

Religions and the Environment: Motivators for Change?

Brian H. Smith

Ripon College

Paper presented at the Midwest American Academy of Religion (MAAR) conference, March 1-2, 2019, Ball State University, Muncie, IN

Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of what resources various religions of the world have to help motivate support for environmental protection in their scriptural and theological traditions, and whether new messages and actions are emerging in these traditions to make environmental protection a serious moral requirement for members. The traditions examined will be Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Are religious leaders in these traditions marshalling the spiritual resources in their respective religions to motivate members today to respect the environment and support public policies that do so? Are they creating programs to educate members on the environment and supporting action programs for environmental sustainability? Are rank and file members of these various traditions taking seriously new messages emerging in these traditions to protect the environment or not? Can religions of the world be significant allies in motivating action to save the environment globally?

I. Introduction

The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCCC) in October 2018 issued a report that the world has just over a decade to get climate change under control. To avoid increased planetary warming beyond the danger level of 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) over preindustrial levels, the panel stated,

would require a “rapid and far-reaching” transformation of human behavior at a rate that the world has never seen by 2030.¹

The U.S. Global Research Program made up of 13 federal departments and agencies in its Fourth National Climate Assessment in November 2018 indicated that climate disasters of storms, droughts and wildfires are becoming stronger and are due to global warming. The Report concluded that “without aggressive action they could become worse.”²

If the warnings in these reports are to be taken seriously it is clear that attitudes of citizens must be supportive if the drastic policy changes called for are to be realized in the next decade.

One source of influence on people is religion and a global survey conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2015 found that more than 8 in ten people on the planet (84%) identify with a religious tradition - – including 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims, 1.1 billion Hindus, 500 million Buddhists, and 14 million Jews.³

Gary T. Gardner, the Director of Publications and Senior Fellow at the Worldwatch Institute, a major advocacy organization on the environment that works with religious groups to promote environmental sustainability, believes that religion has five main strengths and leadership qualities when it comes to environmental sustainability:

1. Engaging members of faith-based groups to discuss and act on environmental issues
2. Using moral authority to offer ethical guidelines and religious leadership when it comes to sustainable living

¹ “IPCC Global Warming Special Report 2018 | What does it actually mean?” Cool Earth, Oct. 8, 2018. [ps://www.coolearth.org/2018/10/ipcc-report-2/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI-rX7tOuC4AIVCJ7ACh0n8gOOEAAAYASAAEgKtKvD_BwE](https://www.coolearth.org/2018/10/ipcc-report-2/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMI-rX7tOuC4AIVCJ7ACh0n8gOOEAAAYASAAEgKtKvD_BwE)

² “What is the U.S. Global Research Program?” VOA News, Nov. 23, 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/a/what-is-the-us-global-change-research-program-/4672014.html>

³ Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life, “Changing Religious Landscape” April 5, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

3. Providing meaning by shaping worldviews, such as linking traditions and teachings to contemporary issues such as plastic pollution, overusing resources and deforestation

4. Sharing physical resources such as temple grounds, schools and crops. Wealthy institutions such as the Catholic Church, for example, have the money to invest in sustainable practices.

5. Building community to support sustainability practices⁴

The first section of this paper examines the moral resources in each of these religious traditions that provide a basis for their “moral authority” in speaking to environmental issues.

The second section describes how religious leaders are issuing “ethical guidelines” in attempt to shape “world views” and their “traditions and teachings to contemporary issues” of sustainability.

The third section describes how various action programs supported by major religions are using their “physical resources....to invest in sustainable practices.”

The final part of the paper analyzes data on public opinion to assess whether these words and actions by major world religions are “building community to support sustainability practices.”

II. Moral and Religious Resources in Religious Scriptures and Traditions for Environmental Sustainability

Each of the major religious traditions of the world has in their scriptures and traditions moral and religious teachings that encourage respect for nature.

A) Judaism

Judaism emerged in a polytheistic culture in the Middle East where some religions worshipped nature as divine. Jews as monotheists wanted to distance themselves from forms of religion that seemed to be pantheistic and as a result placed the divine above nature. In their desire to distance themselves from polytheism they

⁴ Worldwatch Institute: Vision for a Sustainable World, <http://www.worldwatch.org/user/106634>

also put more distance between humans and nature than did many of the surrounding religions in the Middle East.

In the Creation Story in Genesis, however, God says that everything he created is good and gives a command to Adam and Eve to act in his name to care for it.

God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth. (Gen 1:28)

The words “subdue” and “rule” not mean dominate or use in whatever way you wish, but “take care of” and “be stewards of” in God’s name.

This responsibility to respect nature is also made clear in the Book of Numbers:

"You shall not pollute the land in which you live...you shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the lord dwell in the midst of the people." (Num 35:33-34)

In ancient Judaism there were restrictions on what Jewish tillers of the soil could and could not do in relation to the land. Fruit trees could not be harvested until the third year of producing fruit so as to strengthen young trees. Tilled soil had to lie fallow every seven years to renew it. In wartime the land and crops in enemy territory had to be respected⁵. In modern Israel the kibbutzim which are communal farms take great care to fulfill these ancient mandates to protect nature.

B) Christianity

In the Gospels Jesus lived a simple life style. In the Sermon on the Mount he pointed to the beauty of nature and that his followers should learn from God’s providence in sustaining it rather than despoil it:

Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and *yet* your heavenly Father feeds them (Mt 6:26).

The monastic tradition that flourished in the Middle Ages reinforced this respect for nature as men and women monks lived simple lives, learned how to farm and

⁵ Peggy Morgan and Clive Lawton, eds. Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions. Second Edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 209 – 211.

rotate crops to preserve the earth, taught these methods of farming to peasants, and used herbs to develop rudimentary medicines. Figures such as Francis of Assisi saw the glory of God in nature and had mystical visions of its spiritual grandeur. He conversed with birds and animals as his relatives and reminded Christians that God was as present in nature as in the human soul. Like Jesus he felt nature had a spiritual dimension as a gift to humans by God.

C) Islam

Islam accepts the teachings of the Torah and the Gospels about the sacredness of nature as God's creation and the necessity for humans to be good stewards in protecting it. There are approximately 750 texts in the Qur'an that refer to ecology and conservation such as:

"And the sky has he raised high, and has devised (for all things) a balance, so that you might never transgress the balance: weigh, therefore (your deeds) with equity, and do not upset the balance" (Surah 55:7-9)

The Hadith, a collection of sayings by the prophet Muhammad handed down in oral tradition in the early centuries of Islam, include a number of passages concerning wild animals, livestock, plants, crops, soil and of course water, an especially important resource in the desert societies from which Islam first emerged.⁶

D) Hinduism

Hinduism teaches that *Brahman* is a divine spiritual force that pervades the universe and sustains everything. *Brahman* is present in the material world and that it is also possible for individual human *atmans* (souls) to be reincarnated for a time in nature. Both of these Hindu beliefs endow nature with a sacred quality.

Hinduism teaches that the resources of the world will become scarce if humans use them for selfish purposes. Humans have the responsibility to maintain the natural balance and to be respectful of *Brahman* and reincarnated souls in nature:

⁶ Talal al-Khtatib, "How World Religions View the Environment," See-er, Sept. 22, 2015. <https://www.seeker.com/how-world-religions-view-the-environment-1770262467.html>

For, so sustained by sacrifice, the gods will give you the food of your desire.
Whoso enjoys their gift, yet gives nothing, is a thief, neither more nor less.
(Bhagavad Gita 3:12)

Hinduism teaches the value of ahimsa or nonviolence and respect for all life forms and is a reason why many Hindus are vegetarians.⁷

Hinduism has a modern example of someone who takes seriously the presence of *Brahman*. Mahatma Gandhi in 20th century India not only led nonviolent resistance to British colonial rule but simultaneously he worked to create rural communes for the urban poor to learn how to sustain themselves with organic farming and sewing. He saw the connection of economic development to help the poor with a respect for nature without the use of pesticides and other chemicals. He also feared that unchecked industrial growth would not only lead to dehumanization in factories but would destroy nature and warned against both dangers.

E) Buddhism

Buddhism has always taught that humans are part of a greater whole, not individuals apart or above the material world. All sentient beings are linked not only materially (as science has shown) but also spiritually. Buddhists try to live a simple life and control their *tanha* – addictive desires for more possessions and consumption, since they respect the rights of nature as do the indigenous peoples.

When one looks to the Dalai Lama today one truly finds a human for all seasons and whose Buddhist tradition nourishes a profound sense of compassion for others, even his enemies and also for nature. He gives an example of a simple life and literally will not kill an insect that lands on his arm to take blood. He just blows it off with his breath.⁸ He reminds us continually that we have no other home to shelter us than our planet and that we must take care of it:

⁷ “Hinduism: Belief and Care for the Planet,” Bitesize BBC Radio.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/rs/environment/histewardshiprev1.shtml>

⁸ Spirit in Nature. Video Dalai Lama. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I44CSpX0FhE>

"Because we all share this planet earth, we have to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature. This is not just a dream, but a necessity."⁹

III. Statements by Leaders of Major World Religions on the Environment

In recent years leaders of the major world religions have issued important statements of the environment urging their respective members and all people of good will to take the current crisis seriously as a moral imperative and to act to save the planet. They each draw upon the religious and ethical resources at the root of their respective faith traditions and bring them to bear on sustainability today.

A) Judaism

Encouraged by the impending encyclical by Pope Francis to be issued in

July 2015, over 300 American rabbis from a broad spectrum of Judaism in May signed a “Rabbinic Letter on the Environment.” In introducing their letter the rabbis said:

“Our decision to do this arose out of our learning that Pope Francis will this summer issue an encyclical to the Church and the World that will address the climate crisis in the context of worsening concentrations of wealth and power and worsening degradations of poverty.....

We believe it is important for the spiritual leadership of the Jewish people to speak to the Jewish people as a whole and to the world on this deep crisis in the history of the human species and of many other life-forms on our planet.”

In the letter itself the rabbis drew upon ancient Jewish texts about responsibility to protect nature:

⁹ “What to the World’s Religions Have to Say About Sustainability?” 1 Million Women: Fighting Climate Change Through Our Ordinary Lives, Aug. 5, 2016. <https://www.1millionwomen.com.au/blog/what-do-worlds-religions-have-say-about-sustainability/>

The texts of Torah that perhaps most directly address our present crisis are Leviticus 25-26 and Deuteronomy 15. They call for one year of every seven to be Shabbat Shabbaton - a Sabbatical Year - and Shmittah - a Year of restful Release for the Earth and its workers from being made to work, and of Release for debtors from their debts.

In Leviticus 26, the Torah warns us that if we refuse to let the Earth rest, it will “rest” anyway, despite us and upon us - through drought and famine and exile that turn an entire people into refugees.

This ancient warning heard by one indigenous people in one slender land has now become a crisis of our planet as a whole and of the entire human species. Human behavior that overworks the Earth - especially the over burning of fossil fuels —- crests in a systemic planetary response that endangers human communities and many other life-forms as well....“

The rabbis then become very specific in pointing to the causes of the crisis based on a thirst for profits and their use to prevent change:

“The unity of justice and Earth-healing is taught by our ancient texts and by our experience today: The worsening inequality of wealth, income, and political power has two direct impacts on the climate crisis. On the one hand, great Carbon Corporations not only make their enormous profits from wounding the Earth, but then use these profits to purchase elections and to fund fake science to prevent the public from acting to heal the wounds. On the other hand, the poor in America and around the globe are the first and the worst to suffer from the typhoons, floods, droughts, and diseases brought on by climate chaos....”

They conclude by reminding American Jews that “the United States is one of the most intense contributors to the climate crisis, and must therefore take special responsibility to act. “They then offer some very concrete steps members of the American Jewish community can take to fulfill their own ecological responsibility:

One way of addressing our own responsibility would be for households, congregations, denominations, federations, political action —- to Move Our Money from spending that helps these modern pharaohs burn our planet to

spending that helps to heal it. For example, these actions might be both practical and effective:

- § Purchasing wind-born rather than coal-fired electricity to light our homes and synagogues and community centers;
- § Organizing our great Federations to offer grants and loans to every Jewish organization in their regions to solarize their buildings;
- § Moving our endowment funds from supporting deadly Carbon to supporting stable, profitable, life-giving enterprises;
- § Insisting that our tax money go no longer to subsidizing enormously profitable Big Oil but instead to subsidizing the swift deployment of renewable energy. . . .¹⁰

These rabbis not only apply Jewish traditional Torah teaching to the current ecological crisis, but also pull no punches in identifying greed and corruption as underlying the crisis and in giving very specific recommendations for how Jewish people can use their wealth to be part of the solution.

B.1) Christianity: World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches, a fellowship of 350 member churches which represent more than half-a billion Protestant and Orthodox Christians from around the world on the eve of the December 2015 Paris Climate Conference issued a document to its members and to the delegates of the upcoming conference.

Signatories from member churches declared:

“Our religious convictions and traditions point to the relevance of theology for informing new models of development with social and ecological justice. Aware that governments and political agreements alone are not sufficient for the immense challenges ahead – our faith communities can provide solid grounding, moral support, ethical education and value-based sustainable development models which are needed for the global transformation process. As representatives of the majority of the global population who live with

¹⁰ Arthur Waskow, “300+ Rabbis Sign Rabbinic Letter on Climate Crisis,” [Huffpost](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-arthur-waskow/300-rabbis-sign-rabbinic-_b_7283354.html), Updated May 24, 2016. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-arthur-waskow/300-rabbis-sign-rabbinic-_b_7283354.html

religious affiliations and values, we will not only hold leaders to account, but will also support politicians working towards an ambitious global climate agreement in Paris and beyond....”

They called on the delegates to forge “a fair, ambitious and global deal applicable to all countries” which would include:

A long-term goal to phase out greenhouse gas emissions and phase in 100% renewable energy by the middle of the century in order to stay below 1.5/2 C of warming above pre-industrial levels....

They called on all governments:

to commit to nationally binding, ambitious short term emission reduction targets.

to commit to national climate risk management measures.

to commit to the provision of bold support to those countries and people who have less resources and capacity, starting with the most vulnerable.

They concluded “as “faith and spiritual leaders” by committing themselves to:

Undertake a constant effort to raise climate awareness within our communities, as an expression of our care for the Earth, deepening our understanding of the interconnectedness of human beings and nature, building capacity, and advocating for climate justice with our governments.”¹¹

They not only provided an ethical grounding for environmental based on their theology but also called upon all member churches to act as educators and advocates for action to promote sustainability of the planet.

B.2) Christianity: The Vatican

In July 2015, also in preparation for the upcoming Paris Conference on Climate, Pope Francis, the leader of 1 billion Catholics in the world, issued a major encyclical, “Our Care for Our Common Home” and in its first sentence he cites St.

¹¹ World Council of Churches, “Statement of Faith and Spiritual Leaders on the upcoming United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP21 in Paris in December 2015.” October 2015.

Francis of Assisi's Canticum to Nature – *Laudato Si*. He called the earth our common home and addressed not only Catholics but all who are “united by the same concern” to save the planet. He took science seriously about what humans are doing to accelerate pollution and emphasizes how much nature's destruction is hurting both the world's poor and future generations of humanity.

He warned against a modern anthropomorphism (where only humans count) and a “technocratic paradigm” that views nature as a given to be used devoid of all spiritual value. He stated that “at the heart of consumerism and profit-driven economic ideologies is a wrong-footed idea of dominion” (referring to the bad translation of the Hebrew word for stewardship).

He bluntly affirmed:

“Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.”

He concludes by saying:

“God created the world, writing into it an order and dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore.”¹²

C) Islam

Muslim spiritual leaders convened a major conference on the environment in Istanbul, Turkey, in August 2015 on the eve of the Paris Conference on Climate Change after many months of preliminary work by Muslim scholars and environmentalists around the world. The statement they issued, “An Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change,” situated the current ecological crisis in the context of traditional Koranic teachings about the sacred character of nature of Allah's creation and called for Muslims “to tackle the root causes of climate change, environmental degradation, and the loss of biodiversity”:

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday, Inc., 2015, nos. 106-114, pp. 72 – 78.

All that is in the heavens and the earth belongs to Allah. Allah encompasses all things (Qur'an 4: 126) He raised the heaven and established the balance so that you would not transgress the balance. Give just weight – do not skimp in the balance. He laid out the earth for all living creatures (Qur'an 55: 7-10)

The natural state (fitrah) of Allah's creation. So set your face firmly to the faith in pure devotion, the natural pattern on which Allah made humankind. There shall be no changing Allah's creation. That is the true Way, but most people do not know (Qur'an 30: 30).

We recognize the corruption (FASAD) that humans have caused on earth in our relentless pursuit of economic growth and consumption. Corruption has appeared on land and sea by what people's own hands have wrought, that He may let them taste some consequences of their deeds, so that they may turn back. (Qur'an 30: 41) Disruption of the global climate is a consequence of our corruption in the earth. We are but one of the multitude of living beings with whom we share the earth, and a minuscule part of the divine order, yet we have exceptional power, and bear the responsibility to establish good and avert evil in every way we can. The creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of humankind, but most people do not know (Qur'an 40: 57) There is no animal on the earth, nor any bird that wings its flight, but is a community like you (Qur'an 6: 38) We have no right to abuse the creation or impair it. Our faith commands us to treat all things with care and awe (taqwā) of their Creator, compassion (rahmah) and utmost good (ihsān)....

We call on all Muslims, wherever they may be, to tackle the root causes of climate change, environmental degradation, and the loss of biodiversity, following the example of The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), who was, in the words of the Qur'an, "a mercy to all beings." We bear in mind the words of our Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be

upon him) the world is sweet and verdant, and verily Allah has made you stewards.¹³

Again we see a statement by leaders of a major faith tradition take the findings of science seriously about the environmental crisis and marshal the spiritual resources of their religion to motivate strong action by members protect biodiversity on the planet.

D) Hinduism

Hindu spiritual leaders at the World Parliament of Religions in December 2009 in Melbourne, Australia, issued a call to Hindus on the critical need to protect the environment.¹⁴ On the eve of the Paris Climate Conference in 2015 they re-issued and updated the document. It called upon the 900 million Hindus in the world to live lives in harmony with nature to restore balance in the ecological system. It also called on government delegates to the Paris meeting to develop lasting solutions to the environmental crisis:

“Today, with the 2015 Paris Climate Conference nearly upon us, members of the global Hindu community again urge strong, meaningful action be taken, at both the international and national level, to slow and prevent climate change. Such action must be scientifically credible and historically fair, based on deep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through a transition away from polluting technologies, especially away from fossil fuels. A transition towards using 100-percent clean energy is desperately needed, as rapidly as is possible in every nation. Doing so provides the only basis for sustainable, continued human development. It is the best hope for the billions of people without electricity or clean cooking facilities to live better lives and reduce poverty.”

We cannot rely on governments alone to act, however. Each one of us has a part to play in reducing climate pollution, by changing our inner and outer

¹³ “Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change,” Aug. 18, 2015. http://www.ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Islamic_Declaration_V4.pdf

¹⁴ “Hindu Declaration on Climate Change,” Dec. 8, 2009. www.hinduismtoday.com/pdf_downloads/hindu-climate-change-declaration.pdf

behavior. As Mahatma Gandhi posited, “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. We need not wait to see what others do.”....

Through this combination of meaningful action, personal transformation, and service done selflessly and as an act of worship we will be able to make the sort of inner and outer transitions that addressing climate change requires. In doing this we are acting in a deeply dharmic way, true to our Hindu ethos, philosophy, and tradition.

“[W]e call on all Hindus to expand our conception of dharma. We must consider the effects of our actions not just on ourselves and those humans around us, but also on all beings. We have a dharmic duty for each of us to do our part in ensuring that we have a functioning, abundant, and bountiful planet....”

Climate change creates pain, suffering, and violence. Unless we change how we use energy, how we use the land, how we grow our crops, how we treat other animals, and how we use natural resources, we will only further this pain, suffering, and violence. [On a personal basis, we can reduce this suffering by beginning to transform our habits, simplifying our lives and material desires, and not taking more than our reasonable share of resources. Adopting a plant-based diet is one of the single most powerful acts that a person can take in reducing environmental impact. In doing all of this, we help maintain the ecological and cosmic order, an order that allows life and existence to flourish....]¹⁵

As in the other declarations Hindu leaders invoked traditional Hindu spiritual resources and examples and linked to current global challenges and a call to action both at the individual and structural levels is endorsed.

¹⁵ “Bhumi devi ki jai! Ahindu declaration on climate change.” November 23, 2015.
[Http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english](http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english)

D) Buddhism

In 2009 Buddhist scholars and leaders issued “The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change.” Together, with over 5000 Buddhist practitioners, and significant leaders such as the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa, and Thich Nhat Hanh, the declaration. It was later updated and presented to the government representatives at the Paris Climate Conference in 2015 by 15 of the most prestigious Buddhist leaders in the world. It was the first time so many Buddhist leaders have come together to speak to an important public issue. The total number of signatures by 2015 also numbered in the millions.

Like the statements by other faith leaders these Buddhists leaders endorsed the overwhelming consensus of scientists about the serious destruction of nature that human made activities such as the heavy dependence on fossil fuels is causing. They bring to bear on the crisis traditional Buddhist teachings in the Four Noble Truths about the poison of human “greed, ill will and delusion”:

...Many scientists have concluded that the survival of human civilization is at stake. We have reached a critical juncture in our biological and social evolution. There has never been a more important time in history to bring the resources of Buddhism to bear on behalf of all living beings. The four noble truths provide a framework for diagnosing our current situation and formulating appropriate guidelines—because the threats and disasters we face ultimately stem from the human mind, and therefore require profound changes within our minds. If personal suffering stems from craving and ignorance—from the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion—the same applies to the suffering that afflicts us on a collective scale...

The declaration calls for changes of attitudes at the individual level:

Our present economic and technological relationships with the rest of the biosphere are unsustainable. To survive the rough transitions ahead, our lifestyles and expectations must change. This involves new habits as well as new values. The Buddhist teaching that the overall health of the individual and society depends upon inner well-being, and not merely upon economic

indicators, helps us determine the personal and social changes we must make. Individually, we must adopt behaviors that increase everyday ecological awareness and reduce our “carbon footprint”....

The declaration recognizes, however, that solutions must go beyond the personal level and involve major structural changes in the world economy:

These personal activities will not by themselves be sufficient to avert future calamity. We must also make institutional changes....

It has recently become quite obvious that significant changes are also needed in the way our economic system is structured.... Instead of an economy that emphasizes profit and requires perpetual growth to avoid collapse, we need to move together towards an economy that provides a satisfactory standard of living for everyone while allowing us to develop our full (including spiritual) potential in harmony with the biosphere that sustains and nurtures all beings, including future generations. If political leaders are unable to recognize the urgency of our global crisis, or unwilling to put the long-term good of humankind above the short-term benefit of fossil-fuel corporations, we need to challenge them with sustained campaigns of citizen action....¹⁶

The declaration not only applies Buddhist principles to individual life changes that are needed but also articulates them to that legitimize major structural transformations needed to promote sustainability, and commits the signees to collective action if world political leaders are unwilling to act.

IV. Action Programs by Religious Organizations to Protect the Environment

In addition to using the moral and religious resources of their respective traditions to educate members about the critical importance of protecting the environment and offering ethical guidelines for sustainable living, religious leaders and organizations have also been “sharing physical resources” and “investing in sustainable practices” in various parts of the contemporary world.

¹⁶ “The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change”
<https://oneearthsangha.org/statements/the-time-to-act-is-now/>

There are now thousands of new sustainability projects in all regions of the contemporary world supported by religious institutions. The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale has been tracking these new initiatives by clergy and laity in various religions and is the best source of information on what they are doing to promote sustainability in different regions of the world.¹⁷ What follows in this section relies on this resource and the list below of projects is meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Since the 1980's several **international consortia** have been created to promote action programs by religious organizations that enhance a sustainable global environment:

1. Alliance of Religion and Conservation International (ARC)

ARC is a secular organization founded by Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, then president of World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 1995. ARC assists major world religions to create their own environmental programs based on their core teachings. It works with 11 major religious traditions and the denominations within each. ARC has helped create projects sponsored by religious groups in 68 countries of the world focusing on forest management, organic farming, alternative energy, socially responsible investing, educational projects, sacred nature reserves, urban planning, and professional development.

“Current ARC projects include founding an International Interfaith Investment Group (3iG) with the intention of working with the investment arms of religions to create models for positive investment. The aim of this project is for each religion to assess its portfolios with due regard to its beliefs, values, the environment, and human rights “so that all life on Earth can benefit.” Another major initiative, the Asian-Buddhist Network, enables Buddhists from all corners of Asia to share their experiences with environmental projects within their communities.”¹⁸

¹⁷ The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. <http://fore.yale.edu/>

¹⁸ About ARC. http://www.arcworld.org/about_ARC.asp. The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/buddhism/projects/alliance_religion/

2. United Religions Initiative (URI)

URI is an expanding community of individuals and organizations with religious connections to “build cultures of peace, justice and healing for the earth and all living beings.” Created in 2000 by the initiative of the Episcopal Diocese of California it has sponsored regional summits of religious leaders around the world to promote an awareness of and action for environmental preservation and since its founding over a million people have participated in URI events. It has organized inter-religious projects in more than 60 countries and has “generated a global, inter-religious community of Cooperation and Affiliates.”

“It has regional staffing in seven geographic areas of the world and helps support more than 200 self-organizing “Cooperation Circles with more than 15,000 members in 47 different countries” representing “more than 88 religious, spiritual and indigenous traditionswho share a common vision and commitment to the URI Charter.”¹⁹

3. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) - Sacred Earth: Faiths for Conservation

WWF’s Sacred Earth program works with religious leaders and faith communities around the world whose ideals articulate values promoting protecting “the Earth and its diversity, and are committed to protecting it.” It partnership with such groups “focus on activities such as forestation and watershed restoration, river protection and clean up, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and combating illegal wildlife trade.”²⁰

Individual religious traditions have also created international and national networks to support projects for protecting the environment:

¹⁹ United Religions Initiative (URI). <https://www.uri.org/>. The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/buddhism/projects/united_religions/

²⁰ “Sacred Earth: Faiths for Conservation. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/initiatives/sacred-earth-faiths-for-conservation>. The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. <http://fore.yale.edu/religion/buddhism/projects/world-wildlife-fund-wwf-sacred-earth-faiths-for-conservation/>

1. AYTZIM: Ecological Judaism

Founded in 2001 the Green Zionist Alliance, home-based in the United States, seeks to preserve the ecology of Israel. It seeks to “bridge the differences between and within religions and people — helping to build a peaceful and sustainable future for Israel and the Middle East.” It works with Diaspora Jews on educational projects informing them of environmental needs and programs in Israel. It also promotes eco-trips to Israel for teens, adults and funders, and seeks to influence Israeli environmental policies “through increased representation in the World Zionist Congress and its constituent agencies.”²¹

2. Jewish National Fund (JNF -Israel)

Originally founded in 1901 to buy land in Palestine in trust for the Jewish people and now home-based in Israel, JNF now includes an environmental focus. Its seven “action areas, include Forestry and Ecology, Water, Community Development, Security, Education, Research and Development, and Tourism and Recreation.” It has planted 240 million trees in Israel over the past century and today:

“JNF promotes the celebration of *Tu B’Shevat* (the Jewish New Year of the Trees and the original Arbor Day) as a way of expressing a Jewish commitment to the earth through plantings, Seders, and ecological restoration projects....

“Over the past decade, JNF has built more than 160 reservoirs and dams, dramatically increased Israel's water resources by providing drinking water to 1.2 million Israelis. JNF's water management projects include water conservation, river rehabilitation, and recycling....”²²

3. World Council of Churches (WCC) Justice, Peace, and Creation (JPC)

In 1988 the WCC created its Climate Change Program to promote action Projects among its 350 member churches worldwide that encourage “transformation of

²¹ AYTZIM: Ecological Judaism. <http://aytzim.org/about-us>. See also: http://fore.yale.edu/religion/judaism/projects/Aytzim_Ecological_Judaism/

²² Jewish National Fund. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/judaism/projects/jewish_national/

socioeconomic structures and personal lifestyle choices that contribute to global warming.” It focuses on the “myriad destructive effects of corporate globalization:”

“In cooperation with WCC member churches and ecumenical partners (including Christian development agencies such as Christian Aid, Brot für die Welt, Church World Service, Norwegian Church Aid, and Church of Sweden Aid). Ecumenical Earth programs focus on such issues as climate change, transportation, biological and cultural diversity, and biotechnology.”²³

4. Global Catholic Climate Movement

In response to Pope Francis’s strong call to Catholics worldwide to take action to protect the environment the Global Catholic Climate Movement has been created. It includes over 650 Catholic member organizations worldwide, involving large international networks, religious orders, parishes, and grassroots leaders. One of its most important initiatives has been the promotion of divestment by Catholic institutions in corporations producing fossil fuels:

“The September 2018 divestment of 19 Catholic institutions including Caritas India and the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference was featured at the Global Climate Action Summit alongside the total divestment commitments of 900+ institutions.”

“The April 2018 divestment of Catholic institutions including Caritas Internationalis, Catholic banks with €7.5 billion on their balance sheets, and 30+ more institutions was covered widely”

“Over 900 Catholic organizations in US, LA, Europe, Africa and Asia have committed to divesting their stock holdings in companies engaged in production of fossil fuels.”²⁴

5. Catholic Climate Covenant (USA)

²³ The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. ore.yale.edu/religion/christianity/projects/wcc_jpc/

²⁴ Global Catholic Climate Movement. <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/>

In 2006 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) helped create the Catholic Climate Covenant to implement Catholic social teaching on ecology with the US Church with the assistance of 18 national Catholic organizational partners. It accomplishes its mission by:

“sharing authentic Catholic teaching on creation and the poor and by informing and inspiring community leaders to take action (education); by sharing stories of those most affected by climate impacts in the public square (public witness); and by providing concrete tools, techniques and technical assistance to help Catholic peoples and institutions reduce their carbon footprint and to work for justice (resources.”²⁵

Almost 600 U.S. Catholic institutions have recently signed a Climate Declaration indicating they support specific climate actions such as “having homilies on care for creation, having educational sessions amongst parishioners or reducing [their] carbon footprint.”²⁶

6. North American Coalition for Christianity and Ecology (NACCE)

NACCE is an ecumenical organization founded in 1986:

“highlights environmental dimensions of the Christian tradition, helps Christian individuals and churches become more ecologically responsible, and works with people of other traditions in the common effort to create a more sustainable global society....

The NACCE seeks to make connections between Christians, the Christian tradition, and ecology through publications, educational events, gatherings, and collaborative projects. Since its founding, NACCE has organized

²⁵ U.S. Catholic Climate Declaration. <https://www.tfaforms.com/4668211>. “Catholic Institutions Commit to Climate Action: They’re Speaking Out in Support of Paris Agreement.” *Yale Climate Connections*. https://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2018/08/catholic-institutions-commit-to-climate-action/?popupally_stop=subscriber

²⁶ U.S. Catholic Climate Declaration. <https://www.tfaforms.com/4668211>. “Catholic Institutions Commit to Climate Action: They’re Speaking Out in Support of Paris Agreement.” *Yale Climate Connections*. https://www.yaleclimateconnections.org/2018/08/catholic-institutions-commit-to-climate-action/?popupally_stop=subscriber

regional, national, and continental conferences and sponsored regional affiliates and resource centers.”

Its mission statement states that to address the environmental crisis NACCE:

“We will invite people into a loving relationship with Earth through the formation of local earthkeeping circles

We will teach reverence for God’s creation, with the understanding that humans are embedded in the natural world

We will cooperate with other organizations concerned with ecology and social justice

We will promote the study of ecological issues in the context of biblical theology and contemporary science.”²⁷

7. European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN)

Founded in 1998 ECEN seeks to:

“foster sustainability at local, regional, national, and European levels, the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) facilitates collaboration between European churches and Christian groups. ECEN promotes ecological responsibility from a Christian perspective and encourages churches to become environmentally aware and active. The Network aims to provide churches with support and resources as well as opportunities for dialogue and information sharing....

The work of ECEN is concentrated around several Working Groups/Coalitions that address specific themes: Climate Change, Church Environmental Management, Creation Day and Worship, Environmental Education, Transport and Mobility, Sustainable Development, and Water.”²⁸

²⁷ The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/christianity/projects/na_coalition/

²⁸ European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN). <https://www.ecen.org/>. The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/christianity/projects/euro_christian/

8. Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES)

Founded in the mid-1980s in the United Kingdom by Islamic environmentalist, Fazlun M. Khalid, IFEES is now an international organization “articulating Islamic perspectives on the environment....capable of remedying the socio-ecological imbalances of our time:”

“The main objective of this multi-dimensional organization is to set up a center for Islamic research on conservation practice which would serve as the primary training site for practical and theoretical subjects based on the principles of *Shariah*. The center also serves as a demonstration and promotional site for experimental projects on sustainable land resource management and traditional and non-industrial farming techniques (e.g., organic farming) as well as the development of alternative low energy, low cost technology (e.g., water wheels, solar panels, and waste recycling)....”

It has supported a seminar on Islamic ethics and the environment and a community-based resource protection project in Indonesia. It has sponsored a project in northern Nigeria that educates Muslims on the ethics of Islamic environmental practice. In Pakistan it has assisted a project to re-green the Upper Jehlum Canal (UJC) based on Islamic principles. In Yemen it has supported a rehabilitation of traditional water conservation systems by applying Islamic ethical principles.

It maintains partnerships with several Islamic organizations working on sustainability in various countries of the world: Institute of Ecology, Padjadjaran University (Bandung, Indonesia); Heritage Trust (Penang, Malaysia); Institute of Environmental and Water Resources Management (Universiti Teknologi, Johor, Malaysia); Islamic Foundation for Science and the Environment (New Delhi, India); The African Centre for Sustainable Development (Kano, Nigeria); Islamic Relief (Birmingham, UK); and Islamic Resource Center (Birmingham, UK)²⁹

9. Green Muslims (USA)

²⁹ Ifees. ecoIslam. <http://www.ifees.org.uk/>; The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/islam/projects/islamic_foundation/

Green Muslims is a Washington, DC -based organization that serves as a “source in the Muslim community for spiritually-inspired environmental education, reflection, and action.”

It provides educational information for Muslims about Muslim ethics and the environment. It also engages in action projects such as park and river clean-ups and coordinated gardening projects. In addition they serve as a capacity-building resource for Muslim institutions for environmental action:

“We offer one-on-one consulting to community leaders, imams, mosque executive boards, Muslim Student Associations, youth, and others to come up with ways to make green ideas permeate the communities these leaders serve. We understand that no community is alike so the consulting is tailored. We have worked with local mosques in the DC, Maryland and Virginia area to improve recycling practices and hold low-waste if tars. We have worked with universities nationally to help students with green programming through their Muslim Student Associations.”³⁰

10. Moroccan Mosques Go Solar

This project in the kingdom of Morocco is joining religion and technology to reduce global warming and pollution. It involves retrofitting 600 mosques in the country to use more clean energy and make them energy efficient – using LED lighting, solar water heaters and protective panels. It is creating new jobs in engineering, manufacturing and energy auditing. The project is starting with mosques since they are such important institutions in the country in the hopes that citizens will be inspired to invest in the same technology for their homes and businesses.³¹

11. The Chipko Movement (Indian Himalayas)

³⁰ Green Muslims. <http://www.greenmuslims.org/programs/>. There is also a chapter of Green Muslims in Wisconsin educating Muslims and the general public about Islamic environmental justice teachings, applying them to daily life, and forming coalitions with other groups to work for a sustainable environment. <http://fore.yale.edu/religion/islam/projects/Wisconsin-Green-Muslims/>

³¹ “Moroccan Mosques Go Solar.” <http://fore.yale.edu/religion/islam/projects/moroccan-mosques-go-solar-/>

Based on the traditional Hindu value of *satyagraha*, which is nonviolent struggle on behalf of truth and purity (the foundation of Mahatma Gandhi's movement in early twentieth-century India) the Chipko movement in the Indian Himalayas founded in the 1970s is predominantly a female peasant-led organization dedicated to protection of the environment, especially forest preservation. Named for the practice of "tree hugging" in order to protect trees from loggers the movement uses grassroots protests against land use and development strategies that are destructive to nature. Religious practices are incorporated into their activities such as recitation of Hindu scriptures and performance of rituals during protests.³²

"Between 1981 and 1983, [a march of] 5,000 km (3,100 miles) across the Himalaya [brought] the movement to prominence. Throughout the 1980s many protests were focused on the Tehri dam on the Bhagirathi River and various mining operations, resulting in the closure of at least one limestone quarry. Similarly, a massive reforestation effort led to the planting of more than one million trees in the region."³³

12. Gram Vikas Nav Yuvak Mndal (GYNYM) (Northern India)

GYNYM, or the "New Youth Villages Welfare Association," founded by Laxman Singh in 1990 in the Jaipur district of Rajasthan in northern India is a youth-led organization to work on water conservation, agriculture and health issues. Drawing on traditional Hindu beliefs and practices GYNYM mobilizes villagers to engage in water harvesting projects (from seasonal monsoon rains) transforming the normally barren ecosystem into a lush landscape. It builds earthen percolation tanks and water storage units and diverts stored water into garden plots and pastures through construction of canals and aqueducts. The movement employs traditional Hindu practices to bolster and sustain these water systems:

"Small shrines dedicated to Hindu deities and local guardians of water preserves accompany the village's many small tanks and wells. Certain trees and plants (such as Tulsi and Peepal) are worshipped regularly on household

³² The Chipko Movement. <http://fore.yale.edu/religion/hinduism/projects/chipko/>.

³³ Chipko Movement: Indian Environmental Movement. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chipko-movement>

altars; seasonal and family celebrations often begin and end by honoring nature deities; and daily water drawing entails ritual blessings of the Hindu deity, Shiva, at well shrines. In addition, adaptations of traditional rituals, such as the festival of Raksha Bandhan in which ‘the protective tie of brotherhood’ is applied to trees to symbolize the villagers commitment to protect trees as kin, have helped to forge a conservation ethic in Laporiya. Through these measures, GVN YM has succeeded in raising the water table in Lapoira from sixty feet below the surface in 1991 to merely fifteen feet below in 2002. Because of its success, Singh’s indigenous approach to ecological restoration in Laporiya has spread to some 200 neighboring villages.³⁴

13. MLUP Baitong Buddhism and Environment Program (Cambodia)

MLUP Baitong founded in 1998 in face of the rapid deforestation in Cambodia seeks to promote greater environmental awareness and sustainable development. Since its founding it has addressed a variety of issues including wildlife conservation and habitat protection, environmental education curriculums, and community-based natural resource management. Since Buddhist pagodas are at the center of village life MLUP Baitong has established a network of several hundred monks and 15 pagodas in two provinces:

“Rooted in a Buddhist environmental ethic, this program is designed to promote environmental awareness and ecological practices at the grassroots level by providing monks with training in Buddhism and Ecology and by supporting conservation and sustainability initiatives at pagodas. Such initiatives include seedling germination, tree planting, and water and wood management. The Buddhism Environment Program is one of many programs offered by Mlup Baitong. Others include: Women and Environment Program, School Environmental Education Program, National Park Assistance Program, Community Forestry Program, Community-based Ecotourism Program, Radio and Environmental Advocacy Program, and Environmental Education Resource Center Program. Mlup Baitong

³⁴ Gram Vikas Nav Yuvak Mandal. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/hinduism/projects/gram_vikas/. See also: <https://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/gram-vikas-navyuvak-mandal-laporiya-gvnml>

programs are run by its twenty-five local staff members and numerous volunteers.”³⁵

14. Thai Ecology Monks (Thailand)

In the 1990s monks in Thailand started to take active roles in promoting environmental protection. Known as ecology monks (*phra nak anuraksa*) this small but visible percentage of Thai monks feel it is their religious duty to relieve suffering in all sentient beings, including nature, that results from greed, ignorance and hatred:

“Drawing on Buddhist principles and practices, ecology monks have adapted traditional rituals and ceremonies to draw attention to environmental problems, raise awareness about the value of nature, and inspire people to take part in conservation efforts. Ceremonies such as tree ordination rituals (*buat ton mai*), in which trees are blessed and wrapped in saffron robes to signify their sacred status, are part of a larger effort to foster a conservation ethic rooted in Buddhist principles and bolstered by Buddhist practices....

“[They] have organized a wide variety of grassroots conservation initiatives, including tree ordinations and planting ceremonies, the creation of wildlife preserves and sacred community gardens, long-life ceremonies for ecologically threatened sites or natural entities, and initiatives in sustainable community development and natural farming. Ecology monks have taken stands against deforestation, shrimp farming, dam and pipeline construction, and the cultivation of cash-crops.”³⁶

³⁵ MLUP Baitong Buddhism and Environment Program. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/buddhism/projects/mlup_baitong/, See also: <http://mlup-baitong.org/>

³⁶ Thai Ecology Monks. http://fore.yale.edu/religion/buddhism/projects/thai_ecology/. See also Kiley Price, “Ecology Monks in Thailand Seek to End Environmental Suffering. Mongabay, Aug. 13, 2018. <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/08/ecology-monks-in-thailand/>

V. Impact of Religion on Opinions about Environmental Protection

The final part of the paper analyzes data on public opinion to assess whether these words and actions by major world religions are “building community to support sustainability practices.”

An opinion survey of 40 nations conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015 asking whether pollution is a serious problem found that:

Majorities in all 40 nations polled say it is a serious problem and a global median of 54% consider it a very serious problem. Moreover, a median of 78% support the idea of their country limiting greenhouse gas emissions....³⁷

While there is not one global survey that correlates religious belief with attitudes about the environment there is partial data on specific countries and regions that is illustrative.

In the Pew survey of 2015 although religious affiliation was not correlated with views on environmental aggregate data indicated that two regions of the world where religious belief is high – Latin America and Africa- the view that climate change is a serious problem was also very high: 74% in Latin America and 61% in Africa.³⁸ Religion may not be the cause of these high percentages but it clearly is not acting as a deterrent.

However in other regions of the world survey results showed significantly less concern that climate is a serious concern – 45% of residents in the Asian/Pacific area, 38% in the Middle East, and only 18% in China.³⁹ Although we have documented earlier in this paper strong statements by religious leaders in Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism about concern for the environment and encouragement to take action to protect it, such calls are not mobilizing public opinion in their respecting regions.

³⁷ Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends, “Global Concern about Climate Change, Broad Support for Limiting Emissions, Nov. 5, 2015. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/11/05/global-concern-about-climate-change-broad-support-for-limiting-emissions/>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

In the United States, however, a Pew Research Center national survey in 2010 found that religious affiliation significantly leads average public opinion on the environment. While only 45% of Americans believe climate change is a very serious problem (well below the 54% average globally). A strong majority of all major religious groups favored strong government action to protect the environment and close to a majority said they hear sermons on protecting the environment in their respective houses of worship.

Nevertheless, the survey found that religion is not a determinative influence in shaping American views on this issue:

“There is only a modest religious element in attitudes about environmental protection. Solid majorities of all major religious traditions favor stronger laws and regulation, including 73% of white evangelical Protestants, 79% of black Protestants, 85% of Catholics and 84% of the unaffiliated.

Religion has far less influence on opinions about environmental policy than other factors do. Just 6% say that their religious beliefs have had the biggest influence on what they think about tougher environmental rules. Education and what people hear or read in the media are the strongest drivers of opinions about environmental regulations; roughly three-in-ten cite their education (29%), and 26% mention the media as having the most influence on their thinking about this issue....

Although religion is generally not a key influence on people’s opinions about the environment, many churchgoers report that clergy at their place of worship discuss the topic. Just under half (47%) of those who attend worship services regularly say that their clergy speak out on the environment. More black Protestants (59%) than other religious groups report hearing about the environment from their clergy. However, the majority of white Catholics (64%), white evangelical Protestants (59%) and white mainline Protestants (51%) in the survey say that the environment is not discussed at their place of worship.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Pew Research Center US Politics & Policy. “Religion and the Issues: Environment,” Sept. 17, 2010. <http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/17/few-say-religion-shapes-immigration-environment-views/>

Religious people in the United States clearly show very high concern for the environment and favor stronger laws to protect it, but they form their opinions more on the basis of secular influences than the appeals of their respective religious leaders. Religion is a supportive element in formation of their attitudes but not determinative.

In addition, secular factors play a role in diminishing concerns for the environment among the religiously affiliated in the United States.

Serious partisan cleavages exist among US religious groups regarding their attitudes towards environmental protection – indicating that politics is more determinative in shaping religious people’s attitudes on the environment than the ethical values and messages of their respective traditions.

A June 2015 poll by Pew Research Center found:

“About seven-in-ten U.S. Catholics (71%) believe the planet is getting warmer. Nearly half of Catholic adults (47%) attribute global warming to human causes and a similar share (48%) view it as a very serious problem.

“But more than eight-in-ten Catholic Democrats say there is solid evidence that Earth is warming, compared with just half of Catholic Republicans. And while six-in-ten Catholic Democrats say global warming is a man-made phenomenon and that it poses a very serious problem, only about a quarter of Catholic Republicans agree.⁴¹

This politically partisan impact on environmental views of religious persons was also illustrated in a 2012 survey of attitudes of American Protestant pastors conducted by Lifeway Research, a polling organization studying trends in US Protestant churches:

“The October 2012 survey of Protestant pastors' views of environmental issues shows Protestant pastors in the Northeast, older pastors, and pastors self-identifying as Democrats tend to be more environmentally active compared to younger, Republicans, and counterparts in other regions of the country....

⁴¹ Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life, “Catholics Divided Over Global Warming,” June 16, 2015 <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/16/catholics-divided-over-global-warming/>

Pastors identifying as Democrats are the most likely to strongly agree (76 percent) in the validity of man-made global warming, followed by Independents (20 percent). Just 7 percent of Republican pastors strongly agree. Conversely, Republican pastors are the most likely to strongly disagree (49 percent), followed by Independents (35 percent) and Democrats (5 percent).

‘Pastor opinions on global warming reflect their own political beliefs,’ said Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research.’⁴²

It is also true that despite high degrees of support by U.S. Catholics and Protestants for preserving the environment (illustrated in the Pew 2015 survey), a year later 80% of Evangelical Protestants and 60% of White Catholics voted for Donald Trump for President who very clearly indicated during the electoral campaign that he planned to roll back federal regulations protecting the quality of water and air. During the first year of his presidency carbon pollution due to the burning of fossil fuels rose 3.4% in the United States after several years of steady decline.⁴³

Similar research on the correlation of religious attitudes on the environment and political affiliation is not available for other advanced industrial countries that are major producers of pollution. However, similar cleavages occur in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia between those with left and right-leaning political preferences⁴⁴. Moreover, religious belief and practice in these countries is significantly lower than in the United States so one could assume that politics is even more salient than religion in shaping attitudes about the environment.

In some developing countries despite the strong statements by religious leaders urging ecological conservation policies of governments and corporations do not follow suit. In India, for example, as described earlier in the paper Hindu leaders

⁴² Russ Rankin, “Majority of Pastors Doubt Global Warming, But Recycle at Church,” Lifeway, Jan. 10, 2014. <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/research-majority-of-pastors-doubt-global-warming-but-recycle-at-church?carid=jhowe-stetzer-enviro-research-20130416>

⁴³ Brad Plumer, “U.S. Carbon Emissions Surged in 2018 Even as Coal Plants Closed,” New York Times, Jan. 8, 2019. 2019.<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/climate/greenhouse-gas-emissions-increase.html>

⁴⁴ Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends, “Global Concern about Climate Change, Broad Support for Limiting Emissions, Nov. 5, 2015. [HTTP://WWW.PEWGLOBAL.ORG/2015/11/05/GLOBAL-CONCERN-ABOUT-CLIMATE-CHANGE-BROAD-SUPPORT-FOR-LIMITING-EMISSIONS/](http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/11/05/global-concern-about-climate-change-broad-support-for-limiting-emissions/)

have spoken clearly about the need for better environmental policies but water and air pollution continue to be rising and causing serious health hazards to the population.

Sonya Sachdeva, a computational social scientist with the U.S. Forest Service, in a literature survey on the correlation between religious beliefs and concern for the environment finds that there is not always a correlation between religious beliefs about the sacredness of nature in Eastern countries and pro-active policies to protect the environment:

“While some cultures and religions may emphasize the connection between humans and nature, this may not always translate into environmental conservation. The Ganges and the Yamuna are two of the most polluted rivers in the world, despite being life channels for tens of millions of people (Alley, 1994; Haberman, 2006). Narayanan (2001) notes the inherent irony by referring to these rivers as ‘physically polluted moral purifiers.’ Even as studies continue to document the dangerous level of contaminants in the Ganges, millions of pilgrims flock to the river to take a ceremonial, cleansing dip in its sacred water....⁴⁵

She summarizes her review with some cautiously optimistic observations about the role of religion in promoting better environmental policies globally:

“Some might consider that the solutions to the pressing environmental issues acting the world today will come from the secular, scientific community, discounting or disavowing the role of religions in shaping individual environmental concern and action. This review emphasizes that religion has a pivotal role to play in shaping our ecological future. Religious worldviews, as pervasive components of cultural systems, have important implications for how humans think about their role in nature, how to engage with the natural world and, importantly, how shared resources should be managed....

“Successful implementation of policy designed to increase conservation or stewardship behavior is not only dependent on increasing scientific or

⁴⁵ Sonya Sachdeva, “Religious Identity, Beliefs, and Views about Climate Change,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science, Sept. 2016. Online Publication.
file:///C:/Users/Owner/Desktop/Rel.%20Identity,%20Beliefs,%20Views%20-Clim.%20Change%20(PDF).pdf

ecological education but might also require a deeper understanding the ways in which people relate to the environment, which is often bound to religious worldviews. The participation of local communities in designing sustainable management interventions may be one way of integrating religious, spiritual and ecological objectives....⁴⁶

She concludes:

“It is important to remember that religion is one component of a larger societal picture, and it interacts with economic, political, cultural and media factors in determining people’s attitudes towards environmental and climate related issues. Religious values, just as other cultural beliefs, evolve over time and while they may provide a foundation for human-nature relationships, these ideas are shaped by a myriad of factors. This means that no particular religious tradition bears “the burden of guilt”...just as no tradition can be expected to fully promote environmental stewardship. A paradigmatic cultural shift which creates structural opportunities for pro-environmental behavior, including those rooted in religious practices, can be a means to mitigate our current ecological crisis.”⁴⁷

VI. Conclusions

Major religious traditions have values and teachings embedded in their scriptural traditions and sometimes their histories that can provide a moral basis and spiritual motivations for protecting the environment. Their vision of transcendent reality or God in their respective traditions is linked to the material world as creating or sustaining force and gives nature a sacred quality requiring human respect and stewardship.

In recent years major leaders have acted collectively to marshal these traditional resources to provide specific ethical guidelines for behavior in the current global environmental crisis. They have creatively linked ancient spiritual teachings to current challenges to current crises in ways that provide strong motivations for action by their communities.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

All of these religious and ethical resources provide a wider framework in which to understand and act facing environmental problems. They take scientific evidence seriously and articulate strong motives for acting on its warnings. People do not “live by bread alone” but are motivated to act for deeper values that are meaningful for them beyond material survival and major religions today offer such inspiration.

What is also clear is that the statements of religious leaders about the environment are being matched by institutional commitments with structural resources, money and personnel to promote action programs for sustainability. Today there are literally thousands of religious organizations undertaking projects in forest preservation, water conservation, alternate energy production, education, and divestment in corporations that produce fossil fuels. Some of these are international consortia – United Religions Initiative (URI), the World Council of Churches (WCC) Justice, Peace and Creation (JPC), the Global Catholic Climate Movement, and the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) – that provide technical assistance or financial resources to national and local affiliates to implement these projects.

Secular consortia have also been collaborating with religious organizations in recent years – Alliance of Religion and Conservation International (ARC), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. They link religious institutions to the wider environmental movement, provide technical advice and expertise for initiating or sustaining projects, or (as is the case of the Yale project) act as a clearing house for information on what religious leaders and programs are doing globally to enhance environmental sustainability.

Such projects by religious organizations do not have the political clout or economic resources to achieve the goal of “rapid and far-reaching” transformation of human behavior by 2010 called for by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCCC). They are, however, important allies to non-religious groups working towards this goal and are mobilizing resources and actions by people of faith that otherwise might not have responded to the U. N.’s call. Many of the projects supported by religious organizations at local levels – especially in developing countries -- reach remote areas where governmental programs are not active and weave into the projects religious teachings and rituals that inspire local communities to become involved and provide support.

The issue of whether religious calls for action to save the environment are having a significant impact on the attitudes and actions of rank and file members not involved in specific projects is harder to determine. There is not global comparative empirical evidence to explore this question. However, where evidence exists it appears that in regions of the world where Eastern religions are prominent (Asia) or in the Middle East where Islam is influential citizens do not express as strong a concern about the environment as in Western countries.

In the United States) there are indications that people of faith are very concerned about environmental pollution and support strong government policies to reduce it. However, follow up questions in surveys show that it is not religion that is shaping their attitudes but influences from the media and education. Moreover, well over one-half of religious respondents indicate they never hear any sermons in their respective houses of worship by clergy about the environment.

In addition, there are serious political cleavages among people of faith in the United States that affect how they view environmental issues. Those identifying with Democratic Party (both clergy and faithful) tend to be much more concerned about the environment than those who associate with the Republican Party. Presidential election results in 2016 confirmed the fact that among religious adherents political preferences and other issues are more significant than concerns about the environment and there is no indication this is changing.

It is clear that Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism have all have exhibited several strengths identified by Gary Gardner of the Worldwatch Institute for environmental sustainability:

1. Their leaders are “shaping worldviews” by “linking traditions and teachings to contemporary issues” in ecology;
2. Their leaders are “using moral authority to offer ethical guidelines” for “sustainable living;”
3. Leaders are “engaging members of faith-based groups to discuss and act on environmental issues;”
4. Leaders at the international, national and local levels are “sharing physical resources....and money” to “invest in sustainable practices.”

Their progress in “building community to support sustainability practices” is being realized among specific elites within their own organizations -- some clergy and groups of laity involved in their respective ecological projects. However, they do not exercise the same significant impact on rank and file members as do political and economic factors that still are far more powerful in shaping the attitudes of average citizens about the environment than religion.