurity that coalesce into system-wide synchronous failures.
4. Irrevocable undermining humanity’s ability to recover from another cataclysm, such as nuclear war.



Fig. 1: Causal loop diagram cascading global climate failure in which a complete line represents a positive polarity e.g., amplifying feed-back; not necessarily positive in a normative sense and a dotted line denotes a negative polarity meaning dampening feedback (Kemp, 2022).

According to Smith (2019), although the scientific consensus on the climate crisis and the need to take immediate action is clear, the problems of climate change are not only problems of science and technology but “they are also moral, ethical and spiritual problems about how we live our lives”. His research findings show that religious groups have played an important part in responding to climate change by participating in environmental campaigns and by translating scientific and policy language for a religious audience.

## 2. The Role of Religions on Environmental Protection

The two most powerful forces ruling the world today are science and religion. Both attempt to explain human reality as well as shape decision making in daily lives but because of inconsistencies mainly attributed to biological topics which have separated as contradicting beliefs in other fields (Allen, 2018). Albert Einstein (1940) has been very vocal about the entwinement of the two as he declared “science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind”.



Tagging into all individuals having values, attitudes, motivations, and judgments, often based in, and sanctified by religious beliefs with over 80 percent of the global population, religion can be powerful influence on human behaviour, guiding thought processes and daily living (Rappaport, 2019 & Higgins, 2011). In 1986, the key outcome of a first major attempt made to bridge religions and conservation in the Worldwide Fund (WWF) for Nature Summit at the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy was the commitment of each major religion that included Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism to preserving the environment with a plan of how to integrate conservation into its unique beliefs (Awoyemi et al., 2012). It may remain difficult to have a successful result if most religious teachings contradict conservation strategies. Hall et al. (2009) differentiated faiths which are anthropocentric and biocentric. Anthropocentric such as the Abrahamic belief that include Judaic, Christian, and Islamic relates that human are stewards of Yahweh-God-Allah's creation which has been given as a gift. The biocentric relates to other traditions such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism which hold that every being – animal, plant or human has a soul and should be treated with respect. The World Bank Report (World Bank, 2006) identifies three paths for religious influence:

1. They can teach about the environment and natural systems upon which life depends.
2. They can provide leadership in initiating practical environmental projects.
3. They can seek to persuade their members that each individual has a moral obligation to contribute in some way to conservation and can provide guidance on how to pursue environmental management objectives.

Thus, in seeking cooperation with religious institutions, religious scripture and practice that directly protects some natural places as sacred and scripture and practice guides or prescribed behaviours that affect nature must be distinguished. All religions agree that nature is an act of divinity and almost all religions address the issue of the creation of the universe, or universes, in different forms and with varying degrees of clarity or detail. Texts of 11 religions as a reminder of how faith is connected to the environment are examples as quoted by UN Environment.

### **Baha'i**

The Baha'i Faith is a relatively new religion teaching the essential worth of all religions and the unity of all people established by Baha'u'llah in the 19th century.

*"Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world."* (Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 142)

*"Let us look ... at the beauty in diversity, the beauty of harmony, and learn a lesson from the vegetable creation.... It is just the diversity and variety that constitutes its charm; each flower, each tree, each fruit, besides being beautiful in itself, brings out by contrast the qualities of the others, and shows to advantage the special loveliness of each and all."* ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks)

*"We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions."* (Statement of Shoghi Effendi)

### **Buddhism**

The notion of karma alone, being an important part of Buddha's lessons, conveys the values of conservation and responsibility for the future. It is said that the morality of actions in the present will shape the character for the future, an idea close of sustainable development.

*"As a bee – without harming the blossom, its colour, its fragrance – takes its nectar and flies away: so should the sage go through a village."* (Dhammapada IV, Pupphavagga: Blossoms, 49)



*“Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise man, gathering it little by little, fills himself with good.”* (Dhammapada IX, Papavagga: Evil, 122)

*“Our ancestors viewed the earth as rich and bountiful, which it is. Many people in the past also saw nature as inexhaustibly sustainable, which we now know is the case only if we care for it.”* (Dalai Lama, 1990).

### **Christianity**

Christianity is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. It is the world's largest religion, with about 2.8 billion followers, representing one-third of the global population.

*“We must treat nature with the same awe and wonder that we reserve for human beings. And we do not need this insight in order to believe in God or to prove his existence. We need it to breathe; we need it for us simply to be.”* (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, 2010).

*“Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it.”* (Verse 35:33)

*“The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.”* (Pope Francis, 2015)

### **Confucianism**

Confucianism has influenced culture, society, economy, and politics of China mainly and was part of the Chinese social fabric and way of life for more than 2500 years spreading to Japan, Korea and Vietnam. In the Analects of Confucius there is a very little about relation of and nature, but some principles followed in Confucianism humanism are related in nature protection and ecology.

*“... sustainable harmonious relationship between the human species and nature is not merely an abstract ideal, but a concrete guide for practical living.”* (International Confucian Ecological Alliance, 2015)

### **Hinduism**

Hinduism is a religion deeply rooted in nature. The sacred text (Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Epics) has many references of divinity related to nature, such as rivers, mountains, trees, animals, and the earth.

*“I shall now explain the knowable, knowing which you will taste the eternal. Brahman, the spirit, beginningless and subordinate to Me, lies beyond the cause and effect of this material world.”* (Bhagavad Gita 13.13)

*“According to the different modes of material nature — the mode of goodness, the mode of passion and the mode of darkness — there are different living creatures, who are known as demigods, human beings and hellish living entities. O King, even a particular mode of nature, being mixed with the other two, is divided into three, and thus each kind of living creature is influenced by the other modes and acquires its habits also.”* (Bhagavata Purana 2.10.41)

*“There is an inseparable bond between man and nature. For man, there cannot be an existence removed from nature.”* (Amma, 2011)

### **Islam**



Islam is another Abrahamic monotheistic religion, centred primarily on the Quran, a religious text that is considered by Muslims to be the direct word of the God of Abraham as it was revealed to Muhammad, the main and final Islamic prophet.

*“Devote thyself single-mindedly to the Faith, and thus follow the nature designed by Allah, the nature according to which He has fashioned mankind. There is no altering the creation of Allah.”* (Qur’an 30:30)

*“Do not strut arrogantly on the earth. You will never split the earth apart nor will you ever rival the mountains’ stature”* (Qur’an 17: 37).

*“It is Allah who made for you the earth a place of settlement and the sky a ceiling and formed you and perfected your forms and provided you with good things. That is Allah, your Lord; then blessed is Allah, Lord of the worlds.”* (Qur’an, 40:64)

### **Jainism**

Originated from India, the main teaching from Jainism is Ahimsa, the non-violence, in all parts of life. Verbally, physically, and mentally, Jainism doctrines focus on a peaceful and disciplined life. Kindness to animals, vegetarianism, and self-restraint with the avoidance of waste are parts of Jains life.

*“Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being.”* (Mahavira)

*“As a highly evolved form of life, human beings have a great moral responsibility in their mutual dealings and in their relationship with the rest of the universe. It is this conception of life and its eternal coherence, in which human beings have an inescapable ethical responsibility that made the Jain tradition a cradle for the creed of environmental protection and harmony.”* (The Jain Declaration on Nature, 1990).

### **Judaism**

Judaism is also an Abrahamic, monotheistic, and ethnic religion comprising the collective religious, cultural, and legal tradition and civilization of the Jewish people having its roots as an organized religion in the Middle East during the Bronze Age. In tradition, the land and environment are properties of God, and it is the duty of humankind to take care of it. The book of genesis, as an example, proposes that the garden in Eden was initially the chosen territory chosen by God for human to live.

*“And God said: ‘Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed—to you it shall be for food.”* (Gen 1:29)

*“The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof”* (Psalm 24)

*“[...] the Earth is Mine, you are My tenants”* (Leviticus 25:23)

### **Shintoism**

Shinto is a religion based on Kamis with spirits corresponding to natural entities: wind, rocks, water, etc. It makes the faithful very close to nature to preserve the relation of each person with the spirits, thus encouraging preservation of the environment. Shinto followers are expected to be in harmonic existence and in peaceful coexistence with both nature and other human beings and consider forests as sacred.

*“I will give over to my child the rice-ears of the sacred garden, of which I partake in the Plain of High Heaven.”* (Nihongi II.23)

*“The plan is for Religious Forests to be managed in ways which are religiously compatible, environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable.”* (Jinja Honcho, 2009)

### **Sikhism**





Sikhism is a native Indian religion founded by the first guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The sacred text is written by the foundational scripture Guru Granth Sahib where there are several teachings on environment.

*“You, yourself created the Universe, and You are pleased... You, Yourself the bumblebee, flower, fruit and the tree.”* (Guru Granth Sahib, Maru Sohele, page 1020)

*“You, Yourself the water, desert, ocean and the pond. You, Yourself are the big fish, tortoise and the Cause of causes.”* (Guru Granth Sahib, Maru Sohele, page 1020)

### **Taoism**

Taoism, or Daoism, is an old Chinese religion based on the divine harmony between nature and humanity. The Dao principle consists in “a path” where one finds the appropriate way to behave and to lead others.

*“This original nature is the eternal law. To know the nature’s law is to be enlightened. He who is ignorant of the nature’s law shall act recklessly, and thus will invite misfortune. To know the constant law of nature is to be generous. Being generous, one is impartial. Being impartial, one is the sovereign. Sovereign is the nature itself.”* (Lao-Tzu, Tao Te Ching, Chapter 16)

### **3. Religious Faith and Environment Matters**

Anju and Satyawati (2013) express that spiritual dimension, if introduced in the process of environmental policy planning, administration, education, and law, could help create a self-consciously moral society which would put conservation and respect for God’s creation first. Individualism, materialism, and modern desire to dominate nature are relegated in a subordinate place. In addition, they stated that religion can evoke a kind of awareness in persons that is different from scientific or technological reasoning and help make human beings aware that there are limits to their control over the animate and inanimate world and that their arrogance and manipulative power over nature can backfire. It is observed that in many countries, spiritual beliefs and religions define cultural values, social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity. Taking cognizance, the United Nations passed a resolution in 2008 to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace. The UN Inter-agency Task Force on Religion and Development (UN IATF-FBOs) composed of 19 United Nations organizations, including UN Environment was established in 2010. In partnership with faith-based organizations (FBOs), UN Environment launched the Faith for Earth Initiative in November 2017 with the goal to strategically engage with FBOs and partner with them to collectively achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and fulfil the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. The vision is “A World where everything is balance”. The shared values that spell CREATION:

**C: Communication** – Effective communication at all levels between all stakeholders.

**R: Respect** – All spiritual and religious beliefs are respected.

**E: Empower** – Empower and engage all stakeholders.

**A: Act** – Act in coherence with individual reflection and communal beliefs.

**T: Transform** – Transform people’s behaviour for a more responsible lifestyle inspired by their own faiths.

**I: Inspire** –Inspire innovative approaches to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

**O: Organize** – Organize knowledge and other resources related to faiths and sustainable development.

**N: Network** – Build a strong network between the UN and faith-based organizations.



The UN thus recognise that FBOs as key players in eradicating poverty, improving people's health, protecting the environment, and working toward sustainable development. As sustainable institutions, in recent years, policymakers have begun to engage them in environmental conservation and natural resources management. The network of FBOs and faith or spiritual leaders' cross continents and political boundaries make it a viable and practical means to achieve sustainable development. Tapping into the spiritual wealth of people and their beliefs can accelerate people's engagement and the organizational drive to contribute. Faith for Earth is an equitable engagement with all major faiths, along with indigenous spirituality, are represented in a transparent and balanced manner along with the secular position of the UN provides a neutral space for interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

#### 4. Conclusion

There is ample evidence climatic change is becoming catastrophic and mitigations should be urgently addressed. The principles of ecological harmony established centuries ago in the religious traditions are not because the world was perceived as heading for an imminent environmental disaster or destruction, nor because of any immediate utilitarian exigency, but through its quest for spiritual and physical symbiosis, synthesized in a system of ethical awareness and moral responsibility [14]. World religions have been recognized, each in their own way, offer a unique set of moral values and rules to guide human beings in their relationship with the environment. Though religious groups differ in their beliefs and practices, religious faith can be very influential in speaking out more about the environment as most agree about the shared need to care for the environment in their own cultural and religious practise. Spiritual leaders at all levels and FBOs are critical to the success of the global solidarity for an ethical, moral and spiritual commitment to protect the environment and God's creation.

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eISSN 2948-5045

