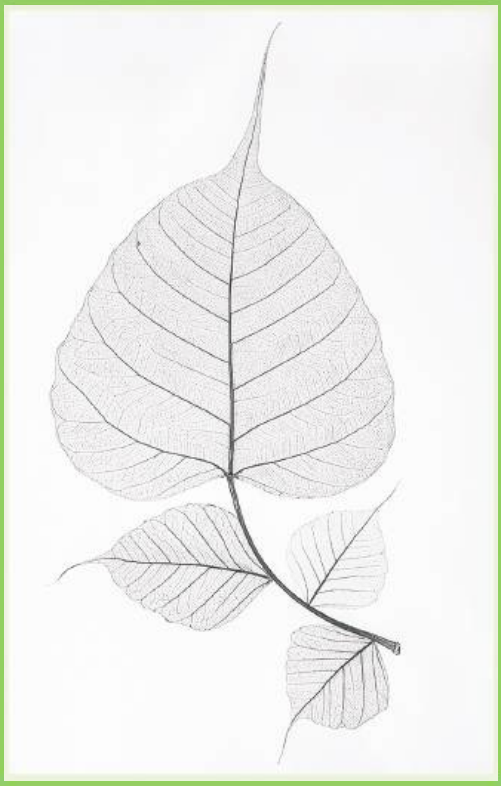
STUDIA INSTITUTI MISSIOLOGICI SVD

Anthony Le Duc

Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing

A Humanistic Relational Approach



FRANZ SCHMITT VERLAG

Anthony Le Duc
Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing
A Humanistic Relational Approach

STUDIA
INSTITUTI MISSIOLOGICI SOCIETATIS VERBI DIVINI
NR. 124

Anthony Le Duc

Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing

A Humanistic Relational Approach

2024
Franz Schmitt Verlag, Siegburg

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek
Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.ddb.de abrufbar.

Franz Schmitt Verlag
Kaiserstr. 99-101
53721 Siegburg
Germany
mis@verlagfranzschmitt.de

Cover Photo: Thang Duc Nguyen

ISSN 0562-2816
ISBN 978-3-87710-563-4

DTP: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, Sankt Augustin
missionswissenschaft@steyler.eu
http://www.missionswissenschaft.eu
Druck: Franz Schmitt, Siegburg

Table of Contents

Papal Documents

CA *Centesimus Annus*
http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html

CiV *Caritas in Veritate*
http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

EV *Evangelium Vitae*
http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.pdf

FT *Fratelli Tutti*
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

LD *Laudate Deum*
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.pdf

LS *Laudato Si'*
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.pdf

PP *Populorum Progressio*
http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html

RH *Redemptor Hominis*
http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html

VS *Veritatis Splendor*
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.pdf

Vatican II Documents

GS *Gaudium et Spes*
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

All Internet sources were controlled on February 15, 2024.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENTAL FLOURISHING

Setting the Scene

Since 2007, I have called Thailand home, with most of those years in the bustling Bangkok metropolis. The city boasts a population of nearly eleven million within its limits, with millions more residing in the surrounding provinces. This is a testament to the city's vibrancy and its ability to attract people from all walks of life and countries, with promises of excitement and opportunities. Amidst the countless high-end shopping centers, towering office buildings, and condominiums sprouting in every direction, it's easy to mistake the population to be twice its actual size. The city's verdant public parks, like Lumpini Park nestled amid imposing structures, and the occasional tree or plant placed before building complexes, are the few reminders of nature in a city dominated by concrete. A sharp contrast to the country's identity rooted in the tradition of forest monks, revered for their spiritual practices, and the overall Theravada Buddhist culture. Despite the country's embrace of modernity, this tradition continues to play an important role in the spiritual and religious life and sensibility of many Thai people. Statistics indicate that 92.5 percent of its 70 million population identify themselves as Buddhist.[1] Muslims and Christians make up most of the rest.

As the beating heart of Thailand, Bangkok attracts millions of visitors annually with its world-famous street food, ornate temples, irresistible vibrancy, and eclectic energy. Yet, beneath its surface lies a disquieting truth—Bangkok is sinking. One wouldn't know that from observing the feverish speed of infrastructure being built in and beyond the city limits. But according to experts, the city, whose official name is the longest in the world and is usually referred to by local people by its shorter version as Krungthep Mahanakhon (or Krungthep), is sinking at an alarming rate of two to three centimeters a year.[2]

---

1 US Department of State, "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Thailand," https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/thailand/#:~:text=Section%20I.-,Religious%20Demography,Muslim%2C%20and%201.2%20percent%20Christian

2 Karin Wenger, "Bangkok Is Sinking but so Are Other Southeast Asian Megacities," *Global Geneva*, April 1, 2020, https://global-geneva.com/bangkok-is-

To be fair, the present-day tourist haven was never built on a firm foundation in the first place. From humble beginnings as a modest trading post during the Ayutthaya Kingdom in the fifteenth century, Bangkok evolved into a beacon of progress as Siam (later renamed Thailand) embraced the tide of modernization in the late eighteenth—early nineteenth century, making it the nation's new capital. Its strategic location by the Chaophraya River, a crucial conduit for economic growth, lent it a distinct advantage. However, the area was originally a swamp, and required the construction of an extensive network of canals that earned it the moniker 'Venice of the East.' Though many of these canals continue to ferry Bangkokians via taxi boats, most of the waterways have been covered over, serving instead as channels for the city's overwhelmed sewage system.

According to experts, Bangkok's current elevation is a meager 1.5 meters above sea level, presenting a host of daunting challenges for its local leaders. With monsoon season in full swing from May until November, the city struggles to effectively drain its water. Additionally, both industry and residents are illegally tapping into groundwater reserves, exacerbating the metropolis' precarious position. Yet, perhaps the most concerning factor is something beyond Thailand's control: rising sea levels. In fact, Bangkok has been designated the world's most vulnerable city due to the devastating impact of climate change on sea levels.[3] It is predicted that by 2050, as much as one-third of the city may be submerged, resulting in millions of people being displaced.

Bangkok is hardly the only major world city that has to deal with worrying prospects about its future. The lives and livelihood of hundreds of millions of people around the world are at stake as environmental concerns continue to mount. As the world grapples with an ever-worsening environmental crisis, the future of cities like Bangkok hangs in the balance. Yet, the stakes are far greater than the fate of any one metropolis. The very survival of our planet and the well-being of its people are at risk. Rising sea levels, devastating weather patterns, and the relentless march of pollution threaten to upend life as we know it.

Environmental disasters have been a natural part of Earth's processes, but the current environmental crisis is distinctively a result of the Anthropocene Era—the Age of Humans. In this unofficial geological epoch, humans have become a force of nature, capable of influencing and altering natural processes, leading to an escalating global environ-

---

sinking-but-so-are-other-southeast-asian-megacities/#:~:text=Bangkok%3A%20A%20city %20sinking%20at, by%20the%20Chao%20Phraya%20River

[3] Earth.org, "Sea Level Rise Projections: 10 Cities at Risk of Flooding," June 4, 2022, https://earth.org/sea-level-rise-projections/

mental crisis. This crisis poses a threat to the progress humanity has achieved in economic and social development, and risks leaving future generations with a depleted and weakened planet. It is a dilemma that cannot be addressed by a single sector of society, politicians, or scientific experts alone. The consensus is an effective solution to ecological concerns requires an interdisciplinary, dialectical, and dialogical approach that engages the collaborative minds and hearts of a diverse group of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions on both local and global levels.

For some time now, there have been voices calling for urgent action. As early as 1962, Rachel Carson prophetically asserted toward the end of her classic book Silent Spring, "We stand where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one 'less traveled by'—offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth."[4]

The multitude dimensions of the environmental crisis are playing out before our eyes in a dramatic fashion. The year 2023 (at the time of this writing) is on track to clinch the title of the hottest year on record,[5] one that will be overtaken if things continue as usual. The choices we make in the coming years will determine whether we leave behind a legacy of destruction or take bold steps toward a more sustainable future. It is time for us to rise to the challenge and safeguard the earth not only for posterity but for the very integrity of nature itself. To tackle this crisis, scientific and technological knowledge must be applied to social, economic, and legal policies. This must also be accompanied by political will, ethical awareness, and personal and religious commitment to act in the best interests of the environment. Only by bringing together a wide range of perspectives and expertise can we hope to find a sustainable solution to the environmental challenges we face.

The Role of Religion in Context of Environmental Concerns

Religious belief remains one of the most persistent and enduring aspects of human life in today's globalized world. A major study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015 revealed that an overwhelming

---

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

5 Kasha Patel, "2023 Is on Track to Be the Hottest Year on Record," *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/08/08/2023-is-track-be-hottest-year-record/

majority (84 percent) of the world's population still maintains a religious affiliation.[6] In 2023, the World Population Review also published similar statistics with 85 percent of the world's inhabitants adhering to a faith tradition.[7] According to Pew, while sixteen percent of the population reported no religious affiliation, many of them acknowledged holding religious or spiritual beliefs, such as belief in God or some transcendent powers. Despite this, the study suggests that the global population of religiously unaffiliated people is declining, with only around ten percent of the world's newborns between 2010 and 2015 born to unaffiliated mothers, even though they make up sixteen percent of the global population.[8] In contrast, Muslims are experiencing a 'baby boom,' and are expected to have nearly caught up to Christians by 2050.[9] While social scientists have been forecasting the decline of religion because of increasing secularization, this prediction has not played out as expected. Admittedly, secularization has been on the rise in Western Europe, North America, and various countries undergoing modernization.[10] However, religion has grown in prominence and number of adherents in other parts of the world.[11] Granted that secularization is not an impossibility in various societies, but the current state of global religion indicates that there is no sign that the *homo religiosus* is facing imminent extinction.

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

---

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

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

8 Pew, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape."

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

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

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

yond personal growth, encompassing social, political, and even cosmic dimensions. It is a profound change that alters the very essence of what it means to be human. He wrote:

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

According to Streng, religion serves as the means to this kind of transformation. The Protestant German-American theologian and philosopher, Paul Tillich, also held a similar outlook. He posited that religion is characterized by being seized by an "ultimate concern." Tillich stated that "religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. And ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit."[13] As human beings, we are constantly driven by a deep desire to comprehend the purpose of our existence and achieve a state of ultimate transformation. This profound aspiration motivates us to evaluate our current circumstances and seek opportunities for personal growth. Religious traditions, with their rich history and teachings, offer valuable guidance and resources to support this journey of self-cultivation. They have the potential to address individual and communal concerns, including the pressing need for environmental care and safeguarding in contemporary society. Therefore, it is pertinent for religious institutions to actively engage in this critical issue, and work toward sustainable solutions that benefit everyone.

Unfortunately, the valuable role of religion or faith actors in promoting communal development has often been overlooked due to false or inaccurate assumptions. Instead, the spotlight is frequently cast on the conflicts that arise from religious differences and intolerance, with religious violence being cited as a major impediment to progress.[14] The destructive impact of extremist religious organizations such as the Islamic State (IS), as well as fundamentalist factions within Hinduism and Christianity, has reinforced the notion in society and academia that religion is inherently prone to violence.[15] Charles Kimball, an ordained

---

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

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

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

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

Baptist minister and expert in Comparative Religion commented, "It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history."[16]

Another perception of faith actors is that they have a hidden agenda of proselytization and would instrumentalize their development work to convert people.[17] Consequently, development institutions and agencies tend to prefer religious partners who are perceived as being more liberal and humanistic in their outlook, rather than strictly adhering to creeds and codes. In his book *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*, Roger S. Gottlieb listed and refuted the common points against religion's involvement in social and political spheres, namely: (1) Religion, in essence, is undemocratic and oppressive; (2) Religious beliefs are irrational or at best nonrational, and thus have no place in the organization of society; (3) Religious values are, at best, peripheral to environmentalism, which should be shaped by science, not faith; (4) Involvement in politics is bad for religion; and (5) Religion has become increasingly irrelevant to modern life, so a religious environmentalism is not needed and will make no real contribution.

While the scope of this introductory chapter prevents a thorough examination of Gottlieb's arguments, it suffices to note that he refuted these positions because of the fundamental fact that "environmental problems can *only* be solved collectively"[18]—which means that religion cannot be simply ignored. To effectively tackle environmental issues (as well as other global and local concerns), it is crucial for all stakeholders to acquire religious literacy which enables the acknowledgement that religious institutions have a vital role to play in the public sphere.[19] After all, most major religions have a vested interest in the well-being of humanity and view the contribution of the religious perspective to social development as an integral aspect of their mandate. An exemplary case in point is Catholic social teaching, which has been a powerful voice in advocating for social justice and promoting integral human development. Pope Francis, in his 2014 World Day of Peace Message,

---

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

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

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

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

stated that authentic development is not about "mere technical know-how bereft of ideals and unconcerned with the transcendent dimension of man."[20] Thus, it is time to do away with the Western mindset focused on a post-religious world where faith actors are refused a place in the public arena.

Despite the lack of awareness or disinterest on the part of secular organizations, over the past several decades, there has been a surge in religious engagement with environmental concerns, as people have come to recognize the intrinsic link between environmental flourishing and human well-being. The involvement of religions in these issues is especially beneficial, as their contribution is both unique and valuable. According to Hans Küng, religious teachings possess an absolute nature, which is essential for encouraging commitment to solving environmental problems. Küng argued that the authoritative voice of religion can impel its adherents to follow prescribed norms unconditionally, even in cases where doing so may be contrary to their own interests.[21] One of the advantages of religion in this context is its ability to propose a "categorical ought" that extends beyond the finite conditions of human existence, human urgencies, and even the survival of humanity itself.[22] Moreover, religion serves as a guiding force, a compass for our moral and ethical sensibility, a source of inspiration for our communities, and a deep well of spiritual motivation. Throughout history, religion has been a powerful voice for social justice, driving movements that challenge inequality and oppression. From the Christian churches' role in promoting social healing in post-genocide Rwanda[23] to the tireless efforts of religious women and men across traditions to promote environmental consciousness and stewardship, religion has been a vital force for inspiring social change.

Through its teachings and practices, religion underscores the interconnectedness of all life, emphasizing the need to promote the well-being of others. This call to action provides a compelling framework for tackling the most pressing social issues of our time, such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Religious communities offer a sense of belonging, an anchor of support and a place to draw strength, and a network of like-minded individuals committed to social justice.

---

[20] Pope Francis, "World Day of Peace Message 2014," http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvii-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html

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

[22] Ibid., 53.

[23] Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs*, 14.

The power of faith is undeniable in shaping attitudes and perspectives, driving individuals and communities toward meaningful and lasting social change. Religion provides a language of morality, hope, and compassion that can inspire and unite people to work together toward creating a more just and equitable world.

With regard to environmental concerns, historian Lynn White Jr. asserted that people's actions toward their ecology are influenced by their beliefs about themselves and their relationship to their surroundings. White suggested that religion plays a crucial role in shaping these beliefs, stating that "human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny."[24] Our interpretation of our own story and destiny, as well as our relationships with others and nature, are all informed by our religious beliefs.

Religious beliefs hold a fundamental role in human life, as they offer primordial, all-encompassing, and unique worldviews. As a result, they possess the power to mobilize the human will and effort to achieve desired transformations.[25] Traditional societies that have succeeded in managing resources over time have done so in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management.[26] The Muslim scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr pointed out that the vast majority of people in the world live within a religiously bound universe. For this reason, religious ethics remain the most practical vehicle for solving the environmental crisis. Rational arguments or scientific reasons in many contexts are less likely to influence individuals to adopt ethical values or change behaviors than the guidance of respected religious leaders.[27]

Nasr's assertion is supported by the results of a 2020 Afrobarometer survey conducted in 34 African countries to gauge the level of trust given to key public officials by the people. The results indicated that religious leaders ranked first with 69 percent. Political leaders ranked significantly lower with trust for the president at 52 percent and trust for parliaments at 43 percent.[28] While it is true that public trust in reli-

---

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

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

[26] Quoted in Tucker and Grim, "Series foreword," xviii.

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

[28] Brian Howard, "Religion in Africa: Tolerance and Trust in Leaders Are High, But Many Would Allow Regulation of Religious Speech," *Afrobarometer Dispatch* 339, January 28, 2020, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-con

gious leaders has declined over time due to multiple factors including various scandals involving religious institutions, overall, these leaders and faith actors are still held in high esteem by many.

This is primarily attributed to the perception that their work is not driven by selfish interests, but rather by a genuine commitment to serving others. Additionally, the trust people have in religious leaders is often reinforced by their firsthand experiences with the valuable services offered by religious organizations.[29] Thus, the above-mentioned arguments suggest that religious beliefs play a vital role in shaping individuals' perceptions of their environment and the actions they take toward it. These perspectives highlight the importance of considering religious factors in environmental policy and management decisions.

While there has been a significant effort to raise awareness of the environmental crisis, neither intellectual and scientific knowledge nor legal regulations have been effective in changing people's attitude toward nature. Therefore, seeking out other sources and methods of persuasion is essential.[30] In this regard, religious involvement has been seen to be effective in promoting environmental agenda in many places. In Bhutan for example, religion has played a significant role in the country's standard for happiness, which includes environmental conservation. Although religious belief and environmental practice may contradict each other in a reductionist viewpoint, they work together in Bhutan, a country in the eastern Himalayas, to conserve the environment. The country's government reports emphasize that Bhutan's distinctive sacred cosmology, which merges Animism, Bön, and Vajrayana Buddhism, has helped preserve its natural surroundings. Consequently, approximately two-thirds of Bhutan is still covered by forests.[31]

Bhutan's unwavering dedication to the conservation of the environment is one of the four pillars of its Gross National Happiness philosophy. As enshrined in its constitution, the country preserves an impressive 60 percent of its land under forest cover and has triumphantly safeguarded over 51 percent of its land—the highest proportion of any

---

tent/uploads/migrated/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno 339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf

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

30 Ryszard F. Sadowski, "Roots of (and Solutions to) Our Ecological Crisis: A Humanistic Perspective," *Ecological Civilization* 1, no. 1 (2023): 10001; https://doi.org/10.35534/ecolciviliz.2023.10001

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

Asian nation. The fruits of this noble pursuit are readily apparent through the country's vast network of protected areas, which allow native wildlife to roam freely, and the thriving industry of ecotourism. The benefits of Bhutan's conservation efforts are not only limited to the kingdom itself but extend to the world, as this region provides water to a fifth of the global population, is situated at the heart of a region replete with biodiversity, and acts as a vital agent in absorbing carbon dioxide to combat climate change.[32]

Scholars have noted that Bhutan's environmental policy is integrally intertwined to its cultural and religious worldview, in particular the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy of peace, friendship, and harmony. This philosophy is combined with the concept of sustainable development to promote Gross National Happiness, which is a prominent feature of Bhutan's development. The Bhutanese government has integrated this philosophy into its policies, which is markedly different from other developing countries.[33]

Religious authorities have also influenced environmental discourse and action by issuing formal declarations. For instance, in August 2015, a group of Islamic scholars from various countries launched a collective call to combat climate change, based on both Islamic teachings and scientific evidence.[34] They urged all people of goodwill, especially Muslims, to protect the environment and the rights of all living beings.[35] They also called for well-funded and coordinated efforts to adopt a green economy and lifestyle, phase out greenhouse gas emissions, and switch to 100 percent renewable energy. Some Muslim countries and organizations followed their lead and invested in eco-friendly practices and renewable energy sources. The declaration also highlighted the plight of vulnerable populations affected by climate change, such as those in developing countries and marginalized communities, and demanded increased financial support from wealthy nations to help them cope and adapt. The declaration challenged Muslims to act individually and col-

---

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

[33] Suppawit Kaewkhunok, "Environmental Conservation in Bhutan: Organization and Policy," *Asian Review* 31, no. 2 (2018): 54.

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

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

lectively, and to advocate for eco-friendly policies and practices. However, it also acknowledged that many Muslim nations have yet to live up to its aspirations.

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis, released in 2015, has been a major force in the environmental movement by highlighting the moral and ethical issues of climate change and advocating for the most vulnerable groups who are affected by it. The Pope consulted with leading experts in climate science and development economics, and his efforts in 2015 inspired global collaboration that led to important international agreements, such as the UN General Assembly's ratification of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate change. The Pope's contributions to the discourse on global environmental challenges and solutions were significant in fostering cooperation among nations.[36]

The encyclical calls for urgent action to address environmental issues, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life and the need to care for the planet and its inhabitants. Since the release of *Laudato Si'*, there has been increased attention on environmental issues within the Catholic Church and among other religious communities. The document has sparked dialogue and debate about the role of religion in environmental stewardship and has inspired many individuals and organizations to act on climate change and environmental degradation.[37] *Laudato Si'* has also had an impact beyond the religious community, influencing public discourse and policy debates on environmental issues. Furthermore, *Laudato Si'* has helped to shift the narrative around climate change and environmental degradation from a purely scientific and economic issue to one that includes moral and ethical dimensions. The document asserts the importance of caring for the planet as a moral obligation and calls on individuals, governments, and institutions to take responsibility for their impact on the environment.

The aforementioned examples affirm that religion is not just an optional factor in addressing the environmental crisis, but a crucial one. The neglect of religion as an essential contributor to the global discourse on various issues constitutes a "misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world."[38] Fortunately, as

---

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

[37] For example, the *Laudato Si'* Movement based in the Philippines, https://laudatosimovement.org/

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

religious leaders and other faith actors increasingly engage themselves in environmental matters, the presence of religion in the conversation has garnered more attention than before. Even in communist China, there has been a resurgence of public interest in Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism and how these traditions can affect the course of national development.[39] While China under Communist leadership is officially an atheist country, these belief systems traditionally have had a significant role in shaping Chinese culture and are often seen as a source of moral guidance. Thus, facing contemporary social concerns, people within the Chinese society have advocated for returning to this source of wisdom for answers. In 2016, China's State Council released guidelines for promoting the "ecological civilization" in which many of the environmental values delineated in the document were observed to be consistent with traditional Confucian values.[40]

Need for an Environmental Spirituality

Mahatma Gandhi has been quoted as saying, "What we are doing to the forests of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another." The religious perspective sees a spiritual crisis at the core of all social and environmental woes. Our ecological troubles stem from our selfishness and warped values that favor material gain over moral and spiritual growth. The economic creed of modern civilization has fueled our obsession with instant gratification and short-term aims, letting greed and excess supplant basic virtues. Thus, we have severed our bond with nature and forgotten our values.[41] The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in 1997 declared:

> For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation… For humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands… For humans to injure other humans with disease, for humans to contaminate the

[39] J. Sawyer, "Introduction," in *Ecological Civilization,* ed. J. Sawyer and D. Jin (Beijing: Pulitzer Center, 2015), Kindle edition.

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

[41] Chris Durante, "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin," *Public Orthodoxy*, September 3, 2021, https://publicorthodoxy.org/2021/09/03/green-patriarch-and-ecological-sin/

> Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances… These are sins.[42]

Thus, environmental degradation reflects a deeper, more insidious malady that plagues humanity—a spiritual and moral decline. It is not merely the result of misguided social, economic, and political governance but rather an expression of a broader malaise that pervades our collective consciousness. The reckless pursuit of overconsumption, the unbridled desire for unchecked development, and the flagrant disregard for the well-being of nature are all symptoms of this ailment, rather than the cause.

The Japanese Buddhist philosopher Daisaku Ikeda reflected well the sentiments of religious leaders from all corners of the world when he remarked that "human relations with nature are intimately bound up in interpersonal relations and with the relation of the self and its inner life."[43] Thus, tackling the ecological crisis and promoting environmental flourishing necessitates a spiritual transformation as the foundation of all endeavors. Without such transformation, the task of caring for our planet risks devolving into a mere series of dry mechanical calculations, abstract concepts, and clever policy enactments. As Bartholomew said, "We need a new way of thinking about our own selves, about our relationship with the world and with God. Without this revolutionary 'change of mind,' all our conservation projects, however well intentioned, will remain ultimately ineffective."[44] Seyyed H. Nasr shared this sentiment, asserting that "the ecological crisis is only an externalization of an inner malaise and cannot be solved without a spiritual rebirth of Western man."[45] By "Western man," Nasr referred to the modern individual who has embraced scientific rationalism as the foundation of all knowledge, resulting in a desacralized perception of nature and humanity devoid of their spiritual dimensions and religious understandings of the world.[46]

Thus, addressing environmental concerns to the core requires authentic *metanoia*, a deep ecological conversion as called for by Pope

---

[42] Bartholomew I, Address at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, November 8, 1997.

[43] AZ Quotes, "Daisaku Ikeda Quotes About Environment," https://www.azquotes.com/author/7152-Daisaku_Ikeda/tag/environment

[44] Bartholomew I, Message at the International Conference on Ethics, Religion, and Environment, University of Oregon, April 5, 2009.

[45] Seyyed H. Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (London: Mandala, 1990), 9.

[46] Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 32.

John Paul II[47] as well as his successors. True conversion, however, cannot take place without religious inspiration and guidance. Religions at their best inspire and infuse external acts that are consistent with authentic interior virtues ordered to the well-being of both humanity and the natural environment. In this respect, religions must undergo their own self-examination in order to adequately speak to the present context. As the Buddhist scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi asserted:

> If any great religion is to acquire a new relevance it must negotiate some very delicate, very difficult balances. It must strike a happy balance between remaining faithful to the seminal insights of its Founder and ancient masters and acquiring the skill and flexibility to formulate these insights in ways that directly link up with the pressing existential demands of old-age. It is only too easy to veer toward one of these extremes at the expense of the other: either to adhere tenaciously to ancient formulas at the expense of present relevance, or to bend fundamental principles so freely that one drains them of their deep spiritual vitality. Above all, I think any religion today must bear in mind an important lesson impressed on us so painfully by past history: the task of religion is to liberate, not to enslave. Its purpose should be to enable its adherents to move toward the realization of the Ultimate Good and to bring the power of this realization to bear upon life in the world.[48]

This sentiment adequately encapsulates the task that religious traditions must undertake to contribute to addressing contemporary issues plaguing society, especially that of the environmental crisis. Despite numerous books, academic articles, and conferences dedicated to the relationship between religion and the environment, the discourse must persist for various reasons. The environmental crisis poses a continuous threat to both human and environmental well-being, leaving no room for silence, even if the ideas have been voiced before. The crisis took years to develop, and it will take time to solve. Thus, persistence is critical for those who understand the problem and tirelessly work toward its mitigation and eventual remedy.

---

[47] John Paul II, "World Day of Peace Message, 1990," https://www.vati can.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.pdf

[48] Bhikkhu Bodhi, "A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence," *Access to Insight*, 1994, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/response.html

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to rejuvenate and reiterate old ideas in new social settings, where both the speaker and the listener bring different perspectives and sensibilities to the table. This hermeneutical approach allows for old voices to be renewed and reinvigorated, potentially breathing new life into the message that they convey. Although the message itself may not be new, the context and delivery can enhance its significance and relevance. Religion and the environment are intricately connected and can influence each other, and can also be impacted by technological and social advancements. Therefore, continuing the conversation in an interdisciplinary and interreligious manner is crucial to achieving the ultimate goal of promoting flourishing and well-being for both nature and humanity. With ongoing engagement and collaboration, we can foster a better understanding of the issues at hand and work toward practical solutions that benefit us all.

Therefore, when it comes to addressing ecological concerns and promoting environmental flourishing, what is needed is not simply an environmental ethic, but more profoundly, an environmental spirituality. While environmental ethics can originate from purely secular philosophy, environmental spirituality is integrally connected to religious and spiritual traditions. This is the unique contribution of religion to the environmental discourse that cannot be filled by other fields. Whether we like to admit it or not, the most profound spiritualities are rooted in religion. Religion provides the anchor for spirituality, and it is via religion that spirituality takes shape and sustains itself. Nasr declared, "From my point of view, which is always of course a traditional one, there is no spirituality without religion. There is no way of reaching the spirit without choosing a path which God has chosen for us, and that means religion (*religio*)."[49]

Since religion continues to play a prominent role in the life of people around the world, it is wise to encourage an environmental spirituality founded upon scientific facts and positively informed and motivated by their faith. In this context, the term 'spirituality' is applied to all religious systems, including nontheistic traditions like Buddhism and Confucianism. One might find the term 'spirituality' applied to a religion like Buddhism to be an oxymoron because Buddhism denies the existence of a 'spirit' or a 'self.' However, 'spirituality' in the broad sense does not necessarily connote the presence of a 'spirit' or a 'soul' as understood in Western Christianity but can also refer to a more general state or experience of inner well-being and transformation. Because of this, spirituality as a discipline can be applied to a variety of religious systems.

---

[49] William C. Chittick (ed.), *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2007), 29.

The famous primatologist Jane Goodall remarked, "If only we can overcome cruelty, to human and animal, with love and compassion we shall stand at the threshold of a new era in human moral and spiritual evolution—and realize, at last, our most unique quality: humanity."[50] Indeed, the Dalai Lama said that spirituality goes beyond religion, which is "concerned with faith in the claims to salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or *nirvana*."[51] On the other hand, spirituality is "concerned with those qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony—which bring happiness to both self and others." Therefore, the Dalai Lama suggested that instead of a "religious revolution," a "spiritual revolution" is necessary. This revolution should involve a fundamental shift away from our usual focus on ourselves and toward the broader community of beings to whom we are linked. Our actions should reflect a consideration for the interests of others in addition to our own.

Having said that, the Dalai Lama did not deny that spiritual "qualities, or virtues, are fruits of genuine religious endeavor and that religion therefore has everything to do with developing them and with what may be called spiritual practice." According to Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "We know what we need to do, but we lack the will. The will is generated by spirituality. And so, by turning to the common resources of our religions, we awaken the will to do the right thing."[52] Indeed, when religion is at its finest, it can function as a doorway into the spiritual domain and inspire ethical transformation. However, if it becomes fixated on its dogmas, creeds, rituals, and its assertion of possessing the absolute truth, it can turn into an obstacle or barrier to genuine spiritual enlightenment.[53]

Religions consistently emphasize that the problems facing humanity today are not limited to social issues that can be effectively addressed

---

[50] Quoted in Fetzer Institute, "Practice: Overcoming Cruelty with Love and Compassion," n.d., https://fetzer.org/resources/practice-overcoming-cruelty-love-and-compassion

[51] Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Putnam, 1999).

[52] Bob Smietana, "Faith Leaders Call for Repentance and Spiritual Reformation to Address Climate Change," *Religion News Service*, August 17, 2023, https://religionnews.com/2023/08/17/faith-leaders-call-for-repentance-and-spiritual-reformation-to-address-climate-change/?fbclid=IwAR1Zmd0ugPfBd5TlQhJ3Zg-vbaeaUvtsUl1SWWeO5tmZReGAHD7v7rr3eIE

[53] Pravat Dhal, "The Future of Religion: Human Life – Education – Spirituality," *Religion and Social Communication* 20, no. 1 (2022): 128.

through 'technical' approaches. As Pope Francis asserted in his exhortation *Laudate Deum*,

> I consider it essential to insist that "to seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system" (LS 111). It is true that efforts at adaptation are needed in the face of evils that are irreversible in the short term. Also some interventions and technological advances that make it possible to absorb or capture gas emissions have proved promising. Nonetheless, we risk remaining trapped in the mindset of pasting and papering over cracks, while beneath the surface there is a continuing deterioration to which we continue to contribute. To suppose that all problems in the future will be able to be solved by new technical interventions is a form of homicidal pragmatism, like pushing a snowball down a hill (LD 57).

Thus, addressing complex dilemmas like the environmental crisis requires an internal transformation of the human spirit. Only then can remedies be effective, long-lasting, and adequate. To achieve this, ongoing work in environmental spirituality must explore several crucial questions:

- How can followers of a religion develop a spirituality that promotes environmental well-being?
- Which elements of their religious tradition can inform an environmental spirituality?
- How can religious traditions motivate and sustain an environmental spirituality that remains faithful to its tradition and responds to the current situation?
- In what ways does a religious environmental spirituality lead to ethical actions and activities related to the environment?
- How can religious systems contribute uniquely to the global discourse on environmentalism?
- How can a religious environmental spirituality enrich and inform purely secular environmental ethics?
- How can religions promote a spirituality of collaboration among people of various faiths and no faith in order to address contemporary environmental concerns?

By addressing these and other questions, we can better understand the role of religion in promoting environmental sustainability and how

it can work alongside secular institutions to address the pressing issues of our time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare humanity's dire need for a profound spiritual transformation. In the first year of the outbreak, while nations and peoples were ravaged by the virus and lockdowns ran rampant, there was a glimmer of hope that the pandemic would act as a catalyst for a much-needed environmental reset. Skies cleared up, wildlife roamed freely in public places, and untouched natural habitats were revitalized. But alas, this respite proved to be temporary, as positive environmental actions were only taken out of necessity, not from any true sense of moral awakening. In fact, many signs pointed to humanity's blatant disregard for the well-being of nature in the face of protecting their own health. Plans for reusable cups in cafés and restaurants were put on hold, masks and COVID-19 test kits became ubiquitous forms of waste, and online orders were delivered in layers of wasteful packaging. Even as petrol prices soared and airline ticket prices skyrocketed, the term 'revenge travel' became a buzzword to describe the overwhelming desire to make up for lost trips during pandemic restrictions. In the latter days of the pandemic, at the COP26 Climate Summit in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2021, 118 leaders and business executives flew in on private jets, potentially emitting over 1,400 tons of carbon dioxide.[54] The irony of this gathering aimed at addressing climate change while contributing to its destruction cannot be ignored.

The pandemic has unveiled a truth that has been obscured by the frenzied pace of modern life: humanity must experience a profound spiritual metamorphosis if we are to salvage our ailing planet. Despite the initial glimmers of hope that the pandemic's onslaught would engender lasting changes in human behavior, it seems that people have returned to their pre-pandemic ways of travel, consumption, and daily life. The ominous warnings of climate scientists, ringing out in the years before the pandemic, remain as potent as ever. And so, we find ourselves confronted with the urgent need for interreligious and interdisciplinary collaboration, an imperative that cannot be ignored as we claw our way out of one of the most devastating calamities of our era. As we emerge from the depths of this tempestuous period, we must recognize that the future of our planet, and indeed, the fate of our entire species, rests in the balance.

---

[54] Ollie A. Williams, "118 Private Jets Take Leaders to COP26 Climate Summit Burning Over 1,000 Tons of CO2," *Forbes*, November 5, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliverwilliams1/2021/11/05/118-private-jets-take-leaders-to-cop26-climate-summit-burning-over-1000-tons-of-co2/?sh=79a1a2f453d9

The Approach of this Book

In this book, I have decided to reflect on environmental concerns from the perspective of spiritual self-cultivation rooted in religious teachings. This self-cultivation is not just about following a set of rules or traditions, but about actively working to nurture and grow our spiritual lives. It involves intentional practices that allow us to develop our character and morality within the context of our chosen religious tradition. Rabbi Rachel Cowan remarked, "Sometimes refinement of character happens naturally as we grow older, but for many people that growth is fostered by spiritual practices adopted and followed in a disciplined way."[55] For people of religion, through disciplined practices such as prayer, meditation, study, and service, we can cultivate a deeper understanding and connection with our faith. By focusing on the inner journey, we can achieve true spiritual progress, transforming negative tendencies into positive ones and developing a higher moral character and wisdom. This intentional cultivation of our inner selves not only benefits us personally but also has the power to transform society and the world at large. As Pope Francis pointed out, "Authentic faith not only gives strength to the human heart, but also transforms life, transfigures our goals and sheds light on our relationship to others and with creation as a whole." (LD 61) Through our deeper and more nourishing relationships with ourselves, others, and the transcendent, we can contribute to a more compassionate and just world. Indeed, as Henri Nouwen affirmed, "The spiritual life does not remove us from the world but leads us deeper into it."[56]

The traits of a spiritually mature person can be as unique and diverse as the traditions that shape them. However, certain qualities tend to manifest within those who have achieved a level of spiritual growth. These qualities include compassion, empathy, humility, inner peace, integrity, gratitude, and wisdom. Those who have traversed this spiritual path have developed a heightened sense of empathy and compassion, propelling them toward acts of altruism and benevolence, aimed at alleviating the suffering of their fellow beings. These acts of kindness take on many forms, ranging from volunteering at local soup kitchens and taking part in environmental conservation projects to championing the cause of justice in the halls of power. Oftentimes, they are willing to sacrifice their own physical and emotional well-being for the sake of the greater good.

---

[55] Quoted in Faith Counts, https://www.pinterest.com/pin/rachel-cowan--385480049365667747/

[56] Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2009), Kindle version.

This commitment likely stems from a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings and the realization that individual actions have far-reaching consequences. Jane Goodall remarked, "You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."[57] Such realization compels spiritually mature people to lead more moderate and responsible lives, reducing their impact on the natural environment and promoting social equity. Lastly, spiritually mature individuals derive deep meaning and purpose in life, which propels them to strive toward creating a better world for themselves and generations to come. Their vision and creativity give rise to innovative ideas and initiatives that have the potential to usher in positive transformations in society.

This book claims that spiritual maturity as envisaged by diverse religious traditions is the hallmark of 'authentic humanhood.' While these religions have varying metaphysical concepts and worldviews, one of their main preoccupations is always the betterment of humankind. The condition of an individual's spiritual state is pivotal to the course of events at a personal, communal, and cosmic level. The first part of this book (Chapters 2-6) examines the concept of self-cultivation and its role in attaining one's authentic self through the lens of Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity (Catholic tradition), and Islam. However, it is important to acknowledge that this selection is limited, given the vast array of religious and spiritual systems in existence. The rationale for choosing these specific religious traditions is based on their diverse metaphysical perspectives and their representation of a significant portion of humanity. It should be emphasized that each tradition discussed in this book does not fully capture the intricate diversity within itself. The intention is not to present these traditions as monolithic entities with uniform doctrines and worldviews. Rather, the aim is to highlight relevant elements within each tradition that align with the book's theme. Including a broader range of religious beliefs in this volume may exceed its intended length, if not scope. Nevertheless, future studies may incorporate additional religions for a more comprehensive examination.

At the heart of the concept of religious self-cultivation lies the fundamental premise that by pursuing spiritual growth and maturity, we can experience a transformative shift that permeates every dimension of our lives. This profound transformation opens us up to healthy and nourishing relationships with ourselves, others, the cosmos, and the

[57] Amy Richardson, "5 Biodiversity Lessons from Dr Jane Goodall," *The Future Forest Company*, April 3, 2023, https://thefutureforestcompany.com/2023/04/03/5-biodiversity-lessons-from-dr-jane-goodall/

transcendent. Through this process, we can tackle the personal and social maladies that afflict humanity.

The crux of this transformation of relationships lies in our recognition of the interconnectedness of all things. By understanding that our actions have consequences that reverberate throughout the web of existence, we can foster healthier relationships with the natural world, thereby promoting environmental flourishing. This is not achieved through an individualistic approach, but rather through collective collaboration with others whom we view as part of the I-Thou relationship.

This shift toward healthier relationships with ourselves, others, and the natural world can have a cascading effect that reverberates through society, leading to a more just and equitable world. It is in this way that religious self-cultivation can serve as a potent tool for personal and societal transformation. Through this transformative journey, we can cultivate a deeper sense of purpose and meaning, leading to a more fulfilling and enriching existence.

In the second part of the book, I propose different ways for transformed humanity to implement collaborative approaches to promote environmental flourishing: becoming intercultural, interreligious, and inter-creational. As human beings live and act within cultural traditions, becoming intercultural facilitates healthy and productive cultural engagement that promotes both societal and environmental flourishing. The interdependent relationship between human well-being and the ecology has been widely acknowledged, emphasizing the need for simultaneous promotion of both. Becoming interreligious facilitates environmental flourishing because the synergistic contribution of religions is essential to accomplishing more than what individual religions can do on their own. Moreover, interreligious collaboration is able to prevent the possibilities of religions negating each other by ineffective and even opposing efforts. Becoming inter-creational is about approaching our relationship with the natural world or creation in a relationship of reciprocity and mutuality rather than a dominating or exploitative manner. By becoming intercultural, interreligious, and inter-creational, we maximize the various ways in which we can develop and sustain our relationship with others with the aim of building a better world for all.

However, for these collaborative efforts to be effective, they must take place in an interdisciplinary, dialectical, and dialogical manner. Interdisciplinary collaboration allows for a broader and more comprehensive approach to addressing environmental issues by integrating various fields of study and perspectives. Dialectical inquiry allows for a rigorous examination of opposing viewpoints, leading to a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Dialogical communication, on the other hand, promotes a respectful and open exchange of ideas, allowing for a

more inclusive and equitable approach to environmental stewardship. Through this multi-faceted approach, we can live out our relationship lives in a way that addresses the existential concerns of our time. By collaborating with others, we can cultivate healthy relationships with ourselves, others, and the natural world, thereby promoting environmental flourishing.

I conclude the book with the call for religions to engage in a transformative process of 'prophetic dialogue' with a broad spectrum of stakeholders such as scientists, communicators, and civic leaders, to name a few. Such a dialogue is essential to effecting the necessary change in our world, stemming trends in social and technological development that threaten our 'Common Home.' It is only through this prophetic dialogue that we can ignite the passion and motivation needed to usher in a new era of life-giving endeavors. Religion, through this dialogue, can cultivate critical reflection and discernment, providing the tools to care for ourselves and the planet we call home.

It is my hope that this book will offer a fresh perspective on an issue that remains ever-present in our collective consciousness. Indeed, the principles espoused in this book are not limited to environmental flourishing alone. Rather, they have the potential to engender flourishing in all aspects of human life, as well as the dimensions that define our very existence. As Pope Francis affirmed, "The rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of twenty centuries of personal and communal experience, has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity." (LS 216) Francis' sentiment with regard to Christianity can be articulated for all the traditions examined in this book as well as many more which are not.

At its core, this book invites us to see religion as a window and gateway to our true potential and purpose. We are not alone in this vast and mysterious universe, but we are also not insignificant. We are part of a cosmic web that connects us to everything else. Religion helps us to remember this cosmic interconnectedness and to act with wisdom and compassion. It inspires us to achieve the best possible version of ourselves, to live fully and joyfully, and to share this gift with others.

PART I

BECOMING HUMAN

CHAPTER 2

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL POISONS

It happens without fail every morning. At around 7:15, the familiar sound of a motorcycle's honk disrupts the otherwise tranquil atmosphere of the Bangkok neighborhood I've called home for the past five years. The motorbike responsible for the minor disturbance belongs to the assistant of an elderly Buddhist monk who makes his round through the neighborhood each morning to receive the merit offerings of the Buddhist faithful. The honk serves as a signal of his arrival to the people. Unlike most monks who adhere to the tradition of moving about on bare feet, the one who visits our area is elderly and relies on a motorbike, with the assistance of a volunteer, to carry out this practice.

On my alley, which is a quiet cul-de-sac off of Ngamwongwan Road, there are only a handful of families who carry out this time-honored Buddhist ritual. However, the ones who do are extremely consistent, especially the family who lives right across from us. Rain or shine, there isn't a day when they do not have an offering, usually some food that they bought from the morning market, already hanging on their front gate in anticipation of the monk's arrival.

Making merit is an especially important concept in Thai Buddhism, which is part of a larger school of Buddhism called Theravada Buddhism. This branch of Buddhism is mostly found in the Southeast Asian countries of Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. It is also present in Sri Lanka, an island nation off of India. Thai Buddhists often make merit on special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries to ask for blessings, which could be for themselves or as an intention on behalf of someone else. Indeed, the merit which is believed to come from the religious act can be dedicated to the living or the dead, the one directly involved in the act or anyone else as long as it is intended as such by the merit maker. Either way, Thai Buddhists strongly believe that merit is accrued through doing good acts, which includes supporting monks in their livelihood. Because the result of actions, both good and bad, can appear right away or in the unforeseeable future, the effect of merit-making can theoretically be instantaneous. For many faithful, the most evident positive effect from merit making is a sense of peace that they feel during and immediately after the good act during which they are blessed by the monk to whom they made merit.

Merit making, which can be done at a temple or any other place, is a fundamental practice in Buddhism that goes back to the days when the

historical Buddha was still teaching the Dhamma to his monks and followers. Giving constitutes one of the ten perfections taught by the Buddha, and is something that anyone, regardless of economic or social status, can perform in order to help themselves advance on the path toward liberation from mundane existence and the cycle of rebirth. Despite being a simple act, which can take the form of offering food, flowers, money, or any other commodity to a monk, it is a privileged action that only human beings are able to make. Those living in other realms, especially the lower realms, do not have the opportunity to make merit or to learn the Dhamma in order to improve their lot in life or to ensure a favorable future rebirth.

The Privileged State of the Human Realm

The ability to perform meritorious deeds and positively impact one's life as a human being is a privilege that should be appreciated because undergoing rebirth in the human realm is a rare occurrence. The Buddha used a parable to depict the profoundly extraordinary nature of being reborn as a human being from a lower realm. The Buddha said: *Imagine that in the vast ocean, there is a blind turtle living at its depths. The turtle only surfaces once every 100 years to breathe then returns to the bottom of the ocean. At the same time, there is a bucket floating aimlessly somewhere in that same vast ocean. The chance that one is reborn as a human being is the same as the chance that the turtle, upon making its once-in-a-century ascent to the surface, pokes its head directly into the bucket floating in the sea.* Although it is impossible to quantify this probability mathematically, undoubtedly, what the Buddha wished to communicate through this parable is how exceedingly difficult it is for one to advance to the realm of human beings from the lower realms, which consist of the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm, and the hell realm. The inhabitants in these realms face significant challenges in being reborn into the human realm due to the extreme suffering they endure, particularly in the hungry ghost and hell realms. In these tortured states, they lack the opportunity to learn, understand, and practice the Dhamma and accumulate merit, thereby reducing their chances of being reborn in a more favorable state of life.

In the vast expanse of the Buddhist cosmogony, there are two heavenly realms belonging to the gods and demi-gods. These are spheres of great bliss that human beings aspire to as very desirable alternatives to complete liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. In these paradisiacal states of life, the residents live for eons in comfort until their good merit runs out and they must then return to earth as humans once more. Notably, in Theravada Buddhist belief, liberation cannot take

place in any but the human state of life. Therefore, even those who made it to the heavenly realm will not experience eternal bliss but will eventually undergo rebirth as human beings once more in order to make their go at liberation.

The human state plays a pivotal role in Buddhism, as it is the only realm in which sentient beings can attain enlightenment and liberation from suffering. Even the Buddha himself, after countless lifetimes, was reborn as a human—his final state of being before his complete emancipation from mundane existence. In his mortal form, he embarked on a challenging spiritual journey that culminated in his attainment of enlightenment. Despite having the option of experiencing eternal peace in *nibbāna* immediately after this event, the Buddha chose to continue living as a human being for another 45 years. During this time, he committed himself to sharing his profound insights and teachings with others so that they too could realize the truths that govern life.[1] For Buddhism, becoming human—that is being born into the human realm—as difficult and special as it is, is only the beginning of a much more strenuous effort toward spiritual progress. What is equally challenging is the work of becoming authentically human, which requires self-cultivation and transformation so that we can overcome our own suffering and mitigate the suffering of others.

The Journey Toward Enlightenment

In ancient India, life was comfortable only for a privileged few, while hardships were abundant for the majority. However, material comfort did not ensure eternal happiness or a similar fate in the next life. The Buddha, originally named Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–483 BCE), came from the Kshatriya social class, the warrior and ruling caste of ancient India. Despite his life of material wealth, Siddhartha recognized that he could not avoid the inevitabilities of aging, sickness, death, and rebirth. Faced with the grim reality of human existence, the future Buddha, like many of his contemporaries, sought ways to break free from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. At 29, he left behind his family and a life of sensual pleasure to embark on a journey to attain enlightenment. After six years of intense effort, he achieved his goal at 35. For the following four and a half decades, he committed himself to sharing his teachings so that others could also find liberation through enlightenment.

---

[1] Nan Tien Institute, "What is Humanistic Buddhism?" https://www.nantien.org.au/en/buddhism/knowledge-buddhism/what-humanistic-buddhism

The Buddha's teachings are encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* – SN.5.11). It can be divided into three sequential steps: 1) identifying the perceived problem—the diagnosis; 2) presenting a goal or vision; and 3) providing the path to realizing that vision. The first two Noble Truths constitute the diagnosis part of the Buddhist pedagogy. According to the Buddha, the nature of mundane life is characterized by unsatisfactoriness, which stems from the impermanence of all things in the world. Through observing life processes such as birth, aging, sickness, and death, as well as other events that occur in the world, the Buddha identified a common description for these realities—suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

> Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

The second truth attributes unsatisfactoriness to ignorance of reality, leading to craving (*tanhā*) for impermanent things. The Buddha identified three key types of craving: the allure of sensory delight, the longing for existence, and the urge to cast aside what we find undesirable. However, the Buddha also presented a hopeful vision of escape from the cycle of suffering and attainment of eternal bliss. The third Noble Truth declares that humans *can* achieve freedom from perpetual unsatisfactoriness by ending these desires. But how can this be done? The Fourth Noble Truth holds the answer, presenting the Noble Eightfold Path as the solution. This path is not just a guide; it is a transformative journey encompassing morality, concentration, and wisdom. For those willing to embark on it, this path promises access to eternal bliss.

Hence, the Noble Eightfold Path is the ultimate route for those in pursuit of a deep and lasting spiritual transformation. This path unites moral virtues (*sīla*) with the refinement of concentration (*samādhi*), and the fostering of wisdom and insight (*paññā*), all converging with the objective of attaining liberation. Buddhahood, the pinnacle of enlightenment, signifies a mind awakened to reality, surpassing all defilements. The historical Buddha, the 'Awakened One,' was the first to share his enlightenment experience, guiding others on the path to self-cultivation and the realization of this profound state of being.

The Noble Eightfold Path represents the Discipline (*Vinaya*) facet of the *Dhamma-Vinaya* (Doctrine-Discipline), where the former corresponds to the Four Noble Truths. Nonetheless, both elements of the

Dhamma-Vinaya are often collectively referred to as the Dhamma.[2] The connection and coherence between the *Dhamma* and the *Vinaya* are illustrated by the fact that the last component of the Four Noble Truths is the Noble Eightfold Path, while the initial aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path is the right view, or correct understanding of the Four Noble Truths. The Eightfold Path transforms the Dhamma from a set of abstract principles into a living, experiential truth. It provides a way out of the suffering that is the starting point of the teaching, and it makes the teaching's goal of liberation from suffering accessible to us in our own lives. Only through direct experience can the teaching's true meaning be known.[3]

The eight factors are often listed as follows:

1. Right view (*Sammā diṭṭhi*)
2. Right thought (*Sammā sankappa*)
3. Right speech (*Sammā vācā*)
4. Right action (*Sammā kammanta*)
5. Right living (*Sammā ājīva*)
6. Right effort (*Sammā vāyāma*)
7. Right mindfulness (*Sammā sati*)
8. Right concentration (*Sammā samādhi*)

The cluster of moral virtues, encompassing right speech, right action, and right livelihood, forms a trio of virtuous conduct that embodies ethical living. This set of principles serves as a mirror reflecting our character, with each word and action having a profound impact on both ourselves and those around us. Thus, it becomes imperative to maintain watchful awareness of our thoughts, given their potential kammic implications. By adhering to these virtues, we lay the cornerstone of moral conduct, a fundamental foundation crucial for our spiritual growth and evolution. This journey demands unwavering dedication, as we nurture virtuous qualities that lay the groundwork for a lifetime of ethical conduct.

The concentration group, encompassing right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, is the pathway to deep insight and wisdom. These three elements reveal the importance of mental discipline and concentration, which are essential for the attainment of tranquility, joy, and wisdom. Through the practice of concentration, we train our

---

[2] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1998), v.

[3] Ibid.

minds to direct and sustain our attention, paving the way for profound spiritual experiences. With continued practice, we gain the ability to explore our consciousness, unlocking new dimensions of perception and understanding.

The wisdom group, consisting of right view and right thought, provides us with the tools to nurture wisdom and insight, opening our hearts and minds to the nature of reality. It is a crucial step toward cultivating a compassionate and non-attached mind, unburdened by the illusions of ego. By practicing wisdom, we gain the power to perceive the world as it truly is, unlocking a profound understanding of our minds and the world around us. This journey of self-discovery leads to the realization of the interconnectedness of all things, and a deep appreciation of the beauty of life.

Thus, the three groups of moral virtue, concentration, and wisdom mark stages in a transformative journey, each propelling us toward the ultimate goal of wisdom. This journey of moral training aims to unveil elevated consciousness, wisdom, and ethical strength, clearing the path to a life free from suffering. At the heart of this journey is the pursuit of wisdom, a potent force dispelling ignorance and opening doors to fresh understanding. Yet, this journey doesn't unfold overnight; it demands deep commitment to moral training, the bedrock for higher consciousness and wisdom. Like a sturdy foundation for a building, moral discipline is vital for the journey toward wisdom. By acting in harmony with our highest values, we unlock profound insights.

From this foundation, we enter the realm of concentration, refining our ability to focus. Like a magnifying glass, concentration delves deep into the mind, unlocking awareness and insight. With a solid foundation of moral discipline and concentration, we reach the sphere of higher wisdom. Here, we perceive the world as it is, untouched by ego-driven illusions. It's a journey of self-discovery, revealing our interconnectedness and the impact of our thoughts and actions on the world around us.

One may question the placement of right view and right thought as the initial components of the Noble Eightfold Path, despite wisdom being regarded as the ultimate culmination of training. However, this arrangement was not a careless choice made by the canonical editors. Crucially, at the very inception of the training journey, a certain measure of right view and right thought about the reality of life is essential to initiate the process. These qualities provide the trainee with a clear perspective and a sense of direction, which are essential to commence their training. It is also crucial to understand that the development and refinement of wisdom is a continuous process that is intertwined with the cultivation of moral discipline and higher consciousness.

These three facets of training are not isolated, but rather form a symbiotic relationship, reinforcing and amplifying each other as the trainee advances on their journey. This dynamic interplay weaves together the different aspects of training, leading to a profound integration and refinement until the ultimate pinnacle of perfection is attained.[4] Thus, this path of transformation, as Damien Keown noted, "is only linear in the metaphorical sense: it does not list stages which are to be passed through and left behind so much as describe the dimensions of human good and the technique for their cultivation."[5] The end of this process of cultivation of moral and intellectual virtue is *nibbāna*, where perfection has been achieved. Keown emphasized that *nibbāna* is the summit of this gradual process and "not an ontological shift or soteriological quantum leap."[6]

The Noble Eightfold Path lays out a clear program for those seeking true transformation. Every aspect of one's being—moral and intellectual—must be cultivated in order to achieve a harmonious whole. Any attempt to develop oneself in a single area while ignoring the others is a futile endeavor. An essential consequence of this path is that through experiential practice, we gain a more profound understanding of the reality of life—its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self—or the Three Characteristics of Existence. Buddhism asserts that life's suffering comes from not realizing the true nature of existence which causes us to be attached to the things that perpetuate this ignorance.

Impermanence (*aniccā*), the first of these three primary characteristics, forms the foundation upon which the others rest. It teaches us that all things are constantly in a state of flux, and the illusion of permanence is but a mirage in the desert of existence.[7] The *Dhammapada*, a sacred text of Buddhism, echoes a universal truth: all that exists in this world is transient, and nothing remains constant (Dp. 277). Impermanence pervades every level of reality, from the cosmic to the mundane. It is the ebb and flow of the universe, with the rise and fall of stars and galaxies echoing the rhythms of birth and death. It is the changing of the seasons, a cycle of life and decay that transforms the landscape around us. It is the passage of time, an unceasing sojourn from birth to death that shapes our existence.

---

4 Ibid., 13.

5 Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 102.

6 Ibid.

7 Bradley K. Hawkins, *Buddhism* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999), 42.

In our daily lives, impermanence is evident in the shifting tides of relationships, the fleeting moments of pleasure and pain, the rise and fall of fortunes, and the passing of material possessions. It is the fading of a lover's touch, the rustling of leaves in the autumn breeze, and the fleeting smile of a passing stranger. Impermanence is the pulse of existence, an ever-changing dance of light and shadow that weaves the fabric of life. By realizing impermanence, we can understand the imperfections of the world. We can learn to let go of attachments to our possessions, relationships, and ideas about ourselves, to accept the transience of all things, and to embrace the beauty of the present moment. This will lead us to a sense of true freedom and peace.

The second characteristic of existence, *dukkha*, is a concept that encompasses both physical and mental pain and suffering. It is the pervasive feeling of dissatisfaction that arises from our experience of the world. Like a dark cloud hovering over our heads, it follows us wherever we go, casting a shadow on every moment of joy and pleasure. *Dukkha* is the cornerstone of the Buddha's teachings, and it is highlighted in the first of the Four Noble Truths, which states that all conditional phenomena and experiences are ultimately unsatisfactory. Suffering arises from our attachment to impermanent things. We cling to fleeting pleasures and material possessions, hoping that they will bring us lasting happiness. But these things are unreliable, and our dependence on them is doomed to fail. The dislocations in our lives, whether they arise from sickness, old age, or the fear of death, all contribute to the unsatisfactoriness that defines *dukkha*.

The origins of *dukkha* can be traced back to *tanhā*, the self-centered desires that drive us toward private fulfillment. These desires, whether they are for material goods, power, or status, lead to a loss of personal freedom and an increasing sense of pain and suffering.[8] Even the pursuit of noble desires, such as happiness or virtue, can lead us down a path of suffering if we become too attached to them. *Dukkha* is not limited to painful experiences, but also extends to pleasurable ones. For even these experiences are impermanent and liable to suffering.[9] Like a beautiful flower that wilts and fades, pleasure is fleeting and ultimately unsatisfactory.

The third characteristic of existence of *anattā* challenges the idea of a permanent, unchanging self or soul. It emphasizes that all aspects of existence, including ourselves, are impermanent and interconnected.

---

8 Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009), 102.

9 Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997), 110.

Rather than having an independent and fixed identity, we are composed of ever-changing physical and mental elements. Our bodies, emotions, and thoughts are subject to constant transformation influenced by external conditions and internal processes. In order to illustrate this point, Buddhist teachers often employ the image of a cart that is nothing but a composition of its parts. The notion of a fixed and permanent entity called 'cart' beyond its aggregates is a mere illusion (*Visuddhimagga* – Vis.M.XVIII). Similarly, human existence, as we perceive it, is made up of momentary forces or entities disconnected from the next. No separate ego-entity or personality exists within or beyond this process.[10] The five elements of form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness do not belong to any persistent substance, and it is erroneous to consider them as 'mine,' 'I,' or 'my self.'[11]

Recognizing the absence of a stable self leads to a deeper understanding of suffering and attachment, offering a pathway to liberation. This concept encourages practitioners to let go of clinging to a fixed identity, to stop holding on to what is impermanent and settling for temporary happiness, but through self-cultivation and self-transformation, achieving authentic personhood and total emancipation. In this quest for lasting happiness, there is no room for trying to affirm a self, building it up, protecting it, or preserving it. The teaching of not-self is not merely a philosophical thesis calling for intellectual assent; rather, it is a prescription for self-transcendence. It emphasizes that our ongoing attempt to establish a sense of identity by taking our personalities to be 'I' and 'mine' is a project born out of clinging, which lies at the root of our suffering.[12]

Spiritual Poisons as the Root Causes of the Ecological Crisis

Having explored the Buddhist framework for self-cultivation, it's now time to examine the interconnection between the environment's vitality (or lack thereof) and humanity's moral values. When tackling a human predicament through a Buddhist lens, it's crucial to methodically dissect the situation within the overarching approach. The Buddhist view posits that the world's challenges arise from a profound moral and spiritual dilemma. By uncovering this facet of human reality, we can

---

[10] Quoted in Thomas T. Love, "Theravada Buddhism: Ethical Theory and Practice," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 33, no. 4 (1965): 304.

[11] Lalji 'Shravak' Varanasi, "Buddha's Rejection of the Brahmanical Notion of Atman," *Communication & Cognition* 32, no. 1/2 (1999): 14.

[12] Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Self-Transformation," *Access to Insight*, 1998, https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_16.html

address the personal and societal issues stemming from internal disharmony. The Buddhist approach requires delving deep into the human condition to illuminate the crisis.

With regard to environmental issues, it's crucial to note that Buddhism does not provide a direct analysis of the ecological crisis as such. While environmental issues during the Buddha's time were not as grave or extensive as the ones facing humanity today, there were fundamental problems that impacted both humans and the natural environment. Water sanitation, for instance, was a pressing concern as drinking unclean water led to life-threatening diseases. The Buddha's decree prohibiting monks from urinating in the river was undoubtedly related to this concern to preserve water sanitation (*Vinaya Piṭaka* – V.IV.205-206).

Human encroachment into forest land was also an issue, as evidenced in the story of the two tree spirits who lost their dwellings due to human intervention. The *Vyagghajataka* story depicts two spirits residing in separate trees in the forest. However, the odor coming from the carcasses of the animals preyed upon by the tiger and lion disturbed one of the spirits, who desired to scare the culprits away. However, the other spirit cautioned against this plan. Despite the warning, the unhappy spirit proceeded with the idea and drove them out of the vicinity. As a result, humans who were previously hesitant to enter the forest due to the presence of the tiger and lion became more audacious and ventured deeper into the forest for hunting and trading purposes. Eventually, the humans began to clear the forest by felling trees to cultivate crops. Consequently, the two tree spirits were bereft of their abodes.[13]

Contemporary scholars of Buddhism have reached a consensus that the religion's birthplace in the Ganges region of India witnessed substantial urbanization and population growth. The establishment of urban hubs necessitated deforestation, which facilitated mercantile activities and trade among the population centers, both near and far.[14] The Buddha himself spent his formative years in a city environment, and even as a wandering ascetic, his teachings and way of life were rooted in urban contexts. Early Buddhist texts reveal that 96 percent of the 4,257 recorded teaching locales were in urban areas, while 94 percent of the

[13] J.272; Christopher K. Chapple, "Animals and the Environment in the Buddhist Birth Stories," in *Buddhism and Ecology*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 141-42.

[14] Lewis Lancaster, "Buddhism and Ecology: Collective Cultural Perceptions," in *Buddhism and Ecology*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 11-12.

nearly 1,400 individuals mentioned in these texts resided in cities.[15] Therefore, the modern-day ecological crisis can trace its origins back to ancient times when societies were developing using various methods that affected the natural environment.

Although the Buddha did not directly address environmental problems per se, his teachings on the suffering of sentient beings highlight the imbalances that humans create in their relationships with the world around them. These external problems are often reflections of internal tendencies that serve as the underlying causes for both personal and social issues. According to the Buddha, the human situation can be divided into two states: wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*) (*Digha Nikāya* – DN.III.275). The root causes of the unwholesome states are greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), while the root causes of the wholesome states are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion.

These universal forces impel all animate life on an individual and collective basis, serving as the motive forces behind our thoughts, words, and deeds. Upon introspection, we discover that the unwholesome roots—also known as poisons—lead to actions that result in suffering for ourselves and others, ultimately contradicting our inner desire for happiness. The realm of the unwholesome extends beyond what is typically considered immoral, as certain thoughts and actions, while not deemed immoral, may still be considered unwholesome and lead to unfavorable kamma results.[16]

Greed is the mental state in which we are constantly preoccupied with a feeling of need and want because we feel there is a lack in our life; and since our appetite is insatiable, even when we obtain what we have wanted, we continue to feel the desire for lasting satisfaction. According to the *Visuddhimagga,* the commentarial literature, greed grips us like monkey lime, trapping us in a constant state of wanting. It functions like meat sizzling in a hot pan, continuously burning with the fire of craving. It refuses to relinquish its hold, clinging like the stubborn dye of lamp black. The root cause of this covetousness lies in finding pleasure in that which leads to bondage. This overpowering current of greed can drag us like a swift-flowing river to states of loss, ultimately leading to the great ocean of suffering (Vism.XIV.162).

---

[15] Johan Elverskog, "Buddhist Contributions to Environmental Ethics: From Creative Destruction to Creative Protection." Lecture delivered at International Conference on Ethics, Climate Change and Energy, Mahidol University, Salaya, Thailand, November 27, 2014.

[16] Nyanaponika Thera, *The Roots of Good and Evil: Buddhist Texts Translated from the Pāḷi* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008), 4.

Hatred arises from the aversion toward oneself or others, and it can manifest in various degrees, from mild irritation to intense anger and hostility. It also includes a range of other negative emotions such as disappointment, despair, anxiety, and dejection. According to the commentarial literature, hatred is characterized by its savage nature, much like a provoked snake. Its venomous effects spread like a drop of poison, consuming everything in its path, much like a raging forest fire that consumes its own support. This negativity can manifest itself as persecution, like a cunning enemy seizing its opportunity. The grounds for annoyance are the proximate cause, and it should be regarded as a toxic blend of stale urine and poison (Vism.XIV.171).

Delusion can be seen in the form of ignorance (*avijjā*) that leads to confusion and lack of directions, or to false views that result in ideological dogmatism and fanaticism. With its characteristic blindness and unknowing, delusion functions as a veil that conceals the individual essence of an object. According to the *Visuddhimagga,* it fails to penetrate or uncover the truth, much like impenetrable darkness. It is manifested as the absence of right theory, as a result of unwise attention, and "should be regarded as the root of all that is unprofitable" (Vism.XIV.163).

These three unwholesome roots, when left unchecked, can manifest themselves in various degrees of severity, ranging from simple wishes to intense cravings, from mild dislike to extreme vengefulness and wrath, from dullness to conceit and ideological dogmatism and extremism. It is important to recognize these negative emotions and their unpleasant images to understand the extent of their unwholesomeness and to take action to uproot them from our minds.

The three insidious roots of the human psyche entwine themselves like a tangled web, and their influence on each other is profound. These malevolent forces interplay with one another and often spur each other on. Greed, for example, can quickly turn to hatred when a person is denied what they crave by people or situations that they encounter. Delusion acts as the foundation upon which these roots stand because it leads us to believe that we must have something or loathe someone, causing us to cling desperately to our desires and prejudices. The *Dhammapada* cautions that the net of delusion is the most potent source of entanglement, trapping us in a cycle of misery and suffering (Dp. 251). In Buddhism, the greatest delusion of all is the false belief in the ego, which drives us to construct, defend, and glorify it. However, the insidious effects of these unwholesome roots are not limited to the individual but also manifest themselves on a collective level. When individuals are afflicted with these negative states of mind, they compete

with each other, vying for power and status, giving rise to conflicts and violence.

Hatred is an especially pernicious affliction because it thrives on the conflicting interests between ourselves and others. It is the seed that germinates into social and political conflicts, which escalate into wars and atrocities like genocides and ecocides. Individual leaders and institutions often exploit hatred to rally people to their egotistical goals or collective cause. The world today bears witness to this promotion of hate, with nationalism morphing into nativism, religious fervor turning into radical fundamentalism, and self-protection metamorphosing into terrorism. The destructive cycle of hate is contagious, spreading like a virus, infecting communities and nations alike.

The social ramifications of the unwholesome roots of greed and delusion are equally pervasive, extending far beyond the individual level. The insatiable desire to own, possess, and accumulate material wealth is deeply ingrained in people of all ages and backgrounds, fostered by the constant barrage of advertisements that inundate us every day online and offline. Companies seeking continuous growth and profit utilize alluring words and captivating images to sell not just their products but a lifestyle, a dream, a vision of success that can only be achieved through the accumulation of material goods. We are surrounded by a consumer culture that has become the driving force of our globalized world, from secular Amsterdam to Buddhist Bangkok to Muslim Dubai.

The Buddhist scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi aptly illustrated the pernicious effects of the three unwholesome roots on a global scale.

> Through the prevalence of greed the world has become transformed into a global marketplace where human beings are reduced to the status of consumers, even commodities, and where materialistic desires are provoked at volatile intensities. Through the prevalence of hatred, which is often kindled by competing interests governed by greed, national and ethnic differences become the breeding ground of suspicion and enmity, exploding in violence and destruction, in cruelty and brutality, in endless cycles of revenge. Delusion sustains the other two unwholesome roots by giving rise to false beliefs, dogmatic views, and philosophical ideologies devised in order to promote and justify patterns of conduct motivated by greed and hatred.[17]

[17] Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Message for a Globalized World," *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, n.d., http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/globalized_world.php

The Buddhist perspective on the ecological crisis serves as a poignant reminder that our individual and collective actions have far-reaching consequences on the world we inhabit. Essentially, the roots of our personal and societal problems stem from the trifecta of greed, hatred, and delusion. As long as these toxic influences continue to dominate our minds and behavior, humanity will continue to experience various forms of exploitation, both environmental and otherwise. This includes the promotion of selfish behaviors and consumer cultures driven by greed, discontentment, and other negative attitudes that can be interpreted as vices.[18] Thus, the late Thai monk Buddhadasa posited that climate change and other imbalances in nature result from human moral degeneration, which impacts the external dimension of the world.[19] Buddhadasa believed that human greed and materialism are the fundamental drivers of the environmental crisis, and that the solution lies in a spiritual transformation that involves cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and a deep sense of interconnectedness with all beings. In other words, the way we treat ourselves and others is reflected in the way we treat the natural world. The disconnection between humans and nature is a symptom of the three poisons, which fuel self-interest at the expense of the collective well-being.

Impact of Greed, Hatred, and Delusion on the Environment

Let us now look deeper into how the three poisons oppose the effort to promote environmental flourishing. The first of the poisons is greed, which reveals itself in a multitude of ways. Like a virus, greed infects business operations, where profit often trumps environmental concerns. The consequences of this self-serving greed are devastating, as we saw in April 2016, when the beaches along Central Vietnam were littered with the corpses of fish, stretching over 200 kilometers across four provinces. This environmental tragedy struck at the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese families, whose fate was bound to the fishing industry, and whose health and well-being depended on a steady supply of fish. The elephant in the room when it came to suspects was Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation with its gigantic plant right on the

---

[18] Pragati Sahni, *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 165.

[19] Buddhadasa, "A Notion of Buddhist Ecology," Thai Buddhism, n.d., http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud_Ecology.htm. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's ideas come from a number of works that have been compiled and translated by Grant A. Olson under the title "A Notion of Buddhist Ecology." In addition to the negative effect on nature, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu asserts that internal degeneration hinders spiritual progress.

shore and center of the site of devastation. After months of denial, the true culprit was revealed to be none other than Formosa Ha Tinh, which is part of the Taiwanese conglomerate Formosa Plastics Group. Its toxic waste pipe extended from an onshore facility directly into the ocean, poisoning the waters and causing widespread environmental damage.[20] The fine of USD 500 million levied against the company, though seemingly substantial, paled in comparison to the long-term harm inflicted on both the environment and the people who depended on it.

Sadly, the Formosa Ha Tinh case is far from an isolated incident for businesses around the world or for this particular conglomerate, which is the world's fourth-largest producer of petrochemicals and plastics. A 2021 report of the company's operations in Taiwan, Vietnam, and the United States reveals that it is a serial offender when it comes to environmental well-being and human rights. The executive summary states:

> Politicians supportive of Formosa Plastics in the United States have described the company as "a fine example" of international trade relations. Yet the conglomerate's six-decade long history exemplifies the profound risks that the petrochemicals and plastics industry poses to human health, local ecosystems, and the global climate. Formosa Plastics Group's global track record shows how the rights and safety of local communities and workers, as well as the environment and public health, become casualties of corporate profit. Formosa Plastics Group—either directly or through its subsidiaries—has been labeled variously a "serial offender," a state's "biggest polluter," and the entity responsible for a country's "worst environmental disaster."[21]

Mahatma Gandhi remarked, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed."[22] Breaches in environmental standards are often enabled by the corrupt backing of government officials willing to turn a blind eye to blatant environmental violations in

---

[20] "Vietnam Blames Toxic Waste Water from Steel Plant for Mass Fish Deaths," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/01/vietnam-blames-toxic-waste-water-fom-steel-plant-for-mass-fish-deaths

[21] Center for International Environmental Law, The Center for Biological Diversity, Earthworks, *Formosa Plastics Group: A Serial Offender of Environmental and Human Rights (A Case Study)*, October 2021, https://www.ciel.org/plastic-human-rights

[22] Quoted in E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered* (London, UK: Blond & Briggs, 1973).

exchange for personal financial gains.[23] Either through voluntary or obligatory bribes, permission is granted to mining companies by government officials at various levels[24] that prioritizes economic gains over environmental sustainability, resulting in the erosion of natural habitats and displacement of indigenous communities. The extraction of precious minerals like gold and copper frequently entails the clearance of forests and the use of harmful chemicals, which contaminate water sources and endanger local wildlife. The people who rely on these resources for their subsistence are frequently left with limited choices and little voice in the decision-making process. When government leaders place their own interests over the welfare of the citizenry and the natural environment, transparency and accountability suffer, paving the way for a culture of corruption that undermines the public good.

Greed, the insatiable desire for more, is a malady that afflicts humanity in many forms. One of its most pernicious manifestations is consumerism. In the relentless pursuit of profit, companies seek to sell more and more products, even those that are not necessary for people's well-being. To feed this hunger for more, companies keep releasing new products, often claiming that the upgraded version is better or more essential than the previous ones. Additionally, the ascent of fast fashion and disposable consumer goods is a major contributor to environmental deterioration. 'Fast fashion' is a business model and approach to clothing production that involves quickly producing and distributing inexpensive and trendy clothing to respond to the latest fashion trends. It focuses on delivering new styles and designs to consumers at a rapid pace, often imitating looks from high-end fashion brands or the latest runway shows. Fast fashion retailers prioritize speed and low costs, aiming to make fashionable clothing accessible to a wide range of consumers.[25] Social media pages are replete with advertisements of the latest clothing trends at extremely affordable prices. This is especially appealing to young people who have low budgets but a high appetite for new fashion.

---

[23] Allianz, "The Environmental Cost of Corruption," August 3, 2020, https://commercial.allianz.com/news-and-insights/expert-risk-articles/esg-risk-briefing-3-2020.html

[24] Carl Henrik Knutsen, Andreas Kotsadam, Eivind Hammersmark Olsen, and Tore Wig, "Mining and Local Corruption in Africa," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2 (2017): 320-34, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26384734

[25] Karen Shedlock and Stephanie Feldstein, "At What Cost?: Unravelling the Harms of the Fast Fashion Industry," Center for Biological Diversity, 2023, https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/pdfs/Unravelling-Harms-of-Fast-Fashion-Full-Report-2023-02.pdf, 5.

Thus, fashion companies churn out an abundance of clothing that is quickly consumed and discarded. It is estimated that Shein, a fashion brand, produces at least 50,000 garments every day at extremely low cost. Therefore, when items are returned by customers, they are frequently disposed of in landfills because the expense of reintroducing these items into circulation outweighs the cost of simply getting rid of them.[26] This practice is not exclusive to Shein but can be found across the apparel industry. The production of these items often requires the use of toxic chemicals, and their disposal releases harmful pollutants into the environment. According to UNEP, the fast fashion industry ranks as the second-largest water consumer and contributes to approximately 10 percent of global carbon emissions, surpassing the combined emissions of international flights and maritime shipping.[27] Fast fashion is indicative of greed, manifested in overconsumption, at both the micro and macro level. This culture of overconsumption takes a heavy toll on nature. Mountains of waste, oceans of plastic, and depleted resources are just some of the outcomes of this voracious appetite. Thich Nhat Hanh said, "As well as the carbon dioxide pollution of our physical environment, we can speak of the spiritual pollution of our human environment: the toxic and destructive atmosphere we're creating with our way of consuming."[28]

The second poison of hatred seeps deeper into the wounds of our planet, degrading it with destructive consequences. Its myriad forms range from overt aggression to subtle apathy, manifesting in individuals, governments, and corporations alike. These entities, driven by greed, often resort to ruthless methods to acquire natural resources, heedless of the harm caused to the environment and the communities reliant on it. Imperialism and oppression that have been the driving forces behind national expansion, development, and modernization for the last 500 years are just a few examples of how this belligerent hatred thrives.

While the natural environment may not be the direct target of political aggression that countries take against one another, it is often one of the greatest victims. The war in Ukraine resulting from the Russian

---

[26] Dilys Williams, "Shein: The Unacceptable Face of Throwaway Fast Fashion," *The Guardian*, April 10, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2022/apr/10/shein-the-unacceptable-face-of-throwaway-fast-fashion

[27] Rashmila Maiti, "Fast Fashion and Its Environmental Impact," Earth.org, May 21, 2023, https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/#

[28] Thich Nhat Hanh, "Statement on Climate Change for the United Nations, 2014" Plum Village, https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/thich-nhat-hanhs-statement-on-climate-change-for-unfccc/

Federation's invasion in February 2022 is a case in point. Amid widespread casualties and displacement, the conflict instigated by Vladimir Putin, Russia's autocratic and authoritarian leader, has caused various forms of environmental degradation. A year after the invasion, the UNEP and partners indicated that initial monitoring of the situation revealed a potential toxic legacy for future generations. The conflict has led to multiple instances of pollution—air, water, and land—as well as ecosystem deterioration, posing risks to both Ukraine and neighboring countries.[29]

The war's impact spans sectors like nuclear plants, energy infrastructure, industries, and agriculture. The ecological impact is anticipated to persist for years. Satellite imagery indicates increased fires in nature reserves, protected areas, and forests. *The Washington Post* reported that forests "have been decimated, as soldiers use them as hiding places and consume their wood. The lush woods east of Izyum that once beckoned campers and backpackers now hold the mass graves of hundreds of civilians who were executed by retreating Russians during fighting last fall."[30] The extensive use of weaponry and the generation of substantial military waste pose significant environmental challenges in both urban and rural areas. Thus, the environmental impact of Ukraine's war is substantial, necessitating comprehensive efforts for assessment, mitigation, and remediation to protect the environment and affected communities' well-being.

Another instance of the destructive impact of hatred on the environment is trophy hunting and poaching. Trophy hunting has been justified by some groups as acceptable because it is legal hunting where individuals acquire permits to hunt specific animals within set rules and limits. Though driven by obtaining animal parts as trophies, advocates claim that it can support conservation efforts and local communities when managed responsibly, contributing to habitat protection and anti-poaching initiatives. On the other hand, poaching involves illegal hunting, capturing, or killing of wildlife, often violating conservation laws. Driven by financial gain, poachers target animal parts for black market trade, endangering species and biodiversity. Unlike regulated trophy hunting, poaching is condemned as a criminal activity, posing a serious threat to wildlife populations and species survival.

---

[29] UN Environment Programme, "The Toxic Legacy of the Ukraine War," *UN Environment Programme News and Stories*, March 8, 2023, https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/toxic-legacy-ukraine-war

[30] Jeff Stein and Michael Birnbaum, "The War in Ukraine Is a Human Tragedy. It's Also an Environmental Disaster," *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/13/ukraine-war-environment-impact-disaster/

While this distinction is made, opponents of both forms of hunting would deem that they are both barbaric and harmful to the natural ecosystem. According to Chris Mercer, Director of Campaign Against Canned Hunting (South Africa), "The only difference between trophy hunting and poaching is a piece of paper. If you are rich and white and you kill a rhino, you are a conservationist. If you are poor and black and you kill a rhino, you are a poacher."[31] The primatologist Jane Goodall argued that "the handful of conservationists who believe the trophy hunting propaganda need to wake up. They are naive and are being manipulated. Society will not forgive them for being complicit in the cruelty and conservation disaster that is trophy hunting."[32] Indeed, Andrew Loveridge, a researcher in Conservation and Management at Oxford University, asserted that with the brilliance to launch people and machines into space, harness nuclear energy, and transmit vast information wirelessly, it's reasonable to expect that we could come up with more compassionate strategies to protect beloved animals, rather than resorting to their killing.[33]

While the above behaviors represent more blatant forms of hatred, it is the more elusive and subtle forms of hatred that can be even more insidious, such as apathy, negligence, and lack of concern. These passive poisons can be found in all of us to various degrees. Thus, they can be more harmful because the cumulative effects of these tendencies can seep into the soil of our planet and contribute to its gradual degradation. Someone once pronounced, "Tolerance and apathy are the last virtues of a dying society." These 'virtues' in fact represent the lack of any desire or effort to address critical issues and complete surrendering to an otherwise preventable unfortunate ending. Those who display shallow concern for the environment yet refuse to alter their behavior are also culpable for the state of our planet. The ecological crisis is a collective problem that implicates us all, and we are all accountable for the future of the earth.

Finally, delusion in the Buddhist framework is a strong driving force behind the ecological crisis since it is the foundation for the other two unwholesome states. This delusion takes hold when people become attached to fleeting things such as material possessions and social status, foolishly believing that they can bring true happiness and satisfaction. In the digital age, happiness for many people depends on the number of

---

[31] Cyril Christo, "Let's Stop Putting a Bullet Through the Heart of the World While We Still Have One," *Changing America*, February 25, 2021, https://thehill.com/changing-america/opinion/540479-lets-stop-putting-a-bullet-through-the-heart-of-the-world-while-we/

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

'likes' and 'shares' they receive for a post that they put out on social media. Armed with this delusion, we hoard and seek without ever reaching the satisfaction we desire, and the search continues in an endless loop. On a larger scale, this delusion assumes a systemic role, as we cling to the misguided belief that continuous economic expansion and unceasing GDP growth are the measures of national good. We view high levels of production and consumption as signs of well-being, while sustainability takes a back seat.[34] British writer and environmental activist George Monbiot pointed out the irony in today's world in which "progress is measured by the speed at which we destroy the conditions that sustain life."[35] The consequences of this type of thinking are far-reaching and dire. Engaged Buddhist scholar and activist Sulak Sivaraksa commented:

> Development can emphasize quantity or quality. With the former, we can measure results, but it is presumptuous to assume that more factories, schools, hospitals, food, clothing, jobs, or income will necessarily enhance the quality of life. Although these are all necessary, they are not sufficient… Development must also take into account the essence of our humanity.[36]

Delusion and ignorance of the true nature of the ecological crisis undermine the severity of the problem, with some even denying its existence altogether. Despite overwhelming evidence from scientists worldwide, many still remain unaware of the reality of global warming. The geochemist James Lawrence Powell conducted a survey of 13,950 peer-reviewed climate articles published between 1991 and 2012, and found that only 24 papers rejected the reality of global warming (0.17 percent). In a period spanning from November 12, 2012, to December 31, 2013, Powell reviewed 2,258 peer-reviewed articles authored by 9,136 scientists and found only one article that attributed climate change to non-human causes.[37] In a 2021 study of thousands of peer-reviewed scientific papers published since 2012, it was found that over 99 percent

---

[34] Christopher Ives, "Resources for Buddhist Environmental Ethics," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20 (2013): 546

[35] George Monbiot, "After This 60-Year Feeding Frenzy, Earth Itself Has Become Disposable," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jan/04/standard-of-living-spending-consumerism

[36] Sulak Sivaraksa, *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century* (Asheville, NC: Koa Books, 2009), 35.

[37] Emily Gertz, "Infographic: Scientists Who Doubt Human-Caused Climate Change," *Popular Science*, January 10, 2014, https://www.popsci.com/article/science/infographic-scientists-who-doubt-human-caused-climate-change

of the authors agreed that the cause of climate change is anthropogenic.[38]

The scientific consensus on the human-caused nature of climate change is unequivocal, yet many people remain unaware of this fact. In the United States, where access to information is supposedly unrestricted, a mere 13 percent of respondents correctly identified the scientific consensus on climate change as being over 90 percent in a 2017 survey.[39] The vast majority either believed that there was no scientific consensus or that it was much lower. In 2023, a Pew Research Center survey found that in spite of the urgent appeals from researchers to confront climate change, a significant portion of the American population either does not consider it a significant concern or remains skeptical about its existence. Only 46 percent of Americans interviewed attributed climate change primarily to human activity. In contrast, 26 percent attributed global warming mostly to natural environmental patterns, while an additional 14 percent believed that there was no substantial evidence indicating that warming of the earth was taking place.[40]

In the struggle to comprehend climate change, a wide chasm appears to exist between the scientific community and the general public, at least in the United States. Lee McIntyre has attributed disinformation campaigns as one of the primary causes for this gap in perception.[41] The entities behind these campaigns use disinformation as a shield to protect their economic or ideological agendas. ExxonMobil serves as a prime example. Despite their 2007 promise to cease funding organizations that promote climate change disinformation, it was discovered eight years later that the oil company provided funds to US Congress members and a corporate lobbying group that attempted to obstruct efforts to combat climate change.

---

38 Mark Lynas, Benjamin Z. Houlton, and Simon Perry, "Greater Than 99% Consensus on Human-Caused Climate Change in the Peer-Reviewed Scientific Literature," *Environmental Research Letters* 16 (2021): 114005.

39 Ruairí Arrieta-Kenna, "Almost 90% of Americans Don't Know There's Scientific Consensus on Global Warming," *Vox*, July 6, 2017, https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/7/6/15924444/global-warming-consensus-survey

40 Giancarlo Pasquini, Alison Spencer, Alec Tyson, and Cary Funk, "Why Some Americans Do Not See Urgency on Climate Change," Pew Research Center, August 9, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/08/09/why-some-americans-do-not-see-urgency-on-climate-change/.

41 Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), Kindle edition.

Such campaigns have also been greatly aided by the news media, who unintentionally grant equal time to climate change skeptics to debate those who hold the opposite view. By adopting the model of presenting "both sides of the story," the media conveys the false impression that the reality of anthropogenic climate change is still a controversial issue, when in reality the scientific community has already reached near unanimous agreement on the matter.[42] The print media also contributes by reporting different opinions without verifying whether those views are supported by scientific findings. Thus, the media's need to create drama or project an image of balance in their programming has helped to propagate the notion that climate change is not 'settled science' and that there is 'no scientific consensus.' In the end, the denial of anthropogenic climate change is a deliberate effort by certain groups to misinform and sow confusion and ignorance in the public about what is really happening to the earth.

The exploration of the three poisons—greed, hatred, and delusion—reveals their detrimental impact on efforts to promote environmental flourishing. These three poisons affect human behavior and are manifested at both the micro and macro levels. They intertwine with and reinforce one another in an unceasing chain of negativity. Only when these poisons are eradicated from individuals can there be changes in personal and communal lives.

Promoting Environmental Flourishing by Overcoming Spiritual Poisons

The ecological crisis plaguing our planet today is not an isolated issue but a reflection of the moral and spiritual decay within us. We are infected by the poisonous trio of greed, hatred, and delusion that cause us to disregard nature and others' well-being. This spiritual malignancy manifests in destructive relationships between humans and the natural world, resulting in resource depletion, inequality, poverty, and political, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Our unwholesome relationship with nature, driven by selfish desires and inconsiderateness, leads to its exploitation and harm, threatening its equilibrium and vitality. Just like in any relationship, harming one party ultimately harms both. As a popular maxim states, "He who seeks revenge digs two graves."

To overcome this spiritual poison and promote environmental flourishing, we must recognize the need for a deep transformation of ourselves. Buddhism can offer a framework for understanding and addressing the ecological crisis. Within the Buddhist tradition, self-cultivation

[42] Ibid.

is not only a profound journey toward spiritual growth but also a powerful tool for social change and environmental care. According to the Buddhist vision, if we treat our spiritual lives with the same care and attention that a skilled gardener gives to a delicate seedling, by cultivating our innermost being through practices like meditation, mindfulness, and ethical conduct, our spirituality will slowly grow and mature until it blossoms into enlightenment.

Self-cultivation brings about a profound transformation. As we practice self-cultivation, we undergo a metamorphosis that frees us from suffering and guides us to ultimate truth. We become like a river flowing effortlessly, free from attachment, greed, hatred, and delusion. As we reach higher spiritual levels, we develop a heightened awareness of the interdependence of all things. This awareness weaves a tapestry of compassion, wisdom, and inner peace that surrounds us and radiates toward all living beings.

This awareness of interrelatedness, supported by spiritual development, serves as a powerful foundation for addressing environmental issues. We realize that our actions have consequences for the world around us, much like a pebble thrown into a calm pond. Through spiritual practices, we deepen our understanding of our connection to nature and foster a stronger sense of responsibility for it. By cultivating inner qualities such as compassion, wisdom, and mindfulness, we can positively affect not only ourselves but also the environment and society at large. Compassion and other environmentally positive virtues arise from understanding and drive us to extend a helping hand, enabling collective efforts toward the common good. These efforts may include reducing our carbon footprint, conserving resources, and supporting sustainable practices. The deeper sense of responsibility can also motivate us to put limits on our consumption, become more involved in environmental causes, and to advocate for policies that protect the earth and its inhabitants. If we are leaders of institutions and governments, we can use our power to enact policies aimed at greater flourishing. Through these actions, our positive influence can ripple outwards, creating a more harmonious, sustainable, and vibrant world for all living beings.

In short, self-cultivation within Buddhism is not solely a means for inner growth and transformation bereft of the communal dimension. Rather it is also a way toward greater social and environmental stewardship. It advocates for balance, harmony, and well-being for all living beings. As the Buddha achieved enlightenment and subsequently enriched humanity with his teachings, the practice of Buddhist self-cultivation aims to guide us in realizing our fullest human potential. By embracing this path, we become instruments of well-being. This extends

not only to ourselves but also to those around us and the natural world, which is an integral part of our mundane existence.

CHAPTER 3

UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE AND VIRTUOUS ACTION

On a website called "World's Scariest Food," there is an entry on the dish of live monkey brain, which is reportedly consumed as a delicacy in a number of countries in Asia. Part of the entry provides the following information:

> There are people who enjoy eating monkey's brain. It is served directly in the skull of a monkey that is still alive or where the cook has just killed it prior to serving. The simian brain begins to shut down a few minutes after the death of the animal giving it a bitter taste. The monkey is usually strapped down rendering it virtually immobile. Using the knife, the skull of the monkey is sliced. The top of the skull is cracked open further to allow easy access for the guest to start eating. The fresh brain is not very strong in flavour and tastes like tofu. In Indonesia, monkeys are stunned by a stroke stick. In Vietnam, they are made more docile by getting them drunk with sweet rice wine while they wait in their cage. The monkey brain is offered, for example, in a restaurant in Kunming in the Chinese province of Yunnan. The chef uses a noose to hang the still living animal by the neck. The dead weight of the monkey against the noose means it doesn't even make a sound. The chef then opens the skull and immediately brings the customer to the table.[1]

Although the comment section under the entry indicates that many people are skeptical about whether such a dish really exists, there are many websites which explain in detail the origin of this horrific way of eating monkey brains (Chinese, 猴腦). Furthermore, social media clips appear to corroborate its existence,[2] though its prevalence is unclear. Nonetheless, the issue at hand transcends whether what has been described exists or not. Rather, what matters is the heinous treatment toward other creatures by human beings. The brutal way of killing and consuming any living creature reveals a level of barbarity that erodes our humanity. As human beings, we define ourselves by our behavior

---

1 World's Scariest Food, https://www.mapotic.com/worlds-scariest-foods/110151-live-monkey-brain

2 YouTube, "Clip Làm Thịt Khỉ Gây Phẩn Nộ," November 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRCbzz2XvZ0

toward others, whether they are human, animal, or inanimate objects such as a mountain peak or a sand dune. While moral norms are often unclear and subject to debate, the act of eating monkey brain directly from its skull should be universally decried as inhumane. Such savage behavior diminishes our humanity and chips away at our moral fabric.

Confucianism in Traditional East Asia

Proper personal and social behavior has always been a primary concern of Asian cultural and ethical systems, especially in China. At the heart of Chinese culture lies the ancient tradition of Confucianism, which is deeply invested in the process of cultivating humanity to its highest potential. For several millennia, this spiritual, cultural, and social foundation has served as a guiding light for countless individuals throughout Asia and beyond. The teachings of Confucianism offer a path to personal development, emphasizing the importance of self-improvement and social harmony. Although in the West, the study of religion typically classifies Confucianism and another famous Chinese tradition of Daoism as religions, the people of these cultures do not necessarily view them in the same way. In fact, individuals from China may adamantly deny that they are Confucianist or Daoist and that these are religions at all.[3] To them, these ancient traditions are not systems of belief to be adhered to, but a way of life, a cultural inheritance to be treasured and practiced with great reverence.

For East Asians, the idea of religion is a relatively new concept, one that was introduced to them by Westerners during the era of colonialism. The word 'religion' itself was a latecomer to their languages, first translated into Japanese as '*shukyo*' in the 19th century, and later adopted by Chinese scholars in the form of the Mandarin word '*zongjiao*.' However, the East Asian perspective on religion is quite different from that of the West. To them, the term 'religion' literally means 'institutional teaching' or 'school of instruction,' which evokes images of something organized, institutional, and sectarian.[4] In contrast, the traditional East Asian approach to spirituality is more fluid, flexible, and all-encompassing. It is not confined to a particular doctrine or creed, nor is it centered around a specific deity or pantheon of gods. Rather, it is a way of life, a holistic approach to living that encompasses every aspect of human existence. To the East Asian mind, Confucianism is not a religion per se, but a pervasive and diffused cultural, social, and spiritual

---

3 Randall L. Nadeau, *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 21.

4 Ibid.

force that supports the cultivation of ethical conduct, personal morality, and social harmony.

The other well-known tradition from China, Daoism, is also considered by Chinese throughout history to be complementary to Confucianism. They interpenetrate each other so much that these two spiritual and philosophical systems may be considered two aspects of a single religious tradition. The Western classification of these traditions as separate entities is misleading, for they are like two sides of the same coin, reflecting the Chinese religious and cultural milieu and sensibility. Although the Chinese people may not identify themselves as followers of Confucianism or Daoism, the influence of these traditions on their daily lives is profound. They participate in family-oriented rituals that have been rooted in Confucianism and Daoism for generations, such as making regular offerings to their ancestors, even if they do not explicitly consider themselves Confucian or Daoist. These practices are an essential part of their cultural and spiritual heritage, deeply ingrained in the fabric of their society, and form a significant source of their identity.

Asian as well as Western scholars of religion have included Confucianism in the list of world religions because like other religious systems, Confucianism aims to provide the means to realize the human desire to achieve ultimate transformation at the individual as well as the communal level. Despite more than two millennia having passed since Confucius (551–479 BCE) first espoused his philosophy, the issues that troubled him remain terribly relevant to the modern world. Though the specific contexts may have changed, the overarching themes of political division, official corruption, poverty, and injustice still plague societies today. In his time, Confucius believed that these ills were caused by the disintegration of traditional values that had once bound communities together. Reverence for Heaven, rituals, ancestors, and elders had fallen away in favor of selfishness and apathy. People had forgotten that true prosperity could only be achieved by prioritizing the good of the community over personal gain. Confucius was convinced that the key to overcoming these issues lay in a return to traditional values, as well as in the cultivation of moral character through ritual, music, and literature.[5]

Confucius advocated the reinstitution of the Way (*Dao*), which had governed people's moral life in the ancient past but was lost during his own time. The Way, whose literal meaning was a physical path or road, was the Heaven-endorsed path or moral virtue known and practiced by the ancient sages. During the rule of the ancient sage-kings Yao and

[5] Edward Slingerland, *Confucius. Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), xxiii.

Shun, moral virtues were not only present in the rulers but also in the officials who served them. The Way was embodied by social leaders and concretely manifested in ritual practices, music, and literature. In the Golden Age of Zhou, moral virtues reached their peak. Although these practices had been passed down and remained available during his time, they were no longer revered and practiced. For Confucius, it was necessary to recover and promote these practices, as any authentic human being must walk this moral path.[6]

Therefore, Confucius' teachings on human ethics and morality, as recorded by his devoted students in the *Analects*, were a call to action aimed at reclaiming the glory of the past in order to confront the challenges of the present. The great master did not profess to be the originator of these teachings, but rather a messenger of the wisdom of the ancient sages. "I transmit but do not create. I place my trust in the teachings of antiquity," Confucius humbly proclaimed. Indeed, the values and practices he championed had endured long before his time, and it was his mission to compile, systematize, and promote the beliefs and practices that had constituted the Chinese cultural and moral fabric for centuries.[7]

While Confucius' teachings largely focused on social relationships, later Confucian scholars expanded on his ideas, giving rise to Neo-Confucianism. During the Song (960–1276) and Ming (1368–1643) dynasties, this school of thought gained prominence. It introduced a significant environmental dimension, drawing inspiration from Daoist and Buddhist thoughts.[8] Neo-Confucianists incorporated these perspectives to develop an ethical vision that reflected a more naturalistic cosmological outlook. This orientation envisioned that self-cultivation was not only essential in promoting social harmony but also instrumental in achieving harmony with the universe.[9] Through this holistic approach, Neo-Confucianism emphasized the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of cultivating a deep reverence for the natural world.

---

6 Ibid., xxii.

7 Nadeau, *Asian Religions*, 23.

8 Baoyu Li, Jesper Sjöström, Bangping Ding, and Ingo Eilks, "Education for Sustainability Meets Confucianism in Science Education," *Science & Education* (June 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-022-00349-9

9 T. Savelyeva, "Vernadsky Meets Yulgok: A Non-Western Dialog on Sustainability," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 5 (2017): 501-20.

Confucianism and the Contemporary Context

For the past several thousand years, the tenets of Confucianism have exerted a profound influence on the spiritual and ethical development of the Chinese people, and even beyond. Through its emphasis on ancestor veneration, its educational curriculum focused on history and culture, and its principles for fostering harmonious family and social relationships, Confucianism has provided a comprehensive framework for moral and societal development. Moreover, this venerable philosophy has been successful in grounding ethical teachings and principles in a broader religious or cosmic context, imbuing them with a deeper sense of meaning and purpose.[10] Confucianism's significance persists to this day due to historical events and migration, shaping the lives of people across Asia, including but not limited to China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, as well as countries with significant Chinese migrant populations, such as Malaysia and Singapore.[11] Vietnam received the earliest wave of Chinese influence during the first centuries of the common era. Korea and Japan experienced the second wave, which had its greatest impact from the eighth century onward, despite beginning in the fourth century. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other regions experienced the third and fourth waves during modern history.[12] Confucianism's teachings on ancestor veneration, education, harmonious relationships, and ethical principles grounded in a religious or cosmic reality have endured throughout these waves of cultural influence and migration.

Drawing inspiration from the ancient traditions of Confucianism, one can discern that history holds many valuable lessons. In today's world, the problems that Confucius confronted during his time are compounded by the escalating ecological crisis, threat of nuclear war, and digitally generated infodemics. In the face of a complex interplay of challenges, it is pertinent to seek guidance from the age-old wisdom of Confucianism. The Confucian response to such challenges is rooted in the idea of cultivating our inner core, beginning with our own self. Through a holistic and integrated approach, we can undertake a journey toward self-transformation, realizing that the pursuit of our own perfection is not only desirable but necessary in navigating the intricacies of the modern age.

In the wake of modernity, our societies have undergone drastic transformations. However, the legacy of Confucianism endures through

---

10 Nadeau, *Asian Religions*, 23.

11 Baoyu Li et al., "Education for Sustainability Meets Confucianism."

12 Nadeau, *Asian Religions*, 24.

its teachings on education as a pathway toward self-cultivation and transformation. As aptly noted by Tu Weiming, a renowned contemporary Confucian scholar, the pursuit of self-transformation as envisioned by Confucianism is primarily for our own sake, a means to realize our true human potential. According to Tu, "Character building, the primary purpose of Confucian moral education, begins with self-cultivation. But education is more than the mere acquisition of knowledge or the internalization of skills. It is a holistic way of learning to be human. In Confucian terms, such learning is defined as 'learning for the sake of the self,' 'the learning of the heart-mind and nature,' or 'learning to be a profound person.'"[13]

At first sight, this self-cultivation seems to be an individualistic act serving one's own interest. However, Tu contended that education is in fact a communal endeavor. Confucian learning takes the individual as the starting point of departure, an independent and autonomous entity "predicated on the dignity of the person as an internal value rather than a socially constructed reality."[14] Nevertheless, the self as the center in the Confucian project is not an isolated individual, but the center of an interconnected and ever-expanding network of human relations—the community comprised of family, village, country, world, and cosmos. Tu pointed out, "Self-realization as a communal act presupposes a personal commitment for harmonizing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. The full realization of personhood entails the real possibility of transcending selfishness, nepotism, parochialism, nationalism, and anthropocentrism."[15]

Therefore, the Confucian approach to self-cultivation is a holistic one, encompassing not only personal growth, but also a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness of four fundamental relationships in human life: self, community, nature, and Heaven. This outlook represents a form of spiritual humanism that sharply contrasts with the anthropocentric worldview found in Western Enlightenment thought, which seeks to dominate and subjugate nature while denying the transcendent. Instead of perpetuating this harmful perspective, Confucianism strives for a harmonious "integration of body and mind, a fruitful interaction of self and community, a sustainable and harmonious relationship between the human species and nature, and a mutuality be-

[13] Tu Weiming, "Ecological Implications of Confucian Humanism," n.d., http://msihyd.org/pdf/19manuscript_tu.pdf, 78.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 79.

tween the human heart and the Way of Heaven."[16] As Wing-tsit Chan asserted, "If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that would be humanism—not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man and Heaven."[17]

Qualities of Authentic Personhood

The Confucian worldview revolves around the notion of authentic personhood, where the cultivation of virtues plays a pivotal role in achieving a complete human existence. The authentic Confucian individual is someone who has nurtured a personality that is both well-rounded and introspective, through the practice of moral reasoning, self-reflection, and strict adherence to social norms. But what are the defining characteristics of an authentic Confucian person? To unravel the answer to this question, we must delve into the fundamental qualities that constitute fully realized humanity.

Ren *(Humaneness, Benevolence, Goodness)*

In the *Analects*, '*ren*' refers to the highest of Confucian virtues. The term *ren* has been translated variously as 'benevolence,' 'humaneness,' 'love,' 'goodness,' and 'kindness.' Nadeau translated *ren* as 'co-humanity' because etymologically, the Chinese character for *ren* (仁) shows two parts. The left part refers to something 'human' and the right side is the character for number two. Together, *ren* suggests a quality of being in co-human relationship, as stated by Mencius (Mengzi), "To be human means being co-human."[18] The late famous American scholar of religious studies Huston Cummings Smith translated the term as 'human-heartedness.'[19] Smith observed that *ren* "involves simultaneously a feeling of humanity toward others and respect for oneself, an indivisible sense of the dignity of human life wherever it appears. Subsidiary attitudes follow automatically: magnanimity, good faith, and charity."[20]

---

[16] Tu Weiming, "Spiritual Humanism," Speech given at Hangzhou International Congress, "Culture: Key to Sustainable Development," 15-17 May 2013, Hangzhou, China.

[17] Wing-tsit Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 3.

[18] D.C. Lau, trans., *The Book of Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), ch. 22.

[19] Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: Publishers Group, 2009), 172.

[20] Smith, *The World's Religions,* 173.

According to Confucius, the virtue of *ren* is innate, but must be nurtured through natural development, not coercion. This virtue is regarded as the most sublime and transcendental of all virtues, permeating benevolent conduct and moral sentiment in all of our social interactions and relationships.[21] An authentic Confucian person embodies this virtue in both public and private life, displaying empathy, generosity, and courtesy in words and actions, and taking our own feelings as a measure for what others might feel.[22] Superficial appearances and clever words do not reflect one's true virtues, as Confucius himself was suspicious of those with a "clever tongue" and "fine appearance" (Ana., 1.3).

Though Confucius believed that he had never seen *ren* fully incarnated in anyone, he also held that being good was a natural inclination within everyone, a sentiment shared by Mencius. For Mencius, all of us possess a capacity for compassion that, with proper cultivation, would lead to the development of *ren*. Cultivating this virtue requires creating an environment that encourages positive human tendencies to naturally grow. Vietnamese culture captures this idea through the familiar adage, "It's dark near ink, while it's bright near the lamp." Indeed, we can only improve ourselves in a sport or in a craft by seeking out the company of those who would challenge us to hone our skills. Likewise, the development of the virtue of *ren* necessitates surrounding ourselves with individuals who encourage empathy, generosity, and courtesy, and who foster a community where the seeds of virtue can take root and flourish (Ana., 15.10).

Fortunately, Confucius believed that if we hold a deep emotional commitment to *ren* and truly desire it, the battle is already half-won. "Is goodness really so far away? If I simply desire goodness, I will find that it is already here" (Ana., 7.30). This does not imply that no effort is required to cultivate *ren*. Rather, it means that our enthusiastic commitment to cultivation compels us to do whatever is necessary to make progress toward it. Once *ren* is fully integrated into our being, it becomes an inseparable part of our nature, and we won't give it up for any reason. "The gentleman does not go against goodness even for the amount of time required to finish a meal. Even in times of urgency or distress, he necessarily accords with it" (Ana., 4.5).

The unselfishness of a person imbued with *ren* is further revealed by our reluctance to outshine others in virtue. We are equally eager to see others improve in their virtues, not just ourselves. Confucius taught

---

[21] P.K. Ip, "Is Confucianism Good for Business Ethics in China?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 88, no. 3 (2009): 463-76, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0120-2

[22] Smith, *The World's Religions*, 173.

that the mark of a superior person is their commitment to improving the admirable qualities of others, rather than trying to exacerbate their bad qualities. Only those with ill intentions would wish to do the opposite (Ana., 12.16). Therefore, we must be just as dedicated to helping others realize themselves as we are to realizing ourselves (Ana., 6.30). This quality of a person imbued with *ren* clearly demonstrates that true goodness is never only for the sake of the self but always with the view of others in mind.

Yi *(Rightness, Righteousness)*

The virtue of '*yi*' (義) is another essential quality that defines a morally upright person, referring to a state where one has a refined sense of what is just and proper. It is often translated as righteousness or justice. Confucius exhorted his disciples to pursue what was right, and to make it their guiding principle. "Be dutiful, trustworthy, and always move in the direction of what is right," he said (Ana., 12.10). In another verse, he instructed that a noble person is neither for nor against anything except what is right, which they unfailingly follow (Ana., 4.10).[23] Confucius also expounded on this virtue by saying, "The gentleman takes rightness as his substance, puts it into practice by means of ritual, gives it expression through modesty, and perfects it by being trustworthy" (Ana., 15.18). This suggests that rightness holds an essential place among various virtuous qualities.[24] Thus, to be righteous is to be the epitome of moral excellence, where one's actions are grounded in an unwavering commitment to justice and fairness.

A person with a strong sense of *yi* has an innate inclination to do what is right, even if it means forgoing personal gain or recognition.[25] The ability to discern and choose the right course of action is paramount, as life presents us with diverse and complex situations that demand appropriate responses. Actions that exemplify *yi* are not necessarily bound by strict rules. These actions can be spontaneous, creative, and new. Determining what is appropriate in a given context and how we can act in a way that embodies that appropriateness to the fullest extent requires an emerging understanding of the particular circumstance.[26] Therefore, doing what is right is a skill that reflects an inter-

---

[23] Hagop Sarkissian, "Ritual and Rightness in the Analects," in *Dao Companion to the Analects, Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy,* ed. A. Olberding, DOI 10.1007m8-94-007-7113-0_6, 95-116, 111.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), 102.

nal disposition, temperament, and sensibility. "Of the virtues that constitute the Way of the gentleman, he possessed four: in the way he conducted himself, he displayed reverence; in the way he served his superiors, he displayed respect; in the way he cared for the common people, he displayed benevolence; and in the way he employed the people, he displayed rightness" (Ana., 5.16).

Confucius emphasized the significance of *yi* as a guiding virtue that could balance and direct other virtues toward the right actions. He cautioned that even courage, without the guidance of *yi*, could result in foolish actions and negative consequences. Thus, a noble person imbued with courage but lacking a sense of rightness could create political disorder. Similarly, a common person in the same predicament would become a thief (Ana., 17.23). While courage in itself is admirable, it can lead to harm when exercised without wisdom. Thus, those who possess *yi* ensure that the conduct that they engage in is contextually appropriate.[27] As Zizhang, a disciple of Confucius, remarked, "To submit to fate when confronted with danger, to think of rightness when presented with an opportunity for gain, to focus on respectfulness when offering sacrifices, and to concentrate upon your grief when in mourning—these are the qualities that make a scholar-official acceptable" (Ana., 19.1). Indeed, in his teachings, Confucius repeatedly emphasized the need for *yi* as one of the virtues that must be exercised in confronting daily life occurrences (Ana., 14.13, 16.10).[28]

Li *(Ritual, Propriety, Decorum)*

The Confucian concept of '*li*' (禮) is intimately linked to the virtue of *ren*, with the latter representing an internal disposition and the former emphasizing the external performance of daily acts.[29] *Li* is often translated as 'ritual' or 'ceremonial living' because the actions are directly connected with religious ceremonies. The Chinese character 禮, in fact, portrays an incense container placed upon a stand which evokes images of offerings being made to ancestors in various family and cultural occasions. Other scholars have also translated the term 'propriety' or 'decorum.' Thus, in Confucian thought system, *li* contains a broad semantic

---

[27] A.S. Cua, "Virtues of Junzi," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2007): 125-42.

[28] Robin Stanley Snell, Crystal Xinru Wu, and Hong Weng Lei, "Junzi Virtues: A Confucian Foundation for Harmony Within Organizations," *Asian Journal of Business Ethics* 11 (2022): 183-226.

[29] Nadeau, *Asian Religions*, 31.

range, referring to both formal ceremonial rituals as well as basic rules of personal decorum.[30]

Confucius highly valued *li*, as he and his close circle of companions and students were part of the *ru* class, responsible historically for performing significant court and clan duties. The *ru* possessed an exceptional understanding of *li*, which, in the context of rituals, pertained to diverse ceremonies performed on various occasions, encompassing cultural and life cycle rites, such as funerals. For members of the *ru* class, mastering *li* was as crucial as other disciplines, including poetry, music, and history (see, e.g., Ana., 16.5, 16.13, 17.21).[31] Regrettably, during the time of Confucius, rituals had significantly declined in practice or had deviated from their original forms. This was a matter of great concern for Confucius, as he frequently lamented to his students (Ana., 9.3, 17.21, 3.10, 3.17).[32] Nonetheless, Confucius strongly advocated for the use of rituals as a means to address the numerous issues afflicting society. He believed that the restoration of rituals could address these problems, as they possessed an inherent transformative power. Confucius and his followers held the view that teaching people how to observe rituals would cultivate their appreciation for fundamental values such as order, harmony, community, and cooperation.[33]

Based on the teachings of Confucius, *li* can be understood as the proper patterns of behavior that each person must demonstrate in their social environment. In the context of family, *li* offers guidance in defining appropriate conduct within different relational roles. Observing *li* in the family helps individuals fulfill their roles effectively, which in turn contributes to their success in society. For instance, a son who embodies filial piety will also show proper behavior toward his superiors in the workplace (Ana., 1.2). Such individuals will earn an equally good reputation in both familial and communal settings (Ana., 11.5, 2.21).[34]

One might wonder how rituals can have a positive impact on our behavior. When we participate in significant life event rituals and are fully present and invested in the actions, it can create a powerful effect. According to Bryan Van Norden, "Because ritual is seen as sacred, it is regarded as having an authority that is not reducible to that of human individuals. This raises the question of what it is for something to be 'sacred.' To regard something as sacred is to think that the proper atti-

---

30 Sarkissian, "Ritual and Rightness in the Analects," 95.

31 Ibid., 96.

32 Ibid.

33 Nadeau, *Asian Religions*, 29.

34 Sarkissian, "Ritual and Rightness in the Analects," 98.

tude toward it is awe or reverence."[35] Approaching rituals with a strong emotional commitment can evoke a sense of reverence, significantly influencing the outcome of the ritual. The intention and emotional presence that the practitioner injects into the actions matters greatly. While the outward elements of the ritual, such as music, incense, and flowers, can create an atmosphere of solemnity, without personal contribution, the practitioner may not feel any deep emotion from the ritual action. Nevertheless, with diligent practice and proper guidance, practitioners can improve in the rituals and fully benefit from the ritual action.[36]

According to Confucius, the level of intentionality and emotional investment we put into rituals could transform our demeanor and decorum regarding social relationships. We should view our interactions with others as daily rites that we perform with the same level of conscientiousness. By paying attention to our actions during our interactions with others, we communicate to them that they are worthy of our concern and care. When we bow or shake hands with the same level of importance as a ritual, we communicate respect and moral attention to the other person. Life, with all its social interactions, is a series of rituals, both large and small, that we must prioritize in our conduct. Even seemingly trivial matters require proper conduct to promote harmony and minimize potential conflict. We have seen how mundane situations, such as lining up at the airport or reclining the airplane seat, can quickly turn into shouting matches or physical altercations. Much of the *ad hominem* attack that people direct at each other on internet platforms can be attributed to the lack of decorum in participating in this mode of social interaction. However, if we treat these micro-ethical situations with the seriousness of a ritual, then our actions and words could be instrumental in maintaining the spirit of courtesy and decorum rather than causing conflict.

From the Confucian standpoint, even seemingly small actions can have a significant impact on our social relationships. How we initially present ourselves through facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures can signal our attitudes and intentions toward others. Therefore, by being mindful of how we carry ourselves, we can promote cooperative and friendly relationships. The diligent practice of rituals teaches us to enter into our engagements with others with intentionality and control, as the profound person does by studying broadly in culture and exercising discipline through the rites. According to Confucius, those who restrain themselves seldom err (Ana., 4.23), and proper conduct can help

[35] Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 102.

[36] Sarkissian, "Ritual and Rightness in the Analects," 100.

maintain a spirit of courtesy and decorum in even the most mundane situations, ultimately minimizing potential conflicts.[37]

As we can see, *li* acts as a governing principle not only in religious settings but also in non-religious situations. In religious ceremonies, actions must be carried out with utmost precision and intention, and the same level of adherence is expected in all contexts. Confucius taught, "Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual" (Ana., 12.1). No matter what setting we find ourself in, our gestures, demeanor, and speech must be in accordance with *li*. According to Confucius, *li* could be mastered by anyone because the inclination to live harmoniously with everyone exists naturally within every individual (*ren*). *Li* then is the externalization of the *ren* in a specific context, in the experience of living out the various relationships in the community: (1) cultivating personal life; (2) regulating familial relations; (3) ordering social affairs; and (4) bringing peace to the world. While *ren* is an internal virtue, it could be manifested in concrete ways through the exercise of *li*, which gives concrete expression to our inner spirit. On the other hand, the exercise of *li* without the motivating virtue of *ren* results in unnatural and coerced actions.

Zhi *(Wisdom)*

The virtue of '*zhi*' (智) refers to moral wisdom, which entails the ability to acquire knowledge and utilize it to examine, analyze, judge, and act wisely in specific situations. This virtue involves both a deep understanding of the Way and the ability to make wise judgments regarding individuals and situations. It has been argued that only individuals with *zhi* can effectively apply morality to benefit others. "The good do not worry, the wise are not confused, and the courageous do not fear" (Ana., 14.28). When faced with a complex problem with multiple solutions, individuals possessing *zhi* can select the optimal course of action among available options.[38] This is because wise people possess the ability to analyze and assess intricate scenarios with uncertain variables.

---

[37] Ibid., 101.

[38] P.R. Woods and D. Lamond, "Junzi and Rushang: A Confucian Approach to Business Ethics in a Contemporary Chinese Context," Presented at the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference, Wellington, New Zealand. December 7-9, 2011, https://www.anzam.org/wpcontent/uploads/pdf-manager/623_ANZAM2011-434.PDF

After thoroughly examining the issue, they can then devise appropriate and effective responses to the given predicament.[39]

While wisdom can empower individuals to analyze and evaluate problems, it does not equate to omniscience. Confucius stressed that true wisdom entails recognizing the limits of our knowledge, acknowledging what we know and what we do not (Ana., 2.17). Embracing our ignorance is a critical aspect of wisdom, as it motivates us to seek knowledge and understanding. But admitting what we don't know should not hinder us from taking action to unravel and overcome challenges. True wisdom lies in acknowledging the extent of our knowledge and limitations, and proactively seeking to expand our understanding.

The path to wisdom is challenging and demands dedication to self-improvement and the application of knowledge in real-life situations. The cultivation of wisdom is further aided by the practice of rituals, including sacrifices to the spirits. However, the true value in these rituals lies in the investment of our hearts and minds, rather than any potential blessing or intervention from the spirits. Confucius emphasized that wisdom includes promoting social harmony among the common people, respecting the ghosts and spirits while maintaining a healthy distance, and approaching rituals with sincerity instead of seeking to flatter and curry favors (Ana., 6.22).[40]

Effective communication is a powerful tool in the hands of the wise. Knowing when and how to speak and act can make all the difference between success and failure. As the Vietnamese saying goes, wise words falling on deaf ears are like "water falling on taro leaves" or the English saying, "water off a duck's back." But communicating the right words to the right person at the right time is an essential aspect of wisdom. According to Confucius, "The wise person does not let people go to waste, but he also does not waste his words" (Ana., 15.8). This means that if someone is open to our message, but we don't speak to them, we deny them the opportunity for self-improvement. However, if someone is not open to our message, but we force our thoughts upon them, we are letting our words (and energy) go to waste. Thus, the wise person must have the discernment to tailor their communication to the specific individual and circumstances they encounter. We can see this ability to communicate effectively in the ministries of great spiritual leaders such as Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius. They all had a remarkable talent for reaching people where they were and conveying their message in a way

---

[39] K.O. Thompson, "The Archery of 'Wisdom' in the Stream of Life: 'Wisdom' in the Four Books with Zhu Xi's Reflections," *Philosophy East & West* 57, no. 3 (2007): 330-44.

[40] Slingerland, *Confucius Analects,* 60.

that resonated deeply with them. As such, the wise person knows that communication is not just about conveying information, but about connecting with people on a deeper level and inspiring them to yearn for personal growth.

True wisdom is not just about intellectual knowledge, but also encompasses the development of our character and the cultivation of virtues. Confucius emphasized the importance of balancing wisdom with other virtues in order to achieve true excellence in all aspects of life. In the *Analects* (15.33), Confucius warned that even if we attain wisdom, we can still lose it if we do not also cultivate goodness to protect it. Furthermore, if we cannot manifest our wisdom with dignity or earn the respect of others, we will not be able to achieve our goals. Finally, if we do not use ritual to put our wisdom into action, it will never truly reach its full potential. Therefore, the goal of the wise person is not only to acquire knowledge and wisdom but also to integrate these virtues into our daily lives through good character, respect for others, and the use of rituals to manifest our wisdom in the world. By doing so, we can attain true excellence and lead a fulfilling life.

Xin *(Trustworthiness, Integrity, Authenticity)*

The concept of '*xin*' (信) refers to a virtuous quality that embodies trustworthiness, authenticity, and coherence between one's words and actions. The Chinese character 信 is constructed from *ren* (人), meaning human being or person, and 'speech' (言), emphasizing the importance of our intentions, words, and deeds being in harmony with one another. In other words, the virtue of *xin* requires us to be true to our word and consistent in our actions. *Xin* encompasses a range of values that includes integrity, honesty, sincerity, and faithfulness.[41] It is the foundation of all trustworthy relationships and the cornerstone of a virtuous and meaningful life. In essence, *xin* is not just a virtue, but a way of being that inspires others to trust and believe in us, and sets us on a path of authenticity and moral excellence.

Trustworthiness is an indispensable quality that lies at the heart of any functioning individual and community. As Confucius himself declared, "I cannot see how a person devoid of trustworthiness could possibly get along in the world. Imagine a large ox-drawn cart without a linchpin for its yoke, or a small horse drawn cart without a linchpin for

[41] Y.L. Chen, "Conceptual Metaphors for 'Xin' in Confucianism Based on 'Xin' in the Four Books," Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Culture, Education and Economic Development of Modern Society (ICCESE 2018), Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research. ISBN: 978-9-4625-2495-8. https://doi.org/10.2991/iccese-18.2018.106

its collar: how could they possibly be driven?" (Ana., 2.22). Indeed, trustworthiness is the instrument that holds together the complex machinery of human relationships. Our words and actions possess true substance and meaning only when they align. Whether in our personal or professional lives, trustworthiness enables us to build relationships that foster trust, mutual respect, and social harmony. Vietnamese people have a saying, "Loss of trustworthiness one time leads to ten thousand times of disbelief." Trustworthiness is not just a desirable quality; it's a fundamental prerequisite for social flourishing.

Nurturing our personal growth often requires us to seek out the company of individuals who embody the virtue of *xin*. As Confucius suggested, befriending those who are sincere in their words and actions, or who possess great wisdom and knowledge, can greatly benefit us (Ana., 16.4). Conversely, associating with those who are skilled in flattery and deceit can be detrimental to our personal development. It is all too common to encounter individuals who speak kindly to our face, only to spread malicious gossip behind our backs. While their criticisms may contain truth, direct constructive feedback is more valuable in helping us to improve ourselves in a meaningful way. By aligning ourselves with those who possess the virtue of *xin*, we create an environment that fosters self-cultivation and allows us to realize our full potential.

A word of caution must be said about the pitfalls of the virtue of *xin*. While trustworthiness is highly valued, it can become petty and narrow-minded when pursued to the exclusion of other virtues. Those who insist on being trustworthy without also cultivating other virtues become what Confucius referred to as "narrow, rigid little" individuals (Ana., 13.20), and their trustworthiness devolves into "petty fidelity" (Ana., 14.17, 1.13). Confucius himself emphasized that "the gentleman is true, but not rigidly trustworthy" (Ana., 15.37), indicating that discretion and flexibility are important components of a well-rounded character. The scholar Huang Kan (488–545) noted, the gentleman must use discretion in order to respond to changing circumstances, and cannot be bound by petty fidelity like those who "strangle themselves in some gully or ditch" (Ana., 14.17). In other words, the pursuit of trustworthiness must be balanced by other virtues and guided by situational awareness in order to avoid excessiveness and maintain harmony. This theme of balance and harmony among virtues is a recurring motif in Confucian teachings (Ana., 14.12), emphasizing the importance of cultivating a range of virtues in order to live a fulfilling and meaningful life.

The Fully Realized Person

The Confucian virtues we have just discussed are the bedrock of the '*junzi*' (君子), the ideal embodiment of social and moral excellence. Originally, during the Western Zhou period (1045–771 BCE), the term *junzi* was reserved for the warrior aristocracy, but through Confucius' teachings, it became associated with moral standing rather than social status. The various translations of Confucian texts have used the word 'gentleman' to refer to the paradigmatic personhood of *junzi*. As a reflection of Confucius' time and culture, this term was generally applied to men. Nonetheless, contemporary translations have adopted the term 'superior person' to account for gender inclusivity. Feminist scholars, for instance, have chosen to translate the term as 'exemplary person,' to highlight the universality of Confucian virtues.[42] Tu Weiming, on the other hand, delved into the inner realm of the superior person by interpreting *junzi* as 'profound person.' In Tu's view, the profound person possesses a deep understanding of oneself, a resolute courage, and a heightened sensitivity to the world.[43] It must be noted that courage here is always tempered by wisdom to avoid whimsical and inappropriate actions.

In any of these renderings, we can see that a *junzi* is a well-cultivated person not plagued by the characteristics of pettiness, mean-spiritedness, boastfulness, coarseness, vulgarity, and narrow-mindedness. Rather, among other things the *junzi* is poised, gracious, competent, and courageous. The two inseparable defining qualities of a *junzi* are being well educated in the arts and literature, history and the rites, and possessing admirable character traits, especially *ren*. According to Confucius, a *junzi* has nine preoccupations: to focus on seeing clearly when looking; to focus on being discerning when listening; to focus on being amiable when making expressions; to focus on being reverent when displaying demeanor; to focus on being respectful when taking actions, to focus on obtaining answers when in doubt; to focus on the potential negative consequences when displaying anger; and to focus on what is right when seeing (Ana., 16.10).

The great Neo-Confucian thinker of the Ming Dynasty, Wang Yangming (1472–1529), described this as "the unity of knowledge and action" where how one behaves reflects the type of education one has received. Thus, knowledge and character are inseparable aspects of the same personality. One of the greatest abilities of a *junzi* is engaging in con-

---

[42] Nadeau, *Asian Religions*, 45.

[43] "Tu Weiming," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://iep.utm.edu/tu-weimi/#SH3c

tinuous critical self-examination which allows the *junzi* to penetrate the inner self and to realize the true nature of human-relatedness.

Thus, a *junzi* fully imbued with the virtues of goodness, righteousness, decorum, wisdom, and trustworthiness represents the highest state of human authenticity, integrity, and realization. When a person imbued with *ren* consistently demonstrates this inner virtue in *li* and other virtues, the individual is rightfully considered a *junzi*—one that is *truly human*. The concept of the *junzi* and its virtues of social and moral excellence offers a powerful vision for personal growth and meaningful relationships. It's not merely about acquiring knowledge or skills for material and social advancement but also about cultivating virtues and character traits that lead to greatness. A realized person embodies qualities such as courage, graciousness, and competence, while avoiding negative traits like pettiness and narrow-mindedness.

But these virtues go beyond just external behavior—they require inner qualities like self-awareness and continuous critical self-examination. By developing these qualities, we become better equipped to connect with others and build meaningful relationships. The unity of knowledge and action highlights the importance of aligning our beliefs and principles with our behavior. When we live out our values in positive actions, we can build stronger, more harmonious relationships with those around us. By cultivating empathy, respect, and reverence, we become more in tune with our true nature and can bring more harmonious energy to the world. In essence, the vision of *junzi* challenges us to not just be good, but to become the best versions of ourselves—and by doing so, to create a more compassionate and enlightened world.

Authentic humanity as depicted in the paradigmatic personality of the *junzi* is never egotistical, narcissistic, or anthropocentric. Rather, a well cultivated person is always conscious of the four essential dimensions of the shared human experience—self, community, Earth (nature), and Heaven. This outlook constitutes the basis of what is known as Confucian humanism. According to Tu Weiming, Confucian humanism contrasts with secular humanism found in the Enlightenment mentality which focuses on the self and community but neglects Earth and Heaven. Confucian humanism, on the other hand, calls for the integration of the body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit of the self. This integration results in actions and interactions that promote harmony at all levels, from the home to the world and beyond. Feng Youlan (1895–1990), a Chinese philosopher, historian, and writer who was instrumental for reintroducing the study of Chinese philosophy in the modern era as-

serted that the pinnacle of human self-realization is achieved by embodying the "spirit of Heaven and Earth."[44]

A highly cultivated person, while deeply rooted in our immediate context, is nevertheless able to enter into relationships with others who are of different socio-economic-cultural status. And in fact, that person is able to do the same with the natural world beyond the human community. This state of humanhood embodies the ultimate goal of "The Great Learning"[45] which espouses that self-examination, reflection, and continuous learning is indispensable to creating a harmonious social order. "Only when personal lives are cultivated are families regulated; only when families are regulated are states governed; only when states are governed is there peace all under Heaven. Therefore, from the Son of Heaven to the common people, all, without exception, must take self-cultivation as the root."

An essential aspect of Confucian humanism is the profound commitment to a relationship of mutuality with the Way of Heaven. While the Heavenly Way and the Human Way are distinct, the former is considered superior to the latter. Thus, it is of utmost importance for human beings to keep our hearts and minds open to the ways of Heaven to avoid misguided actions. By striving for self-cultivation, we attain the qualities needed to be in tune with this transcendent reality. The aim to align the human actions with the Way of Heaven is not just for some future other-worldly bliss, but for happiness in the present, which is obstructed by social chaos, interpersonal conflict, and immorality. Indeed, Confucius was always focused on addressing the existential questions of human society rather than delving into metaphysical questions concerning spirits and death, despite his disciples' repeated attempts to steer him toward these issues. This isn't to say that metaphysical concerns don't matter in human life, but the priority always lies in the person's life here and now.[46]

Authentic Personhood and Environmental Flourishing

Authentic personhood as envisioned by Confucianism has the potential to deeply impact the way we view our relationship with the envi-

---

[44] Feng Youlan, "Xin yuanren" (New Origins of Humanity) in *Zhenyuan liushu* (Six Books of Feng Youlan in the 1930s and 1940s) (Shanghai: Eastern Chinese Normal University Press, 1996), vol. II, 626-49.

[45] "The Great Learning" is a chapter in the Book of Rites, one of the Five Confucian Classics.

[46] Tu Weiming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985), 52.

ronment. Its outlook offers a refreshing perspective that challenges the modern worldview rooted in scientism and secularism, which emphasizes development, power, and mastery over nature while reducing the spiritual realm to a mere illusion. In contrast, the Confucian worldview recognizes that human beings are part of a larger cosmic order, with relationships that extend far beyond ourselves. The moral education called for by Confucianism helps us become truly human, with the understanding that we shouldn't be singularly focused on our own happiness. Rather we should see ourselves as the center of ever-expanding concentric circles of relationships, beginning with the family but reaching out to the entire cosmos.

This mindset counters tendencies toward egotism, nepotism, narrow nationalism, and anthropocentrism. Citing Huston Smith, Tu Weiming argued that in order for the human community to flourish, we must transcend our individualistic and narrow perspectives, and engage in a process of continuous self-transcendence through self-cultivation. This involves expanding our empathic concern from ourself to our family, community, nation, and ultimately all of humanity. By doing so, we can overcome selfishness, nepotism, parochialism, chauvinistic nationalism, even anthropocentrism, and connect with the larger cosmic reality. Indeed, nepotism harms family harmony, chauvinistic nationalism contradicts legitimate patriotism, and anthropocentrism is also detrimental to achieving human and environmental flourishing.[47]

The vision of harmony at the local and cosmic levels demands that human beings see ourselves as both socialistic and naturalistic. We cannot be solely anthropological or anthropocentric; instead, we must be 'anthropocosmic,' seeing ourselves beyond mere socialistic or materialistic qualities. Tu asserted:

> Strictly speaking, the Way of the Great Learning is anthropocosmic rather than anthropological, not to mention anthropocentric. As clearly stated, the purpose of this kind of learning is "to illuminate the illuminating virtue." The illuminating virtue is the virtue that emanates from the Heavenly-endowed human nature. To use an expedient Christian analogy, the divinity in the human as endowed by God entails self-illumination. Yet, contrary to Christian theology, in Confucian philosophy this self-illuminating virtue, although endowed by God, is distinctively human to the extent that its further illumination to enable the inner divinity to be a sustained presence in the lifeworld cannot

[47] Tu Weiming, "The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World," *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 254.

> depend on God's continuous grace. It must be maintained by persistent human effort.[48]

While self-cultivation is a process of deepening subjectivity and broadening sociality, achieving authentic human flourishing requires a transcendent vision. This vision does not limit the individual to the mundane world but encourages them to aim for unity with Heaven and embrace the universe as a whole. The human person is comprised of vital energy (*qi*), life (*sheng*), and consciousness (*zhi*), and human nature is endowed by Heaven. Thus, self-cultivation can help human beings to emulate Heaven and become active participants and co-creators in the transformative process of Heaven and Earth. By taking part in this creative process, human beings enter into communion with Heaven and Earth in a tripartite relationship.[49] In other words, the tripartite relationship is constituted when the human heart aligns with the Divine Will as demonstrated in humanity's harmonious relationship with nature, the mediator between human beings and Heaven.[50] According to Confucius, Heaven does not "speak," but the Will of Heaven is displayed in the four seasons and the myriad things (Ana., 17.19). If there is flourishing, then we can be certain that our actions are in alignment with the will of Heaven, as Heaven only supports what is morally good and valuable.[51]

Recognizing the spiritual and naturalistic dimensions of Confucian humanism helps us understand that human beings are part of this great transformation, along with all other entities in nature. Major Neo-Confucianist thinker Chang Tsai's (1020–1077) *Western Inscriptions* contain these sentiments:

> Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.
>
> All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions…
>
> Respect the aged… Show affection toward the orphaned and the weak… The sage identifies his character with that

---

48 Tu, "Ecological Implications of Confucian Humanism," 79-80.

49 Ibid., 80.

50 Ibid., 257.

51 Shui Chuen Lee, "The Possibility of a Global Environmental Ethics: A Confucian Proposal," n.d., https://in.ncu.edu.tw/phi/teachers/lsc/docs/The%20 Possibility%20of%20a%20Global%20Environmental%20Ethics%20A%20Confucian%20Proposal.pdf, 5.

> of Heaven and earth, and the virtuous man is the best [among the children of Heaven and earth]. Even those who are tired and infirm, crippled or sick, those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to.[52]

The Neo-Confucianist philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529) declared that a fully realized person naturally feels united with Heaven, Earth and all the things between as an inner reality of our own experience. He observed, "The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body. He regards the world as one family and the country as one person."[53] According to Wang, people with great character are able to perceive the interconnectedness and unity of all things, while people with small character make distinctions and separations between objects and themselves or others. Additionally, the ability to perceive the world as a unified whole is not a conscious decision but a natural inclination of the humane nature of the mind of those with great character.

Therefore, virtues such as goodness, wisdom, empathy, and compassion are extended not only to one's kin or fellow human beings, but various entities in nature as well. This moreover is a defining trait of every human person. This is why we can argue that someone who consumes monkey brain from a live monkey is acting in an inhumane manner, contrary to how a human being should behave. This is consistent with the Mencian thinking that human hearts are naturally inclined to be sensitive to the suffering of others. Wang Yangming illustrated his idea with the following examples:

> When we see a child about to fall into the well, we cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that our humanity (*ren*) forms one body with the child. It may be objected that the child belongs to the same species. Again, when we observe the pitiful cries and frightened appearances of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, we cannot help feeling an "inability to bear" their suffering. This shows that our humanity forms one body with birds and animals. It may be objected that birds and animals are sentient beings as we are. But when we see plants broken and destroyed, we cannot help a feeling of pity. This shows

---

[52] Quoted in Wm. Theodore de Bary et al., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 524.

[53] Quoted in Xuezhi Zhang and Min Wu, "From Life State to Ecological Consciousness: On Wang Yangming's 'Natural Principles of Order within the Realm of Liang Zhi,'" *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 1, no. 2 (2006): 222-36.

> that our humanity forms one body with plants. It may be said that plants are living things as we are. Yet even when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows our humanity forms one body with tiles and stones.[54]

Confucian teachings, from the ecological perspective, emphasize the importance of self-transformation in recognizing the natural world and the cosmos as our home. This realization leads us to see all entities as part of our kinship network and places the responsibility for the well-being of non-human nature upon us, in accordance with the moral agency that has been endowed to us.[55] The ultimate goal is to achieve perfect harmony with both Heaven and Earth, as stated in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, a central teaching in Confucian thought aimed at realizing authentic inner peace and harmony:

> Only those who are the most sincere [authentic, true and real] can fully realize their own nature. If they can fully realize their own nature, they can fully realize human nature. If they can fully realize human nature, they can fully realize the nature of things. If they can fully realize the nature of things, they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth.[56]

This human endeavor is not meant to be an abstract and lofty ideal meant for the select few, but an invitation to all to undertake as part of the basic human practice. Only when each person is willing to undergo self-cultivation in order to enter into mutual relationship with Heaven and Earth, will we be able to turn away from selfishness, the temptation to ignore the Will of Heaven, and the desire to dominate and subjugate other people and nature.

The ideas highlighted above demonstrate that a viable environmental ethic may be derived from a process that begins with human self-cultivation. When imbued with the proper value and standards, a human-centered epistemology does not have to descend into egocentrism and exploitation. Confucianism is concerned with self-cultivation in order to become a fully realized person imbued with a sense of empathy

---

[54] Quoted in Chan, trans., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 259-60.

[55] Lee, "The Possibility of a Global Environmental Ethics: A Confucian Proposal," 5.

[56] Quoted in International Confucian Ecological Alliance (ICEA), "Confucian Statement on the Environment," July 2013, https://interfaithsustain.com/confucian-statement-on-the-environment/

for others. However, in order to develop the fullest extent of this character, we must continually expand our boundary of concern until it encompasses all of humanity and even extends to the natural world. Indeed, the concentric circles that make up Confucianism's vision of human flourishing do not begin with the self and expand to just the world but to the entire cosmos and the transcendent. By extending relationship to the furthest reaches, human realization and flourishing is more fully manifested. Thus, the aim of achieving authentic humanity in the present context cannot be separated from simultaneous concerns for the environment; and the effort to promote environmental flourishing must be implemented within the very project of promoting human ethical and moral transformation.

It must be said that Confucianism was originally intended to support the human social and political system in ancient China, and continued to play this role throughout the history of China as well as the neighboring countries which adopted Confucian thought. Nonetheless, religion often has the task of addressing more profound problems that linger from the past, and which may continue to impact human flourishing in the future. Religions are not static realities. To remain relevant, they must address unique circumstances arising with time and social development. Therefore, it is the responsibility of religious leaders, scholars, and followers to delve deeply into their scriptural and literary resources and traditions to craft a creative response that upholds the timeless wisdom of their faith while resonating with contemporary contexts.

For ancient religious traditions in which the original scope of human affairs did not include the ecological crisis, the task of re-examining and re-interpreting religious sources for environmentally relevant elements may prove more challenging than for others. Each religious tradition has to negotiate between strands of thought that are conducive to promoting environmental flourishing and those that may help justify negative human tendencies toward domination and subjugation of nature for selfish purposes. Confucianism's humanistic outlook can be reconsidered to discover profound implications for environmental well-being and flourishing. By highlighting the environmentally relevant dimensions of Confucian humanism, this chapter demonstrates that it can be re-contextualized effectively to address the present ecological crisis.

CHAPTER 4

LIVING UP TO THE DIVINE TRUST

In the intricate plotline of a novel or film, the 'reveal' is the pivotal thread that can elevate the quality of the narrative to soaring heights. It is the critical juncture where the reader or audience is granted an unobstructed view of the hidden truth, a revelation that fundamentally alters their perception of the characters and events that have been unfolding until that moment. The reveal is a potent instrument that has the power to evoke a range of emotions, from heart-wrenching sorrow to spine-tingling suspense. It can manifest in a variety of forms, be it the electrifying discovery of a central piece of evidence, the unburdening of a personal confession, or the unfurling of a deep, dark secret that has been concealed for far too long.

Whatever the motif, the reveal is the moment of truth that can make or break a narrative, and it is the masterful handling of this critical element that separates a mediocre tale from a truly unforgettable masterpiece. Audiences and readers look for these reveals to keep them engaged in the narrative and find the time spent with a book or a movie worthwhile. The thrill of uncovering the true nature of a character or situation, whether it is a product of fiction or reality, is a powerful draw that keeps viewers and readers glued to their screens or pages.

In the realm of narrative plots, there is also another type of reveal called anagnorisis. It is a common element in many classical Greek tragedies, which depicts the pivotal moment in the story arc when the protagonist experiences a profound realization that alters their perception of themselves, those around them, or the world they inhabit. This moment of self-discovery is a seismic shift in the protagonist's understanding of their identity and existence, with the potential to catalyze a profound transformation in their approach to life's trials and tribulations. For the audience, the anagnorisis is a captivating moment of dramatic intensity that allows them to connect more intimately with the internal struggles and emotions of the main character. It is a moment that serves to ignite empathy and understanding within the audience, allowing them to walk in the protagonist's shoes and experience the full weight of their journey. Anagnorisis is the very essence of catharsis, the transformative power of art that leaves an indelible impression on the soul, like a bolt of lightning that illuminates the darkness and changes the course of one's life forever.

The Cosmic Reveal

In the cosmic drama of life, however, there is an infinitely more impressive and awe-inspiring type of reveal—one by the Creator of life and all that exists Himself. Within Islam, particularly in Sufism (Islam mysticism), there is a much more significant and ongoing reveal, a cosmic self-disclosure or self-manifestation by Allah, the Creator, to the world.[1] This divine unveiling is not a singular dramatic moment, but an ongoing story at the cosmic level. According to a sacred saying (*Hadith qudsi*)[2] in the Sufi tradition, Allah declared, "I was a hidden treasure, I wanted to be known. Hence, I created the world so that I would be known."[3] According to Mehdi Aminrazavi, certain figures within Islam have advanced the notion that "God, through the act of creation, be it *creatio ex nihilo* or emanation, creates the world and thereby discloses Himself. In this act of disclosure, for Muslim theologians and philosophers, as the Quran says, 'There are signs for those who think.' This disclosedness or manifestation of God allows for the possibility of knowing God and is indicative of God's desire to be known."[4]

Ibn al-'Arabi, prominent Muslim mystic, philosopher, and scholar who lived in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, espoused that everything that exists in the world is a manifestation of the Absolute, and every event in the world is a self-manifestation of this Absolute. "The whole cosmos is the locus within which God's Names become manifest."[5] This idea has significant implications for how we understand the relationship between God and the world.[6] It suggests that there is a fundamental unity between God and the world, and that the world is not

---

1 Syafaatun Almirzanah, "God, Humanity and Nature: Cosmology in Islamic Spirituality," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): a6130, https://doi.org/ 10.4102/hts.v76i1.6130, 1.

2 A Hadith Qudsi is a type of Hadith in Islam that is a narration of the sayings, actions, or teachings of Prophet Muhammad, but the words of the Hadith are considered to be words of Allah revealed to the Prophet. In other words, it is a Hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad conveys a message from Allah, but he uses his own words to do so. Unlike the Quran, which is considered the direct word of Allah, a Hadith Qudsi is a divine revelation in which Allah's message is conveyed through the Prophet's words.

3 Almirzanah, "God, Humanity and Nature: Cosmology in Islamic Spirituality."

4 Mehdi Aminrazavi, "God, Creation, and the Image of the Human Person in Islam," in *The Concept of God, the Origin of the World, and the Image of the Human in the World Religions*, ed. Peter Koslowski (Hanover, Germany: Springer, 2001), 107.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

something separate from God but rather a manifestation of God's divine attributes. This means that the cosmos is not just a physical entity, but it is also a means of knowledge and a way of knowing God. The self-disclosure concept proposes that the cosmos functions as a series of mirrors reflecting divine realities.[7]

There is also an important environmental implication in the self-disclosure paradigm. The concept of the universe as the self-disclosure of God can lead us to adopt a more inclusive and just perspective, not only toward humans but all creatures. By recognizing that everything in the universe participates in a theophany, we come to acknowledge that there is more to the world than just ourselves, and consequently, we must also acknowledge the existence and needs of all others.[8] While Ibn al-'Arabi used the 'self-disclosure' language, many in orthodox Islam see creation of the universe, in so far as an act of revelation, as a declaration of God's will and the affirmation of God's absolute sovereignty.[9]

According to certain views within Islamic thought, Allah created the universe as a proof of His existence and as a way of showing His names and attributes. Allah's many attributes include mercy, compassion, and justice.[10] Indeed, the Quran affirms that Allah created the universe with significant purposes and not for idle sport (21:16, 38:27). This specific purpose is to serve Allah's will and to provide a place for humans to live and worship Him (Quran 51:56). Although Allah's creation encompasses all things, humanity possesses the unique ability to comprehend and know our Creator, making us central figures in this divine revelation. Islamic intellectual thought emphasizes that only human beings have the capacity to acknowledge God, and this knowledge is attainable through reason, which is believed to be a gift from God.[11] In other words, among all of God's creations, it is only humanity that has the capacity to intellectually know our Creator, and it is through this ongoing cosmic revelation that we come to understand our place in the universe.

---

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Avery Dulles, "Revelation," *Encyclopædia Britannica,* https://www.britannica.com/topic/revelation

10 "Islam and the Nature of the Universe," IslamOnline.net, https://islamonline.net/en/islam-and-the-nature-of-the-universe/

11 Aminrazavi, "God, Creation, and the Image of the Human Person in Islam," 107.

Human Beings as Part of Allah's Divine Plan

Whatever reason for the creation of the universe, Allah had a specific reason to create human beings. According to the Quran, before the creation of human beings, objections were raised by the angels upon hearing about God's plan. "Will You place in it someone who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we declare Your praises and sanctify You?" (2:30), they asked. In response, Allah declared, "I know what you do not know."[12] Thus, despite the angels' insistence that humans, being made of earth, will cause chaos and destruction on earth, Allah went through with the plan to create human beings.

Why, then, did Allah create human beings? The Quran provides the definitive answer to this question. The creation of human beings by Allah was meant to provide a vicegerent (*Khalifat Allah*) on earth who would represent God in the world and remember Him. As a unique and special gift (*al-amanah*), human beings were bestowed with a status and responsibility that set them apart from all of God's creation. This cosmic drama of creation is a testament to Allah's infinite wisdom and divine plan, in which human beings play a central role.[13]

The Islamic perspective holds that human beings are not a mere coincidence, but rather the product of a deliberate and purposeful act of creation by Allah. This understanding imbues human life with a sacred essence and a divine mission. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr eloquently argued, "If the human being is nothing but the result of 'blind forces' acting upon the original cosmic soup of molecules, then is not the very statement of the sacredness of human life intellectually meaningless and nothing but a hollow sentimental expression? Is not human dignity nothing more than a conveniently contrived notion without basis in reality?"[14] In Islam, human beings derive our identity and purpose solely through our relationship with Allah, who created us for a specific reason.[15]

Thus, the Quran is emphatic about the role of and purpose for creation of humanity. According to the orthodox view of Islam, human beings are designated as God's vicegerent, bestowed with the noble responsibility of representing God on earth. As such, our foremost duty is

---

[12] All Quran verses are taken from the translation on the "Clear Quran" website https://www.clearquran.com

[13] Aminrazavi, "God, Creation, and the Image of the Human Person in Islam," 99.

[14] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (Pymble, NSW: Perfectbound, 2002), 275.

[15] Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 276.

to be obedient to the Divine Law, or Shari'ah,[16] which acts as a guiding light for our earthly journey. Furthermore, human beings are considered as God's servants, or *'abd Allah*, with a deep and unwavering receptivity to God's will.[17] By adhering to the teachings of the Shari'ah, human beings can maintain moral purity, achieve peace in our hearts, and secure eternal salvation in the Hereafter.

The word 'Islam' means 'peace' as well as 'submission.' The implication to be drawn here is the intimate connection between submitting to God's will and the attainment of personal, social, and ecological peace. The Shari'ah provides a comprehensive framework for the human experience, encompassing every aspect of human life and existence. Through our obedience to the Shari'ah, human beings can fulfill our divine mission on earth and achieve the ultimate purpose of our creation. Without perfect submission to God, there can never be true tranquility either in this life or the next. This concept extends beyond individuals to families and societies as a whole. When families submit to God in their interactions and care for one another, they experience harmony and peace. Similarly, societies can experience peace by following God's teachings and principles in their social affairs.

In addition to submitting to Allah, human beings have a unique role as the 'Pontifex,' acting as a bridge between God and the rest of creation. This is emphasized in the Quran, which repeatedly reminds us of God's sovereignty over the universe and the importance of acknowledging and accepting this truth. By fulfilling this role and bearing witness to God's supremacy, human beings can find a sense of purpose and fulfillment in our lives.

The concept of human beings as God's vicegerent is a profound and spiritual one, rooted in the very essence of human creation. As the famous hadith recounts, God created Adam in His form, endowing him with a divine essence that is reflected in the very fiber of his being. Like a mirror reflecting light emanating from the Sun, human beings are a reflection of God's Names and Qualities, imbued with a sacred purpose and a transcendent potential. As creatures made in the 'image of God,' we possess a multitude of attributes that can be seen as reflections of Allah's divine nature. Our ability to reason, contemplate, make decisions, exercise love and empathy toward others, act with justice, and display creativity in our artistic expressions and scientific innovations are all manifestations of the divine spark that resides within us. Indeed, Allah has 99 Beautiful Names, each one a reflection of His infinite

---

[16] Aminrazavi, "God, Creation, and the Image of the Human Person in Islam," 106.

[17] Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 276.

wisdom and compassion. And while human beings are blessed to participate in some of these attributes of God, we can never hope to attain them to the same degree as the Divine.

Nonetheless, the human capacity to reflect God's attributes, even in a limited way, bestows upon us a unique and elevated status that sets us apart from all other entities in the created order. This intrinsic quality is the wellspring of the dignity and sacredness that infuses every human life, past, present, and future. As the Quranic verse asserts, "We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them on land and sea, and provided them with good things, and greatly favored them over many of those We created" (17:70). The very fact that human beings reflect certain qualities of God makes us theomorphic in nature, and endows us with a sacred role on earth. We are not only created in the image of God but are imbued with the ability to embody divine qualities in our lives. Through our actions, we have the potential to manifest divine love, compassion, justice, and creativity in the world. In this way, we assume a sacerdotal function, representing the divine on earth and contributing to the ongoing unfolding of creation.[18]

Human beings have been endowed with a variety of attributes, including the capacity for free will. This means that we have the ability to choose whether to serve God with complete obedience or to act contrary to God's will. However, it is important to recognize that this choice carries with it significant consequences, as what all Islamic schools of thought and ordinary believers agree on is that God is the ultimate creator and cause of our existence. Thus, it is our duty to honor and fulfill our responsibilities toward God, and our rights as human beings are derived from our obedience to God's will.[19] The Quran decisively declares, "I did not create the jinn and the humans except to worship Me" (51:56); "I—I am God. There is no God but I. So serve Me, and practice the prayer for My remembrance" (20:14). This spirit of submission to God is most clearly reflected in the very opening verses of the first chapter of the Quran, *Surah al-Fatihah*:

> In the name of God, the Gracious, the Merciful.
> Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.
> The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.
> Master of the Day of Judgment.
> It is You we worship, and upon You we call for help.
> Guide us to the straight path.

---

[18] Ibid., 230.

[19] Ibid., 277.

> The path of those You have blessed, not of those against whom there is anger, nor of those who are misguided. (1:1-7)

Thus, our true identity as human beings and our ultimate fulfillment is intrinsically tied to our worship and service of God. Nasr noted, "Only in carrying out the aim and purpose of our existence are we fully human. Otherwise, although we carry the human reality within ourselves, we fall short of it and live beneath the fully human state."[20] The power of free will along with the other noble attributes bestowed upon us is a double-edged sword, granting us the freedom to choose our path but also requiring us to accept the consequences of our actions. By recognizing the supreme importance of our relationship with God, we can understand the vital role that obedience to God's will plays in our lives. As we fulfill our responsibilities toward God, we simultaneously honor our own humanity and ensure that our rights as human beings are upheld. Let us now explore in further detail in what way human beings live out our human vocation on earth.

The Human Vocation on Earth

In the preceding section, we delved into the fundamental nature of human beings in Islam and the overarching purpose of our existence in the created order. Now, we will delve deeper into the intricate details of how our human vocation and mission are actualized in four primary domains: (1) our responsibility to Allah; (2) our responsibility to ourselves; (3) our responsibility to society; and (4) our responsibility to creation. Through this exploration, we will come to appreciate how each of these responsibilities is interwoven with one another and ultimately reflects our complete and unwavering submission and obedience to Allah, the Almighty, whom we serve as His representatives on earth.

Responsibility to God

As previously mentioned, Islam assigns the greatest responsibility to human beings to submit and worship God alone. The holy books of Islam consistently emphasize the exclusivity of Allah's divinity. "Your God is one God. There is no god but He, the Benevolent, the Compassionate" (Quran 2:163). In order to reinforce this knowledge, the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632 CE) was chosen by God to spread this message to humanity. "To every community We sent a messenger: 'Worship God, and avoid idolatry'" (Quran 16:36). *Tafsir al-Tabari*, a classic Qur-

[20] Ibid.

anic commentary by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, reiterated that "Allah is the One who possesses divinity (*al-uluhiyyah*) and the right to be worshipped over all of His creation."

The act of submission in Islam involves obeying God's commands as outlined in the Quran, which is considered the central religious text of the faith. Muslims believe that the Quran is the literal word of Allah, revealed to humanity through the Prophet Muhammad over a span of 23 years. It is composed of 114 chapters or *surahs*, each of which contains verses or *ayat* that address various aspects of human life and society. As a result, it serves as the ultimate guide for all aspects of life, covering religious, spiritual, social, legal, and ethical matters. Given its wide scope, the Quran offers guidance for leading a virtuous and fulfilling life. Islam holds that the Quran has been preserved in its original form since it was revealed, with no additions or alterations.

This conviction provides a sense of security and confidence in the authenticity and authority of the Holy book as a source of inspiration and guidance regardless of time and place. For Muslims, the Quran is as relevant today as it was over 1400 years ago when the verses were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Because of this primacy of the Quran, its recitation is considered a form of worship and is an essential component of Islamic prayer. The Quran is also frequently memorized and studied, with many Muslims dedicating significant amounts of time to its study and reflection.

In addition to the Quran, Muslims also turn to the Sunnah for guidance. The Sunnah consists of the Prophet Muhammad's words, actions, and silent approvals, which were passed down through generations and serve as a valuable source and model for moral life. Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was the perfect example of a human being and the best role model for all Muslims to emulate. Therefore, the Sunnah serves as an essential source of guidance and inspiration for Muslims in their daily lives.

The Sunnah covers a broad range of issues, similar to the Quran, and provides practical examples that can be applied to real-life situations. For instance, the examples of the Prophet Muhammad provide guidance on how to pray, fast, give charity, interact with others, and live a righteous life in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Therefore, Muslims believe that their responsibility to God means complete obedience to Him as taught by the Quran and exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, whom they regard as the last and final prophet sent by Allah to guide humanity. By studying the Quran and the examples of the Prophet Muhammad, and by worshipping and serving God according to these teachings and examples, human beings can gain a deeper knowledge of God.

The more Muslims adhere to the teachings laid out in the holy books, the more they are imbued with '*taqwa*.' *Taqwa* can be understood variously as 'piety,' 'God-consciousness,' or 'fear of God.' *Taqwa* is considered the most important possession anyone could have (Quran 2:197), as it instills an awareness of God. Having *taqwa* is essential to a Muslim's relationship with Allah, and it is a means of attaining salvation and success in this life and the hereafter. *Taqwa* helps the faithful avoid sins and disobedience, make better decisions, and lead a more purposeful life in accordance with divine will. This concept applies not only to personal life but also to social affairs. According to the Quran, wisdom begins with fear of God, and those who possess this quality will not perish. "God will save those who maintained righteousness to their place of salvation. No harm will touch them, nor will they grieve" (Quran 39:61). By cultivating *taqwa* and living in accordance with the teachings and examples of the Prophet, we deepen our relationship with God and fulfill our responsibility to Him.

Responsibility to Oneself

Our responsibility to ourselves is an essential part of our responsibility to God. As human beings, we are not the architects of our own lives but rather, we exist because of the divine. As a result, our lives are imbued with a sense of sacredness and dignity. However, this does not mean that we have the right to claim that we can do whatever we please with our bodies and our lives because they belong to us. Nasr opined that this modern perspective, frequently echoed in various forums, including television shows and street protests, is inconsistent with the Islamic perspective.[21]

On the other hand, we have a responsibility to maintain our physical health and avoid harm except in self-defense or in defense of others.[22] The Quran instructs Muslims, "Do not throw yourselves with your own hands into ruin" (2:195), stressing the importance of maintaining one's physical well-being. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad reminded Muslims that a strong believer is more valued by Allah than a weak one, while also acknowledging the good in both (*Sunan Ibn Majah* 79). He also cautioned against overindulging in food, advising the faithful to be moderate in their consumption as it could weaken their faith (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 5373).

While many of the central tenets of Islam are based on spiritual practices, they also have physical benefits. For example, fasting during

---

[21] Ibid., 279.

[22] Ibid., 278.

the holy month of Ramadan not only brings spiritual rewards but also improves physical health in a number of ways.[23] By abstaining from food and drink during the day, the body is given a chance to detoxify and rejuvenate, leading to better overall health, including improved brain function, greater focus, and increased alertness. Fasting also enhances the immune system, making the body more resistant to diseases and infections as well as reducing the risk of diabetes and heart disease by improving insulin sensitivity and lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels. In addition, fasting promotes healthy digestion by giving the digestive system a chance to rest and repair itself. Other potential benefits include improved sleep quality and opportunity to adopt healthier sleeping and eating habits, leading to long-term improvements in overall well-being.[24]

In the Islamic perspective, the responsibility to ourselves includes the crucial task of improving and maintaining our spiritual well-being, which can be achieved through various activities. Seeking knowledge is one such activity, and Muslims are enjoined to seek knowledge of God and the teachings of Islam. The Quran declares, "Allah Himself bears witness that there is no god but He, as do the angels, and those endowed with knowledge—upholding justice. There is no god but He, the Mighty, the Wise" (3:18). This verse emphasizes the importance of gaining knowledge and standing firm on justice, which is only possible through the acquisition of knowledge. Furthermore, gaining knowledge and sharing what we understand is not only following Allah's command but also a sign of gratitude to God for the blessing of knowledge. The Quran states, "Read: In the Name of your Lord who created. Created man from a clot. Read: And your Lord is the Most Generous. He who taught by the pen. Taught man what he never knew" (96:1-5). These verses highlight the importance of reading and seeking knowledge, which is a fundamental aspect of Islam. By seeking knowledge and proclaiming what we know, we show our gratitude to God for the blessings of the fruits of our intellect. Indeed, gaining knowledge of God is not a selfish endeavor but one meant to also be shared with and proclaimed to others for the benefit of all.

Another spiritually beneficial activity is consistent prayer and worship, as well as reflection and contemplation. In Islam, *salah* or prayer is one of the most important and fundamental acts of worship. It is an expression of submission to Allah and a way to establish a personal

---

[23] Iradge Ahrabi-Fard, *Implications of the Original Teachings of Islam for Physical Education and Sport*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Minnesota, 1974.

[24] Mohammed Tadeeb Ansari, "8 Health Benefits of Fasting," *Islamicity*, March 3, 2023, https://www.islamicity.org/77276/8-health-benefits-of-fasting/

connection with Him. Muslims are required to perform five daily prayers at specific times throughout the day, which are called *Fajr* (dawn), *Dhuhr* (noon), *Asr* (afternoon), *Maghrib* (sunset), and *Isha* (night). The act of performing *salah* involves a combination of physical and mental aspects. It begins with the intention to pray, followed by the recitation of specific verses from the Quran and other supplications. The recitation is then followed by a series of physical postures, including standing, bowing, prostrating, and sitting, all while facing the Kaaba in Mecca.

The benefits of performing *salah* are numerous and go beyond the physical act of prayer. *Salah* provides a sense of spiritual purification and helps to strengthen one's faith and connection with Allah. It is a way to seek forgiveness for sins and mistakes, and it helps to cultivate a sense of gratitude and humility toward Allah. Moreover, the consistent practice of *salah* also helps to establish a routine and discipline in one's daily life, leading to greater self-control and focus. It also serves as a reminder of the transient nature of life and the importance of striving for the hereafter. The emphasis on *salah* in the Quran is evident through various verses, such as: "Recite what is revealed to you of the Scripture, and perform the prayer. The prayer prevents indecencies and evils. And the remembrance of God is greater. And God knows what you do" (29:45); and "Guard your prayers, and the middle prayer, and stand before God in devotion" (2:238).

In addition to daily prayers, Muslims are required to take the *hajj* pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca if circumstances allow. In Islam, this spiritual journey is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, which every able-bodied and financially capable Muslim is expected to undertake at least once in their lifetime. The *hajj* pilgrimage offers numerous spiritual benefits to Muslims who undertake it, including the opportunity for spiritual purification, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and deeper faith and connection with Allah. The act of undertaking the *hajj* involves a series of rituals that symbolize the life of Prophet Ibrahim and his family, as well as their devotion and submission to God. The *hajj* rituals begin with entering the state of *ihram*, in which the faithful wears two white sheets of cloth that signify purity and equality. The pilgrims then proceed to the Kaaba, circumambulating it seven times while reciting supplications and prayers.

The *hajj* pilgrimage provides a unique opportunity for Muslims to gather together from all parts of the world, regardless of their social status or race, to worship Allah and perform acts of devotion. The act of self-sacrifice during the *hajj*, including the act of offering an animal sacrifice (*qurbani*), signifies a willingness to submit to Allah's commands and to give up one's own desires and wishes for the sake of Allah. Moreover, the *hajj* pilgrimage is a means of seeking forgiveness for

sins and mistakes, and it helps to cultivate a sense of gratitude and humility toward Allah. The Quran emphasizes the significance of the *hajj* pilgrimage, stating, "And announce the pilgrimage to humanity. They will come to you on foot, and on every transport. They will come from every distant point" (22:27). This proclamation signifies that the *hajj* pilgrimage is an expression of devotion to Allah and a means toward moral and spiritual purity.

Responsibility to Society

Islam places a great emphasis on our responsibilities toward society, beginning with our own family. The Quran states that we must treat our parents with kindness and respect: "Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and that you be good to your parents. If either of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect, nor scold them, but say to them kind words" (17:23). On the other hand, parents have a duty to raise their children with the teachings of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad said in *Sahih Muslim* Book 13, Hadith 4005, that "it is the responsibility of parents to teach and educate their children about Islam at an early age." If we neglect this duty, our children may grow up unaware and unable to care for us or continue the message of Islam. But if we instill good values in them, we can expect eternal rewards. As the saying goes, "you reap what you sow," and by sowing good values, we can reap benefits in this life and the hereafter.[25] In addition to the relationship between parents and children, the Quran also emphasizes the importance of treating our spouses with kindness and compassion. The Prophet Muhammad said, as related by Ibn 'Abbas, "The best among you is the best toward his wife, and I am the best of you to my wives."[26] By fulfilling our duties toward our families, we can lay the foundation for a just and caring society.

Of course, social responsibility extends well beyond the confines of the family. And here, Islam is rich with teachings about how we are to deal with other people, especially the poor and marginalized. With our neighbors, we are enjoined by Islamic teachings to treat them with respect regardless of their social and religious backgrounds. As it is stated in *Surah An-Nisa*, the fourth chapter of the Quran, "Worship God, and ascribe no partners to Him, and be good to the parents, and the rela-

---

[25] My Islam, "Best Islamic Quotes about Family (Importance of Family Ties)," https://myislam.org/islam-quotes-family/

[26] Muhammad Fathi, "Cherish Your Wife: The Prophet's Way – 10 Hadiths," *About Islam*, 13, 2023, https://aboutislam.net/shariah/hadith/hadith-collections/cherish-your-wife-the-prophets-way-10-hadiths/

tives, and the orphans, and the poor, and the neighbor next door, and the distant neighbor, and the close associate, and the traveler, and your servants. God does not love the arrogant showoff" (4:36).

In Islam, our social responsibility extends beyond our immediate family and neighbors to include the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable in our community and world. The Five Pillars of Islam, which are the foundation of Islamic practice, provide a framework for our social responsibilities. *Zakat*, one of the pillars, is a mandatory act of charity that requires giving a portion of one's wealth to those in need, such as the poor, orphans, and widows. This act of giving not only helps those in need but also purifies the giver's wealth and soul. Additionally, the practice of *sawm* during Ramadan is another way for Muslims to develop empathy and compassion for those who suffer from hunger and thirst. Muslims are required to fast from dawn until sunset during the holy month of Ramadan. Consistent and conscientious practice fosters a deeper understanding of what it means to be without basic necessities, such as food and water. Through this experience, Muslims develop a sense of gratitude for the blessings they have and are encouraged to share them with those who are less fortunate.

Moreover, Islamic teachings exhort us to participate in social justice issues and to defend the rights of others, especially the vulnerable, even when those rights conflict with our own interests. As the Quran states, "O you who believe! Stand firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even if against yourselves, or your parents, or your relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, God takes care of both. So do not follow your desires, lest you swerve. If you deviate, or turn away—then God is Aware of what you do" (4:135). We are reminded to prioritize justice and to resist the temptation to act solely on personal interest. In addition, we are called to be just and not let our biases or prejudices affect our sense of justice. "O you who believe! Be upright to God, witnessing with justice; and let not the hatred of any people prevent you from acting justly. Adhere to justice, for that is nearer to piety; and fear God. God is informed of what you do" (5:8). By upholding justice and advocating for the vulnerable, knowing that every human being has inherent dignity and worth, we can create a more equitable and compassionate society.

Responsibility to Creation

The responsibility to care for the environment is an essential component of Islamic social and religious responsibility. Nasr pointed out, "The world around us is not limited to the human sphere—we also have responsibilities toward animals and plants and even inanimate parts of nature such as water, air, and soil. This latter set of responsibilities

involves what modern Western writers now refer to as environmental ethics."[27] The concept of caring for creation is integral to the Islamic injunction to promote the common good, which is intricately linked to the principles of justice, equity, mutual responsibility, and environmental stewardship. This highlights the significance of collaborative efforts to achieve greater good and upholding moral values that benefit society as a whole. In this section, we will delve into a number of Islamic concepts that help human beings to fulfill their responsibility to God to care for the environment.

Unity

Authors who write about Islamic environmentalism emphasize that God is the owner of all creation. Allah sets the celestial bodies in motion, causes rain to fall, regulates the cycle of day and night and the seasons of the year, and creates animals and plants to thrive on earth. All of creation is a part of Allah's revelation, and its well-being is vital to our understanding of and appreciation for Allah. The integrity and sustainability of creation, manifesting balance and harmony among human beings and non-human creation, and within non-human creation itself, bear witness to the Oneness and Uniqueness of God, as expressed in the doctrine of *Tawhid*.[28] According to Fazlun Khalid, "*Tawhid* is the primordial testimony of the unity of all creation and the interlocking grid of the natural order of which man is intrinsically a part."[29] As the Quran declares, "To Him belongs everyone in the heavens and the earth. All are submissive to Him" (30:26).

The doctrine of *Tawhid*, derived from the Arabic word *'wahid'* meaning 'one' or 'unique,' is a central concept in Islamic belief. It asserts the oneness and uniqueness of Allah (God) as the fundamental principle of Islamic theology and the most important belief for all Muslims. The doctrine comprises three aspects: *Tawhid al-Rububiyyah*, *Tawhid al-Uluhiyyah*, and *Tawhid al-Asma' wa al-Sifat*. *Tawhid al-Rububiyyah* affirms that Allah is the only creator and sustainer of the universe. *Tawhid al-Uluhiyyah* asserts that Allah is the only one worthy of worship and that all forms of worship and devotion should be directed toward Allah alone. *Tawhid al-Asma' wa al-Sifat* declares that Allah has

---

[27] Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 279.

[28] Abdullah Omar Naseef, "The Muslim Declaration on Nature," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. Harfiyah Abdel Haleem (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998), 13.

[29] Fazlun Khalid, "Islam, Ecology, and the World Order," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. Harfiyah Abdel Haleem (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998), 18.

unique names and attributes, and possesses the most perfect attributes.[30] The doctrine of *Tawhid* stands as the foundational pillar of Islamic faith, and it is imperative for every follower of Islam to uphold this belief. By recognizing the oneness and uniqueness of Allah, Muslims strive to purify their beliefs, actions, and intentions and seek to live their lives in accordance with the teachings of Islam.

The understanding of the Unity of the Creator suggests that in the created order, every part of creation has a unique and complementary role to play, and by fulfilling these roles, all parts of creation support one another.[31] The Quran, in *Surah Al-Baqarah* states, "We spread the earth, and placed stabilizers in it, and in it We grew all things in proper measure" (15:19), highlighting the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation. This interconnectedness emphasizes our responsibility to care for the environment, as it is a manifestation of Allah's wisdom and greatness. As such, it is our duty to utilize the environment in a sustainable manner and safeguard it from harm, thus demonstrating our worship and glorification of Allah.

Balance

Human beings exist within the primordial pattern of creation and are subject to God's immutable laws, just like non-human creation. It is crucial to maintain balance and justice in all aspects of life, which is closely related to the Islamic teaching of *mizan*. The concept of *mizan* emphasizes the importance of upholding justice and fairness in dealing with others and maintaining harmony in all aspects of life. Muslims must remember that Allah has established a balance in the universe, and it is their responsibility to maintain it through their actions and behaviors. The Quran states, "And the sky, He raised; and He set up the balance. So do not transgress in the balance. But maintain the weights with justice, and do not violate the balance. And the earth; He set up for the creatures" (55:7-10). The relevance of *mizan* to care for creation is significant, as it underscores the importance of treating the environment with respect, care, and responsibility. The environment is a part of Allah's creation, and it should be regarded as a trust given to humanity. Muslims have a duty to use the environment sustainably and protect it from harm.

---

[30] Salafi-Dawah.com, "What is the meaning of Tawhid-ul-Rububiyyah, Tawhid-ul-Uluhiyyah, and Tawhid-ul-Asma' wal-Sifat?," https://www.salafi-dawah.com/what-is-the-meaning-of-tawhid-ul-rububiyyah-tawhid-ul-uluhiyyah-and-tawhid-ul-asma-wal-sifat.html

[31] Khalid, "Islam, Ecology, and the World Order," 20.

The 2015 Islamic Declaration on Climate Change refers to *mizan* in its text to warn that the current rate of consuming natural resources is unsustainable and puts the earth's balance at risk:

> This current rate of climate change cannot be sustained, and the earth's fine equilibrium (*mīzān*) may soon be lost. As we humans are woven into the fabric of the natural world, its gifts are for us to savour. But the same fossil fuels that helped us achieve most of the prosperity we see today are the main cause of climate change. Excessive pollution from fossil fuels threatens to destroy the gifts bestowed on us by God—gifts such as a functioning climate, healthy air to breathe, regular seasons, and living oceans. But our attitude to these gifts has been short-sighted, and we have abused them. What will future generations say of us, who leave them a degraded planet as our legacy? How will we face our Lord and Creator?[32]

The concept of *mizan* reminds us of the divine origin of the natural order (*fitrah*) imposed on the world. According to Fazlun Khalid, the Quran (30:30) locates human beings within this natural pattern of creation.[33] Also, the balance between the seasons, the cycle of growth and harvest, and the species of animals and plants is divinely ordained. Khalid asserted, "To function within the limiting principles of creation, if only to leave behind an earth that is livable for our children and theirs, we need to reabsorb the certainties of *tawhid,* and regain our role as *khalifah*. This will give us a sense of where the *mizan* is and locate our awareness in the *fitrah*."[34]

Maintaining environmental equilibrium is also an act of submission to God and of revering God in all things. Careless or irresponsible actions on our part risk Allah's wrath. Mehmet Ozalp contended that because human beings have been made the *khalifah* by God, care for creation becomes an Islamic obligation (*fard*) for every individual Muslim, Muslim organizations, and Muslim nations and governments. He asserted that we are "charged with the responsibility of protecting the natural world and not causing 'corruption on earth' by destroying either its order or its beauty. Whenever the Quran puts responsibility onto humans, it comes with an obligation to follow through with the responsibility and the resultant accountability before God. Hence, humans

---

[32] "Islamic Declaration on Climate Change," ARRCC, https://www.arrcc.org.au/islamic_declaration

[33] Khalid, "Islam, Ecology, and the World Order," 20.

[34] Ibid., 30.

should expect to be judged on how they treat other living creatures and the environment."[35]

Trusteeship

Acting in a manner within the divinely established order entails that human beings understand our role and responsibility as God has delineated. We are authentically ourselves when we carry out that role with the utmost obedience and conscientiousness. While human beings are part of the order of creation, God has bestowed upon us special gifts that enable us to serve Allah in the role of vicegerent, a position of trusteeship (Quran 2:30).

Along with the status of honor, human beings have been provided with good things. Indeed, it is mentioned that all that is on earth was created for our benefit (Quran 2:29, 17:70). In addition, humans have been preferred greatly over many of those that have been created. Humans even possess certain gifts that the angels do not have, such as the ability to grow in piety due to repentance from sin.[36] This is a powerful reminder that human beings are not just ordinary creatures, but they have a special purpose to fulfill in the grand scheme of things.

Furthermore, the Quran reveals that Allah offered the position of trusteeship to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, but they refused to take on the task. However, human beings accepted this role despite not being informed of what the responsibility involved (33:72). Because human beings have accepted the position of trust from God, preserving the environment becomes a religious duty rather than being a social obligation.[37] Thus, care for the environment is not an optional matter. Our commitment to the responsibility is also a test of whether we are worthy of the gifts that have been bestowed upon us (Quran 6:165). While this position comes with a certain level of power and freedom to exercise creativity, none of it is absolute because ultimately everything belongs to God, and any creativity must be in accordance with God's unchanging laws. Nasr noted that the notion of trusteeship must be complemented by the understanding of servantship (*al-'ubudiyyah*)

---

[35] Mehmet Ozalp, "Caring for God's Creation: An Islamic Obligation," ISRA, April 2021, 2023, https://www.isra.org.au/2021/04/caring-for-gods-creation-an-islamic-obligation/

[36] Naser Makarem Shirazim, "Question 98: Is Man Superior to Angels?," Islam.org, https://www.al-islam.org/philosophy-islamic-laws-naser-makarem-shirazi-jafar-subhani/question-98-man-superior-angels

[37] Labeeb Bsoul, Amani Omer, Lejla Kucukalic, and Ricardo H. Archbold, "Islam's Perspective on Environmental Sustainability: A Conceptual Analysis," *Social Sciences* 11 (2022): 228, https://doi.org/10.3390/ socsci11060228

where human beings are God's servant (*'abd Allah*). He commented, "As *'abd Allah,* he must be passive toward Allah and receptive to the grace that flows from the world above. As *khalifat Allah,* he must be active in the world, sustaining cosmic harmony and disseminating the grace for which he is the channel as a result of his being the central creature in the terrestrial order."[38]

When power is not absolute but delegated, the one who exercises power has to be accountable for their actions.[39] Unfortunately, when assessing the state of the environment, Islamic leaders have lamented, "Our species, though selected to be a caretaker or steward (*khalīfah*) on the earth, has been the cause of such corruption and devastation on it that we are in danger ending life as we know it on our planet" (Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change 2015). The reality is that we are not living out our divinely ordained vocation, but rather are doing the opposite. We have shifted from being caretakers of the environment to predators and exploiters of the natural world, leading to the destruction of the very environment upon which we depend.[40]

Common Good

The trusteeship requires that we must devise ways of caring for the environment that are in accordance with God's laws. Here, the Islamic concept of *maslahah* can be of great benefit. The term '*maslahah*' denotes something that brings profit, welfare, and benefit, and prioritizes the public good.[41] It is a concept that encourages individuals and communities to act in the best interests of society. *Maslahah* is often invoked in Islamic jurisprudence to justify actions that serve the public good, even if they conflict with individual interests. According to Imam al-Ghazali, a twelfth-century Muslim thinker, the aim of *maslahah* is to protect the objectives of Islamic law, which are the protection of religion, life, reason, lineage, and property.[42] Because *maslahah* has a

[38] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Sacred Science and the Environment Crisis: An Islamic Perspective," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. Harfiyah Abdel Haleem (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998), 124.

[39] Naseef, "The Muslim Declaration on Nature," 13.

[40] Charles Le Gai Eaton, "Islam and the Environment," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. Harfiyah Abdel Haleem (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998), 47.

[41] Marina Abu Bakar, Ahmad Khilmy Abdul Rahim, and Che Zuina Ismail, "The Application of Maslahah in Islamic Finance and Banking Products & Fatwa Resolutions in Malaysia," *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government* 27, no. 1 (2021): 2794.

[42] Tarmizi, "The Concept of Maslahah According to Imam Al-Ghazali," *Jurnal Al-Dustur* 3, no. 1 (2020): 22-29.

broad scope, it can be applied to various matters in modern society and serves as the fundamental principle for realizing all human interests, whether general or specific.[43]

The concept of *maslahah* is applicable in promoting environmental flourishing because the environment is a shared resource that affects the well-being of all living beings, making it essential to protect it in the public interest. The principle of *maslahah* encourages people to prioritize environmental flourishing by adopting sustainable practices, conserving resources, and reducing waste and consumption, even if it requires personal sacrifice or inconvenience.[44] Using the concept of *maslahah,* legal and policy changes that promote environmental well-being, such as advocating for clean energy, preserving biodiversity, and reducing pollution, can be justified as serving the public interest and advancing the common good.

The Islamic tradition provides many examples of individuals and communities acting in ways that prioritize environmental flourishing for the greater good. The Prophet Muhammad urged his followers to use resources wisely and avoid waste, as exemplified in his advice to "not waste water, even if you are standing on the bank of a flowing river." This sense of responsibility to the common good extends not only to present society but also to future generations who will inherit the earth. Islamic scholars have expressed concern about our short-sighted attitude toward God's gifts, warning of the legacy we leave behind for our descendants and how we will answer to our Lord and Creator. As stated in the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change 2015, "What will future generations say of us?"

Although not all schools of Islamic thought adopt the principle of *maslahah*, it is significant enough in most schools (with varying degrees of application) that it deserves attention when it comes to environmental concerns.[45] In fact, this principle has been invoked in the issuing of *fatwas* by Islamic bodies in many places. In the context of environmental issues, the principle of *maslahah* is often used to justify the protection and preservation of natural resources and the environment, as these are considered to be in the public interest. Many *fatwas* related to

---

43 Tarmizi, "The Concept of Maslahah According to Imam Al-Ghazali."

44 William Avis, "Role of Faith and Belief in Environmental Engagement and Action in MENA Region," K4D, May 19, 2021, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/16719/1005_Role_of_faith_and_belief_in_environmental_engagement.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

45 Muhammad Zarunnaim Haji Wahab and Asmadi Mohamed Naim, "The Reviews on Sustainable and Responsible Investment (SRIs) Practices According to Maqasid Shariah and Maslahah Perspectives," *Etikonomi* 20, no. 2 (2021): online, https://doi.org/10.15408/etk.v20i2.18053

environmental issues, such as those calling for the protection of forests, the preservation of marine life, and the reduction of waste and pollution, reflect the principle of *maslahah*.

One notable example is the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), which in 2014 issued a *fatwa* requiring the country's 200 million Muslims to take an active role in protecting endangered species, such as tigers, rhinos, elephants, and orangutans. This edict aimed to provide legal certainty on Islam's perspective on animals that are classified as 'vulnerable,' 'endangered,' or threatened with extinction. Although the *fatwa* is not legally binding under Indonesian secular law, it is based on Islamic law and tradition and is therefore considered binding within that context. To support its implementation, the MUI established an agency to promote Indonesia's environmental well-being, including an education program to help communities understand and apply the *fatwa's* principles. Through such initiatives, Islamic scholars and leaders are increasingly recognizing the importance of applying Islamic principles to address modern environmental challenges.[46]

In 2016, the Perlis Fatwa Committee in Malaysia issued a *fatwa* prohibiting activities that could harm the environment, including open burning, dumping of toxic waste, and logging of protected forests. This edict emphasizes the responsibility of every individual, especially Muslims, to protect the environment, which is regarded as a divine trust. The *fatwa* also urges the government to take strict action against those who pollute or damage the environment. It is part of Malaysia's broader efforts to address environmental issues and promote sustainable development. Elaborating on the *fatwa*, State Mufti Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin stated that "the act of polluting the environment, which directly affects the ecosystem and harms living beings, is in conflict with the teachings of Islam." He further affirmed that Islam is a religion that emphasizes the preservation of human life and the universe, and prohibits harmful acts.[47]

In a significant move for Islamic environmentalism, Egypt's Dar al-Ifta approved the world's first *fatwa* charter on climate change in 2022. Launched at the institution's seventh international conference in October, the charter is based on Islamic law principles and outlines a range of environmentally harmful actions that are prohibited by religious

---

[46] Alliance of Religions and Conservation, "Indonesian Clerics Issue Fatwa to Protect Endangered Species," March 5, 2014, http://www.arcworld.org/newseb86.html?pageID=689

[47] Malay Mail, "Perlis Fatwa Committee Bans Act of Polluting Environment," March 1, 2016, https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/03/01/perlis-fatwa-committee-bans-act-of-polluting-environment/1071077

teachings. The charter bans activities such as hunting and killing birds, wild animals, and marine creatures; cutting or destroying plants; and open waste burning. The edict also forbids the use of hazardous materials and waste, excessive energy consumption, encroachment on agricultural land, the use of pesticides and compound chemicals without following the terms of use, and dumping waste into oceans. By raising awareness of the dangers of climate change from a religious perspective, Dar al-Ifta aimed to contribute to the implementation of sustainable development goals.[48]

Thus, *fatwas* have proven effective in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of Muslim communities and promoting environmental conservation and sustainable resource use. This demonstrates the relevance of Islamic teachings in addressing modern environmental challenges and underscores the significance of taking concrete actions to protect the environment.

Overcoming Forgetfulness – Remembering God

This chapter advocates for a balanced and symbiotic relationship between humanity and the natural world, emphasizing the sacredness of nature as a manifestation of divine power and wisdom. The reckless exploitation and depletion of natural resources is an unholy act of desecration. Islamic scholars attribute this degradation to a scientistic worldview that disregards the spiritual connection with the natural world. In *Man and Nature*, Seyyed Hosein Nasr warned against the dangers of such a view that severs humanity from our spiritual roots, rendering nature a desacralized and expendable commodity. Nasr remarked, "Nothing is more dangerous in the current ecological debate than that scientistic view of man and nature which cuts man from his spiritual roots and takes a desacralized nature for granted while expanding its physical boundaries by billions of light years. This view destroys the reality of the spiritual world while speaking of awe before the grandeur of the cosmos. It destroys man's centrality in the cosmic order and his access to the spiritual world."[49]

The cold and distant gaze of scientism has stripped nature of its sacred essence, reducing it to a mere object of scrutiny and manipulation.

---

[48] Ayah Aman, "First Climate-Related Fatwa Prohibiting Environmentally Harmful Practices Issued in Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, October 26, 2022, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/first-climate-related-fatwa-prohibiting-environmentally-harmful-practices-issued

[49] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1988), 7.

Nature, once revered as a divine manifestation, is now subject to domination and exploitation, stripped of its intrinsic value and reduced to a mere means to an end. This objectification of nature has led to the reckless pursuit of personal pleasure without any sense of obligation or responsibility, perpetuating a cycle of degradation and destruction. The desacralization of nature has severed our connection to the divine and has left us wandering aimlessly in a world devoid of spiritual significance. Humanity must remember that every aspect of creation is sacred, imbued with a divine essence that reflects the Creator's power and wisdom. We must recognize that all of nature is linked to the Almighty, who created it and continues to sustain it. Only by reviving this spiritual connection can we truly restore our rightful place as caretakers of the natural world, fulfilling our obligations to the Creator and all His creations.

To be truly human is to live in accordance with the divine design etched in the depths of our souls, the *fitrah*, a natural disposition instilled by Allah in every human being. It is a gift that inclines us toward truth, goodness, and beauty, providing a pathway to deeper knowledge and wisdom. For those who nurture this innate inclination, the purpose of our existence is illuminated, and they attain a profound understanding of God and creation. Embracing our authentic human vocation requires us to nurture our *fitrah* and strive toward its fulfillment, thus unlocking the potential of our human nature.

Tragically, as a consequence of the Fall, humanity is plagued with a propensity toward forgetfulness. We are forgetful of God's laws, forgetful of God's goodness, and forgetful of our purpose as custodians of His creation. This forgetfulness leaves us vulnerable to the seductive whispers of negative social and cultural influences, ultimately leading us astray. Even Muslims, equipped with the divine guidance of the Quran and Sunnah, are not immune to the insidious pull of worldly temptations that threaten to derail their spiritual journey. At times, we become ensnared in modes of thought, values, and ways of living that are not only inconsistent with the teachings of our faith, but that also compromise our responsibilities to ourselves, our communities, and the natural world.[50]

As human beings, we often demand our rights without considering our obligations to God and the world around us. We forget that our rights are intertwined with our responsibilities in a hierarchy of relationships that extends beyond the individual to include our communi-

[50] Ilyas Baker, "The Flight of Time, Ecology and Islam," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. Harfiyah Abdel Haleem (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998), 84.

ties, societies, and the natural world. We must strive to remember that we are not the only creatures in this cosmic order with rights and responsibilities.[51] Every creature, great and small, is part of this intricate web of life, each with its own place and purpose. When we forget our responsibilities, we risk losing sight of our true purpose and the beauty of creation. Our individualism blinds us to the needs of others, and we become blind to the interconnectedness of all things. We must guard against this forgetfulness, for it leads to the neglect of the natural world, the exploitation of resources, and the mistreatment of others. Our rights are not independent of our obligations; rather they are inextricably linked, and we must honor both to live in harmony with creation and with true obedience to God.

To be authentically human necessitates overcoming forgetfulness and negligence (*ghaflah*) by cultivating a sense of remembrance (*dhikr*) of Allah as the "Ultimate Environment," which surrounds, encompasses, and nourishes human life. "So remember Me, and I will remember you. And thank Me, and do not be ungrateful" (Quran 2:152). "O you who believe, remember God with frequent remembrance. And glorify Him morning and evening" (Quran 33:41-42). To maintain fidelity to our human vocation, we must be vigilant in guarding against forgetfulness and remain steadfast in our commitment to the divinely ordained path. Only then can we hope to fulfill our obligations to God, ourselves, and the world around us as we work to restore the balance and harmony that are increasingly being lost due to our misuse of natural goods. Although we may falter in our responsibilities at times, we must strive to remember our place in the grand scheme of things, learn to cherish the delicate balance of the world, and recognize the vital role we play in maintaining it. Only then can we hope to live in harmony with God and all of God's creation.

[51] Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 281.

CHAPTER 5

HUMAN BEINGS FULLY ALIVE

Irenaeus of Lyons, a bishop in the early Christian church and a prominent theologian in the second century CE, reportedly said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God." The quote emphasizes that human beings are meant to live fully and abundantly, reflecting the glory of God. This involves not only physical health and vitality, but also a spiritual connection to God that allows us to truly live and thrive. The basis for Irenaeus's sentiment can be found in the Gospel, for it was Jesus himself who declared that his purpose for coming into the world was so that humanity "may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10, NIV).[1]

These two statements embody the aim of Christian humanistic outlook which is to make God's glory seen and felt by humanity being fully and truly itself as intended by its Creator. What needs to be explicated is: what does it mean for human beings to be authentically and fully ourselves? How is it manifested in our attitudes, behavior and relationship with God, with fellow human beings, and with all of creation? To be fully alive, or to flourish, is a notion so rich and varied that it bears many hues. It may encompass our physical and social well-being, or the attainment of worldly success. It may speak to a life imbued with purpose, one that finds fulfillment in all its moments, or the pursuit of an admirable existence. To some, it may mean a deep and intimate communion with the divine, as they seek to connect with the shared community of God. Yet, the implications of flourishing may shift and change, depending on the social, cultural, and temporal context being considered.

Catholic theological anthropology proposes a vision of human flourishing distinctly and integrally tied to our relationship with God, with fellow human beings, and with all of God's creation. According to this vision, human flourishing is not simply a matter of individual success or achievement, but rather a holistic and integrated state of being. It is a state in which we are in right relationship with God, experiencing a deep and abiding sense of love, grace, and belonging. It is also a state in which we are in right relationship with one another, living in a community marked by compassion, justice, and mutual care. And it is a state in which we are in right relationship with creation, recognizing our role

[1] All Biblical verses are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

as stewards of creation and seeking to live in harmony with the rest of God's creatures.

This outlook constitutes what has been called Christian humanism, which recognizes that our flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of all of God's creation. It calls us to embrace a way of life that is marked by humility, gratitude, and reverence for the sacredness of all that exists. It challenges us to live in a way that honors our interconnectedness with the rest of the world and to recognize our responsibility to care for and protect our common home. In this chapter, we will explore how Christian humanism, especially as found in the Catholic tradition, promotes environmental flourishing through spiritual self-cultivation in order to achieve the state of being intended by God for humanity.

The Roots of Christian Humanism

As we delve into the topic of Christian humanism, it is important to briefly explain the difference between the term humanism as understood by Catholic thinkers over the centuries and that as appropriated by the Enlightenment project. Humanism is a notion that long precedes the free thought ideology which interprets the human condition through a rationalist, secularist, and naturalist worldview. This restrictive use of the term humanism is a rather recent development, and certainly not an invention of the secular humanist movement, as the humanist Nicolas Walter accurately observed. According to Walter, the term 'humanism' is not exclusive to any particular group and has been used by many people in various ways over time. Historically, most meanings of the term have been connected to religion, while some of its non-religious meanings may require clarification to be understood properly. Walter asserted that all reasonable interpretations of a word are equally valid, and that being dogmatic or authoritarian about word meanings is inconsistent with the values of most secular humanists. Therefore, no one can claim ownership over a word, as language is constantly changing and evolving, and words cannot be fully controlled by any individual or group.[2]

The humanist tradition in the West can be traced back to the Latin term '*humanitas*,' which signifies the refined and cultured aspects of

[2] Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), Kindle edition.

human nature, in contrast to the savage and barbaric.[3] In the Middle Ages, a humanist was a person who received a comprehensive education in language and literature, and who went on to pursue these fields as a scholar or teacher.[4] Such individuals were known for their moral and social uprightness, embodying the full essence of what it meant to be human.[5] As the term made its way into English in the sixteenth century, it continued to be used to describe someone who excelled in the art of grammar and rhetoric, or someone who dedicated themselves to the study of human affairs.

Humanism, as it emerged and evolved in Europe, was largely focused on education and learning. However, it was always grounded in a broader Christian framework that assumed a belief in God. It wasn't until the late 1800s that humanism started to take on a more secular and even anti-religious tone, portraying humans as rational beings independent of theological considerations.[6] This modification, however, is judged by Nicolas Walter to be "applied retrospectively and indeed anachronistically and unhistorically."[7] In the following years, philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach and Arnold Ruge took further steps to eliminate Christian elements from humanism to the extent that humanism itself became its own religion—a religious alternative to Christianity.

Despite the movement to replace faith in God with faith in humanity, inspired by Auguste Comte's anti-theistic positivism, humanism continued to be referred to in religious overtones. It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that humanism made a complete divorce from religion, as reflected in educationalist Harold Blackham's declaration that humanism is an "alternative to religion." Humanism, asserted Blackham, proceeds "from the assumptions that man is on his own and this life is all and as assumption of responsibility for one's life and for the life of mankind."[8] While this understanding of humanism gained popularity in a particular circle of thinkers, the term continued to be connected to a wide range of disciplines, including religious, scien-

---

3 Angus Ritchie and Nick Spencer, *The Case for Christian Humanism: Why Christians Should Believe in Humanism, and Humanists in Christianity* (London: Theos, 2014), 15.

4 Walter, *Humanism*, Kindle edition.

5 John W. O'Malley, "How Humanistic Is the Jesuit Tradition?: From the 1599 Ratio Studiorum to Now," in *Jesuit Education 21: Conference Proceedings on the Future of Jesuit Higher Education*, ed. Martin R. Tripole (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 2000), 189.

6 Ritchie and Spencer, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, 17.

7 Walter, *Humanism*, Kindle edition.

8 Quoted in Ritchie and Spencer, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, 20.

tific, secular, ethical, rationalist, spiritual, and civic disciplines. Catholic thinkers throughout history and up until the modern age continued to insist on a humanism rooted in religion and faith in God and modeled on the person of Jesus Christ. Christian humanism maintained its own place of importance, as reflected in the vibrant teachings of the Catholic Church up until the present.

Humanism, despite the attempt by some to depict it as an ideology wholly and necessarily free of any spiritual or religious dimensions, does not represent a vision of life that departs from that of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Moreover, in the Catholic context, humanism bears little resemblance to the one that insists on putting faith in humanity rather than in God. Although modern humanism has its origins in the Renaissance Era, Christian humanism can be traced back to Christianity's early days, with a legacy that is long and varied.[9] Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, and Jerome represented some of the most learned men of their time, and their writings became resources for developing humanistic education. Augustine's *De Doctrina Catholica* as well as his rhetorical skills were of tremendous inspiration to the medieval education,[10] which made part of its agenda the recovery of the ancient Christian tradition, both Greek and Latin.[11]

Christian humanism continued to be advocated in modern times, as represented by the philosophy of Jacques Maritain, who insisted that Christian humanism served to develop the complete human person by not rejecting the spiritual dimension of life and setting "no a priori limit to the descent of the divine into man."[12] This anthropological outlook where human beings avail themselves to the divine and the superrational distinguishes Christian humanism from what Maritain labeled "anthropocentric humanism," in which human beings become their "own centre, and therefore the centre of all things."[13] In addition, it leads to

---

9 William Schweiker, "Humanity before God: Theological Humanism from a Catholic Perspective," Martin Marty Center Web Forum, 2003, https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/102003/Schweiker%20essay.pdf, 1.

10 Ibid., 2.

11 Alistair Hamilton, "Humanism and the Bible," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101.

12 Jacques Maritain, "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times," *The Review of Politics* 1, no.1 (1939): 8. Maritain describes this Christian humanism as "integral humanism," which "considers man in the wholeness of his natural and supernatural being."

13 Jaques Maritain, *True Humanism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 19.

the "discovery of a deeper and fuller sense of the dignity of the human person, so that man would re-find himself in God refound, and would direct social work toward an heroic ideal of brotherly love."[14] Maritain's moral philosophy emphasizes the concept of human freedom as a central idea. However, being free does not mean an unrestricted or solely rational independence. Instead, true freedom lies in the fulfillment of the human person in accordance with their inherent nature, specifically in the attainment of moral and spiritual excellence.[15] Thus, the ultimate goal of human life is to achieve spiritual fulfillment by realizing our full potential as rational and moral beings. This goal can be achieved through a combination of faith, reason, and the cultivation of moral virtues such as love, justice, and compassion.

Maritain's integral humanism finds continuity and resonance in the ethical personalism of Louis Janssens, who declared that the person is a complex totality whose value as a person is realized in the very act of living life.[16] Rather than being an individual whose existence is isolated from everything else in space and time, the person, comprised of both physical and spiritual components, is able to direct him/herself toward God and others in free, loving, cooperative and reciprocal relationships. Therefore, self-actualization or true personhood is achieved in the process of encountering with others in mutual dependency rather than domination or instrumentalization of the other.

The thoughts of Maritain and Janssens were consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church, whose vision of Christian humanism made its appearance in one of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*. In the church's articulation, Christian humanism is integrally connected to the person of Christ who restored to humanity all that was lost through the sins of Adam.

> Christ, the final Adam, reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. He who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) is himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam he restores the divine likeness that had been disfigured by sin. Human nature, assumed by him, was not annulled but was raised to a divine dignity. The Son of God, by his Incarnation, was united to every man.

---

[14] Maritain, "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times," 7-8.

[15] William Sweet, "Jacques Maritain," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/maritain/

[16] Louis Janssens, *Personne et société. Théories actuelles et essai doctrinal* (Gembloux: Ducolot, 1939), 3.

> Born of the Virgin, he was made one of us, like us in all things except sin (GS 22).

Therefore, human moral, social, and spiritual development must be measured against the person of Christ who represents perfection in all these respects. Through the status of the Incarnated Christ, human beings no longer need to focus on sinfulness or lament human brokenness, but can look toward a higher destiny made possible through this extraordinary event in human history. Christ's incarnation also made possible for human beings to be united to God who created humanity and wills that all people constitute one family (GS 24). If human beings are aware of the extraordinary gift to them in Jesus Christ, they will come to understand that a fully realized human destiny can only come from each person being "a sincere gift of himself" (GS 24). Therefore, Christian humanism is defined by "spiritual and moral maturity of the human race" and characterized "by responsibility to his brothers and to history" (GS 55). The Council Fathers insisted that Christ himself "can offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny" (GS 10).

The centrality of Christ in Christian humanism envisioned by the Second Vatican Council has further been affirmed by successive generations of popes up until the present. Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* declared that only when integral human development is directed to Christ can it "promote the good of every man and of the whole man" (PP 14). Paul VI wrote, "By reason of his union with Christ, the source of life, man attains to new fulfillment of himself, to a transcendent humanism which gives him his greatest possible perfection: this is the highest goal of personal development" (PP 16). Likewise, in the first encyclical of Pope John Paul II's pontificate, *Redemptor Hominis*, he also insisted that authentic humanism must be connected to Christ and the redemptive act accomplished in the cross, death, and resurrection of Christ (RH 10). When this link which Christ forged through the paschal mystery is broken, not only do human beings suffer, but so does the entire creation. Human progress disavowed of Christ, according to John Paul II, only leads to futility characterized by environmental destruction, armed conflicts, and utter disregard for life (RH 8). On the other hand, union with Christ the Redeemer helps human beings to overcome the effects of sin, imbue the heart with fullness of justice, and make manifest the noble dimensions of human nature (RH 9).

Like *Gaudium et Spes*, John Paul II recognized and affirmed the ethical thrust contained in a Christ-centered humanism, which manifests itself in humble service. While the Christian vocation is described as "kingly" because it shares in Christ's own kingly mission, this kingly

vocation does not support the exercise of arrogance and domination, but a sincere imitation of Christ who "came not to be served but to serve." For John Paul II, authentic kingship is derived from the self-mastery through personal development of virtue and spiritual maturity manifested in true servanthood. The combination of kingship and servanthood gives rise to the principle of "kingly service" which "imposes on each one of us, in imitation of Christ's example, the duty to demand of himself exactly what we have been called to do, what we have personally obliged ourselves to by God's grace, in order to respond to our vocation" (RH 21).

John Paul II's successor, Pope Benedict XVI, condemned any humanism stripped of the God dimension as "inhuman." He wrote in the conclusion of the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*:

> *A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism*. Only a humanism open to the Absolute can guide us in the promotion and building of forms of social and civic life—structures, institutions, culture and ethics—without exposing us to the risk of becoming ensnared by the fashions of the moment (CiV 78).

Elements of Authentic Christian Personhood

Now that we have traced the evolution of Christian humanism over time and defined its significance within the Catholic perspective, we will explore how this worldview envisions different facets of human life.

To Become Fully the Image of God

The doctrine of the *imago Dei,* derived from the words of Genesis 1:27, declares that when God chose to create humanity, we were fashioned in God's likeness—not in the sense of physical image of the infinite, but imbued with qualities that reflect the divine. These include free will, wisdom, reason, moral conscience, a sense of justice, and love for others. While some may be tempted to allow this special association with God to inflate their sense of self-importance, such an attitude is misguided. The profound dignity that the Creator has bestowed upon us instead reinforces the fundamental importance of human relationships. By sharing His very nature with us, God reveals that we are "not just something, but someone." Like the divine, we have the ability to know ourselves, to possess ourselves, and to offer ourselves freely in communion with others.[17] According to Pope Francis, "The creation accounts in

[17] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 375.

the book of Genesis contain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself" (LS 66).

Genuine relationship requires a willingness to fully acknowledge, appreciate, and cherish the other person with love, rather than dominating or oppressing them. It is important, therefore, that Christians understand the mandate of 'dominion' in Genesis 1:28 through the lens of relationship rather than power. Pope Francis asserted, "The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to 'till and keep' the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). 'Tilling' refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature" (LS 67). When this relationship with nature is jeopardized due to misinterpretation of God's mandate, our relationship with our human brothers and sisters is also negatively impacted. And as in an interconnected chain, our relationships with ourself and with God are likewise broken (LS 70). Thus, becoming human in the Christian outlook is to become more truly the image of God in our set of relationships that extends to all facets of existence.

To Be Perfect as the Heavenly Father Is Perfect (Matt 5:48)

The poet Alexander Pope affirmed, "To err is human." Being human has long been regarded as a license to err and as a declaration of our frailties in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual spheres. While we may indeed falter and display a multitude of moral imperfections, religious traditions, including Christianity, have consistently urged their followers to refuse complacency in the face of their shortcomings. To become truly human is not to accept the reality of our deficiencies and simply make do with our limitations. Rather, it is to strive to overcome them with both our personal effort and the grace of God. We are called by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to rise above our imperfections and to become perfect as the Heavenly Father is perfect.

In our contemporary understanding of the word 'perfect,' Jesus' exhortation seems like an extraordinarily tall order. According to Jonathan Pennington, the contemporary understanding of the word denotes a state of "moral perfection, absolute purity, and even sinlessness."[18]

[18] Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Penguin Books, 2017), 138.

This is a source of great misunderstanding and confusion. How can we carry out a sinless life when the doctrine of the Fall tells us that sin is inherently a part of human existence even from the moment of our birth? Pennington, however, asserted that the original Greek word '*τέλειος*' as it appears in the New Testament, can be more accurately translated as 'whole,' 'complete,' or 'virtuous.'[19] Therefore, in the context of Jesus' sermon, the call to perfection is tantamount to an exhortation to grow in spiritual maturity and integrity. These qualities serve as the antidote to the broken relationship with God due to the sins of disobedience and hubris. It implies growth in relationship with God, to more fully embody God's nature, to more clearly become the *imago Dei* as God intended when God created each of us. As Pope Benedict XVI assured, "Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."[20]

To Become Disciples of Christ

The Christian who is steeped in spiritual maturity and has achieved authentic personhood naturally becomes a devoted disciple of Christ and proclaims the Kingdom of God. To become a disciple of Christ means to be firmly attached to the person, the teachings, and the vision of Christ about the kingdom of heaven, which is governed by justice, peace, and harmony. It is a kingdom where the most ferocious of natural enemies lie side by side without fear of becoming each other's prey, and where even infants can fearlessly lead dangerous lions and frolic with venomous cobras (Isa 11:6-8). In this heavenly realm, where the values of divinity reign supreme, there is no place for fear of violence and harm. Instead, there is perfect harmony among all creatures of nature and peace between human beings and the natural world. Thus, to become a disciple of Christ means to embrace the role that is an intrinsic part of our relationship with God, defined by our being the *imago Dei*.

As disciples of Christ, we are called to embrace the sacred task of proclaiming the Good News to all of creation. In Mark 16:15, Jesus instructed his disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation," emphasizing the universality of the message. The prophet Isaiah also envisioned a world in which the knowledge of the Lord fills the entire earth, with no corner left untouched by divine wisdom (11:9). The Good News is not meant for human beings alone but is to be cele-

---

[19] Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 138.

[20] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry, April 24, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html

brated by all of creation, as expressed in the exultant words of Isaiah, "Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" (49:13). This is a world in which even the mountains burst into song, overcome with the goodness of God. To be true disciples, we must cultivate a deep and abiding relationship with all that fills the earth and the cosmos. Only through openness and humility can we begin to comprehend the vastness of God's creation and the immense joy that comes with proclaiming the Good News to all.

Another important mission of the disciples of Christ is to be a community of love and service. In commanding his disciples to love one another as he had loved them, Jesus emphasized the centrality of love in the relationship between himself and his followers, and among the followers themselves. It is through this bond of love that Christ's disciples are identified, and it is through this love that the disciples can extend themselves to the most vulnerable and marginalized. For Christ declared that by loving these individuals, we love him (Matt 25). But the scope of this love extends beyond human beings, encompassing all of creation. Christ is the "firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15), and it is through Him that "all things were created…and in Him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17). His love for us and for all of creation is demonstrated in his reconciling of all things to himself through his cross and resurrection (Col 1:20). Therefore, to be a disciple of Christ is to be in relationship not only with him, but also with all of creation, which was brought into existence through the Word.

Christian Humanism and Environmental Flourishing

The teachings of Council Fathers and generations of popes as well as influential Catholic thinkers make it clear that Christian humanism aims at achieving integral human development and a life of virtue for the sake of service of others. The focus on the human person in Christian humanism does not entail self-centered preoccupation with one's own fate and perfection while disregarding the well-being and flourishing of others. Regarding ecological concerns, Christian humanism strives for mental and spiritual transformation needed to counter tendencies toward exploitation and misusing of power that leads to ecological degradation. From the Catholic humanistic standpoint, the ecological crisis is as much a concern about humanity as it is a concern about the ecology. Pope Benedict XVI argued that the ecological crisis reflects a flaw in the "human ecology." When the human ecology is in disarray with weakening virtues, disrespect for life and loss of conscience, the environmental ecology also suffers (CiV 51).

Pope John Paul II identified this weakening state of human ecology as the "culture of death" (EV 12) that destroys human life on the social level and is also manifested in the "irrational destruction of the environment" (EV 38). For John Paul II, the culture of death, undergirded by a "veritable structure of sin," not only takes on the form of lack of respect for human life in all its stages but also the lack of respect for nature as reflected in the "technical and scientific way of thinking, prevalent in present-day culture [that] rejects the very idea that there is a truth of creation which must be acknowledged, or a plan of God for life which must be respected" (EV 22). The absence of peace, in addition to resulting from regional conflicts, abortion, poverty, and similar issues, also arises from the exploitation of nature's resources.[21] Similar to other social problems, the ecological crisis is a moral issue reflecting a disharmonious relationship between humanity and God. In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II diagnosed a widespread "anthropological error" as the root cause of the ecological crisis afflicting human society.

> Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him (CA 37).

Therefore, the effort to promote environmental flourishing must proceed from the effort to "safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic 'human ecology'" that enable human to "respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed" by God (CA 38). The principle of a sound human ecology which promotes human dignity was reaffirmed and extensively discussed by Pope Francis in his encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si'*, demonstrating its inseparability from any discussion on the natural ecology. The Pope wrote:

> The destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us

[21] Pope John Paul II, "World Day of Peace Message 1990," https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.pdf

> men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in "lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies." Authentic human development… presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and "take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system" (LS 5).

What Christian humanism emphasizes as expressed by all the popes cited thus far is a need for approaching the development process in general and addressing the ecological crisis in particular with a more "integral and integrating vision," taking into account both social and natural dimensions of reality (LS 141). A lack of "genuine and profound humanism" will ultimately render social, political, economic, and scientific mechanisms ineffective no matter how well-thought out they may be (LS 181). It is not enough to coordinate and bring together various fields of knowledge without that effort being driven by a humanism that can grasp a more comprehensive vision of reality.

Ecological Conversion

Christian humanism in the context of environmental concerns is consistent with the call for an ecological conversion that has so often been voiced by leaders of the church. The term 'ecological conversion' itself was first used by Pope John Paul II in a speech in a General Audience in 2001 in which he addressed the topic of care for creation.[22] In his speech, Pope John Paul II emphasized the importance of ecological conversion as a response to the environmental crisis. He argued that ecological conversion involved a fundamental change in our attitudes and behaviors toward the natural world, and called on individuals, communities, and governments to work together to promote a more sustainable and just future for all. However, the Pope asserted that ecological conversion is not solely about "a 'physical' ecology that is concerned to safeguard the habitat of the various living beings, but also a 'human' ecology which makes the existence of creatures more dignified, by protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations and by preparing for future generations an environment more in conformity

[22] Pope John Paul II, General Audience Speech, January 17, 2001, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.pdf

with the Creator's plan." Undergoing an ecological conversion, therefore, is to see that in the "rediscovered harmony with nature and with one another, men and women are once again walking in the garden of creation, seeking to make the goods of the earth available to all and not just to a privileged few."

In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI echoed the wisdom of his predecessor, John Paul II, recognizing the necessity of a comprehensive ecological conversion that must be anchored in "human ecology" (CiV 51). The Pontiff emphasized the interconnectedness of environmental and social concerns and calls for a radical transformation of our mindset, compelling us to embrace a lifestyle that prizes truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others. Benedict XVI asserted that the disregard for solidarity and civic friendship harms not only society but also poses a grave threat to the environment. Conversely, the degradation of the environment has an adverse impact on social relations. The church bears a responsibility for safeguarding both humanity and creation from self-destruction.

Pope Benedict XVI also argued for the development of a human ecology that fosters a deep reverence for the natural world and recognizes the intrinsic worth of every human being (CiV 51). Mere economic incentives, education, and laws cannot sufficiently protect creation; instead, society must undergo a transformation in its moral orientation. The book of nature, said Benedict XVI, is not merely about the environment but also encompasses life, sexuality, marriage, family, social relations, and integral human development. Thus, there is a need to fulfill our duties toward both the environment and the human person, avoiding the dangerous contradiction that degrades the person, disrupts the environment, and ultimately damages society. Therefore, ecological conversion is an essential part of a more profound human conversion, both to humanity and to creation.

The call for a true and holistic conversion was again taken up by Pope Francis who called for an "interior conversion" (LS 217). Referring to good, committed, and prayerful Christians who eschew any talks about environmental concerns, Francis remarked, "So what they all need is an 'ecological conversion,' whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (LS 217). It is unfortunate when we compartmentalize ourselves to the extent that we do not recognize the inherent interconnectedness between our own well-being, that of others, and the well-being of creation.

An ecological conversion, however, is not an individualistic endeavor removed from communal efforts. According to Pope Francis, individual self-improvement is not enough to address the complex problems facing our world today. Social problems must be addressed by community networks, not simply by individual good deeds. This requires a different attitude toward the world and a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is a community conversion that calls for a number of attitudes, including gratitude and recognition that the world is God's gift. We are called to imitate God's generosity in self-sacrifice and good works, and to be aware that we are not disconnected from other creatures but joined in a splendid universal communion.

By developing our God-given capacities, we, as individuals, can inspire greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems. Various convictions of faith can help us enrich the meaning of this conversion, including the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us. Christ has taken unto himself this material world and is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. God created the world with an order and dynamism that humans have no right to ignore. By recognizing and living fully this dimension of their conversion, all Christians can help nurture a sublime fraternity with all creation, embodying the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi (LS 217–221). Thus for Pope Francis, ecological conversion is imperative to developing an integral ecology that takes into account the well-being of all dimensions of life.

Ecological Conscience

If you were to ask Catholics gathered at a parish retreat, youth camp, or meeting of seminarians or religious whether they have ever confessed to committing ecological sins, chances are you would receive an overwhelming "No." This lack of awareness is surprising, given that the church has long recognized and taught the concept of ecological sins. As noted in the introduction of this book, even the 'Green Patriarch' Bartholomew I, leader of the Orthodox Church, has been vocal in identifying abuses of the environment as ecological sins. In 1997, Bartholomew, representing 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide, made this assertion to 800 participants at a symposium on religion, science, and the environment at St. Barbara's Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, CA. Paul Gorman, one of the participants at the conference, reacted to Bartholomew's words by remarking that his pronouncement introduced "a whole new level of theological inquiry into the cause, and

depth and dimension of human responsibility by lifting up that word—sin."[23]

Indeed, Bartholomew's declaration on ecological sins has proven to be one of the most significant and influential religious proclamations of our era. This pronouncement has been quoted and echoed numerous times across traditions. In *Laudato Si',* Pope Francis cited these very words of Bartholomew in order to awaken the conscience of the Catholic faithful (LS 8). On the occasion of commemorating the 50th Earth Day in 2020, Pope Francis lamented, "We have failed to care for the earth, our garden-home; we have failed to care for our brothers and sisters. We have sinned against the earth, against our neighbours, and ultimately against the Creator, the benevolent Father who provides for everyone, and desires us to live in communion and flourish together."[24] In the exhortation *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis cited the African bishops declaring that "climate change makes manifest 'a tragic and striking example of structural sin'" (LD 3).

Pope Francis also cited the bishops of the Amazon region who had also addressed the issue of ecological sin in their final synod document. It states:

> We propose to define ecological sin as an action or omission against God, against one's neighbour, the community and the environment. It is sin against future generations, and it is committed in acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment. These are transgressions against the principles of interdependence, and they destroy networks of solidarity among creatures (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 340-344) and violate the virtue of justice.[25]

In order for an ecological conversion to take place in which we recognize our ecological sins and desire to turn away from those sins, there needs to be formation of an ecological conscience. While the term 'ecological sin' is a more recent thought, the concept of an 'ecological conscience' preceded the former by many decades. In the 1940s, in his book

---

[23] Larry B. Stammer, "Harming the Environment Is Sinful, Prelate Says," *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1997, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-nov-09-mn-51974-story.html

[24] Pope Francis, General Audience Address, April 22, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200422_udienza-generale.pdf

[25] Pan-Amazon Synod. Final Document, The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology, 2019, no. 82, http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.pdf

A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold had already called for the development of an ecological conscience with regard to land ethic.[26] The call for an ecological conscience was a recurrent theme in Leopold's writings and advocacy. According to Leopold, an ecological conscience arises out of consideration of our relationship with the environment beyond that of individuals and society. He wrote:

> The first ethics dealt with the relation between individuals; the Mosaic Decalogue is an example. Later accretions dealt with the relation between the individual and society. The Golden Rule tries to integrate the individual to society; democracy to integrate social organization to the individual. There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus' slave-girls, is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations. The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity. It is the third step in a sequence. The first two have already been taken. Individual thinkers since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong. Society, however, has not yet affirmed their belief. I regard the present conservation movement as the embryo of such an affirmation.[27]

Nearly a century has passed since the introduction of the concept of ecological conscience by Leopold. And yet, as we stand on the precipice of a new age, there is still much work to be done in promoting this crucial ethos. Religion, perhaps more than any other institution, must lead the charge. For the Christian, ecological conscience is born of a deep reverence for the interconnectedness of all life and the divine spark that runs through everything. It is a recognition that our planet and its bounty are a sacred gift, bestowed upon us by the divine, to be cherished and safeguarded. It is an awareness that every action we take has a ripple effect, not just on our immediate surroundings, but on the entire world and every creature that calls it home. This ecological conscience tugs at our hearts when we witness the destruction of ecosystems, the extinction of species, and the degradation of natural resources. It gives us a pang of guilt when we realize that our actions, even the seemingly small ones, contribute to the harm and exploitation

---

[26] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

[27] Ibid.

of the environment. For instance, we may feel the weight of our ecological conscience when we see images of oil spills devastating marine life or hear about deforestation causing loss of habitat for countless species. We may also feel a sense of responsibility when we use single-use plastics or waste food, knowing that these actions contribute to larger environmental problems. We start asking ourselves questions such as: Do I really need a straw to drink out of a Coke can or a bottle of water? Do I really need to eat food shipped from the other side of the world? Do I really need to add another sweater to my already stuffed closet of jackets and sweaters? Do I really need to drive a car or motorbike for a 1-km trip to the store instead of riding a bike or walking?

An ecological conscience is rooted in the belief that all of creation, including the environment and its creatures, is part of God's divine plan and deserving of respect and care. It involves a commitment to uphold the principles of justice and compassion for all, including the environment, while recognizing that environmental degradation and climate change disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations. An ecological conscience demands that we incorporate our actions toward creation into our examen exercise each night before we go to bed, and each time we prepare to enter the confessional just as we do with other aspects of our relationships. Some pertinent questions for this examination of conscience may include:

- Have I centered my life around the overflowing love of God, which is made manifest through Jesus and the splendor of creation?
- Do I express gratitude and offer thanks for the abundant and wondrous gifts of creation that God has bestowed upon me?
- Do I pray for the mending of the rift between humanity and the environment, seeking forgiveness for the harm we have caused?
- Have I utilized my unique talents and skills to protect and revere the delicate and interdependent tapestry of life, securing its well-being for future generations?
- Have my behaviors contributed to the deterioration of other creatures' habitats due to mindless consumption or wastefulness?
- Do I endeavor to eradicate all barriers that impede the growth and optimal development of all living beings, as intended by their Creator, such as pollution, excess, disease, warfare, extinction, and oppressive institutions?

- Have I inspired others to acknowledge the crucial significance of cherishing the earth and its inhabitants?

In the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis reiterated the idea that "among the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and the prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles" (FT 25). What has arisen from this situation is "a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference" (FT 30) toward the pain of fellow human beings and of creation. Those who are in need of our care and attention either do not exist or their problems are beyond the scope of our interest (FT 73). In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis pointed out the problem of "attempts to deny, conceal, gloss over or relativize" the issue of climate change—even within the Catholic Church—despite clear evidence (LD 5, 14). A sincere ecological conversion, therefore, requires that we shift away from indifference, exploitation, and insensitivity toward compassion, care, and solidarity with all of God's creation, including humanity itself.

Being Ecologically Conscious

In order for Christians to form an ecological conscience, the church must make use of all of its resources—the Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Tradition—through the means of catechism, Bible studies, parish retreats, liturgies, homilies, pastoral communication, etc. to inspire and lead Christians to a "conversion to what is true and to what is good" (VS 64). Only through a well-formed ecological conscience can we become ecologically conscious individuals, communities, and church. Jame Schaeffer, in examining *Laudato Si'*, has highlighted multiple characteristics of an ecologically conscious person.[28]

Ecologically conscious individuals possess a unique perspective on the natural world, viewing all creatures as interconnected and interdependent. This perspective is grounded in a deep sense of awe and wonder toward the beauty and complexity of the earth, which drives their desire to learn more about the natural world and its interconnectedness. They realize the benefits of contemplating each creature for its meaning within God's plan, including discovering teachings from God and seeing ourselves in relation to all other creatures. For those with faith, the sense of awe and wonder is further deepened by the belief that

[28] Jame Schaefer, "Converting to and Nurturing Ecological Consciousness – Individually, Collectively, Actively" (2018). Theology Faculty Research and Publications. 680. https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/680

all creatures are manifestations of God's presence, and that each creature reflects a part of God's wisdom and goodness. They see the natural world as a book that reveals God's character, and view the many diverse creatures in the universe as a source of wonder and awe.

In addition to their spiritual beliefs, ecologically conscious individuals are also open to scientific understandings of the natural world. They recognize the importance of discovering scientific knowledge about environmental problems, in order to make informed decisions about how to function within the shared home of humans and other species on earth. This openness to scientific knowledge leads to greater creativity and enthusiasm in the ways to address the challenges facing the planet.

Ecologically conscious individuals exhibit a spiritual disposition in their relationship with God and the earth. They recognize that the planet is a gift from God and that they have a duty to protect it for future generations. They demonstrate justice by advocating for the poor and vulnerable who are often most affected by environmental degradation. They limit consumption to the necessities of life, avoid wasteful practices that are detrimental to other species, ecological systems, and the biosphere of the earth. They approach earth stewardship with a long-term perspective, recognizing that today's actions will affect future generations. They view themselves as part of a larger community of living beings and recognize the importance of cooperation and mutual support for all species to thrive.

Ecologically conscious individuals view the environment not just as a resource for human benefit but as an intrinsic part of God's creation, deserving of reverence and respect. They seek to live in harmony with nature, recognizing the inherent value of all species and ecosystems and striving to live in a way that respects the natural environment and laws of nature. Ultimately, their actions reflect a deep reverence for the earth and all its inhabitants as manifestations of God's presence in the world. Ecologically conscious people cooperate with God by limiting and directing technology to a constructive type of progress that promotes human dignity and assessing and mitigating harm caused to other species and systems of the earth.

Ecologically conscious people are propelled by virtues that promote environmental well-being. They have an ingrained sense of responsibility to engage in dialogue with others about their relationships with the environment and make decisions for mutual flourishing. They express their compassion for the poor and vulnerable by addressing environmental injustices, providing fresh foods, creating green spaces, and advocating for protective laws. Ecologically conscious individuals are persistent and put the common good before their personal interests, facing challenges with conviction and without being deterred by obstacles.

They draw upon God's grace to remain steadfast in their commitment to the earth community.

To nurture an ecological consciousness is to tend to it as one would a garden, with a constant and loving act of care. Just as a garden requires attention and nourishment to flourish, we must also cultivate our ecological consciousness. Reflection on our faith and its teachings is a fertile soil in which to sow the seeds of this consciousness. We can begin by immersing ourselves in the biblical accounts of creation, which unveil the sanctity of all living things and the importance of stewardship. These teachings remind us that while humans have been given dominion over the earth, we are also called to protect and preserve it, as faithful stewards of creation.

As we tend to our ecological consciousness, we can look to the inspiring leadership of Christian women and men who have spoken out against environmental degradation and called for greater care and protection of the natural world. The countless individuals include Katharine Hayhoe, a climate scientist and an evangelical Christian; Dorothy Mae Stang, a Catholic nun who was murdered in 2005 for her environmental advocacy in the Amazon; Sallie McFague, Protestant eco-feminist theologian; Thomas Berry, Catholic priest and ecotheologian who articulated and developed the concept of 'Earth Jurisprudence'; and St. Kateri Tekakwitha of the Iroquois nation, and the patron saint of environment and ecology. These visionaries serve as a guiding light, illuminating the path toward a more sustainable future. By following their lead, we can deepen our commitment to ecological stewardship, and, in turn, inspire others to do the same.

Taking practical steps to reduce our environmental impact is a crucial aspect of nurturing our ecological consciousness. We can take actions such as conserving water, reducing energy consumption, and recycling, as we tend to the flourishing of the earth. Supporting policies and initiatives that promote sustainable practices and protect the environment is another way in which we can tend to our ecological garden, planting the seeds for a more equitable and sustainable future. By living in harmony with the earth and its ecosystems, we can ensure that coming generations inherit a world that is teeming with life and possibility.

Spiritual Self-Cultivation

Like other religious traditions discussed in this book, Christianity offers a wealth of resources to help us cultivate ourselves and achieve spiritual maturity. At the heart of Christian self-cultivation lie inten-

tional practices that nurture our relationship with God and foster growth in faith, wisdom, and character. Whether through prayer, Bible reading and study, worship, service, or fellowship, there are countless ways in which we can deepen our connection to the divine. These practices are not just arbitrary rituals; instead, they are essential components of a vibrant and fulfilling Christian life. Engaging in these activities regularly can enrich our faith, expand our horizons, and develop a more profound sense of purpose and meaning. While the particular forms and contents of these activities may vary among the denominations, they constitute fundamental elements that contribute to a spiritually well-rounded Christian.

In the journey of Christian spiritual self-cultivation, prayer is a sacred and transformative practice that enables believers to connect with the Almighty and seek divine guidance and wisdom. As the Psalmist reminds us, "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me" (Ps 50:15). It is a deeply personal and intimate experience, and while there are no fixed rules for prayer, Christians have long considered it to be a vital tool for spiritual growth. As Saint Augustine once said, "God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them." Prayer is an essential practice that helps Christians to open their hands and hearts to receive the blessings that God has in store for them. Through prayer, believers can offer thanks, seek forgiveness, and express their deepest hopes and fears, fostering a deeper connection with God and a greater understanding of God's will.

At the heart of Christian devotion lies worship, a practice that allows us to express our reverence and love for God in various forms. As the Psalmist declares, "Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness" (Ps 96:9), emphasizing the importance of offering our adoration to the divine. Worship services provide a space for believers to gather together and draw closer to God. Singing hymns and songs of praise, reading the Bible, praying, and participating in sacraments such as the Eucharist are all ways in which we can experience the power and spiritual fruits of worship. The author of Hebrews reminds us of the significance of attending church services, insisting on "not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:25). Worship allows us to deepen our connection to God, gain a greater understanding of our faith, and more fully appreciate God's love for all of creation. Worship is a transformative tool for Christian self-cultivation. Through worship, we can experience a profound sense of inner peace and fulfillment that can positively impact our lives and the lives of those around us.

Another vital means of spiritual self-cultivation for Christians across denominations is Bible reading and study. These activities serve as in-

tegral components for gaining knowledge and wisdom and understanding God's will, and help Christians to love the Word of God as well as God of the Word. Saint Jerome, one of the most important figures in the early Christian church, declared, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ" (Letter 30). Jerome's sentiment highlights the importance of studying the Bible for Christians. The Bible is the primary source of teaching, offering guidance for living an authentic Christian life. In fact, as the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). Regular Bible study and reading provide individuals with the opportunity to gain insights into God's character and the ways in which God works. Through consistent Bible study and reflection, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of God and their faith, helping them to live a more spiritually fulfilled and virtuous life. Indeed, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

An essential aspect of a well-developed Christian spirituality is the community. Church Father Tertullian once wrote, "We are a body knit together as such by a common religious belief, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope."[29] Jesus himself formed a community of disciples, who supported and shared life with him as he carried out his mission. Christian fellowship is when believers who share the same faith come together, united in Christ. It offers an opportunity to build relationships, share biblical knowledge, and encourage one another in the faith. In his letter to one of the early Christian communities, Paul exhorted, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing" (1 Thess 5:11). The importance of fellowship lies in providing support, guidance, and community to help Christians grow spiritually. Fellowship can be found through small groups, meals, weekly gatherings, and even social media platforms. Through Christian fellowship, individuals can establish meaningful relationships, accompany one another spiritually, and join hands in creating a more flourishing world for all.

Service is the lifeblood of Christian spirituality, a vital component of self-cultivation that enables believers to put their faith into action. Whether it's volunteering at a local soup kitchen, visiting the sick, or participating in an environmental clean-up project, acts of service pro-

[29] Tertullian, *Apology*, 39, trans. S. Thelwall, *Early Christian Writings*, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian01.html

vide an opportunity to develop virtues such as compassion and empathy that lie at the heart of the Christian faith. Perhaps the greatest example of Christian service in modern times is Mother Teresa. She dedicated her life to serving the poorest of the poor, founding the Missionaries of Charity and ministering to the sick, hungry, and dying in some of the world's most impoverished communities. For Mother Teresa, service was not just about meeting physical needs, but also about showing love and compassion to those who had been rejected and forgotten by society. Her words, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love," embody the humble, loving response that service requires. By adopting this attitude toward service, Christians can deepen their own spiritual journeys while fulfilling their call to love their neighbors as they love themselves.

While many Christians may have already employed some or all of these means in their spiritual development, they have not always been tailored to the context of environmental care. Traditionally, these spiritual activities have often focused primarily on personal piety and social concerns, neglecting the broader ecological dimensions of our faith. However, in the face of the pressing ecological challenges we now confront, it is imperative that we adapt and expand our spiritual practices to encompass care for creation.

Incorporating these spiritually fruitful Christian activities into the context of care for creation allows us to align our faith with ecological matters. By consciously integrating environmental concerns into our spiritual lives, we can bridge the gap between our religious beliefs and our responsibility as stewards of the earth. Through prayer, we can develop a profound connection with the Creator and seek guidance in our environmental efforts. We can express gratitude for the beauty and abundance of nature, seek forgiveness for the harm caused to the environment, and petition for strength and wisdom to undertake sustainable actions. By weaving ecological themes into our prayers, we can foster a deep sense of reverence for creation and cultivate a partnership with God in the task of caring for our common home.

Worship, as an integral part of our Christian practice, provides a communal space to celebrate and honor God's creation. By incorporating environmental elements into our worship services, such as hymns, prayers, and liturgies that acknowledge the interdependence of all living beings and the need for ecological justice, we can deepen our spiritual connection with the natural world. Worship becomes an opportunity not only to praise God but also to recommit to environmental stewardship, recognizing that our care for creation is an essential expression of our faith.

Bible study and reflection play a crucial role in shaping our Christian beliefs and values. By examining biblical passages that speak to the care of creation, such as the Genesis creation accounts, the Psalms' hymns of praise for the wonders of nature, or Jesus' teachings on love and responsibility, we can gain a deeper understanding of God's intentions for the earth and humanity's role within it. Engaging in Bible study and reflection informed by ecological principles equips us with a scriptural foundation for our environmental ethics, inspiring us to integrate ecological concerns into our daily lives and decisions.

Fellowship and community provide vital support and encouragement in our pursuit of environmental care. By gathering with like-minded believers, we can share experiences, exchange knowledge, and collaborate on practical initiatives that promote sustainability and justice. In the context of care for creation, Christian fellowship becomes a space for education, advocacy, and collective action, enabling us to amplify our efforts and create meaningful change in our local communities and beyond.

Finally, acts of service rooted in care for creation become a tangible expression of Christian love and compassion for the earth and its inhabitants. By engaging in environmentally focused service projects, we actively demonstrate our commitment to the well-being of our common home. Whether it is participating in conservation efforts, advocating for sustainable policies, or promoting responsible consumption, these acts of service allow us to embody our faith and be agents of positive transformation in the world.

The imperative to develop and nurture a Christian ecological conscience is an ongoing and urgent concern for Christian disciples of our time. Through numerous documents at the universal and local levels, the Catholic Church has called for ecological awareness and responsibility in the face of ongoing environmental degradation. Reflection on our faith and its teachings serves as fertile soil in which we can sow the seeds of this consciousness. By recontextualizing our Christian sources and practices for spiritual formation and development toward environmental concerns, we align our faith with our ecological conscience and foster a transformative shift in our attitudes and behaviors toward the natural world.

As we nurture our ecological conscience, we become catalysts for change, inspiring others to embrace a holistic vision of faith that encompasses environmental care. By fulfilling our sacred duty as responsible stewards of creation, we actively participate in the healing and restoration of the earth. Through the integration of our spiritual practices with environmental care, we contribute to a more sustainable and

just world, embodying the love, compassion, hope, and responsibility that are central to the Christian faith.

CHAPTER 6

HUMANISTIC RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENTALISM

Some years ago, I participated in an academic conference on religion and ecology, which was held at a prestigious university in the United States. As a contributing speaker, I presented a paper from the Buddhist perspective, alongside my fellow attendees who offered insights from other religious traditions. The conference's format stipulated that each session would comprise three papers, followed by a response from a designated commentator. During my session, our respondent listened carefully to the diverse religious perspectives presented and commented that, although each offered deep spiritual and religious insights on how to tackle the ecological crisis, they remained notably "anthropocentric." The comment was meant to not only highlight a common thread running throughout the various religious perspectives but also to draw attention to what might be perceived as a shortcoming in environmentalisms rooted in religious traditions.

Anthropocentrism – A Controversial Concept

In the field of environmental ethics, the term 'anthropocentric' or 'anthropocentrism' is often associated with ideologies and ways of thinking and behaving that prioritize human status, rights and desires at the detriment of non-human beings such as animals, plants and other biotic and abiotic entities. Anthropocentrism has been almost universally blamed as one of the primary causes of the environmental crisis. Anthropocentrism comes in various degrees from weak (benign) to strong (tyrannical), but when push comes to shove, this worldview entails that human interests ultimately come out on top and moral consideration is reserved first and foremost for human beings. Since the beginning of the field of environmental philosophy in the 1970s, anthropocentrism and associated topics such as intrinsic value of nature and ecological worldview have often been the focus of debate and reflections across a whole gamut of environmental writings.[1] Warwick Fox wrote in the 1990s, "Virtually every paper and book that ecophilosophers have writ-

[1] Keith R. Peterson, *A World not Made for Us: Topics in Critical Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020), 1.

ten either implicitly or explicitly develops some kind of answer to [the] question 'what's wrong with being anthropocentric?'"[2]

The term anthropocentrism is not new, and has been in existence for over 150 years since it was first coined in the 1860s in debates on Darwin's theory of evolution to describe the prevailing historical assumption that human beings occupied the center of the universe.[3] Although the literal meaning of the term is 'human-centeredness,' what this actually implies is vague and leaves open to a variety of interpretation. *The Cambridge Online Dictionary* gives a single definition for 'anthropocentric,' which is "a belief in humans and their existence as the most important and central fact in the universe."[4] The implication drawn from this definition is that human beings occupy ontological and moral priority over all other entities—both biotic and abiotic—in the universe. Anthropocentrism as an ontological perspective ensures that human beings, as the zenith of creation, are privileged when considerations are given to matters that affect their well-being and flourishing. Warwick Fox defined anthropocentrism as "the arrogant assumption that we humans are central to the cosmic drama; that, essentially, the world is made for us."[5] This represents a sort of human chauvinism which reflects John Seed's observation that "the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things, is deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness."[6]

Embracing this outlook is a small step away from the ethical view that human beings reserve the right to do with nature as they see fit, even if it means wanton exploitation, because only they are ascribed intrinsic value, whereas all other entities possess only instrumental value. This ethical view directly results from human chauvinism which, according to Frederic Bender, is "the deeply ingrained assumption that humans have the right to draw down ecospheric integrity—without concern for limits—to satisfy even the most peripheral human desires."[7] Values are accorded to entities in the non-human world only when they

---

2 Quoted in Peterson, *A World not Made for Us*, 2.

3 Elisa K. Campbell, "Beyond Anthropocentrism," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 19 (1983): 54-67.

4 Cambridge Online Dictionary, "Anthropocentrism," https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anthropocentrism

5 Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1990), 11.

6 Quoted in Peterson, *A World not Made for Us*, 20.

7 Frederic Bender, *The Culture of Extinction* (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 69.

directly or indirectly serve human interests in some ways.[8] Consequently, when human interests conflict with those of non-human entities, priority is inevitably given to the former at the expense of the latter.

In addition to the ontological and ethical views of anthropocentrism, there is also a third view, which is often overlooked in the ecological discourse. According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, anthropocentrism is the epistemological reality of "interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences."[9] This definition emphasizes not the attitude of human beings toward themselves or toward non-human entities, but the mere fact of human *locatedness* in the grand scheme of things. Eugene Hargrove remarked that epistemologically, anthropocentrism is unavoidable because the world can only be perceived through the human locatedness.[10]

Frederic Ferré employed the term "perspectival anthropocentrism" to describe a reality in which humans "have no choice but to think as humans."[11] This is the case "even while we try to transcend egoism by cultivating sympathy and concern for other centres of intrinsic value."[12] Indeed, human beings may try to imagine what it might be like to view the world through the eyes of a chimpanzee or a bird as a stimulating intellectual exercise or as a practice in enhancing human empathy toward non-human creatures, but ultimately, the only reference that human beings can be confident of is our own. And even with that there are already plenty of disagreements because points of view among human beings often fail to coincide. All we have to do is turn on the American evening news commentary programs from the various channels to affirm this reality. Tim Hayward asserted that not only is anthropocentrism unavoidable and unobjectionable in certain respects, but it is also even desirable in order to "perform the critical function envisaged for it."[13]

---

8 Katie McShane, "Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism: Why Should We Care?" *Environmental Values* 16, no. 2 (2007): 170.

9 Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, "Anthropocentrism," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthropocentrism

10 Eugene Hargrove, "Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, eds. Andrew Light and Holmes Roston III (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 175.

11 Federick Ferré, "Personalistic Organicism: Paradox or Paradigm?" in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, eds. Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72.

12 Ferré, "Personalistic Organicism," 72.

13 Tim Hayward, "Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem," *Environmental Values* 6, no. 1 (1997): 51.

The fact that there are multiple valences to anthropocentrism, both objectionable and unobjectionable, has led to alternative terminologies. Each tries to resolve the tension between a natural and inescapable reality of human beings as the subject of perceiving and valuing and the negative tendency of human beings to turn into despots ready to conquer, dominate and subjugate nature at all costs. William Grey advocated an "enriched and enlightened" anthropocentrism in which a "short and narrow" conception of human interests and concerns ought not to trump environmental balance. Grey claimed that "anthropocentrism is natural and inevitable, and when properly qualified turns out to be perfectly benign."[14]

The benign anthropocentrism advocated by Grey is similar to the concept of weak anthropocentrism proposed by Bryan Norton. According to Norton, weak anthropocentrism involves humans controlling their decision-making process by carefully examining their felt and considered preferences while considering a worldview derived from sound aesthetic and moral ideals, robust scientific theories, and a metaphysical framework that interprets these theories.[15] Norton's use of the adjective 'weak' implies that there is a strong anthropocentrism characterized by uncontrolled exploitation and destruction of nature to serve human interests, which is deemed unacceptable and must be resisted.

Both Grey's benign anthropocentrism and Norton's weak anthropocentrism serve to affirm the inevitability of human situatedness in decision-making concerning the human future and the ecology's future, while also rejecting the potential abuse of power in these contexts. Scholars like Grey and Norton object to proponents of non-anthropocentric paradigms such as Deep Ecology that "often try to correct anthropocentric bias by developing and defending a conception of environmental value which downgrades or denies human values and concerns altogether, and in so doing renders them marginal or useless for decisions and action."[16] According to Hayward, "If the ultimate point of an ethic is to yield a determinate guide to human action, then, the human reference is ineliminable even when extending moral concern to nonhumans."[17] The agent can respond to the ethical obligation to make

---

[14] William Grey, "Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 4 (1993): 470.

[15] Bryan G. Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984): 134.

[16] William Grey, "Environmental Value and Anthropocentrism," *Ethics and the Environment* 3, no. 1 (1998): 99.

[17] Hayward, "Anthropocentrism," 56.

others' ends their own, but, ultimately, asserted Hayward, "values are always the values *of* the valuer."[18]

Hayward, Grey, and Norton all concur that the necessity of a human reference point makes it impossible to create a totally non-anthropocentric value system which has no basis in the human experience and existing human values. The notion that values can simply be recognized and selected without any need to refer to human interpretation is a delusion. Even the natural balance advocated by ecocentrism is a perception shaped by human ideas of what balance should be like. One perspective of balance might be that human beings do not interfere in the workings of nature so that nothing is disturbed. Let whatever happens happen. If a virus invades a population of birds, the virus has as much right to flourish as the birds. The fact that the virus is winning the battle is simply part of the many dramas taking place in nature, which human beings can sit back and observe but have no role in determining the outcome.

A second interpretation of balance could be that human beings use their intellectual abilities and technological knowledge to 'enhance' the natural balance. For example, when a certain animal population is under attack by a destructive pest, human beings should intervene to remove the threat in order to restore the natural balance. A third interpretation of natural balance is that human beings, as natural entities in themselves, simply act in accordance with their nature, and whatever results from their actions is regarded as entirely normal. If human beings end up destroying themselves along with present ecosystems, it will simply represent an event among the countless events in the ongoing life history of the planet. One million years after human extinction, nature will still be nature, whatever that may look like. E.O. Wilson provided clarity when he said, "If all mankind were to disappear, the world would regenerate back to the rich state of equilibrium that existed ten thousand years ago. If insects were to vanish, the environment would collapse into chaos."[19]

Depending on one's perspective, any of these three and other possibilities can be argued as representing true natural balance. Nonetheless, the fact that one interpretation of natural balance will be preferred over the other signifies that there is a selection criterion of values that are meaningful to human desire and experience. It is more reasonable and realistic to acknowledge that what is perceived as natural balance

---

[18] Ibid., 57.

[19] Quoted in Elizabeth Kolbert, "Where Have All the Insects Gone?" *The New Yorker*, October 25, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/01/where-have-all-the-insects-gone-e-o-wilson-silent-earth

often aligns with what human beings desire for themselves and the world, rather than projecting human desires onto nature and asserting that it represents what nature 'wants.' Mary Anne Warren commented:

> We are not gods but human beings, reasoning about how we ought to think and act. Our moral theories can only be based upon what we know and what we care about, or ought to care about. If this makes our theories anthropocentric, then this much anthropocentrism is inevitable in any moral theory that is relevant to human actions.[20]

Despite this rather extensive debate, it seems that at least in terms of the public consciousness, the word 'anthropocentrism' is still largely seen as a 'dirty' word when speaking about human behavior and attitudes toward the environment. Thus, when religious environmentalisms are characterized as 'anthropocentric,' as was done by the commentator mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, one cannot help but feel that this characterization is meant to be a negative critique.

I believe that when it comes to religious environmentalism, it is not helpful to frame the discussion within this 'anthropocentrism' vs. 'non-anthropocentrism' framework because it would always be the case that religious ethical ideals, even those concerning the environment, would be anthropocentric in *some* way. After all, religions in every instance were first created by humans and for humans as the first priority. While some religious soteriologies involve non-human beings, the focus and the central concern is always human happiness and spiritual liberation. Religious environmentalisms cannot depart from this fundamental worldview because the concern for the environment has to be integrally connected to the concern for human beings. The question that religious environmentalism attempts to address is essentially how promoting environmental well-being and flourishing can be viewed as an integral part of human soteriological aspirations. It underscores that achieving full humanhood is only possible when we consider the well-being of others, both humans and non-humans. We will delve into this point further in this chapter.

Alternative Secular Environmental Paradigms

Because religiously inspired environmentalisms are perceived as somewhat anthropocentric, not everyone has embraced them. Some choose to develop ecosophies that shift from a human-centered focus to

[20] Mary Anne Warren, *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

those that are 'eco-' or 'bio-centered' to avoid the perceived challenges associated with systems of thought that prioritize the human as the center of value and agency. Environmental philosophers such as Paul W. Taylor (biocentrism), Lawrence E. Johnson and Holmes Rolston III (ecocentrism), and Arne Naess (Deep Ecology) represent the various approaches to the non-anthropocentric worldview. Biocentrism is concerned with the 'inherent worth' of biological individuals and argues that there is no biological basis for human beings to adopt a chauvinistic understanding of their place in the world. According to Taylor,

> We share with other species a common relationship to the Earth. In accepting the biocentric outlook, we take the fact of our being an animal species to be a fundamental feature of our existence. We consider it an essential aspect of 'the human condition…' The laws of genetics, of natural selection, and of adaptation apply equally to all of us as biological creatures. In this light we consider ourselves as one with them, not set apart from them.[21]

Taylor proposed a 'biocentric ethic' asserting that all living individual organisms possess intrinsic value as teleological centers of life. Through their adaptive mechanisms and biological functions, they indicate themselves to have goals of living, flourishing, and propagating themselves. Organisms indicate themselves to be self-valuing, goal-seeking individuals independent of any human valuation of them. Thus, by recognizing that non-human organisms have 'inherent worth,' it is sufficient to devise prescriptive or prohibitive norms that prevent human interference in the development and flourishing of these life forms.[22]

Ecocentrism extends moral considerability not only to biological entities but also to entire systems comprised of both biotic and abiotic entities, including air, water, land, and ecosystems. Holmes Rolston III argued that each organism has a telos or a 'valued state.' By virtue of its DNA-programmed activities, it seeks to attain certain states while avoiding others. Because the telos is a valued state, Rolston reasoned, the fulfillment of the telos involves the realization of value. This value is what he refers to as 'natural value.' However, there is also a 'systemic value' in which entities in nature either possess their own telos or have a role of producing or supporting the teleological processes of life in a 'projective nature.' According to Rolston, the existence of this value is

---

[21] Paul Taylor, "The Ethics of Respect for Nature," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, eds. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 74-84.

[22] Ibid.

'objective' and not 'subjective' because it does not depend on the presence of any minds.[23]

Deep Ecology, on the other hand, is not primarily an environmental ethics but rather a philosophical orientation or ideology advocating 'Self-Realization.' When self-realization is achieved, one fully identifies themself with the world and their behaviors and thinking naturally are in harmony with nature. Environmental ecosophies, like Deep Ecology, focus on the issue of the extreme disconnection between humans and nature. They aim to create a philosophy and understanding of humanity that bridges this gap by emphasizing the unity or identity of humans and nature. The solution to this issue is thought to be achieved by individuals attaining a sense of 'self-realization' of this unity. This approach is believed to resolve all associated problems, such as denial of reliance, assimilation, homogenization, and exploitation.[24]

As we delve into the diverse environmental worldviews, a distinct effort is apparent to get rid of the concept of anthropocentrism as it is deemed detrimental to the flourishing of the environment. Unfortunately, when this approach is taken to the extreme, any environmentalism that highlights human agency is immediately dismissed as anthropocentric, and therefore, undesirable. This viewpoint poses an immense challenge to many religious systems as religious environmentalisms cannot merely disregard the role of humans in the subject matter unless it undergoes a radical reframing. In fact, most religious systems aim to address and enhance the human spiritual condition, both in this life and beyond. Hence, any environmentalism derived from religion must acknowledge and embrace the responsibility and role of human beings not just as the root of environmental issues but also as a means of resolution.

Religious Humanism as an Environmental Paradigm

The philosophical debate outlined above illustrates that labeling religious environmentalisms as 'anthropocentric' may be dismissive and counterproductive. This term is loaded with connotations that might hinder understanding of religious environmentalisms within their unique context and epistemology. It reduces environmental thinking inspired by religious thought to be merely axioms to be evaluated like other secular environmental ethics in the field. In order to avoid this

---

[23] Holmes Rolston III, "Value in Nature and the Nature of Value," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, eds. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 143-53.

[24] Peterson, *A World not Made for Us*, 30.

conundrum, I suggest that religious environmentalisms should be characterized as 'humanistic.' The concept of humanism has been acknowledged across various religious traditions and is widely accepted in the secular sphere as well. Indeed, the term 'humanism' has been employed by numerous groups and individuals across history, religions, philosophies, cultures, and worldviews.

Despite the many usages of the term by various groups to suit their own metaphysical assumptions and needs, the common thread that runs through every thought system that claims to be humanistic is the emphasis on human value, integrity, and agency. Both religious and secular humanisms advocate for human beings to achieve full self-realization, to become their best self, to be *truly human*. In other words, it is the process of not so much changing oneself to become something different, but to eliminate the things that cover and obstruct one's true self. As the Indian Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi pointed out, "Realization is not the acquisition of anything new nor is it a new faculty. It is only removal of all camouflage."[25] The true self is akin to a lamp concealed beneath a thick layer of dust, obscuring its light. When this dust is removed, the lamp can shine brightly, illuminating even the darkest room. Therefore, it is only by fully embracing and expressing our genuine humanity that we can attain what is best for ourselves as individuals and also contribute to the well-being of others.

As expected, every philosophical system has a distinct perception and methodology regarding exemplary personhood. Christians seek inspiration from the embodiment of perfection in Jesus, while Muslims aspire to emulate the Prophet Muhammad. Similarly, Buddhists follow the path of Gautama Buddha in their pursuit of enlightenment. For atheist humanists, attaining human transformation is a personal journey without any reference to spiritual or transcendental beings. In this book, however, I have argued that religious systems fulfill one of their most fundamental tasks when they help people to achieve authentic personhood. The author Shannon L. Alder reportedly asserted, "Before you call yourself a Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu or any other theology, learn to be human first."[26] However, she misses the point. You can choose to achieve self-realization by any means you want—religious or otherwise—but if you've managed to do it without religion, then you don't ever need to join one. A fundamental reason for joining a religion

---

[25] Quoted in Samantha Lawyer, "80 Quotes That Will Help You Reflect on Your Spiritual Journey," *Woman's Day*, May 2, 2022, https://www.womansday.com/life/a39788446/spiritual-quotes/

[26] Quoted in Nicole Conner, "God, It Hurts to Be Human!" Reflections of a Mugwump, March 9, 2021, https://www.nicoleconner.com.au/god-it-hurts-to-be-human/

is that it will help you achieve spiritual goals that you cannot attain on your own.

Despite varying approaches, humanistic ideologies typically hold an optimistic outlook on the potential of human beings and the collective good that can be accomplished through the realization of that potential. Religious environmental humanism, in particular, subscribes to this view of the human person. It posits that cultivating the self to attain spiritual progress and self-transformation is key to contributing positively to environmental safeguarding, and it holds implications for the flourishing of both humans and nature. According to the Buddha, people fall into four categories based on their acts: those who benefit neither themselves nor others, those who benefit others but not themselves, those who benefit themselves but not others, and those who benefit both themselves and others. Of these, the last category is the most esteemed (AN 4.95.3.3). Religious humanism does not subscribe to the zero-sum mentality, which posits that the advancement of one group necessarily means the decline of another. In fact, religious environmental humanism acknowledges the intrinsic connection between the environment's role and flourishing and the quest for human spiritual growth essential to achieving lasting happiness. Thus, there exists a causal relationship between the quality of the human person and the flourishing of the natural environment.

Let us now briefly revisit the four representative religious traditions examined in the previous chapters to see how authentic humanity and environmental flourishing are integrally connected to each other.

Buddhism

In the Buddhist tradition, specifically Theravada Buddhism discussed in Chapter One, authentic humanity is not a mere state of existence, but a dynamic and intentional process of self-cultivation. It involves the development of virtue, concentration, and wisdom, which enable us to perceive the true nature of reality—one that is fleeting, plagued with suffering, and devoid of a fixed self. Through this realization, we can liberate ourselves from the toxic poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion that tether us to a cycle of pain and dissatisfaction. These spiritual poisons infect our relationships with others, blinding us to their inherent dignity and worth. When greed dominates, we become possessive and exploitative, reducing others to mere objects of our desires. When hatred rules, we lash out with verbal, emotional, and physical violence, fracturing the bonds of community and sowing seeds of isolation. And when delusion takes hold, we cling to false assumptions and limited perspectives, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts.

Like the destructive poisons that infect our relationship with other people, greed, hatred, and delusion corrode our relationship with nature. When greed takes root, we strip the earth of its treasures without a second thought, blind to the ecological devastation we leave in our wake. Hatred blinds us to the beauty of nature, reducing it to nothing more than a commodity to be exploited and discarded. And delusion leads us to believe that our actions have no consequences, that the earth will continue to provide for us regardless of how recklessly we treat it. Yet the damage we inflict upon nature reverberates through every corner of our lives, impacting our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Thus, in the Buddhist tradition, the cultivation of the self is not a solitary pursuit, but a path toward connection with all things, a means of fostering harmony and balance in our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the natural world.

Confucianism

Authentic personhood, according to Confucian thought, unfolds through the intricate process of self-cultivation, a journey that is marked by education in rites, literature, and music. Through this cultivation, we emerge as fully realized beings, embodying the essence of knowledge and wisdom in our actions. Such transformation imbues us with the five cardinal virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness, which become the pillars of our existence, allowing us to reflect critically on our actions and to improve ourselves in the face of our shortcomings. It is this deep sense of inner harmony that inspires us to engage with the world around us, nurture our relationships with others, and to actively contribute to the well-being of our families, communities, societies, and the natural world.

In the Confucian worldview, the range of relationships includes that with Heaven, with Earth (nature), and with other people. While in the Confucian tradition, Heaven is not a deity like God in monotheistic religions, it is viewed as a cosmic force or principle that governs the universe and serves as the ultimate source of moral guidance for all people, from rulers to ordinary folks. Hence, it is crucial that we conduct ourselves in a manner that aligns with the will of Heaven. The 'Mandate of Heaven' pertains not only to rulers who must fulfill their duties in accordance with the wishes of Heaven but also to ordinary individuals who are expected to live their lives in accordance with the Way of Heaven. Thus, in the way we relate to others and the natural world, we are judged for its alignment with the Will of Heaven and the ethical principles set by Heaven for humanity to follow. Certainly, the more we achieve self-realization, the more our social relationships and our relationship with nature are in harmony with Heaven.

Islam

In Islam, the idea that human beings are the creation of God, the Creator of the universe, is a fundamental belief. This relationship with God has multiple dimensions that have a significant impact on individuals and their relationships with others. According to the Quran, human beings are created in the best of molds (95:4). In Islam, the concept of authentic humanhood entails being a faithful, learned, just, and moral person who fully submits to the Will of God, obedient to God's law, and exercises responsibility toward oneself, neighbors, and creation in accordance with God's teachings. A good human being in Islam is characterized by kindness, compassion, honesty, and justice toward others, regardless of their race, religion, or social status. These virtues should be particularly demonstrated toward the poor, the suffering, and the marginalized. Responsibility also involves being accountable to others, and most importantly, to God. Thus, authentic personhood in Islam requires us to fully embrace our role as God's vicegerent on earth in order to reflect God's qualities in our interactions with other people and with creation.

The Islamic ideal of *insan al-kamil*, which translates to 'the perfect' or 'complete human being,' embodies the concept of authentic humanhood. While this term is commonly associated with Prophet Muhammad, it represents a goal for all Muslims to aspire to. This ideal is attained by striving to become a better person and fulfilling one's potential as a human being, similar to the idea of cultivation in Buddhism and Confucianism. To approach the ideal of *insan al-kamil*, we must lead a meaningful and purposeful life that contributes to the greater good of society. By doing so, we will experience authentic peace and tranquility in our lives as we grow in holiness. Therefore, the ultimate goal of authentic humanhood in Islam is to become the best version of ourself and make positive contributions to society, all while upholding the moral and ethical principles of the faith. In essence, by embracing the concept of authentic humanhood, we can strive to become better individuals and, ultimately, fulfill our true purpose in life.

Christianity

From the Christian perspective, authentic personhood involves the belief that human beings are created in the image of God, with free will, reason, intellect, and creativity. This means that we are expected to reflect God in our dealings with others, and care for creation on behalf of God as stewards. By practicing environmental flourishing and sustainability, we fulfill our responsibility as the *imago Dei.* Our interactions with others must be rooted in love, compassion, and empathy,

recognizing the inherent worth, value, and dignity in every person. To fulfill these duties, we must continually cultivate our spiritual and moral character and maintain a personal relationship with God through prayer, worship, and spiritual reflection.

The Christian notion of authentic personhood is integrally connected to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. While Christianity holds that Jesus Christ as the second person in the Trinity is fully God, he is also fully human as a result of the mystery of the Incarnation. Although Christians are not given detailed injunctions like in Islam, they are called to follow Jesus' commandment of love: to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:37-39). This entails praying for our enemies, forgiving those who harm us, reconciling with those who hate us, and being willing to sacrifice ourselves and our possessions for others. By studying and imitating Jesus in our interactions with others and our relationship with God, we can become more authentic individuals. Ultimately, the Christian understanding of authentic personhood is grounded in the belief that we are created in the image of God, and our purpose is to reflect God's qualities in our relationships with others and with creation. Through our actions and choices, we can become more like Jesus and fulfill our duty as stewards of the earth and loving neighbors to all.

Humanistic Religious Environmentalism

Amidst the examination of religious environmentalism, a question lingers in the air: "Is it anthropocentric?" A weighty query, deserving of an answer both direct and nuanced. And so we search, weighing the scales of Yes and No. Yes, if we conceive of anthropocentrism in its epistemological sense, recognizing that as humans we are inescapably rooted in our interpretations and interactions with nature. As adherents of religion, our focus is inevitably on ourselves, on our relationships with others, with the world around us, and often with the divine. The human experience lies at the heart of religious discourse, and thus must be the starting point of any conversation.

And yet, even as we acknowledge this necessary focus on humanity, the answer is also No. For true religious environmentalism recognizes the interdependence of all beings and the sacredness of all creation, and calls us to honor and protect the earth not just for our own sake, but for the sake of all life. It is an invitation to move beyond anthropocentrism toward a deeper awareness of our interconnectedness, a call to embrace a more holistic vision of the world and our place within it.

But surely, this sense of anthropocentrism is not what most people are concerned about. The sense that keeps environmentalists up at night is reflected in Lynn White's allegation in 1967 that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion in history.[27] Here, White had in mind something more sinister than just a perspectival issue. He implied that Christianity (and the Judeo-Christian tradition as a whole) through its teachings have enabled a worldview that desacralizes nature and encourages the domination and exploitation of nature for human needs. White's accusation kick-started a whole series of efforts on the part of theologians and Scripture scholars to re-examine Biblical evidence as well as Church teachings that either support or refute White's claims.

White's paper continues to reverberate in scholarly discussions and academic debates today, both within and beyond the realm of Christianity. Its influence remains palpable and its implications profound, as evidenced by the numerous citations and references to it in contemporary literature. The enduring impact of White's provocative thesis speaks to the persistent emotional, psychological, and intellectual resonance of his arguments, which have fascinated and challenged the minds of generations of scholars of religion worldwide. As such, it remains a seminal work of scholarship that continues to shape the discourse on the relationship between religion and the environment. It's not so much that White opened Pandora's box. Instead, he probed a sensitive area in our perception of ourselves and the world, like a skilled massage therapist pressing on a trigger point in our muscle. And we cannot help but respond.

White's indictment, although initially directed toward the Judeo-Christian tradition, contained an implication that resonated with people of other faiths. Thus, they couldn't help but ponder the same question: "Is my religious tradition also anthropocentric?" For they too feared that one day, someone might point a finger at them, revealing a similar flaw within their own beliefs or practices. And so, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jains, adherents of African Traditional Religions, and followers of the Chinese traditions all began to question their own assumptions, to dig deeper into their sacred texts, and to reflect on their daily lives in order to see if the same charge would hold in their context.

Many who sought to explore the matter hoped to discover proof that their tradition was not anthropocentric, and if it were, that it could be considered 'weak,' 'benign,' or 'non-objectionable' rather than 'strong,' 'tyrannical,' or 'objectionable.' While some viewed Buddhism as comparable to Deep Ecology and therefore non-anthropocentric, others per-

[27] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-07.

ceived the Buddhist perspective as anthropocentric but weak or benign. The same held true for other traditions placed under scrutiny. As such, religious environmentalism was evaluated using axiomatic principles devised by secular environmental philosophy and ethics. That's why at the conference where I and other scholars of religion presented our papers, the commentator observed that our religious perspectives were all 'anthropocentric.' However, he did not specify what sort of anthropocentrism they exhibited.

This presented us with two possibilities. We could revisit the religious traditions to identify teachings that could render them non-anthropocentric, thus, aligning them more closely with biocentric secular environmental ethics—an improvement, so to speak. Alternatively, we could acknowledge that the religious traditions were irredeemably anthropocentric, which means their viability as an environmentalism would be severely limited. Neither option seems appealing from the perspective of the respective religious traditions concerned.

Even though nearly a decade has passed since that conference, I still find myself troubled by the commentator's conclusion about our papers. It seems to me that he missed the essence of religious environmentalism by subjecting it to the lens of secular environmental philosophy and ethics. It is akin to judging the taste of Thai *padthai* against the standards of Italian spaghetti. Though both are noodles, carbohydrates, and can mitigate any hungry stomach, they are entirely distinct. Religious environmentalism also endeavors to confront the ecological crisis and foster environmental well-being, but it does so within its own metaphysical and epistemological contexts that diverge significantly from those of secular environmental philosophy. Moreover, there is no single religious environmentalism, as religious worldviews also vary widely among and even within themselves.

This does not mean that there are no overlaps among religions as well as between religion and secular environmental worldviews. If commonality is what we aspire for, there is much that can be discovered in serious dialogue. In this book, I have endeavored to explore these areas of commonality among religions, which make religious environmentalisms not only viable but also necessary as approaches to promote environmental flourishing in the contemporary milieu. In the first part of this book, I emphasized the religious task of self-cultivation and human transformation, which are essential for promoting personal, social, and environmental well-being. This pursuit of becoming authentically human is not a narrow preoccupation with individual happiness, nor is it meant to create a class of spiritual elitists who see themselves as superior to others. Unfortunately, some people misunderstand spiritual cultivation and view it in this light. For instance, Gary Snyder, a West-

ern Buddhist, criticized the idea of spiritual cultivation and preferred to focus on the human-nature relationship. According to Snyder, by acknowledging the reality of human-nature interdependence, we can act to promote environmental well-being without the need for spiritual cultivation. Snyder remarked:

> The word *cultivation*, harking to etymologies of *till* and *wheel about*, generally implies a movement away from natural process. In agriculture it is a matter of "arresting succession, establishing monoculture." Applied on the spiritual plane this has meant austerities, obedience to religious authority, long bookish scholarship, or in some traditions a dualistic devotionalism…and an overriding image of divinity being "centralized," a distant and singular point of perfection to aim at. The efforts entailed in such a spiritual practice are sometimes a sort of war against nature—placing the human over the animal and the spiritual over the human. The most sophisticated modern variety of hierarchical spirituality is the work of Father Teilhard de Chardin, who claims a special evolutionary spiritual destiny for humanity under the name of higher consciousness. Some of the most extreme of these Spiritual Darwinists would willingly leave the rest of earth-bound animal and plant life behind to enter an off-the-planet realm transcending biology.[28]

Snyder's words assert that spiritual cultivation and development of consciousness involve practices that are in opposition to nature and represent a movement away from natural processes. He suggested that this approach can result in a hierarchical spirituality that places humans over animals and the spiritual over the human. This can create a class of spiritual aristocrats who reinforce the state of human-nature dualism, causing harm to animal and plant life. The attitude of Snyder and others like him toward Western hierarchy has resulted in the extreme of emphasizing the relational dimension of human-nature relationship at the exclusion of the dimension of personal cultivation in a Buddhist environmental spirituality. This, however, is quite unfortunate, for without development and transformation of consciousness, Buddhism itself would not exist. After all, the purpose of every devout Buddhist is to practice self-cultivation in order to get rid of unwholesome tendencies within oneself, to purify one's activities of body and mind, and to achieve transformation of consciousness.

---

[28] Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1990), 98.

In Chapter Two, we discussed the program of cultivation, known as the 'threefold learning' (*ti-sikkhā*), in which individuals train themselves in morality, meditation, and insight. Buddhahood, the state of perfect enlightenment, involves awakening the mind to reality and freeing it from defilements. The historical Buddha, also known as the 'Awakened One,' was the first to share his enlightenment and teach others how to cultivate themselves to achieve the same experience. Consciousness development is an essential and fundamental aspect of Buddhism, and it is incorrect to assume that all forms of consciousness cultivation result in practitioners becoming 'Spiritual Darwinists' ready to dominate and subjugate nature according to their own desires.

Spiritual cultivation, rather than causing dualism as some fear, is key to promoting a deeper understanding of the human-nature relationship. I have tried to demonstrate this in all the previous chapters in this book, and will continue to explicate the point further in the remaining chapters. Thus, self-cultivation is not only fundamental to religious spirituality, but also necessary for religious environmentalism. Rejecting cultivation is actually rejecting the path that can lead us to understanding ourselves and our relationship with the natural environment and developing the virtuous qualities to act in accordance with that understanding. Self-cultivation is the antidote to a myopic, egocentric focus on one's own concerns without regard for others or the transcendent. In terms of our relationship with nature, it is through self-cultivation that we can actualize our envisioned relationship with nature through concrete, virtue-based actions, rather than just espousing noble words. All four religious traditions examined in this study demonstrate that self-cultivation is the key to ultimate transformation, which in turn leads to a transformative relationship with the natural world.

The religious approach to environmentalism discussed in this book, as well as many other traditions not mentioned, is not anthropocentric in the negative connotation that the term is commonly employed in environmental discourse and has been ingrained in people's consciousness. Although the term has a justifiable sense, as already presented above, it remains that the word comes with a great deal of baggage that any association with it proves to be detrimental to the religious approach as an environmentalism. Therefore, I propose to characterize religious environmentalism as 'humanistic' in order to communicate more fully and accurately the nature of this approach. Describing religious environmentalism as humanistic emphasizes the importance of the human person as an agent with inherent value and dignity. However, human agency does not mean that the sole focus is on meeting human needs and desires. Instead, humanistic environmentalism in the religious context emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings in the universe,

including both biotic and abiotic entities, and both corporeal and spiritual aspects. This approach recognizes that every being that comprises the existent reality is deserving of respect and care. By embracing this interconnectedness, humanistic environmentalism promotes a holistic approach to environmentalism that prioritizes the well-being of the entire ecosystem.

To be humanistic is to embody the noble calling of humanity, as envisioned by the sacred traditions that inspire us. It is a vision that eschews egoism, narcissism, and human chauvinism. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems."[29] When we prioritize human interests above all else, we sow the seeds of destruction. However, true humanism requires us to transcend selfishness and myopism and recognize ourselves as part of a vast, interconnected cosmos. This profound recognition influences the way we treat others in our daily interactions, our development activities, and the way we use the natural goods of our world.

The words of Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic, echo this truth: "You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop."[30] Indeed, religious humanism offers us the possibility of realizing our unique identity while also becoming the medium through which the rest of the cosmos is reflected. Only by embracing the spiritual dimensions of our existence and recognizing the interconnectedness of all life can we truly become conduits of life itself. This requires us to cultivate a sense of awe and wonder toward the cosmos, recognizing our place within it, and dedicating ourselves to loving and compassionate action. As we live out this vision of humanism, we can help create a world that is more just, equitable, and sustainable, where all living beings can thrive and flourish. Our ultimate purpose is to attain the fullest expression of our humanity, by striving toward moral maturity, cultivating virtues, and embodying the image of the divine within us. Only then can we unlock our innate potential for goodness and compassion, and use it to uplift the world around us.

---

[29] Quoted in Enotes, "Mahatma Gandhi," https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/difference-between-what-we-do-what-we-capable-282415

[30] Quoted in Matt Auron, "Evolution Is Everywhere," *Medium*, December 15, 2017, https://medium.com/@mattauron/you-are-not-a-drop-in-the-ocean-you-are-the-entire-ocean-in-a-drop-jalaluddin-rumi-a70feaa36936

PART II

BECOMING RELATIONAL

CHAPTER 7

BECOMING INTERCULTURAL

The world we inhabit today is a constantly changing landscape, marked by an incessant flux of people and ideas. Millions of individuals are on the move both domestically and internationally in search of new opportunities, to escape persecution, or to experience firsthand diverse cultures and ways of life. Digital realms serve as channels for countless others, bridging distances that once seemed insurmountable, and connecting individuals from every corner of the globe. Yet, as humanity journeys forth, it confronts a myriad of challenges: geopolitical tension threatens to fracture nations, interreligious and interethnic conflicts sow seeds of division and discord, while the unchecked spread of misinformation, a veritable 'infodemic,' erodes public trust and corrodes the foundations of civil society. Meanwhile, the natural world, long neglected and exploited, suffers under the weight of environmental degradation, an existential crisis that demands immediate attention and action. In the face of these pressing issues, the need for human solidarity and cooperation has never been greater.

Amidst the turbulence of our times, a pressing need arises for a new paradigm of social interaction that confronts and addresses the myriad challenges that beset us. The notion of interculturality has gained traction among social scientists as a relevant concept for navigating our current milieu. Recognizing its significance, UNESCO has endorsed interculturality as a part of the 2005 Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. In the document, 'interculturality' is defined as "the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect."[1]

On the surface, it may seem that interculturality only serves to promote social harmony. However, a closer examination will prove that interculturality has both social and environmental dimensions and can be effectively employed as a paradigm to promote environmental flourishing as well. Beyond its obvious benefits in fostering diverse cultural exchange, interculturality possesses an untapped environmental potency, one that merits recognition in order to fully appreciate its transformative potential in today's world. By embracing interculturality, we

[1] UNESCO, "Interculturality," https://en.unesco.org/creativity/interculturality

can unlock a wealth of possibilities for a brighter future, both socially and ecologically.

Understanding Interculturality

Interculturality is not a new concept. It was introduced and began gaining traction in the academic and social spheres during the late 20th century. It emerged as a response to the growing recognition of cultural diversity, globalization, and the need for effective interaction and understanding among groups and individuals from different cultures. Since the last decade of the previous century, and notably in the early 2000s, there has been a growing focus and discourse on interculturality in the global North, predominantly centered around the notions of diversity and, more specifically, cultural diversity.[2] Thus, interest in interculturality spans across corporate companies, international institutions, and organizations, as they increasingly recognize its importance in fostering diversity and inclusivity. Organizations that embrace interculturality tend to have a learning-oriented culture that emphasizes flexibility, open-mindedness, and exploration, and can equip themselves with the ability to adapt and innovate.[3] Similarly, a McKinsey report affirms the strong business case for both gender diversity and ethnic and cultural diversity in corporate leadership—and shows that this business case continues to strengthen.[4] The most diverse companies are now more likely than ever to outperform less diverse peers on profitability. International organizations like the UNESCO have also emphasized that intercultural dialogue is necessary to address global issues such as poverty, terrorism, and forced displacement.[5]

The significance of interculturality is not limited to organizational settings. In the field of education, intercultural competency has become a central focus. Universities and educational institutions are increasingly incorporating intercultural training programs and courses into their

---

2 Gunther Dietz, *Multiculturalism, Interculturality and Diversity in Education: An Anthropological Approach* (Münster: Waxmann, 2009).

3 J. Yo-Jud Cheng and Boris Groysberg, "Research: What Inclusive Companies Have in Common," *Harvard Business Review* (2021), https://hbr.org/2021/06/research-what-inclusive-companies-have-in-common

4 D. Hunt, S. Dixon-Fyle, S. Prince, and K. Dolan, *Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters* (McKinsey and Company, 2020), https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/diversity%20and%20inclusion/diversity%20wins%20how%20inclusion%20matters/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters-vf.pdf

5 UNESCO, "We Need to Talk: Measuring Intercultural Dialogue for Peace and Inclusion," https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382874

curricula, aiming to prepare students for a globalized and diverse world.[6] Research emphasizes the importance of developing intercultural competence among students, as it enhances their ability to navigate and interact effectively in multicultural environments.[7] Intercultural communication plays a crucial role in facilitating understanding and collaboration among individuals from different cultures. Scholars have extensively studied various aspects of intercultural communication, including non-verbal communication, language barriers, and cultural norms. Notable thinkers in intercultural communication include Edward T. and Mildred R. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, John Mole, Richard D. Lewis, and M. Bennett. These prominent scholars have significantly contributed to the development of the theoretical framework in the field of cross-cultural communication.[8] Their groundbreaking work establishes the foundation for cross-cultural analysis, providing invaluable insights into the intricate interplay between culture and communication, while also informing strategies for effective intercultural living and working.

Culture is a fundamental aspect of human life and a basic concept of examination across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and various social sciences. Ways of defining culture with different nuances and emphases are also many. The anthropologist James Spradley defined culture as "the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior."[9] Louis Luzbetak, a Catholic priest and cultural anthropologist, called culture "a socially shared design for living."[10] Because that design is not shared by everyone in the world but only a certain group of people, in many parts of the world, even a short trip outside one's province already renders one a stranger in a strange land.

---

6 Darla Deardorff and Lily Arasaratnam-Smith, eds., *Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Approaches, Assessment and Application* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

7 Darla Deardorff, "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10, no. 3 (2006): 241-66.

8 Brian J. Hurn and Barry Tomalin, *Key Thinkers in Cross-Cultural Communication* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

9 James Spradley, "Ethnography and Culture," in *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, 14th edition, eds. J. Spradley and D.W. McCurdy (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2012), 9.

10 Louis Luzbetak, *Church and Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 155.

As the world undergoes a profound shift from monocultural to multicultural societies, it has become increasingly vital for people from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage in positive interactions with each other. The concept of interculturality has emerged as a crucial tool for promoting mutual understanding and respect between different cultures, both in secular and religious spheres. This paradigm shift speaks to society's growing awareness of the rich tapestry of cultures that exist within communities worldwide. Thailand, my home for the past 17 years, serves as a prime example of a country that embraces cultural diversity. The bustling metropolis of Bangkok, with its nearly eleven million inhabitants, is a multiplicity of Thai people from all 77 provinces, expatriates from every corner of the globe, millions of migrant workers, and a constant stream of international tourists. Yet, impressive diversity can also be found in Thailand's more remote provinces in the North and Northeast as they receive people from all over the world. The Thai experience is undoubtedly echoed in many other countries around the globe, where cultural heterogeneity is becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Cultural exchange is a complex process that takes various forms depending on multiple factors. For instance, when migrants move to a new country, they may voluntarily adopt the dominant culture's beliefs, values, behaviors, and mannerisms, or they may be forced to assimilate. Take the example of Vietnamese migrants to the United States which began at the end of the Vietnam War. After a period of time in America, they inevitably adopt some American practices and language. When they return to Vietnam for visits, the locals often easily spot them as '*Việt Kiều*' (overseas Vietnamese). Their appearance, gait, and physical gestures are often unmistakable, revealing the influence of American culture on their identity. As someone who was born in Vietnam but grew up in California, I had the chance to return to Vietnam for the first time in 1999, and I can attest to this phenomenon firsthand.

The assimilation process of Vietnamese Americans involves a set of complex dynamics that doesn't reflect an all-out surrender of Vietnamese culture to the American way of life. It's more of an integration that allows for the retention of their roots while adopting aspects of the dominant culture. Vietnamese Americans maintain their language, build their own temples, organize vibrant cultural festivals, open various businesses, and even operate their own media channels. Older Vietnamese Americans who are fluent in both Vietnamese and English can easily flip between Vietnamese-language news broadcasts and those in English, be it CNN or Fox News, depending on their political inclination. But this phenomenon is not unique to the Vietnamese community alone. Other ethnic groups also adopt this approach, making the United

States a truly multicultural salad bowl. It's no wonder the US is renowned worldwide for embracing and celebrating diversity.

The American society has been a mosaic of cultures since its inception, with countless migrants from all corners of the world arriving on its shores. However, cultural exchange and assimilation are not unique to this great nation alone. Thailand, for example, has a rich history of successfully integrating various ethnic groups into its society, thanks to a common language—Central Thai—that unites them all. Although regional dialects persist among the populace, formal activities such as classroom lectures, government meetings, and religious ceremonies demand the use of the Central Thai dialect, creating a cohesive cultural and linguistic identity. Even those who migrated to Thailand from neighboring countries like China and Vietnam have embraced the Thai way of life, adopting Thai names and identities. While cultural diffusion has allowed these groups to absorb aspects of Thai culture, they also proudly maintain their own customs, such as unique foods and cultural celebrations. Thailand may be primarily a Theravada Buddhist country, but it also has a vibrant Chinese Buddhist community that builds numerous Chinese style Buddhist temples throughout the Kingdom. The Chinese and Vietnamese communities in Thailand also celebrate important cultural events like the Mid-Autumn Festival and Lunar New Year with joy and enthusiasm. This fascinating blend of cultures is a testament to the power of cultural exchange and the unique identity it creates.

With a desire for a holistic approach to handling cultural encounters, social scientists have adopted interculturality as a practical paradigm. Interculturality prioritizes relationships founded on exchange, dialogue, and mutual transformation, going beyond the superficial aspects of cultural exchange. Instead, it refers to an ongoing and complex process of growth that unfolds as individuals from diverse cultural groups interact. It also transcends mere peaceful coexistence in a state of 'separate but equal' and delves deeper than surface-level interactions like sharing food or music. True interculturality cannot be achieved through forced unity that disregards cultural differences. Attempting to deny or suppress these distinctions will not promote unity, nor will adopting a defensive or separatist mindset. In reality, interculturality arises from the integration of diverse cultural elements to create something entirely new, without diminishing the worth of each individual cultural component.[11]

[11] Daniel Pietrzak, "Interculturality and Internationality: A Utopia or a Constructive Tension for a Franciscan Missiology," 2016, Paper given at the International Missionary Congress OFMConv, Cochin, India.

Thus, in interculturality, the primary dynamic that defines cultural encounters is mutuality. Interculturality does not support the idea that one has to give up one's identity in order to become the same as the dominant group for the sake of homogeneity. On the other hand, interculturality also rejects the notion that every culture is so different that no common ground can be established among the various cultures. Those advocating the intercultural paradigm espouse that although each culture contains its uniqueness, there are cultural overlaps (analogy) that make the cultures both different and the same. According to Robert Kisala, "The use of intercultural (and its derivatives interculturality, interculturation) serves to emphasize and make more explicit the essential mutuality of the process of cultural interaction on both the personal and societal level. It also makes explicit that the goal of this process is neither assimilation nor the ghettoization of different people or cultures, but the appreciation and acceptance of similarities and differences."[12]

As mentioned above, the United States and many other countries are known as multicultural societies. What this term implies is that in a particular geographical space such as a city or a country, there is a plurality of ethnic groups or cultures living side by side. In multiculturalism, in addition to co-existence, there is often an emphasis on mutual tolerance. Multiculturality can also characterize entities such as NGOs, tech companies, and religious congregations. In these organizations, 'internationality' is also a defining characteristic because their multiculturality often results from members coming from various national backgrounds living and working together. Obviously, multiculturality can exist independently of internationality. An American company can be extremely multicultural without having any of its employees holding a foreign passport. The United States Congress can be said to be a multicultural institution with its makeup of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, etc.

What advocates of interculturality have pointed out is that multiculturality and internationality only reflect the cultural and national constituents of the community but do not affirm anything about the relationships among its members. When speaking about multiculturality, Anthony Gittins observed:

> The word multicultural can apply to a *de facto* social reality without disclosing anything about the quality of relationships involved. Millions of people live in multicultural cities or neighborhoods, side by side with people from different

[12] Robert Kisala, "Formation for Intercultural Life and Mission," *Verbum SVD* 50, no. 3 (2009): 335.

> cultures, but without ever trying to learn another language or encounter their neighbors in other than a perfunctory or conventionally civic fashion. Multiculturalism has been described as "living together separately."[13]

In the modern world, multiculturality and internationality are not difficult to achieve since the advancement of technology, the ease of travel, and the need for transnational migration has made this a common present-day reality. Even in countries such as Japan and South Korea, which are known for their homogeneity, notable changes in cultural landscapes are occurring due to migration. As Japanese society is aging, the need for workers has brought millions of people from other parts of the world (Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Brazilians, etc.) into the country to keep the Japanese economy afloat. In countless other cities around the world, there is much evidence of internationality and multiculturality—food sold in shopping centers, languages heard on the street, the ethnic makeup of passengers riding the metro and so on—but little strong evidence that confirms the existence of interculturality.

In interculturality, the emphasis is not on socio-cultural makeup but the dynamics taking place among people of different cultural backgrounds. Lazar Stanislaus and Christian Tauchner asserted that interculturality entails

> a sustained interaction of people raised in different cultural backgrounds that leads to mutually reciprocal relationships among and between cultures; people learn and grow together, mutually enrich one another by these learnings and integration, and challenge one another on the cultural value differences and practices that gear toward mutual transformation.[14]

Interculturality and Social Flourishing

Interculturality, as a defining model for cultural exchange at both individual and communal levels, is immensely beneficial for fostering social flourishing. It transcends the mere coexistence or tolerance of different cultures and embraces transformative dynamics. In an intercultural exchange, participants actively engage with each other, learn, and undergo growth and transformation, being shaped and molded by

---

[13] Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), xiv.

[14] Lazar T. Stanislaus and Christian Tauchner, eds., *Becoming Intercultural: Perspectives in Mission* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2021), xiv.

each other's experiences.[15] In other words, interculturality involves an active process of relationship building that embraces reciprocity, appreciation, and celebration of each other's cultures. It goes beyond mere recognition of cultural uniqueness and tolerance, instead utilizing the cultural resources of both parties involved in the interaction as a means to promote transformation and growth. Through mutual transformation, cultural encounters allow individuals to be challenged by one another and recognize elements of their own culture that may not promote the values of peace, justice, and equality.[16] This reciprocal exchange of perspectives and experiences is a fundamental aspect of intercultural communication, fostering greater understanding and respect for the diversity of humanity.

Thus, living in our globalized, multicultural world, merely praising the importance of internationality or multiculturality within communities and societies is no longer sufficient. The concept of interculturality, as presented above, is highly relevant to our contemporary sociocultural context, as it delves deeper into the realm of relationships rather than superficial community affiliation. Through intercultural encounters, a mutual gifting takes place, leading to the creation of a new synthesis. This synthesis not only creates a positive atmosphere within the community but also fosters various collaborations within the multicultural community. The paradigm of interculturality offers a fresh perspective, emphasizing the importance of meaningful connections, cultural exchange, and mutual respect as key elements in building a thriving, diverse community.

Interculturality offers a solution to the zero-sum mentality derived from game theory, which suggests that one person's gain necessarily comes at the expense of another person's loss. In a multicultural society, this mindset hinders progress and limits the potential for flourishing, as it pits groups against each other in competition. A mindset that operates on the premise of zero-sum can have damaging effects on social and economic development by eroding the foundations of trust and cooperation that are essential for a thriving society. This viewpoint can also lead to a fundamental shift in one's perception of social relationships,

---

[15] Lazar Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, eds., *Intercultural Living* (New Delhi–Sankt Augustin: ISPCK–Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), xxiv.

[16] Lazar Stanislaus, "Interculturality in the Post-Pandemic World," in *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond,* ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2022), 52.

resulting in increased hostility, a focus on dominance, and even encouraging the use of aggressive, non-cooperative approaches.[17]

Interculturality not only fosters a cooperative mindset that opposes the zero-sum mentality, but it also has the power to combat negative tendencies such as ethnocentrism and narrow nationalism, which can hinder social flourishing. The concept of ethnocentrism is not a new one in the field of social sciences. It was first introduced by the American sociologist William G. Sumner in his seminal work *Folkways* back in 1906. Sumner defined ethnocentrism as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." Ethnocentrism can be extremely detrimental to social flourishing as it involves constantly viewing other cultural groups through the lens of one's own culture, and often in a negative light.

To hold ethnocentric beliefs is not necessarily negative, but in reality, it often leads individuals to think that their race, ethnicity, or culture is the most significant or superior to others. Common expressions of ethnocentrism include claims such as "my language is much richer than another language," "my food is much more exquisite than another food," and "my cultural celebration is much more impressive than another celebration." While these statements may appear harmless, chronic and more intense ethnocentric beliefs can significantly impede cultural exchange. This is particularly concerning when individuals judge other cultural practices, values, and beliefs to be wrong simply because they do not align with their own principles. When such assumptions are held by those in power, it can result in public belittling of another cultural group or depriving them of their rights.

Ethnocentrism can take on a more insidious form when it pervades popular media, leading to negative portrayals of cultural groups on television, in movies, or on social media. But when it reaches its most extreme levels, ethnocentrism can result in violence against a targeted group. Persecution, exploitation, discriminatory laws, and policies aimed at depriving certain groups of their basic human rights are all potential consequences of unchecked ethnocentrism. In the worst cases, it can lead to ethnic genocide. History is rife with examples, from the systematic extermination of Jews by Adolf Hitler during the 1940s to the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the ongoing attacks against the

[17] Patricia Andrews Fearon, Friedrich M. Götz, Gregory Serapio-García, and David Good, "Zero-Sum Mindset & Its Discontents," *The Global Policy Forum*, 2021, https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/publications/zero-sum-mindset-and-its-discontents, 43.

Hazaras in Afghanistan.[18] These atrocities serve as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences that can arise from extreme ethnocentrism.

Another negative social tendency which interculturality aims to counter is narrow nationalism. While it is natural for people to take pride in their national identity, excessive emphasis on national identity can lead to negative consequences. Narrow nationalism, for instance, amplifies this sentiment, encouraging a sense of hostility toward other nations and peoples that may be perceived as a threat to one's own nation's welfare. This is not just limited to hostility between different countries but can also occur within a nation between citizens belonging to different cultural or religious groups. In such situations, one group may view itself as the sole representative of the national identity, with any other cultural group viewed as a negative influence on the purity and welfare of the nation.

A tragic example of the destructive consequences of narrow nationalism can be seen in Myanmar, where a militant Buddhist movement led by U Wirathu has incited violence against ethnic Muslim Rohingyas. The MaBaTha (The Burmese acronyms for the Patriotic "Association of Protection of Race and Religion") has actively encouraged Buddhists to take action against Muslims in order to 'protect' the Myanmar Buddhist race and religion. The Rohingyas have been particularly targeted, portrayed as invaders seeking to destroy Myanmar's Buddhist heritage and identity.[19] This violent campaign began in 2016 and reached its peak in August 2017, resulting in the death of 9,000 Rohingyas and the displacement of a million more who fled to neighboring Bangladesh in search of safety.[20]

Despite its initial hesitance, in March 2022, the United States formally accused Myanmar of committing genocide against the Rohingyas, which prompted punitive measures against the country's military-led government. The officials in Myanmar had the support of militant Buddhists who believed that Myanmar's Buddhism is linked to the country's ethnicity and identity and needed protection from the threat of conversion. The convergence of narrow nationalism, ethnocentrism, and

---

[18] Mohammad Hussain Hasrat, "Over a Century of Persecution: Massive Human Rights Violation Against Hazaras in Afghanistan," *Kabul Press*, May 15, 2019, https://www.kabulpress.org/article240586.html

[19] Zo Bilay, "The Characteristics of Violent Religious Nationalism: A Case Study of Mabatha against Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar," *Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022): 90.

[20] Lara Jakes, "Myanmar's Military Committed Genocide Against Rohingya, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, March 21, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/us/politics/myanmar-genocide-biden.html

religious identity is evident in this particular context.[21] Narrow nationalism seeks to prioritize the interests of one's own nation without regard for others. This kind of nationalism can lead to violence and bloodshed that can completely destroy a community or country. The dynamics of ethnocentrism can also be observed in narrow nationalism. The actions of officials in Myanmar illustrate the dangers of such nationalistic tendencies when it is driven by ethnic or religious identity, leading to violent campaigns against other groups.

In short, by adopting interculturality as a paradigm of cultural interaction, we can create a world where diversity is celebrated and individuals are empowered to learn from one another. It is a means of cultivating our collective cultural intelligence and fostering social flourishing. By engaging with different cultures, we can challenge our assumptions, broaden our perspectives, and create a space where mutual respect and understanding thrive. Interculturality is about more than just tolerating others; it is about actively seeking out diverse perspectives and valuing them as important contributions to our global community. It is a process of continuous learning and growth, where the exchange of ideas and experiences allows for the development of new knowledge and insights.

Furthermore, interculturality is not a one-way street. It involves both giving and receiving, and recognizing the value of each individual's unique cultural background. By embracing interculturality, we can create a world where individuals and communities are empowered to flourish and reach their full potential. In essence, interculturality is a call to action, inviting us to engage with the world around us and to embrace the richness of human diversity. Through this process, we can create a more just, equitable, and inclusive society that values the presence and contributions of all individuals and cultures.

Interculturality and Environmental Flourishing

The Relationship between Culture and Nature

Although the socio-cultural dimension of interculturality is evident, the significance of interculturality extends beyond the social and cultural realms to also encompass the environmental sphere. While interculturality promotes social flourishing by opposing negative tendencies such as ethnocentrism and narrow nationalism, it can serve as a guide for responsible environmental behavior by discouraging attitudes that

[21] Paul Fuller, "The Narratives of Ethnocentric Buddhist Identity," *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 20 (2018): 25.

justify the reckless treatment of nature and natural resources. Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that social and environmental well-being are inextricably linked. Pope Francis, for instance, has emphasized that the natural ecology is intertwined with the human ecology, which requires an "integral ecology" that takes into account both environmental and social factors. "We are not facing two separate crises, one environmental and the other social," said Francis. "But rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (LS 139). Thus, the well-being of one is intimately connected to that of the other. Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff was instrumental in establishing the intimate link between social and environmental concerns. In his 1997 book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Boff extended the purview of liberation theology to encompass the natural environment. His work helped to bridge the gap between social and environmental activism, revealing that both issues must be addressed in tandem in order to achieve true flourishing for both humans and the planet. Boff explicated:

> Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: they start from two bleeding wounds. The wound of poverty breaks the social fabric of millions and millions of poor people around the world. The other wound, systematic assault on the Earth, breaks down the balance of the planet, which is under threat from the plundering of development as practiced by contemporary global societies. Both lines of reflection and practice have as their starting point a cry: the cry of the poor for life, freedom, and beauty … and the cry of the Earth groaning under oppression.[22]

"We won't have a society if we destroy the environment."[23] Therefore, it is important to advocate for a paradigm that would not just promote either one but not the other. Interculturality, I believe, can effectively respond to this need, providing thoughtful consideration is given to all the dimensions embedded in this paradigm. However, before discussing how interculturality benefits the work of safeguarding the environment, it is important to take a step backward to consider, from a philosophical perspective, the nature of the relationship between nature and culture, if any. Indeed, culture and nature are distinguishable from one another on many levels. As Holmes Rolston III pointed out, "Information in nature travels intergenerationally on genes; information in culture travels neurally as persons are educated into transmissible cultures. The de-

---

[22] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

[23] This quote is often attributed to the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, but the source has not been verified.

terminants of animal and plant behavior are never anthropological, political, economic, technological, scientific, philosophical, ethical, or religious."[24] It is only in the human species that fields of knowledge exist, which are systematically organized and passed on through the intellectual task of education, often in schools and universities, but also in a whole host of settings that make up our life contexts. In nature, while there are schools of fish, transmission of knowledge certainly does not take on the same content or process. Despite certain aspects of human culture resembling nature, for example, the use of the law of aerodynamics by both a Boeing 777 and wild geese, Rolston observed, "It is only philosophical confusion to remark that both processes are equally natural… No interesting philosophical analysis is being done until there is insightful distinction into the differences between the ways humans fly in their engineered, financed jets and the ways geese fly with their genetically constructed, metabolically powered wings."[25]

While no thoughtful person would ever equivocate about human culture and nature, not all environmental philosophers are comfortable with what they perceive as an undue 'dualism' conceived regarding culture and nature. J. Baird Callicott, for example, called for putting human beings back into the fold of nature rather than perpetuating a "sharp dichotomy between man and nature." Instead of perceiving nature as 'other,' Callicott asserted that "a new dynamic and systemic postmodern concept of nature, which includes rather than excludes human beings, is presently taking shape."[26] The American biologist, ethologist, behavioral ecologist and writer Marc Bekoff remarked that "[hu]man is a part of nature, not apart from nature."[27] These sentiments echo that of Deep Ecology which is "often grounded in an intuitive experience of nature as a unified totality that we can relate to and that in some sense we are. A sense of being part of a vast, inclusive whole can enable one to drop a confined view of the self, give a feeling of being fully a part of and at home in nature, and motivate environmental activism."[28] The French philosopher J. Schaeffer called for the "end of

---

[24] Holmes Rolston III, "Nature and Culture in Environmental Ethics," in *Ethics: The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, Vol. 1 (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), 152.

[25] Ibid.

[26] J. Baird Callicott, "La Nature est morte, vive la nature!" *Hastings Center Report* 22, no. 5 (September/October 1992): 16-18.

[27] Mark Bekoff, "Redecorating Nature: Reflections on Science, Holism, Community, Humility, Reconciliation, Spirit, Compassion, and Love," *Human Ecology Review* 7, no. 1 (2000): 59-67.

[28] David Landis Barnhill, "Relational Holism: Huayan Buddhism and Deep Ecology," in *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred*

the human exception" by recognizing that human beings are just living beings among others. According to Schaeffer, the social and cultural aspects of the human person do not disconnect us from our biological reality since "the social and the cultural are deeply dependent on the biological."[29] The above articulations demonstrate a longing for human beings and whatever makes up the human reality to be grounded in the larger reality of nature, to which we still can find true connections.

Indeed, the idea that human beings are not ontologically removed from nature has not only been stated by individuals from the secular fields of environmental philosophy and ecology but also religion. In his exhortation *Laudate Deum* released in 2023, Pope Francis reiterated the same sentiment that he made in the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Francis asserted that nature cannot be seen as "a mere 'setting' in which we develop our lives and our projects. For 'we are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it' (LS, 139), and thus 'we [do] not look at the world from without but from within' (LS, 220). This itself excludes the idea that the human being is extraneous, a foreign element capable only of harming the environment. Human beings must be recognized as a part of nature. Human life, intelligence and freedom are elements of the nature that enriches our planet, part of its internal workings and its equilibrium" (LD 25-26).

Similarly, in an article titled "Buddhist Solutions for the Twenty-first Century," the esteemed Thai professor monk in the Theravada tradition, Phra Prayudh Payutto, pointed out that one of the causes for the modern-day environmental crisis is "the perception that mankind is separate from nature, and must control, conquer or manipulate nature according to his desires."[30] In order to address this issue, he asserted, human beings must perceive themselves as being part of nature. "If we have the insight that we are part of nature, and we see that changes in nature must also have an effect on us, our actions will be constrained, clearly defined and balanced."[31] Likewise, the late Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh quipped, "We classify other animals and living beings as nature, acting as if we ourselves are not part of it. Then we pose the question 'How should we deal with Nature?' We should deal

---

Ground, eds. David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 78.

29 J.-M. Schaeffer, *La fin de l'exception humaine* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 11.

30 Prayudh Payutto, "Buddhist Solutions for the Twenty-First Century," 1994, http://www.thawsischool.com/old/dhamma_English/pdf/P.%20A.%20Payutto%20in%20English %20for%20Web/Buddhist%20Solutions%20for%20the%20Twenty%20First%20Century.pdf, 92.

31 Ibid., 107.

with nature the way we should deal with ourselves! We should not harm ourselves; we should not harm nature… Human beings and nature are inseparable."[32]

It should be noted that this phrase 'part of nature' may not mean exactly the same for each person who employs it, once metaphysical assumptions of each circumstance are carefully examined. And even if everyone recognizes that human beings are part of nature, the outcome in terms of human-nature relationship and ethical responsibilities may vary significantly between a deep ecologist and an Islamic environmentalist. However, what all these sentiments portray is an intuitive sense that human beings and nature should not be juxtaposed to one another in a dichotomy. There is a desire to recognize some level of continuity and interconnectedness between human beings and everything else that we lump together as nature. Despite the fact that human beings have evolved in ways that make them seem drastically removed from nature, those bonds may not have completely been broken and reconnection is still possible if only human beings realize their inextricable relationship with nature.

Because human beings are part of a grand natural order, human culture is also connected to nature. Freya Matthews contended, "It is no longer controversial to state that a human individual is essentially a cultural being, and that culture is an emanation of Nature."[33] Val Plumwood said that human culture is embedded in nature and there should not be a dualism between culture and nature.[34] The sentiments of Matthews and Plumwood highlight a perceived necessity for human beings to come to the realization that they are indeed part of nature. This realization, many believe, would contribute significantly to reversing environmental degradation borne out of human recklessness and inconsiderateness. Indeed, the vast opus of writings concerning humanity and nature in the last 50 years consistently point out that the primary cause of the modern environmental crisis is traced to anthropocentrism demonstrated in industrial and technological developments that have caused human alienation from nature.

This self-imposed alienation, however, does not reflect objective reality. This becomes most dramatically evident when a farmer takes a

---

[32] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 41.

[33] Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble Books, 1991), 138.

[34] Val Plumwood, "Wilderness Skepticism and Wilderness Dualism," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 670.

walk in the forest and gets swallowed whole by a giant python, and becomes its dinner. Human beings may see themselves as distinct to the rest of nature either due to being divinely endowed with certain qualities or as a consequence of evolutionary happenstance, but from the view of other animals (with the exception of house pets), human beings are often seen as either predator or prey. This perception of other moving entities in the environment is the way most animals maintain their existence. Thus, when we see birds constantly hopping from branch to branch in a tree, don't think that they are playing or exercising to maintain their health. They are in fact either looking for a meal or avoiding being one. Nowadays, human beings have managed to insulate ourselves from nature to such an extent that we no longer feel that we have any part in the natural food chain. However, once in a while, we get to have a dramatic encounter with nature that serves as an effective reminder that we are not as removed from nature as we may believe. Take the example of an Indonesian farmer being swallowed whole by a giant python while returning home from work as a case in point.[35]

For some segments of humanity, however, the assertion that human beings are part of nature does not need forceful convincing. For them, their cultural life is intimately tied to the natural environment. While nature may not need human beings, human beings cannot exist without nature, which was present billions of years before the various ancestors of *homo sapiens* arrived onto the scene. Rolston said, "Nature is the womb of culture, but a womb that humans never entirely leave."[36] Therefore, the construction of culture will always be dependent on nature in some ways. Rolston wrote:

> No matter what kind of exodus humans make from nature, they are going to remain male or female, with hearts and livers, and blood in their veins, walking on two feet, and eating energies that were originally captured in photosynthesis by chlorophyll. Culture remains tethered to the biosystem and the options within built environments, however expanded, provide no release from nature. Humans depend on air flow, water cycles, sunshine, nitrogen-fixation, decomposition bacteria, fungi, the ozone layer, food chains, insect pollination, soils, earthworms, climates, oceans, and

[35] Mary Bowerman and Sean Rossman, "Indonesian Farmer Swallowed Whole by 23-Foot-Long Python," *USA Today*, March 29, 2017, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/03/29/missing-indonesian-man-swallowed-whole-reticulated-python/99771300/

[36] Rolston, "Nature and Culture in Environmental Ethics," 154.

> genetic materials. An ecology always lies in the background of culture, natural givens that underlie everything else.[37]

The connection with nature is not only demonstrated in the biological dimensions of human culture but also in the spiritual dimensions. Hundreds of millions of people around the world believe that certain natural features (mountains, rivers, forests, individual trees, etc.) are abodes of the spirits that must be respected. This belief is part of a worldview classified as 'animism' which describes the widespread perspective of numerous indigenous peoples that the spiritual and physical world are inherently connected, and that all material phenomena have agency.

Animism is an anthropological construct by academics studying cultures and religions rather than a concept that the indigenous people articulate on their own. In many cultures, such beliefs continue to exist even after the adoption of a formal religion by the people. When I was a parish priest in Nong Bua Lamphu, a small province in the Northeast of Thailand, I served a community consisting of local people and residents of the HIV/AIDS center and orphanage built on the same grounds as the church. Except for the few orphans who wanted to be baptized as Catholics, most of the residents—both adults and children—were Buddhist. One day, I noticed several items placed at the base of a banana tree behind the rectory. A ribbon adorned the trunk, while various soft drinks and incense were placed at the foot of the tree. Having knowledge of the local culture, I recognized this as an offering to the spirit, but I was unsure of the reason behind it. When I asked one of the youth volunteers about the offering, he explained that it was placed there by a resident of the HIV/AIDS center named Pan. Apparently, a few days prior, Pan had been searching for trees on the church grounds that could help him obtain the lucky number for the next lottery drawing. He came across the banana grove and made a scratch on one of the trees' bark. To his surprise, the sap that oozed out of the incision formed a specific number that he believed would bring him luck. He purchased a lottery ticket with that number and ended up winning. Feeling grateful for the help he received from the spirit residing in the banana tree, Pan returned with offerings as a gesture of his gratitude.

The instance involving the HIV/AIDS center resident is not an isolated case in Thailand, a self-proclaimed Buddhist country. Although the nation has embraced Theravada Buddhism, an atheistic religion, animistic beliefs are widespread among its people. This is evident from the presence of spirit houses in countless homes and businesses across the land. These shrine-like and intricately decorated structures can be

[37] Ibid., 155.

seen by the roadside, on farms, and by rivers, erected as tributes to the guardian spirits believed to reside in those localities. By building these houses and presenting offerings, Thai individuals aim to appease these spirits and, in turn, receive their blessings of prosperity and peace.

Nature holds immense significance in numerous cultures, not only due to its sacredness but also because it plays a crucial role in their way of life. For individuals residing in forested areas, all flora and fauna constitute an integral part of their way of life and cultural identity. The natural resources derived from the forest serve as their sources of sustenance, medicinal treatments, clothing, furniture, and even entertainment. Nature is also intertwined with their cultural customs. When the Kankanaey people, a sub-group of the larger Igorots,[38] residing in the highlands of the Philippines, observe a *Tengaw*, a communal period of rest for both the people and the earth, they place a traditional marker called *pudong* at the entrances and exits of their community. This sign, a simple stick with knotted leaves attached to its top, demands respect from anyone who encounters it, informing them that a ceremony is taking place and to not interfere.[39] Despite modernization and external influences, the Kankanaeys have retained the use of the same materials for the *pudong* and continue to observe the *Tengaw* during various points in the agricultural cycle, during tragedies such as a community member's death or a house fire, and other significant communal occasions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kankanaey communities voluntarily conducted *Tengaw* ceremonies to adhere to official social distancing guidelines and seized the opportunity to rest and reconnect with nature.[40]

In today's society, dominated by concrete forests and digital landscapes, it may appear that humanity has abandoned its roots in nature altogether. As Rolston observed, "Nature evolved into culture; culture evolved out of nature, but it did evolve out *of it*" (italics in the original).[41] Rolston posited that human culture, in its increasing detachment from nature, has become an "emergent" rather than merely an "emanation" from nature. While this may hold true for cultures that prioritize technological advancement as the key to progress, it is not a universal truth. Upon closer examination of cultures across the globe, one can

---

38 "Igorots" means "people living in the mountains."

39 Brandon Billan Cadingpal, "'*Tengaw*' Observance: Implications of the Kankanaeys' COVID-19 Response for the New Normal," in *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2022), 218.

40 Ibid., 228.

41 Rolston, "Nature and Culture in Environmental Ethics," 154.

discern the enduring presence of nature and its integral role in people's lives. The merging of culture and nature can be seen in people's values, religious beliefs, spirituality, language, traditions, and livelihoods.

Environmental Benefits of Interculturality

It is because of this enduring convergence of culture and nature in human lives throughout the world that I believe interculturality can significantly aid in promoting environmental flourishing. Interculturality can contribute to this task in three ways. First, it can foster a greater consciousness of the ongoing importance of nature to culture. Second, it can facilitate a deeper cultural understanding of the environment. Finally, it can help cultures that have moved away from nature in the course of development to rediscover and reconnect with the natural aspects of culture that have been lost or suppressed for the sake of technological advancement.

First, interculturality is a powerful tool in promoting environmental flourishing by helping to raise consciousness about the importance of nature to culture. Through intercultural exchange and enrichment, individuals and communities can gain valuable insight into how other peoples adapt to their environment and live in harmony with nature. This paradigm also fosters a deeper appreciation of the fact that nature remains integral to people's way of life, livelihood, and individual and communal identity. As the goal of interculturality is to promote cultural flourishing, it is essential to avoid destroying the elements that allow cultures to sustain and thrive. In this way, interculturality can foster greater empathy and understanding toward nature-oriented cultures and motivate actions that contribute to the flourishing of both culture and nature.

These actions may involve carrying out development projects that do not threaten the existence of certain cultures or the marginalization of groups of people. When a group's cultural and spiritual identity is attached to specific natural places or entities, having those things destroyed or taken away from them can be enormously detrimental to their well-being. All over the world, we have witnessed this phenomenon as a result of deforestation, mining, and urbanization projects. In 2022, the last known member of an indigenous tribe in the Amazon passed away, having lived in solitude in the forest for years. It is believed that the remaining members of his tribe were victims of violent attacks orchestrated by gunmen hired by colonists and ranchers, a series of incidents that can be traced back to the 1970s.[42] In the face of

[42] Rachel Treisman, "The Last Member of a Tribe in Brazil Has Died, Pulling Indigenous Rights into Focus," *NPR*, August 30, 2022, accessed June 14,

ongoing large-scale deforestation in the Amazon and the destruction of their culture, some indigenous people such as the Guajajara 'Forest Guardians' in Brazil have been forced to take matters into their own hands by patrolling the land to confront illegal activities. They are also forced to arm themselves with guns and rifles for self-protection and to detain trespassers.[43]

In other cases, well-intentioned but misguided conservation projects also contribute to the destruction of environmentally friendly cultures. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has been accused of being complicit in the theft of Baka land in the Cameroon.[44] In 1991, the WWF commissioned a research team to assess proposals for establishing a protected area in southeast Cameroon, following concerns raised by the Baka 'Pygmies' and the Bangando community. The local communities expressed apprehensions regarding the detrimental impact of loggers and trophy-hunters on animal and tree populations, while the researchers acknowledged the sustainable land use practices of the Baka and Bangando. The researchers recommended measures to restrain the destructive activities of external actors, safeguard the rights of local inhabitants, and target professional poaching networks.

Contrary to these recommendations, the WWF supported the creation of the Lobéké National Park, resulting in the unlawful expulsion of the Baka and neighboring communities from the park and adjacent trophy-hunting zones. Furthermore, the WWF formed alliances with logging companies without acquiring consent from the affected communities. Similar instances of land appropriation occurred in subsequent protected areas, including Boumba Bek, Nki National Park, and the Ngoyla Wildlife Reserve. The violence perpetrated by anti-poaching squads, supported by the WWF, has been particularly severe, impacting vulnerable individuals, such as pregnant women, the elderly, and even children. Despite being aware of the persecution endured by the Baka for more than 15 years, the WWF has failed to undertake effective action. The situations in the Amazon and in the Congo Basin call for empathetic treatment of indigenous cultures and conservation of the envi-

---

2023, https://www.npr.org/2022/08/30/1119939392/last-member-uncontacted-tribe-dies-brazil#:~:text=Press-,'Man%20of%20the%20Hole%2C'%20the%20last%20member%20of%20his,rights%20are%20on%20the%20ballot

43 CSIS, "Deforestation Hits Home: Indigenous Communities Fight for the Future of Their Amazon," December 19, 2020, https://journalism.csis.org/deforestation-hits-home-indigenous-communities-fight-for-the-future-of-their-amazon/

44 Survival International, "How Will We Survive?" n.d., https://assets.survivalinternational.org/documents/1683/how-will-we-survive.pdf

ronment in accordance with true intercultural dialogue and collaboration.

Second, interculturality helps to acquire deeper cultural understanding of the environment. The importance of diverse cultural practices and worldviews in the field of biodiversity management emphasizes the significant role that knowledge plays as a bridge between nature and culture. The manner in which individuals perceive and comprehend the world has a profound impact on their conduct and values, thereby influencing their interactions with the natural world. Knowledge pertaining to nature, often referred to as traditional, indigenous, local, or ecological knowledge, is accumulated within societies and transmitted through cultural channels like storytelling and narratives. Cultural understandings of the environment not only promote sustainable management practices but also encompass insights into the requirements of species, the dynamics of ecosystems, sustainable utilization of resources, and the interconnectedness of ecological systems. This culturally embedded knowledge empowers individuals to establish a harmonious existence within the confines of their environment in the long run.[45] Thus interculturality is essential for acquiring information and knowledge on how to carry out development projects that align with sustainability goals. Dialogue with the local cultures who are most knowledgeable about the land and are most invested in the future of the land is imperative if there are plans for development projects.

Moreover, the exchange of knowledge and experiences between cultures holds the potential for the development of effective and culturally suitable solutions to environmental challenges. Indigenous communities, who have nurtured a profound connection with the environment over generations, possess a wealth of wisdom and practices that can be shared with other cultures lacking similar levels of experience. As Pope Francis aptly acknowledged, indigenous communities possess the capacity to cultivate essential values that can profoundly impact environmental stewardship and community dynamics (LS 179). Their deep connection with the land allows them to foster a heightened sense of responsibility toward the natural world, nurturing a strong communal spirit and a genuine readiness to safeguard the well-being of others. This cultural perspective also nurtures a spirit of creativity, enabling indigenous communities to develop innovative approaches to addressing environmental challenges. Furthermore, their great love for the land extends beyond their own lifetime, as they are deeply concerned about the inher-

[45] Jules Pretty and Sarah Pilgrim, "Nature and Culture," *Resurgence and Ecologist Magazine* (September/October 2008); https://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article2629-nature-and-culture.html#:~:text=NATURE%20AND%20CULTURE%20converge%20in,a%20change%20in%20the%20other

itance they will leave for future generations, namely their children and grandchildren. These values are intrinsic to indigenous peoples, shaped by their intimate relationship with the environment and their ancestral wisdom.

Engaging in intercultural exchange not only recognizes the existence of diverse ways of understanding and inhabiting the world, but also affirms that some of our knowledge stems directly from the natural environment itself. Therefore, interculturality within an ecological framework acknowledges that a portion of our knowledge is derived from the intricate intelligence inherent in the cosmos.[46] By embracing intercultural dialogue and collaboration, societies can tap into a rich treasure trove of perspectives and insights rooted in the profound interconnections between humans and the natural world. This multifaceted exchange of knowledge enables the collective exploration and cultivation of sustainable approaches to environmental conservation and harmonious coexistence with the earth's ecosystems. It serves as a testament to the vast reservoir of wisdom that different cultures possess, allowing for the continuous enrichment and evolution of our collective understanding of the intricate web of life.

Finally, interculturality serves as a catalyst for individuals and communities who have become increasingly disconnected from nature, urging them to rediscover and reestablish their lost connections with the natural world, which have been marginalized or suppressed in favor of technological advancements.[47] It is undeniable that all forms of culture originally derived from nature; however, throughout the course of evolution, culture has evolved to the point where its origins have become obscured. In the present digital age, people are increasingly preoccupied with cyberspace and the intangible aspects of existence, as they spend a significant portion of their waking hours engrossed in the online domain. For many individuals residing in urban settings, the closest encounter with 'nature' often entails watching YouTube videos about nature, a visit to a local park, or an occasional trip to the zoo during weekends.

Some individuals may choose to embark on trips to mountainous regions or similar destinations for leisure purposes such as holiday trips or annual vacations. However, in many cases, these visits to natural

---

[46] Ricardo Gonçalves Castro, "Interculturality and Ecology," in *Becoming Intercultural: Perspectives on Mission,* eds. Lazar T. Stanislaus and Christian Tauchner (New Delhi–Sankt Augustin*:* ISPCK–Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2021), 271.

[47] Brian Cain, "How Technology Embodies Our Alienation from Nature," *Medium*, June 7, 2022, https://medium.com/illumination-curated/how-technology-embodies-our-alienation-from-nature-bf3525a35bb

environments primarily serve as opportunities for capturing aesthetically pleasing backgrounds for social media posts or check-ins. I have observed tourists in Japan vigorously shaking cherry branches, causing the blossoms to fall, all in the pursuit of capturing a photo standing amidst a shower of cherry blossoms. There is little meaningful engagement with the natural environment, which may explain why there are so many unfortunate mishaps, some deadly, with people accidentally falling off cliffs and bridges in their attempt to capture the perfect Instagram photo.

Due to their primary focus on personal pleasure, tourists often disregard the well-being and sustainability of the locations they visit. Consequently, concerns have been raised by many about the presence of tourists, who, despite their economic contributions to local communities, can cause significant harm to the non-human inhabitants of these areas. The environmental impacts of tourism are substantial and encompass resource depletion, pollution, intensified pressure on land use, soil erosion, habitat loss, the strain on endangered species, and excessive water consumption in activities like golfing. Additionally, tourism makes a notable contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.[48] The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the impact of tourism, or lack thereof, as many natural sites experienced a revitalization due to the absence of human presence during national lockdowns.[49]

Thus, interculturality demands a deeper engagement with other cultures concerning the environment, potentially leading to a genuine rediscovery and reconnection with a culture's natural roots. This reconnection with nature by humanity is consequential to directions for future development that contributes to the establishment of a global ecological culture and civilization. Without the task of recovering the connectedness between culture and nature, the claim that human beings are part of nature becomes a meaningless mantra and presents little consequence for how humans set out their course of development going forward.

---

[48] The World Counts, "Negative Environmental Impacts of Tourism," accessed June 14, 2023, https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/consumption/transport-and-tourism/negative-environmental-impacts-of-tourism

[49] Ashwani Kumar, Muneer Ahmad Malla and Anamika Dubey, "With Corona Outbreak: Nature Started Hitting the Reset Button Globally," *Frontiers in Public Health* 8 (September 2020): 1-10.

Promoting Interculturality in Religious Communities

As this book focuses on the role of religion in promoting environmental flourishing, I argue that religions have a particularly crucial role in promoting this paradigm of cultural engagement. It should be noted that in many contexts, religion and culture are inextricably intertwined. In the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, for example, many of the cultural elements are rooted in religious traditions and practices. At the same time, in increasingly secular Europe, one can argue that European culture is still one that is deeply imbued with Christian values. Thus, religions shape and are in turn shaped by the cultures with which they come in contact.

In addition, all the major religious traditions already have an international presence or a multicultural local congregation. Christianity, for example, can be found on every continent. The same can also be said of Islam. In places like the United States and Australia, Christian churches tend to be multicultural in their membership. In the Catholic Church, there are also many religious congregations which have a presence in countries throughout the world, and the members that make up the congregation in a local community can likewise be multicultural.

The Society of the Divine Word, a male religious missionary congregation in the Catholic Church, of which I am a member, is an example of such a congregation. Its 6,000 members come from over 60 countries around the world, and the congregation is serving in about 80 different countries and territories. Wherever possible, the Society of the Divine Word attempts to form multicultural local communities in order to facilitate living interculturality in communities as a means to promote this paradigm in the larger society in which it serves. The SVD's commitment to interculturality is a fundamental aspect of our life and work and is enshrined in our Constitution. According to former General Superior Antonio Pernia, interculturality is intrinsic to the SVD's DNA and is essential to our self-understanding.[50] As a result, many SVD scholars have published on the topic of interculturality, including some that have been cited in this chapter, namely, Stanislaus, Ueffing, Tauchner, Kisala, Nguyen, and Castro.

In addition to academic discussions, the SVD's intercultural approach is evident in the cultural composition of its communities, which is intentionally diverse to reflect the global church's reality and to promote mutual learning and respect across cultures. Members of the congregation undergo extensive cross-cultural communication training be-

[50] vanThanh Nguyen, "Biblical Foundation for Interculturality," *Verbum SVD* 54, no. 1 (2013): 35-47.

fore being sent on mission. In our community living and mission work, the SVD stresses the importance of intercultural living and cultural immersion. The experience of intercultural exchange and dialogue within the community builds solidarity, fraternal communion, and a shared vision.

Interculturality is also a core value of the SVD in its missionary approach, emphasizing the fostering of relationships through dialogue in the local context. SVD members seek to understand and respect the local cultures and traditions of the people we work with, learning the local language, customs, and beliefs to build relationships based on mutual understanding and respect. This intentional effort allows individuals in the congregation to live and work effectively in various mission contexts worldwide. For example, the nearly 100 members in the Province of Australia, which includes Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and Myanmar, come from 19 different countries and live and work in smaller intercultural communities ranging from several members to nearly 20 members. They work with indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, the marginalized, and people of other faiths and cultures.[51] The SVD Australia Province's vision and mission statement, adopted in March 2023 at the Provincial Chapter, affirms that intercultural living enables them to join hands with dialogue partners to "foster a culture of encounter and care for creation." Thus, the SVD's efforts to promote interculturality in community living and mission are a valuable model for promoting social and environmental flourishing in the present milieu.

However, the Society of the Divine Word is only one religious congregation among thousands of congregations in the Catholic Church. And the communities it serves represent only a tiny fraction of many more communities of people of various cultural and religious backgrounds globally. The work of any one group of people, no matter how well-intentioned it may be, cannot bring about results on a significant scale if similar efforts are not made by other groups in other contexts. Thus, it is important for religious traditions to take the initiative in promoting interculturality as part of its ad intra and ad extra cultural engagement process. Because it would make this chapter unreasonably long, the close connection between religion and culture was not discussed here. However, the reality of this intimate relationship between culture and religion warrants religious involvement in promoting interculturality in the contemporary milieu. While many social scientists have already advocated for interculturality, the task of promoting it should not fall upon secular institutions alone, especially considering

[51] AUS [Australian] Provincial Chapter Documents, 2023. Unpublished.

the level of influence that religions have on the life of the people. This point was already mentioned in the introductory chapter and need not be further discussed here.

In short, interculturality should be widely adopted and promoted, not only in and by religious communities but in all organizations, groups, and communities in an intentional and methodical manner. Through its widespread application in various contexts, interculturality can gain momentum and become the operative paradigm in the larger society and the world. It is important, therefore, that organization and community leaders explore interculturality with its related aspects such as intercultural communication, intercultural competence, and intercultural living in order to better understand and apply this paradigm to their specific contexts. Especially with the concerns of this book, it is important to give attention to the environmental dimension of the paradigm to fully utilize its potential toward the common good.

CHAPTER 8

BECOMING INTERRELIGIOUS

In our neighborhood comprised of a mix of family homes and apartment buildings, there is an elderly woman who each morning makes a round to collect recyclables. Although she has told me her name, I always address her as 'Khun Yai,' which means 'Grandma.' We always save our recyclables for her which she picks up with a cart when the amount is more than what she can carry by hand. This usually happens after some activity at our community in which there are people coming to attend, such as a cultural celebration or a religious occasion. As a Catholic religious community in a neighborhood comprised of nearly all Buddhists, we stand out in the community and are known as a 'Christian Church.' In our garden, there is a marble statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary 150 cm tall surrounded by various flowering plants, which was erected when we first moved to this location.

Every day when Khun Yai walks by our community house, she takes a moment to '*wai*' Our Lady before moving on. *Wai* is the traditional greeting gesture used in Thailand and involves pressing your palms together in a prayer-like position, fingers pointing upwards, and bowing the head slightly. The height of the hands and the depth of the bow depend on the social status and age of the person being greeted, as well as the degree of formality of the occasion. The *wai* is used as a sign of respect, gratitude, and reverence, and is commonly used when greeting others, saying goodbye, or expressing thanks. It is also used as a way of apologizing, asking for a favor, or showing remorse. The *wai* is deeply rooted in Thai culture and is an important part of social etiquette and manners. This gesture, however, is not only reserved for people but also gods and spirits. Thai people have a wonderful habit of performing the *wai* when they walk by a sacred place (temple, church, shrine, etc.) or a statue of an important figure (the Buddha, saints, important historical figures, the king, etc.).

Khun Yai does the same every time she passes by Mary, even when our gate is closed, and the statue is out of sight. She simply turns to where she knows Mary is standing and makes her gesture of respect. Once a week, Khun Yai buys flowers or a small *puang malai* to offer to Mary. *Puang malai* is a traditional Thai floral garland that is often given as a gesture of respect or welcome on various occasions, such as weddings, funerals, or religious ceremonies. The garland is typically made of fragrant and colorful flowers, such as jasmine, orchids, or roses, and is intricately woven into a circular shape with a string or ribbon.

Unless she sees one of us when she comes, Khun Yai simply hangs the flowers at the gate for us to take to place at the statue of Mary. While there is no fixed schedule for this flower offering, she pays attention to the holy days on the Buddhist calendar (*wan phra*) and makes it a point to offer flowers to Mary. I am not certain if Khun Yai does the same with other places, but for Mary, she has consistently offered flowers to her for the last four years and never fails to *wai* when she walks by.

Some reading this anecdote may feel that Khun Yai is simply unscrupulous in her choice of spirituality, and that she will revere anything she feels will be of benefit to her life. Others may think that it might be her way to 'pay back' for the recyclables we offer her. However, it is not every day that we have things to give, and paying back can be in other ways that do not involve such a unique religious expression. In our neighborhood, we also do favors for other neighbors such as letting them use our trash can as the common trash bin, or let them park their car within our yard, but they certainly don't show their appreciation with anything similar to what Khun Yai has been doing.

Khun Yai's religious expression emanates from her own spirituality that recognizes the possibility of sacredness in other religious traditions. And she responds to this consciousness with gestures and actions that are within her own religious worldview and sensibility. She demonstrates the same display of reverence to Mary as she would a statue of the Buddha by the *wai* gesture and the offering of flowers. In fact, she is the only person to do so of all the people who live around us or regularly come to our community for liturgical celebrations and other gatherings (including Catholics).

Interreligious Dialogue in the Contemporary World

Friedrich Max Müller, who was a Sanskrit scholar and philologist, declared, "To know one [religion] is to know none."[1] As a scholar of comparative religion and mythology, Müller well understood that religious self-understanding was integrally connected to learning and appreciating about the beliefs of people from other religious traditions. Understanding other religions sheds light on one's grasp of one's own religious adherence. Vietnamese American theologian Peter C. Phan observed that in the contemporary world, one cannot be religious without being interreligious. Phan asserted that this is the "imperative of our time" because the widespread phenomena of globalization, religious plural-

[1] F.M. Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution with Two Essays on False Analogies, and the Philosophy of Mythology* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1873).

ism, and transnational migration have caused people of various cultures and religions to end up living right next door to one another.[2] According to Phan, the objective of interreligious dialogue is not to merge all world religions into a singular global religion, but rather to address the potential for violence and animosity that may arise from religious differences. Its primary goals include dispelling mutual misunderstandings and prejudices, fostering a deeper appreciation of and respect for diverse religious traditions. The ideal outcome is to cultivate religious harmony, which does not seek to eliminate differences and diversity but instead aims to enhance one's own religious heritage through engagement with others. The fundamental purpose of interreligious dialogue is to foster global justice and peace.[3]

Global religious leaders agree that interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the contemporary world. This was certainly the sentiment of all those who gathered in Kazakhstan in mid-September 2022 for the Seventh Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. This event was originally initiated by Nursultan Nazarbayev, the first president of Kazakhstan, in 2003.[4] The idea was to create a platform for dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders of different faiths. The first congress was held in Astana (now Nur-Sultan) on September 23-24, 2003, with the theme "Religion, Society and International Security."

The theme of the 2022 gathering, which took place while the war waged on Ukraine by Russia was raging, appropriately focused on the role of global and traditional religious leaders in the spiritual and social advancement of humanity during the period following the pandemic. In his welcome speech, President Tokayev set the agenda for discussions and reflections by remarking that "as we face an increasingly turbulent geopolitical post-pandemic world, it becomes more crucial to develop new approaches to strengthening inter-civilizational dialogue and trust at the global level."[5] The declaration released at the conclusion of the two-day event affirms the essential role of religions in helping to address contemporary global dilemmas. One of the major concerns which the leaders paid attention to was caring for our common

---

[2] Rumi Forum, "Peter C. Phan: Being Religious as Being Interreligious," YouTube, July 2, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrSCMZu47HM

[3] Peter C. Phan, "Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue at Vatican II. Some Rethinking Required," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* 42, Article 5 (2012), http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol42/iss1/5

[4] Qazadstan Tarihy, "Congress of World Leaders and Traditional Religions," August 8, 2013, https://e-history.kz/en/e-resources/show/13450/

[5] Remarks by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, retrieved from https://religions-congress.org/en/news/novosti/1679

home. In his speech in the first plenary session, Pope Francis identified this as one of four important tasks that needed to be carried out going forward. The others were becoming artisans of communion, addressing the challenge of peace, and promoting fraternal acceptance.[6]

In the issued statement, the Congress also declared "that in the conditions of post-pandemic world development and the globalization of processes and security threats, the Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions plays an important role in the implementation of joint efforts to strengthen dialogue in the name of peace and cooperation, as well as the promotion of spiritual and moral values."[7] In the document, the religious leaders also "appeal to all people of faith and goodwill to unite in this difficult time and contribute to ensuring security and harmony in our common home—planet Earth."

The event in Kazakhstan is by no means exceptional and there have been countless interreligious initiatives at various levels throughout the world over the years. This is significant because through both theoretical analysis and practical application, dialogue has demonstrated its effectiveness as a powerful tool for driving the necessary positive transformations within our global community. Various religious institutions have recognized the significance of dialogue, utilizing it to de-escalate conflicts and contribute to peacebuilding, policymaking, organizational and societal development, as well as the pursuit of inclusive and peaceful societies.[8]

Moreover, it is not only religions that see interreligious dialogue as essential to building a harmonious and sustainable society but also secular institutions like the United Nations. In 2010, in a meeting at the UN, King Abdullah II of Jordan introduced the idea of organizing a World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) with the aim of fostering a culture of peace and nonviolence. The UN General Assembly swiftly embraced the concept, passing resolution A/RES/65/5, which designates the first week of February annually as World Interfaith Harmony Week. This resolution urges governments, institutions, and civil society to observe the week through diverse programs and initiatives that ad-

---

6 Pope Francis, Speech at the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, Kazakhstan, September 14, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220914-kazakhstan-congresso.html

7 https://religions-congress.org/en/page/deklaraciya-uchastnikov-VII

8 The International Dialogue Centre, *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging Differences and Building Sustainable Societies* (Vienna: KAICIID, 2021), 9.

vance the objectives of WIHW.[9] When religious leaders are able to converge in these contexts, they demonstrate that they are "united in their conviction that spiritual faith is not a cause for violence and oppression, but for reconciliation, justice and peace. This message rings true and powerful against those preachers of hate that still try to use religion as a false justification for oppression and violence."[10]

Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental Flourishing

Interreligious dialogue is a dynamic and transformative approach to tackling the pressing issue of the ecological crisis. It brings together individuals from diverse faith backgrounds, recognizing that environmental challenges like climate change, pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity affect people of all faiths and no faith. To address these issues, collective action and cooperation are essential. The Dalai Lama has emphasized the need for a global ethic that incorporates both spiritual and secular values in order to address environmental challenges. The Tibetan Buddhist leader remarked, "I believe it is very important that we try to make this twenty-first century a century of dialogue. In addition to non-violence in our relations with each other, we also need to employ a much greater sense of non-violence in relation to the environment, because a healthy natural environment is essential to the survival of life on our planet."[11] Unfortunately, oftentimes instead of meaningful dialogue, there are numerous confrontations that prevent peacebuilding and environmental safeguarding.[12] However, the Dalai Lama emphasized that this is a pivotal generation, and "we have the capability and the responsibility. We must act before it is too late."[13]

Why is interreligious dialogue and collaboration essential in addressing the ecological crisis? I propose the following reasons.

---

9 United Nations, "World Interfaith Harmony Week," https://www.un.org/en/observances/interfaith-harmony-week

10 Alvaro Iranzo Gutiérrez, Ambassador of Spain in Saudi Arabia, quoted in The International Dialogue Centre, *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging Differences and Building Sustainable Societies* (Vienna: KAICIID, 2021), 18.

11 Dalai Lama, Dalai Lama on the Environment: Collected Statements, 1987–2007 (India: Environment and Development Desk, TPI, 2017), 147-48.

12 Dalai Lama, *My Tibet* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.,1990), 80.

13 Ibid.

Shared Responsibility

The American poet Wendell Berry stated an undisputable fact: "The earth is what we all have in common."[14] Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environmental crisis demonstrate that religions recognize the shared responsibility of all people to care for the planet. In Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, he specifically affirmed the earth as our 'common home' which all people have the responsibility to care for. Pope Francis has repeatedly called for interfaith cooperation to address environmental challenges, stating that "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" (LS 13). For Pope Francis, dialogue with other religions to address the ecological crisis is part of a multi-faceted dialogue involving the international community, in national and local policies, in decision-making, in politics and economy, and between religion and science (LS 163-201). In other words, there is a need to "enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (LS 3).

The concept of a common home is deeply meaningful as it highlights how everyone has a shared social and emotional interest in the earth's well-being. This means that there's a collective responsibility to promote flourishing on the planet. By employing the analogy of a home, Pope Francis emphasized the earth's cohesive nature, where every element is interconnected and interdependent. While humans maintain our distinctiveness from the earth, we exist as integral parts of its interconnected web. In recognizing the earth as a shared dwelling, people of diverse religions and cultures can be regarded as members of a global family, entrusted with the duty to preserve our common abode and foster harmonious relationships within it. A Vietnamese proverb aptly captures this sentiment: "When the house is clean, it feels cool; when the bowl is clean, food tastes good." Consequently, the flourishing of the earth directly benefits humanity.

The language of caring for our common home as a shared responsibility has resonated with other religious leaders as well. On the occasion of the Day for the Protection of Creation in 2017, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued a message calling upon "all people of good will to undertake the good struggle for the protection of the natural environment and the establishment of solidarity." In the same message, Bartholomew called on businesses to stop "trading" in the environment. The Patriarch asserted, "The short-term benefits dictated by the rise of

[14] Susan Ratcliffe, ed., *Oxford Essential Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [4]2016).

living standards in some parts of the world simply camouflage the irrationality of abuse and conquest of creation. Corporate business that does not respect the planet as our common home cannot be sanctioned as business at all."[15]

The theological and moral reasoning presented by Pope Francis in support of his plea for shared responsibility has also found resonance among Muslim scholars and leaders. In a commentary on *Laudato Si'*, A. Rashied Omar remarked, "I concur with Muslim scholars such as Joseph Lumbard, Anas Malik and Ibrahim Ozdemir, who have each engaged with *Laudato Si'*, that the important themes in Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment resonate well with the teachings of Islam."[16] Omar emphasized the necessity for Muslims to actively participate in the dialogue with *Laudato Si'* and contribute significantly to fostering a robust global solidarity centered on responsible environmental stewardship. By assuming the role of conscientious caretakers, Muslims have the potential to play a pivotal role in advancing meaningful global commitments that prioritize the well-being of all individuals and the planet as a whole.[17]

Countering the Image of Interreligious Conflict

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on environmental concerns serve as a powerful means to transcend the deeply ingrained stigma associated with interreligious conflicts. The prevalence of religious conflicts, prominently highlighted in daily news, has contributed to the perception of religions being perpetually engaged in adversarial encounters. Despite the messages of love and forgiveness espoused by religious leaders, instances of animosity and ill-treatment toward other groups and faiths have cast doubt on the sincerity of their teachings. Consequently, a significant number of individuals have cited interreligious conflict as a catalyst for their disillusionment with organized religion, leading them to identify as 'none'[18]—those who do not affiliate with any

---

15 World Council of Churches, "Ecumenical Patriarch Calls for Solidarity in the Protection of Creation," August 31, 2017, https://www.oikoumene.org/news/ecumenical-patriarch-calls-for-solidarity-in-the-protection-of-creation

16 A. Rashied Omar, "A Muslim Response to Pope Francis's Environmental Encyclical Laudato Si'," *Contending Modernities*, December 17, 2015, https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/field-notes/a-muslim-response-to-pope-francis-environmental-encyclical-laudato-si/

17 Ibid.

18 Pew Research Center, "Why America's Nones Left Religion Behind," August 24, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/

particular religious group. It is disheartening that the positive contributions made by religious institutions worldwide often remain overshadowed by the negative events unfolding within interreligious relationships.

Interreligious conflicts are often described as multifaceted by experts, acknowledging the involvement of factors such as politics, economics, and cultural and ethnic identity. While religions can be instrumentalized in various conflicts, it is undeniable that the religious dimension receives significant attention and is frequently cited as a key factor contributing to discord by both the parties directly involved and external observers. The association between religion and conflict emerges as a recurring theme, capturing considerable focus and prompting extensive discussions.

In order to overcome this stigma and disillusionment, interreligious collaboration on environmental issues emerges as a transformative avenue. By shifting the focus from divisive religious disputes to shared concerns for the well-being of the planet, religious communities can forge meaningful partnerships and demonstrate their capacity for collective action and unity. Such collaborations exemplify the potential for religions to rise above their differences and work together in addressing global challenges. By promoting dialogue, cooperation, and responsible stewardship of the earth, faith actors can showcase the positive and constructive role that religion can play in fostering harmony and sustainability.

It is imperative to recognize that interreligious conflicts do not encapsulate the entirety of religious experiences or the teachings of all religious traditions. Many individuals and communities within religious contexts actively advocate for peace, interfaith understanding, and social justice. By emphasizing the positive contributions and diverse expressions of religious beliefs, we can reframe the narrative surrounding religion and move beyond the notion of inherent conflict. Through dialogue, empathy, and collaborative efforts, religions can reshape their public image and inspire hope for a future where shared values and a collective sense of responsibility guide their actions.

Countering the Negative Impact of Religious Climate Change Skeptics

A religious united front is necessary to counter the impact of faith actors who either do not see the value of religious collaboration when it comes to addressing common concerns or do not perceive environmental issues in the same way. For example, on April 27, 2015, prior to the release of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis received an open letter from the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation which raised con-

cerns about the accurateness of some of the climate science. It claimed that empirical evidence suggests that there was "no rational basis to forecast dangerous human-induced global warming, and therefore no rational basis for efforts to reduce warming by restricting the use of fossil fuels or any other means."[19] For this group, fossil fuel use actually demonstrates the glory of God. "Truly, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' (Psalm 19:1). By using fossil fuels to generate energy to lift billions of God's precious children out of poverty, we liberate from the tomb of the earth the carbon dioxide on which plants and therefore all the rest of life depend. This beautifully reveals the Creator's wisdom and care for all of His creation—people, animals, plants, and the earth itself."

The Cornwall Alliance, founded by Calvin Beisner, is one of the most prominent evangelical voices challenging the consensus on anthropogenic climate change. The organization takes a different stance on the ecological crisis compared to many mainstream environmental organizations. In the executive summary of a document titled "A Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor," it declared: "The world is in the grip of an idea: that burning fossil fuels to provide affordable, abundant energy is causing global warming that will be so dangerous that we must stop it by reducing our use of fossil fuels, no matter the cost. Is that idea true? We believe not. We believe that idea—we'll call it 'global warming alarmism'—fails the tests of theology, science, and economics."[20]

The organization argued that many proposed solutions to environmental problems, such as heavy government regulation and restrictions on economic growth, are not effective and can have unintended negative consequences for human flourishing, particularly for the world's poor. Rather, economic growth, technological advancements, and free markets can help alleviate poverty and lead to a healthier environment. The Cornwall Alliance has also questioned the extent and impact of human-caused climate change. They contended that the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change is overstated, and that natural factors play a significant role in shaping global climate patterns.[21] They advo-

---

[19] Cornwall Alliance, "An Open Letter to Pope Francis on Climate Change," April 27, 2015, https://cornwallalliance.org/anopenlettertopopefrancisonclimatechange/

[20] Cornwall Alliance, "A Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor," May 1, 2009, https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/a-renewed-call-to-truth-prudence-and-protection-of-the-poor/

[21] Cornwall Alliance, "Protect the Poor: Ten Reasons to Oppose Harmful Climate Change Policies, 2014," https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/protect-the-poor-ten-reasons-to-oppose-harmful-climate-change-policies/

cated for further scientific research and critiqued policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions as potentially harmful to economies without providing significant environmental benefits.

It must be noted that The Cornwall Alliance has faced criticism from various sources, including the website Skeptical Science. Skeptical Science has published critiques that question the Cornwall Alliance's motivations and affiliations. Detractors of the Cornwall Alliance argued that the organization operates as a "front group for fossil fuel special interests." They pointed to its close connections with the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, an organization that has previously received funding from major players in the oil industry, including Exxon-Mobil and Chevron.[22] Either way, the organization represents an influential religious voice with a counter-narrative that can negatively sow confusion regarding the religious stance toward environmental concerns.

Religions' Interest in Temporal Issues

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environment showcase that religions extend their concerns beyond matters pertaining solely to the afterlife. They exhibit a profound interest in temporal issues, as they are deeply committed to the well-being of humanity. Thus, religious preoccupations also include the physical, emotional, and social aspects of human life. Religions acknowledge that temporal concerns have the potential to impact the overall health and flourishing of individuals, and ultimately, their spiritual well-being. As Christine Schliesser pointed out, many faith actors "view human flourishing as a holistic process as they aim at providing sustenance for the body and the soul."[23] This notion of integral well-being holds that physical, emotional, and spiritual health are interconnected, influencing, and nourishing one another.

For instance, poverty and illness are recognized as pressing temporal concerns that can profoundly affect an individual's spiritual journey. Religions understand that when individuals struggle to meet basic needs, such as access to food, shelter, and healthcare, their capacity to engage in spiritual pursuits can be compromised. These real-life hardships can lead to emotional distress, erode one's sense of hope, and impede the ability to focus on matters of the spirit. As a Vietnamese saying states, "You can't do well in religion without food." Recognizing this

---

[22] Wikipedia, "Cornwall Alliance," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornwall_Alliance

[23] Christine Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 39.

interplay, religions may direct their efforts toward alleviating poverty, providing aid to the sick, and promoting environmental sustainability, all in service of helping their followers maintain spiritual health.

Moreover, religions emphasize the interconnectedness of all aspects of human life. They recognize that temporal concerns have ripple effects, not only on individuals but also on families, communities, and society at large. By addressing social issues, religions seek to create an environment conducive to the practice of charity, compassion, and justice, all of which are integral to spiritual growth. Confucianism holds that one cannot develop one's virtues without the proper environment where one's potential is nourished and actualized. Many religions also view the pursuit of temporal well-being as an expression of their core values and teachings. They advocate for ethical living and social responsibility, calling on their followers to actively engage with the world and work toward the betterment of society.

Religions often provide moral frameworks that guide individuals in navigating social concerns, encouraging service, compassion, and the promotion of justice as concrete manifestations of faith. Schliesser noted, "Whoever tries to separate 'spiritual' issues of worship and prayer from 'worldly' concerns for justice and development has not grasped that both are intrinsically interwoven in the DNA of Christian faith."[24] Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared, "Just as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is wordly."[25] No doubt it was this conviction that compelled Bonhoeffer to participate in the plot to overthrow the Nazi regime—an action that led him to be caught and hung on April 9, 1945.

What is true for Christianity is also true for Buddhism, which despite its soteriological goal of emancipation from mundane existence is far from being escapist. This ultimate goal does not prevent a Buddhist from caring for others in this world. On the contrary, compassion, loving kindness, and a host of other Buddhist virtues that demonstrate care for others are precisely the means that help us to achieve this ultimate goal. Thus, human actions on earth hold implications for where we find ourselves in the afterlife. Buddhism presents us with an ultimate vision of no more suffering and permanent happiness in *nibbāna*. Buddhism also teaches us to not be attached to things in this world, indeed not attached to even ourselves. But Buddhism does not advise us to be uncaring toward the things that belong to mundane existence. To be detached and to be uncaring are different attitudes. Buddhist detachment

---

[24] Schliesser, *On the Significance of Religion for the SDGs*, 31.

[25] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* 6, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 59.

does not in any way prevent us from exercising relationally positive actions toward other people and things. This is precisely the reason why the late Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh founded the movement of Engaged Buddhism in the 1960s. This movement called on Buddhist practitioners to utilize their practice, wisdom, and insights gained from meditation and dharma teachings to directly confront real-world obstacles related to social, political, environmental, and economic suffering and injustice.[26]

The advice for religions to keep their attention on spiritual matters instead of what's going on in the world is inherently contrary to the nature of religion, no matter what tradition we are referring to. As Henri Nouwen affirmed, "The spiritual life is not a life before, after, or beyond our everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now." Thus, when religions dialogue and collaborate in order to address environmental issues, they are in fact doing something intrinsic to their very existence. They affirm that they have a legitimate interest in the well-being of the world because the flourishing of the environment also affects the well-being of humanity.

Witnessing Value of Finding Common Ground

For many religions, the way to attract new followers and to reinforce the belief of the existing faithful is through meaningful witnessing actions. Interreligious dialogue and collaboration on environmental concerns present a compelling case for the importance of finding common ground and fostering relationships across diverse religious traditions. Despite the significant differences in worldviews, beliefs, and practices that exist among various religions, the shared commitment to addressing environmental issues highlights the potential for constructive cooperation and mutual understanding. Such collaboration not only serves to protect the planet but also offers a model for other groups and institutions to envision their place in a diverse world and build constructive relationships with others.

One of the significant strengths of interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environment is the recognition that caring for the earth is a shared responsibility that transcends individual religious boundaries. Air pollutants do not choose to hover over people of one religious affiliation over the other. By engaging in dialogue and collaborative efforts, religious traditions can contribute their unique perspectives,

[26] Oxford Reference, "Engaged Buddhism," http://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095751887;jsessionid=62F8D1C0C163FB26CB1342C9414A7C8C

knowledge, and resources to tackle these global issues collectively. In doing so, they exemplify the possibility of setting aside differences to address a common concern, fostering a sense of unity and purpose.

Furthermore, interreligious dialogue and collaboration on the environment have a broader societal impact. By showcasing cooperation among different religious traditions, they inspire other groups and institutions to reconsider their own relationships with diverse communities. In a world marked by increasing polarization, disinformation, prejudice, and intolerance, interreligious dialogue and collaboration holds enormous witnessing value. It exhibits the possibility of working together toward a common goal and demonstrates the potential for mutual exchange and respect across differences. It encourages and models the way for individuals and organizations outside the religious sphere to embrace dialogue, empathy, and collaboration as essential tools for addressing complex global issues.

The collaborative efforts of religious traditions in addressing environmental concerns can also mobilize significant social and political change. Religions often possess extensive networks and resources that can be harnessed to raise awareness, promote sustainable practices, and influence policymakers. By coming together, religious communities can amplify their collective voice and advocate for policies that prioritize environmental protection and sustainability. Through joint initiatives, they can educate their respective followers and wider communities, fostering a sense of environmental responsibility grounded in shared values and teachings.

Four Forms of Dialogue in the Environmental Context

Interreligious dialogue encompasses a range of forms that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The four widely recognized forms include the dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchange. These forms are not isolated but intertwine to promote understanding and cooperation. For instance, the dialogue of action should be guided by solid theological principles rooted in each respective religious tradition. Likewise, the dialogue of theological exchange should foster direct experiences of different faiths. Within the context of environmental care, we delve into these forms of interreligious dialogue to explore their significance.

Becoming Interreligious in Life

The term 'dialogue of life' is often used to describe the everyday interactions and relationships that occur between individuals from differ-

ent religious backgrounds. The Catholic Church's document "Dialogue and Proclamation" defines dialogue of life as "where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations."[27] Life is the word that we use to describe all that takes place as we go about our days, whether it is working in the yard, taking a morning run at the neighborhood park, grabbing some groceries from the local supermarket, or participating in some community activities organized by our church, mosque, or some other social organization.

Because life is the broadest common denominator in human experience, the dialogue of life can take many different forms, including shared community activities, social events, and personal relationships. I remember when I was the parish priest at a small Catholic church in Northeast Thailand, one of the vendors at the local morning market was a Muslim woman who sold vegetables for a living. When she found out that I was a Catholic priest, she often asked me questions about what a priest could or couldn't do when I went to buy groceries from her. According to her, she was curious because I was the only Catholic priest that she's ever met in her life.

As societies continue to become more culturally and religiously diverse due to migration, dialogue of life can take place between neighbors, co-workers, and college roommates. Because people nowadays often marry outside of the religion, families are also becoming more religiously diverse. Nearly 40 percent of Americans report being married to someone of a different faith.[28] In Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist country, as much as 80 percent of Catholics marry non-Catholics. Thus, the dialogue of life can take place even in our own living room and at the dining table day after day. The key to this dialogue is the recognition of shared human values, such as compassion, respect for life, and the importance of family and community.

The dialogue of life can play an important role in promoting environmental flourishing by fostering cooperation and collaboration between individuals and communities of different faiths. It is an opportunity for people to come together to share their knowledge, experiences, and values, and to work together toward a shared goal of protecting

---

[27] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation," 1991, no. 42, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

[28] Stephanie C. Toelle and Victor W. Harris, "Are You Marrying Someone from a Different Culture or Religion?" University of Florida/Dep. of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, September 27, 2018, https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ publication/FY1337

and preserving the natural world. The Dalai Lama advocated for dialogue to begin within the household. He wrote, "So the concept of dialogue must begin at the family level. As individuals we must look within, investigate, analyze and then try to overcome contradictory ideas. We must not lose hope or despair of the irritating conflict we find inside ourselves. So these are some of the ways in which we can ultimately solve environmental problems."[29]

The dialogue of life can also promote environmental flourishing by encouraging people to develop a deeper appreciation for the natural world and its sacredness. In Thailand, people often tie ribbons around certain trees, especially older ones. This practice, commonly known as 'spirit tree,' is rooted in a traditional belief system that combines elements of animism, Buddhism, and local folklore. It is believed that spirits or deities reside in these ancient trees and have the power to protect the surrounding environment and bring good fortune to those who pay respect to them. Tying ribbons around old trees is considered an act of reverence and a way to seek blessings. The ribbons, usually brightly colored, are tied around the trunk or branches of the tree in the hope of attracting the attention of the spirits or deities that reside within.

This practice is not limited to specific locations but can be observed throughout Thailand, including in temples, forests, marketplaces, and even urban areas where old trees still stand. The act of tying ribbons is often accompanied by prayers, incense offerings, and other rituals to express gratitude, make wishes, or seek protection and good fortune. People may also leave small offerings such as flowers, fruits, or coins at the base of the tree as a sign of respect and gratitude. While spirits can inhabit any tree, the reverence given to old trees and the act of tying ribbons around them reflects the deep-rooted connection between nature and spirituality in Thai culture. Trees are considered sacred symbols of longevity, strength, and wisdom. They are seen as guardians of the land, linking the human and spiritual realms. By demonstrating respect for these trees, people aim to maintain harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm.

Additionally, the practice of tying ribbons around trees serves as a way to raise awareness about environmental conservation. By emphasizing the sacredness and importance of these trees, it encourages people to appreciate and protect the natural world. It promotes a sense of environmental stewardship and reminds individuals of their responsibility to safeguard the earth's resources. While Christians and Muslims in Thailand may not hold the same beliefs regarding the tree spirits, as they immerse themselves in this Thai cultural milieu, they can learn to

[29] Dalai Lama, *Dalai Lama on the Environment*, 79-80.

appreciate the spiritual as well as environmental significance of this practice. By reflecting on the environmental implications of this practice, Christians and Muslims may discover ways within their own tradition to highlight the sacredness of nature and promote environmental well-being. As has been observed, one of the causes of the modern-day ecological crisis is the desacralization of nature brought about by modern scientism that attempts to displace the presence of the divine in the world.

Becoming Interreligious in Collaborative Action

The concept of 'dialogue of action' in interreligious dialogue refers to the process of engaging in collaborative efforts between people of different faiths "for the integral development and liberation of people."[30] It is concerned with humanitarian issues and involves working together to identify and address the root causes of social problems and to develop practical solutions that can benefit communities.

The dialogue of action is grounded in the notion that people of different faiths believe universal ethical principles have the potential to be a constructive influence in building a fair and compassionate society. These common values include upholding the sanctity and worth of every individual, fostering a sense of belonging and active participation in communities, honoring the rights and duties of each person, assisting marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society, acknowledging the value of labor and workers' rights, promoting solidarity, and nurturing a responsible approach toward the environment.[31]

Environmental care is ideal for the dialogue of action due to its intrinsic connection to the very essence of our shared existence. It serves as a unifying force that transcends religious boundaries, reminding us that the protection and preservation of our planet is a responsibility we all bear. By engaging in the dialogue of action on environmental care, we embark on a journey of exploration and discovery of how to turn spiritual teachings and profound religious insights into praxis of faith that concerns the well-being of all. According to the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), faith-based organizations (FBOs) have gained recognition as significant contributors in the fight against poverty, enhancing public health, preserving the environment, and advancing sustainable development. Particularly at the local level and in collabora-

[30] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation," no. 42.

[31] Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz, "Religions in Action: The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Public Health* (Oxf) 43, no. 2 (June 7, 2021): 1-2.

tion with faith actors, their adaptability plays a pivotal role. FBOs serve as sustainable institutions, and policymakers have increasingly involved them in initiatives related to environmental preservation and the responsible management of natural resources.[32]

It is because of this understanding that the international body has been actively engaging with religions, setting itself up as a platform for interfaith collaboration on environmental action. The Faith for Earth Initiative was launched by the UNEP in 2017. The initiative aims to engage with FBOs and faith leaders to promote environmental awareness and action. Its main goal is to leverage the influence and networks of FBOs and leaders to help address environmental challenges and promote sustainable development. The initiative focuses on issues such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and sustainable consumption and production.

Other notable interfaith efforts on behalf of the environment have also been launched over the years. For example, the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) was launched in June of 2017 at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, Norway, in a first-of-its-kind summit of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist religious leaders. In attendance were also climate scientists, rainforest experts and indigenous peoples' representatives from various countries. According to its website, the organization aims to "provide a platform for religious leaders to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, civil society organizations and businesses on actions that protect rainforests and safeguard the indigenous peoples that serve as their guardians."[33] The initiative has organized several interfaith events including a meeting of religious leaders in Brazil in 2018 to discuss rainforest protection and a series of interfaith workshops in Indonesia in 2019 to address the deforestation crisis in the country.

Religions for Peace is an international coalition of representatives from different religions, founded in 1970, with the aim of promoting multi-religious cooperation for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.[34] Its mission is to work with religious leaders, communities, and institutions to promote peace, end poverty, and protect the environment. The organization is involved in various initiatives, including interfaith dia-

---

[32] UNEP, "Why Faith and Environment Matters," https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment-programme/faith-earth-initiative/why-faith-and-environment-matters

[33] Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/about-us-2/

[34] Wikipedia, "Religions for Peace," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religions_for_ Peace

logue, peace education, humanitarian aid, and advocacy for peace and justice. It has a presence in over 90 countries and operates through a network of national and regional interfaith councils. Religions for Peace is headquartered in New York City, and its work is supported by various governments, foundations, and individuals.

While these examples represent the dialogue of action at the international level, there is no reason why the same dialogue cannot take place at the neighborhood or local level, where members of the same community come together on the issue of environmental care. At the community level, people of different faiths can collaborate on environmental care through various actions such as organizing clean-up days, community gardens, and tree planting initiatives. During community clean-up days, individuals from diverse faith communities can engage in not only picking up litter but also conducting recycling drives to ensure proper waste management. They can educate their communities about the importance of recycling, segregating waste, and minimizing plastic consumption to reduce pollution and landfill waste.

In Japan, children are taught how to segregate waste from a young age as part of their education and upbringing. Waste management and recycling are ingrained in the culture, and the Japanese society places great emphasis on environmental responsibility. In homes, restaurants, and public places where there are waste bins, there are always multiple ones for different kinds of waste. Communities can initiate this kind of environmental awareness formation within their own neighborhoods to instill environmental consciousness within children as well as adults.

Another effort that can be initiated at the local level is community gardens that can become spaces not just for growing organic fruits and vegetables but also for promoting biodiversity. Participants can establish native plant gardens that attract pollinators and create habitats for local wildlife. They can also incorporate composting techniques to minimize waste and enrich the soil naturally. The gardens can serve as educational resources, offering workshops on organic farming methods, permaculture, and the benefits of growing food locally. The garden with its variety of fruits and vegetables that come in different shapes and colors can become a symbol of harmony and richness amidst diversity in the community. Besides having aesthetic and spiritual value, the produce from the garden can be shared with community members in need, promoting food security and fostering a sense of solidarity. The idea of community gardens is not new, and there are many examples of successful community gardens in various countries that people can study in order to start their own local project.

A third initiative that local communities can implement to collaborate on environmental care is tree planting, which can have numerous

positive impacts. Faith groups can play a significant role in this effort by selecting native tree species that are well-suited to the local ecosystem. By involving local schools and youth organizations, they can educate the younger generation about the vital role of trees in mitigating climate change, providing oxygen, and preventing soil erosion. This educational aspect can encompass lessons on the interconnectedness between trees and the overall environment, including their ability to support biodiversity and act as carbon sinks. To maximize the impact of tree planting efforts, faith communities can organize events in areas prone to deforestation or those in need of ecological restoration, such as degraded parks or urban spaces. By targeting these locations, they can transform barren landscapes into vibrant green areas. This not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of the community but also improves air quality by absorbing pollutants and releasing oxygen. Furthermore, the planted trees provide shade, creating cooler microclimates and offering respite from the heat for community members during the hot summer months.

The collaborative nature of these tree planting initiatives strengthens the sense of unity and shared purpose among different faith communities. It fosters a collective commitment to environmental stewardship and empowers individuals to take tangible action to improve the local ecosystem. By working together, faith groups can leave a vibrant earth for future generations, creating a greener, healthier, and more sustainable community that benefits both humans and the natural world.

Becoming Interreligious in Religious Experience

The 'dialogue of religious experience' is "where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute."[35] This recognition of the presence of the Holy in one another can deepen an individual's own faith and foster empathy, respect, and appreciation for the diversity of religious traditions.

In the dialogue of religious experience, participants go beyond merely discussing their personal experiences and beliefs and actively participate in the religious practices of others. By experiencing the rituals of other faiths, they gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual practices and beliefs of other religions. For instance, Catholics and Buddhists can appreciate each other's practices of meditation and contemplation when

[35] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation," no. 42.

they attend and participate in the rituals afforded by each tradition. Catholics may find it extremely enriching to participate in a Buddhist meditation session on compassion while Buddhists may resonate with the Catholic's contemplative gaze in a Eucharistic Adoration liturgy. Another religious ceremony that Buddhists and Catholics may appreciate experiencing is the ordination of monks and priests in each respective tradition.

In the context of environmental care, the dialogue of religious experience may find expression through prayer events that specifically address environmental concerns. One notable series of gatherings that exemplify this intersection is the Assisi gatherings, which is an interfaith peace meeting that originated in 1986 under the leadership of Pope John Paul II. The event brought together religious leaders from diverse faith traditions worldwide to engage in prayer and dialogue for peace, as well as to discuss pressing global issues.

Among the various topics addressed in the Assisi gatherings, the environment has emerged as a significant focus. In particular, the most recent gathering in 2016, led by Pope Francis, placed a special emphasis on the environment and its conservation. During this event, religious leaders from different traditions united to offer prayers and reflections on the urgent need to address climate change and environmental degradation.

The significance of the Assisi gatherings lies not only in the collective power of prayer but also in the resulting declarations and calls to action. In 2016, the religious leaders who participated signed a declaration that urged immediate and concerted efforts to combat climate change and protect the environment. By doing so, they sought to amplify the moral imperative for environmental care, emphasizing the responsibility shared by people of faith in safeguarding the earth for future generations.

The Assisi gatherings serve as notable examples of how prayer events can facilitate dialogue and collaboration among religious leaders on global environmental concerns. By coming together, they not only express a unified commitment to environmental stewardship but also generate awareness and inspire action within their respective communities. These occasions provide a platform for religious leaders to advocate for the protection of the environment and to engage in meaningful interfaith dialogue aimed at finding common ground and sustainable solutions to ecological challenges.

In 2022, during the United Nations Climate Change Conference or Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP27) in Egypt, the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders organized 'climate repentance' cere-

monies in Egypt and London in which representatives from various religious traditions contributed to the event with prayers and actions that characterized their respective traditions.[36] A similar ceremony was also held at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in August 2023. As part of these ceremonies, the set of "10 Spiritual Principles for Climate Change," which was issued by the interreligious organization in 2022, was also read and reflected upon.[37] In these events as also in the case of the Assisi gatherings, we see that religious leaders tended to combine interfaith religious rituals with formal declarations to mark their solidarity on the concern for the environment.

At the local level, communities can come together to organize eco-religious rituals that integrate environmental themes into cultural-religious observances. These rituals aim to strengthen the spiritual bond between humans and the natural world, nurturing a deep sense of reverence, gratitude, and responsibility toward the earth. They incorporate ecological elements and symbols, emphasizing the importance of environmental care and sustainability within religious traditions. One example of eco-religious rituals is the inclusion of blessings or prayers specifically dedicated to the earth during religious ceremonies. These blessings can express gratitude for the earth's abundance, seek forgiveness for human actions that harm the environment, and invoke divine guidance for the preservation and healing of the natural world.

Seasonal celebrations provide another avenue for eco-religious rituals. By adapting existing festivals to include ecological themes, communities can highlight the importance of nurturing the earth and promoting sustainable practices. The Lunar New Year or the Spring Festival celebrated in many Asian countries is a great occasion for promoting environmental awareness. The Lunar New Year is not only a cultural holiday but also a religious one for Asians because no matter what faith they belong to, many Asians use this occasion to go to temples and churches in order to give thanks for the blessings of the previous year and to pray for the new year.

The occasion of the Lunar New Year teaches us about the importance of environmental flourishing through its symbolism of renewal, connection to nature, and seasonal awareness. As the Lunar New Year marks the beginning of a new lunar cycle, it emphasizes the need

[36] Bob Smietana, "Faith Leaders Call for Repentance and Spiritual Reformation to Address Climate Change," *Religion News Service*, August 17, 2023, https://religionnews.com/2023/08/17/faith-leaders-call-for-repentance-and-spiritual-reformation-to-address-climate-change/?fbclid=IwAR1Zmd0ugPfBd5TlQhJ3Zg-vbaeaUvtsUl1SWWeO5tmZReGAHD7v7rr3eIE

[37] The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, "10 Spiritual Principles for Climate Repentance," https://climaterepentance.com/the-spiritual-principles/

to nurture and revitalize our natural world alongside personal growth. Incorporating elements of nature in celebrations fosters a deeper appreciation for the environment, highlighting our interdependence with the natural world. Additionally, the timing of the Lunar New Year during the spring season, with its vibrant blooms and budding trees, prompts us to observe and value the cycles of nature, reinforcing the significance of maintaining ecological balance and preserving biodiversity for the flourishing of our environment. The Lunar New Year, therefore, can be a wonderful occasion for people of different faiths to come together for not only cultural celebrations, but also to pray for environmental flourishing and to promote environmental awareness.

Each religious tradition can easily identify events within its calendar of celebrations that hold environmental significance and can transform them into interfaith occasions that involve members of other faiths, may it be Thanksgiving (US and Canada), Kumbh Mela (India), Water Festival (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar), Yom Kippur (Israel), and so on. All these occasions can become opportunities to organize eco-religious rituals that serve as a response to environmental concerns. They become a means of healing and restoration, with communal prayers, offerings, or acts of service aimed at repairing environmental damage and fostering renewal.

The specific practices and expressions of eco-religious rituals may vary among different faith traditions. However, they all share a common goal of deepening the spiritual connection between humans and the environment. By integrating eco-religious rituals into their worship and observances, and inviting people of other faiths to join in these celebrations, communities nurture a profound commitment to environmental care and foster a sense of reverence and stewardship for the natural world.

Becoming Interreligious in Theological Exchange

The 'dialogue of theological exchange' is "where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values."[38] This is a commonly encountered form of dialogue, encompassing bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral exchanges involving individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, each offering unique perspectives. The nature of these meetings can vary, accommodating varying numbers of participants, from large congresses to intimate gatherings in private residences. This form

[38] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "Dialogue and Proclamation," no. 42.

of dialogue is based on the recognition that religions have their own unique metaphysical principles and theological perspectives, but that there are also many shared theological questions and concerns that can be explored and discussed.

Through the dialogue of theological exchange, participants can explore the similarities and differences in their theological beliefs, engage in critical and constructive discussion, and learn from one another's perspectives. This can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the diversity of religious traditions and the ways in which they contribute to human understanding and flourishing. The dialogue of theological exchange can also help to clarify misunderstandings and address misconceptions that may exist between different religious traditions. By engaging in respectful and open-minded dialogue, participants can build relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

The exchange of theological ideas can take place through written communication, such as the publication of books and articles in scholarly journals, where authors may receive feedback from other scholars in the form of correspondences or a response article or essay. In the age of social media, the platform for this dialogue can be a YouTube video or a podcast. However, it is equally, if not more, fruitful when theological discussions occur in formal or informal settings, where participants face each other to engage in real-time conversation. The location of such a happening can be on the 'home ground' of one of the participants or in a neutral location. While the dialogue of theological exchange often takes place in conference settings or roundtable discussions, such an activity can just as well be carried out among colleagues over shared meals and drinks. The informal setting may facilitate the building of friendships and lead to greater openness in accepting fresh insights and perspectives.

The dialogue of theological exchange in interreligious dialogue can promote environmental flourishing by fostering a deeper understanding of the theological underpinnings of environmental stewardship and conservation within different religious traditions. By engaging in theological exchange, individuals can share and learn about the environmental teachings, values, and ethics within their own and other religions. For example, Jews and Christians may discuss their understanding of the Biblical concept of the '*imago Dei*' and how it emphasizes the responsibility of humans to care for the earth as stewards of God's creation. Muslims may share their concept of '*khalifa*' or vicegerency, which emphasizes the responsibility of humans to care for the earth as Allah's trustees. Jains and Hindus may highlight their respective perspectives on the concept of '*ahimsa*' or non-violence, which emphasizes the importance of avoiding harm to all living beings. Scholars of Confucianism

may present the concept of the Mandate of Heaven and its relevance to environmental conservation. Through these exchanges, participants may be able to agree on a set of religiously inspired virtues that contribute to promoting environmental flourishing.

Through the dialogue of theological exchange, individuals can also explore how their religious teachings can inform environmental action and advocacy. For example, they can discuss how the concept of social justice within their religions relates to environmental justice, and how their religious teachings can inspire sustainable practices in areas such as agriculture, energy use, and waste reduction. They might also explore how significant figures in their traditions, such as the Founder or renowned saints, can serve as role models for living in an environmentally friendly manner.

On many occasions, the meeting of religious leaders and experts in dialogue has resulted in meaningful interreligious declarations. For example, on June 10, 2002, the "Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics," was signed by Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I.[39] The statement calls for cooperation among all human beings to restore the original harmony of creation, which was destroyed by the sin of humanity. It emphasizes the importance of ecological awareness that leads to practical programs and initiatives to protect natural resources and respect the environment. It stresses the need for repentance, humility, and a change of heart to live in accordance with the divine design for creation. The statement also highlights the importance of the relationship between God and humankind and how it leads to responsibility toward self, others, and creation. Finally, it invites all people to ponder the importance of ethical goals, including valuing the world's children, using science and technology constructively, being humble regarding ownership, acknowledging the diversity of responsibilities, and imploring God to enlighten people everywhere regarding the duty to respect and carefully guard creation.

Another notable document is the Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto that was signed in October 2008 at the Interfaith Summit on Climate Change held in Uppsala, Sweden.[40] The leaders recognized that their faith is a potent force that can empower people to change their lifestyles and consumption patterns. They believed that major transformations in human life, economy, trade, and technology are required

---

[39] Vatican, "Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics," June 10, 2002, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration.html

[40] Martin Robra, "Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto 2008," *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 2 (2010): 242.

to address the problem of climate change. The leaders urged governments and international organizations to prepare and agree upon a comprehensive climate strategy to keep climate change below 2° Celsius. They called for rapid and large emission cuts, binding cuts for the rich world, measurable and verifiable mitigation actions by developing countries, massive transfers and sharing of important technology, and economic incentives for developing countries to foster cleaner development on a national scale. The religious leaders also recognized that adaptation to climate change is important, and they committed themselves to taking and sharing responsibility for providing moral leadership within their various faith traditions.

In the following year, religious leaders signed the Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change (2009).[41] The document emphasizes that the care and respect for life is central to all faiths, and that the rising levels of greenhouse gas emissions are endangering life on earth. The signatories acknowledged the science of climate change and called for global leaders to adopt strong, binding, science-based targets to reduce greenhouse gases. They also asserted that climate change is a moral, spiritual, and cultural problem and committed to changing their habits and teaching their followers to live within the shared limits of the planet. They called upon leaders, people of faith, and all people to accept the reality of the common danger we face, take immediate and decisive action, and see the opportunity to change.

In 2015, the Parliament of the World's Religions issued the document "Embracing Our Common Future: An Interfaith Call to Action on Climate Change." The statement discusses the warming of the earth's atmosphere and oceans, which is primarily caused by human use of fossil fuels and deforestation. This has led to irreversible damaging impacts of climate change, and if humans don't modify their behavior, these effects will become far more extreme, causing harm to humans and other forms of life. The poor, marginalized, and vulnerable are the most affected, and this is a massive injustice. However, the document affirms that this crisis can be addressed by reducing and then ending emissions of greenhouse gases, transitioning to renewable energy, and fulfilling basic needs and ending poverty for people in all countries. Action is needed at all levels; thus, the signers pledged to do their parts individually and as communities, as well as called on governments and other institutions to act swiftly to achieve these goals.

In 2021, a Joint Appeal was signed by almost 40 faith leaders representing various religions including representatives from across the

[41] "Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change," 2009, https://interfaithdeclaration.org/index.html

Christian denominations, both Sunni and Shi'a Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, and Jainism. These religious leaders joined scientists at the Vatican to call on the international community to raise their ambition and step up their climate action ahead of COP26. They also signed a joint appeal that was presented by Pope Francis to UN Secretary-General António Guterres.[42] The document says that faith leaders and scientists have come together to address the unprecedented challenges facing the environment and humanity. They emphasized the duty to care for the environment and for future generations, and the need for a long-term, common response using both scientific knowledge and spiritual wisdom. The signatories called for net-zero carbon emissions, adoption of sustainable practices, and promotion of sustainable lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production. They urged governments, financial institutions, and civil society to take responsibility and act collaboratively, with a focus on protecting the most vulnerable communities. The faith leaders also highlighted the importance of encouraging their communities to embrace sustainable lifestyles, align financial investments with environmentally and socially responsible standards, and evaluate purchases and services with an ethical lens. The leaders warned that our descendants will not forgive us if we fail to act now to protect our common home.

Toward a More Effective Interreligious Dialogue

In the contemporary world, becoming interreligious is imperative. It is necessary in order to build a world free of fear of other religions and to aim for common aspirations that benefit all. According to research, dialogue has a significant impact on fostering positive social change and peacebuilding; however, assessing the outcomes of smaller dialogue initiatives can be difficult because the results are often abstract and take time to materialize, involve various stakeholders with shared responsibilities, and require monitoring of transformation at different levels.[43] Nonetheless, mechanisms for evaluating the work of interreligious dialogue should be installed and there are also ways to make interfaith dialogue more effective. I would like to suggest a few ways toward this end.

---

[42] "World Religious Leaders and Scientists Make Pre-COP26 Appeal," UN Climate Change, October 5, 2021, https://unfccc.int/news/world-religious-leaders-and-scientists-make-pre-cop26-appeal

[43] The International Dialogue Centre, *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging Differences and Building Sustainable Societies* (Vienna: KAICIID, 2021), 63.

First, interreligious dialogue can be made more effective by using a common language and framework that respects the diversity of religious views and values. Fundamental humanistic values such as respect, freedom, justice, community, love, and compassion form the common foundation of many global religions, which also emphasize principles such as acknowledgement, remorse, tolerance, and forgiveness that are closely associated with nonviolent conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and reconciliation processes.[44] In this book, I have employed the concepts of 'humanistic religious environmentalism' and 'environmental flourishing' to depict environmental ethics in a holistic and relational way. Flourishing refers to the idea that all beings, including humans, have inherent value and a right to live and thrive. It is often associated with a holistic approach to environmental ethics that considers the interconnectedness of all life and recognizes the intrinsic value of nature beyond its instrumental value for human use. By using a common language and framework, participants in interfaith dialogue can approach environmental issues from a shared understanding and work toward common goals. It also allows for the recognition and appreciation of diverse religious views and values while still providing a common ground for collaboration and action.

Second, interreligious dialogue should be practical and action-oriented by engaging in environmental projects, campaigns, education, advocacy, and policymaking. This can involve joint efforts such as planting trees, cleaning up polluted areas, reducing carbon footprints, and promoting sustainable practices. By engaging in practical and action-oriented efforts, interfaith initiatives can demonstrate the shared commitment of different religious traditions to environmental protection and sustainability. This can also provide concrete solutions and strategies to address specific environmental challenges, while promoting interfaith collaboration and understanding. Although the building of bridges just by coming together contributes to positive change, the act of traversing those bridges through cooperative endeavors carries even greater importance.[45] Moreover, such efforts can also lead to greater engagement and participation from the wider community, including those who may not be traditionally involved in interfaith dialogue. By focusing on practical outcomes, interfaith initiatives can help to raise awareness of environmental issues, promote sustainable behaviors, and inspire more people to take action toward environmental protection.

Finally, diverse and representative participants from different religious traditions, backgrounds, genders, ages, and roles should be in-

[44] Ibid., 49.

[45] Ibid., 52.

volved. The reason for this is to ensure that multiple perspectives are included and considered in the dialogue process. Including a diverse range of participants also means that the dialogue is not dominated by one particular group. This can lead to a more balanced and nuanced understanding of the issues and can help to build bridges between different communities. It is also important to ensure that the participants are representative of the wider community and not just a small group of individuals. This increases the chance that the outcomes of the dialogue are relevant and meaningful for a wider range of people. Ultimately, including participants from different ages and roles affirms that the dialogue process is inclusive and that everyone has a voice. This can be particularly important when engaging with marginalized or underrepresented communities, as it can help to empower those who may not otherwise have a platform to speak.

Diversity of voices in interreligious dialogue affirms that a plurality of perspectives is not a threat to unity but a valuable resource. As Lubna Qassim articulated, "Bringing together followers of religions and diverse cultures through a constructive dialogue aims to serve humanity and peace purposes and spread good all over the world so differences are no longer a reason for conflict but a factor toward social harmony."[46]

[46] Ibid., 17. Lubna Qassim is Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations in Geneva.

CHAPTER 9

BECOMING INTER-CREATIONAL

In his novel *Small Gods*, the British author Terry Pratchett wrote:

> One of the recurring philosophical questions is: "Does a falling tree in the forest make a sound when there is no one to hear?" Which says something about the nature of philosophers, because there is always someone in a forest. It may only be a badger, wondering what that cracking noise was, or a squirrel a bit puzzled by all the scenery going upwards, but *someone*. At the very least, if it was deep enough in the forest, millions of small gods would have heard it.[1]

Pratchett's humorous quip challenges the notion of isolation embedded in the question by suggesting that there is "always someone in a forest." He points out that the forest is not devoid of observers, even if they are creatures like badgers or squirrels. Perhaps there are even "millions of small gods" inhabiting this place that is full of life and activities by sentient beings. This assertion renders absurd the underlying assumption of a forest without human presence as empty and devoid of awareness and consciousness. Indeed, it invites us to contemplate the possibility that perception is not limited to the human realm and consciousness is inherent in the natural world, that even in the quietude of a forest, active observation and contemplation persist.

Unfortunately, the creatures in the forest are not able to participate in the philosopher's thought experiment to voice their displeasure with its premise. Their presence is relegated to the symphony of the woods: the gentle rustling of leaves as they dance to the tune of the wind's whisper, the swift patter of animal paws weaving a narrative of sustenance, and the inquisitive melodies of birds serenading their mates in nature's choir.

If human beings happen to set foot in the forest and take time to contemplate this vibrant web of existence, they might realize that there isn't any natural phenomenon taking place without an observer somewhere being aware of the event. This realization, however, would make it possible for them to answer the question that Thai scholar monk Prayudh Payutto posed to his listeners in a lecture: "Is the relationship

---

[1] Terry Pratchett, *Small Gods* (HarperCollins e-books, 1994), 2.

between Thai people and forests one of friendship or of enemies?"[2] Indeed, the response will depend on whether one is able to even conceive of a relationship between humans and non-human entities.

Stretching the Imagination

In the previous chapters, we explored the intricate connections between cultures and religions, recognizing their crucial role in our environment. However, this chapter goes even further. It reveals a fascinating realm that expands beyond our human interactions. It dives into our deep connection not only with other humans, faiths, and cultures, but with the entire web of existence. This journey challenges us to rethink our bond with nature, urging us to explore uncharted territories beyond our familiar relationships. This task is particularly demanding for societies shaped by the Enlightenment's mindset, which often views non-human beings as mere subjects of scientific investigation and manipulation.

However, through the lens of faith, a multitude of revelations awaits. These revelations help us uncover various insights that strengthen our journey toward a concept I call 'inter-creationality.' In this vision, we affirm the inherent goodness within every aspect of creation, fostering empathy, solidarity, and mutual understanding as guiding principles within our interconnectedness. Furthermore, as we cultivate our spiritual essence, this experience kindles a desire toward mutual service and gratitude. It transcends the impossible dichotomy of instrumental versus intrinsic value, a distinction that often confounds contemporary environmental ethics. This concept opens the gateway to a harmonious coexistence, where humanity and nature entwine in a relationship undergirded by respect and appreciation.

At the outset, it is crucial to clarify that while the term 'creation' carries a distinct association with the theologies of the Abrahamic traditions, this book employs it to encompass both living and non-living entities that do not emerge spontaneously but rather rely on a cause. Although this cause may be attributed to the ultimate cause (God, the Creator), it can also refer to a secondary cause. Even religions that espouse the eternity of the world do not negate the fact that individual creatures and elements within this universe have their origins and conclusions. Interpreted in this manner, everything in the cosmos can be regarded as having been created and existing in intricate interrelationships.

---

[2] Prayudh Payutto, *Thai People and Forest* (คนไทยกบั ป่า) (Bangkok: Karomwichakan, 2010), 11.

It should be noted that the term 'creation' has been accepted in interreligious contexts as well. For example, the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, comprised of representatives from Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and the Religions of India[3] has employed this term in a 2022 document titled "10 Spiritual Principles for Climate Repentance."[4] In the text, the term 'creation' is used to refer to 'nature.' The first principle states:

> Creation is not our possession. The human person must recognize this and find his/her rightful place in relation to this fundamental fact. For some of us, this leads to a sense of gratitude for God's gifts and for the gift of life itself, wherein humanity takes its rightful place as partner and co-creator, in advancing the life of all creation. For others, creation itself is sacred. Therefore: We recognize human responsibility to love and protect nature.

The document also indicates that human beings constitute a part of the overall creation, which forms the foundation for human-nature relationship. The third principle affirms that "within creation, and between humans and other parts of creation, as well as among religious communities, there is interdependence. All are part of a greater whole wherein each element both receives and gives influence, impact, love, and growth." Because of this interdependence, "care for the other is expressed in love and compassion as fundamental spiritual principles. These are to be applied to other humans, human communities, and other parts of creation" (Principle 10). Thus, the I-Thou relationship naturally extends not only to other human beings and human communities but all entities within the order of creation.

It is within this framework of cosmic relationality that the concept of inter-creationality is envisioned. The different spiritual traditions discussed in this book, despite their divergent worldviews, provide insights that support the notion of inter-creationality because in various ways they all depict a shared existential reality among all created beings. Let us explore some examples from various religious traditions.

---

[3] The Elijah Interfaith Institute, "The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders," https://elijah-interfaith.org/about-elijah/the-elijah-board-of-world-religious-leaders

[4] The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, "10 Spiritual Principles for Climate Repentance," https://climaterepentance.com/the-spiritual-principles/

Religious Foundations for Inter-Creationality

Theravada Buddhism

Within Theravada Buddhist cosmology, a captivating vision unfolds, revealing a vast '*loka*' where all beings find their place amidst a collection of interconnected realms. Spanning this cosmological continuum are six primary realms, each characterized by a distinct degree of suffering. At the worst state of this continuum lies the hell realm, a reality reserved for those who have accumulated much negative kamma in their lives.[5] Here, in a desolate world characterized by darkness, searing fires, and bone-piercing cold, beings bear the brunt of their negative kamma, enduring unimaginable anguish and torment. The punishments inflicted upon them are ghastly, spanning from the agony of immolation and the chill of freezing to the crushing weight of existence and the piercing sting of weapons. Humans must avoid the perilous fate of rebirth in this realm at all costs by embarking on a profound spiritual journey, guided by the tenets of Buddhist teachings. Through the cultivation of mindfulness, virtue, and wisdom, they strive to cleanse the tarnished remnants of negative kamma, purifying their existence and steering clear of the shadowed depths of the infernal realm.

On the contrasting end of the spectrum resides the pinnacle of *samsara*: the celestial abode known as the heavenly realm. This ethereal domain serves as a haven of unparalleled joy within the cyclical web of life. Within its sacred confines, individuals, especially those who chose the life of a householder and who have led a virtuous life, find solace.[6] Generosity, morality, and meditation have enriched their lives, bestowing upon them a treasury of merits. At the highest level of the heavenly realm, sixteen hundred human years equal one day. Yet, amidst the paradisiacal joy, it is imperative to grasp the transient nature of this celestial splendor. The teachings of Buddhism declare that the heavenly realm too is impermanent,[7] underscoring its inability to yield ultimate and everlasting happiness. Within this ideal place, inhabitants remain beholden to the ceaseless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, much like their counterparts in the other states of life. Inevitably, the reservoir of merits that sustains their celestial existence will wane, leading to imminent rebirth. Thus, unlike Christian beliefs, the hell realm does not

---

5 Punnadhammo Mahāthero, *The Buddhist Cosmos: A Comprehensive Survey of the Early Buddhist Worldview* (Canada: Arrow River Forest Hermitage, 2018), 99.

6 Roderick S. Bucknell, *Reconstructing Early Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 261.

7 Punnadhammo Mahāthero, *The Buddhist Cosmos*, 315.

condemn its inhabitants to eternal damnation, and the residents of the heavenly realms do not bask in everlasting bliss, even though their journeys within these realms can stretch across eons. Bound by the unending cycle of rebirth, these inhabitants remain intricately woven into the fabric of the mundane world, alongside those dwelling within the four other realms.

Human beings find their abode in the realm between animals and demi-gods. Nevertheless, these six realms intertwine seamlessly, with the possibility for residents of realms characterized by greater suffering to accrue sufficient merit over countless lifetimes, eventually transitioning into a realm where they can experience greater happiness. Conversely, those granted the privilege of existence in heaven must, once their merits have been depleted, experience a rebirth in the human realm before they can attain permanent liberation. Furthermore, it is worth noting that humans, through immoral deeds, can swiftly accumulate enough negative kamma to warrant rebirth in one of the three less desired states of life. Thus, the gecko that seems to have become a permanent fixture on your wall might very well be a distant relative from a previous life or a good friend in the next, attesting to the fluid nature of existence and the interconnectedness that pervades the cosmic cycle of rebirth.

This intricate mosaic of Buddhist cosmogony unveils a profound truth: human and non-human beings are intricately intertwined, far from existing in isolation. Together, they bear the weight of a shared destiny, ensnared within the relentless cycle of birth, aging, death, and the ubiquitous presence of suffering. The connection between the human and the animal realm stands particularly salient, for not only do they face similar fates, but they also inhabit the same physical space, bound within the reality of earthly existence. Gazing upon this vast panorama, we perceive a collective journey undertaken by sentient beings, all yearning to liberate themselves from the clutches of suffering and discover the elusive shores of eternal happiness. Within this spectrum of existence, the human state possesses a distinct significance, as it is the sole domain from which escape from the cyclic bonds of rebirth can be attained. Endowed with the capacity for intellectual inquiry, humans possess the profound ability to comprehend and reflect upon spiritual teachings, unlocking the gateway to enlightenment. Through this profound insight, we gain a deeper understanding of the nature of reality, the origins of suffering, and cultivate the virtues of wisdom and compassion.

Furthermore, our human existence bestows upon us the gift of freedom. We can exercise our free will to make choices and engage in deliberate actions. This liberty affords us the opportunity to nurture virtuous

qualities, accumulate merits, and forge a path toward transcendence. Yet, there exist deeper reasons why the human state of life holds such significance. In our mortal coil, we encounter a balance between pleasure and pain.[8] It is within this delicate interplay that we discover the transitory and unsatisfying nature of all conditioned phenomena, igniting within us an ardent longing for permanent liberation. The pangs of pain we experience serve as a poignant reminder, urging us to transcend this temporary existence, while our pleasures offer just enough consolation to get us out of bed each day, kindling the flames of personal growth and self-improvement.

In this grand order of existence, sentient beings share aspirations and common challenges while journeying through life. As humans, we navigate this intricate path using our intellectual abilities, free will, and wisdom gained from experience. This guides us on a transformative journey toward ultimate liberation from suffering. At the core of this profound Buddhist worldview lies the recognition that human beings occupy a pivotal role, serving as a bridge that spans the divide between the lower and higher realms. In our earthly journey, our encounters with both joy and desolation become the means in which sentiments of unity, benevolence, and empathy are engendered. It is through these very experiences that we cultivate a profound sense of solidarity, extending our hearts to embrace the collective plight of all sentient beings.

Indeed, the essence of Buddhist moral training resides in empowering individuals to transcend the confines of personal suffering, going beyond the boundaries of self-interest.[9] Instead, it impels us to anchor our ethical actions upon the bedrock of universal empathy, wherein the suffering of every sentient being becomes the catalyst for compassionate engagement. As we internalize this transformative vision, we awaken to the profound interconnection that binds us all, dissolving the illusion of separateness and nurturing a deeper reservoir of altruism. Thus, within this reality of existence, we stand poised as agents of compassion, striding forth to bridge the chasm that separates realms as well as divisions within our own human community. Our very existence, woven with threads of joy and sorrow, becomes the crucible from which empathy and benevolence arise. With open hearts and minds, we embark on a noble quest, channeling our experiences to forge a path of ethical action that embraces the suffering of all creatures.

---

8 Ibid., 146.

9 John J. Holder, "A Suffering (but Not Irreparable) Nature: Environmental Ethics from the Perspective of Early Buddhism," *Contemporary Buddhism* 8, no. 2 (2007): 123.

The notion of common bond between human and non-human creation finds support not only in Buddhism but also in the thought system of Chinese religions. Despite its distinct worldview, Confucian cosmology too espouses a shared connection between humanity and the wider web of creation through a fundamental essence—the life force known as '*qi*.' *Qi* animates and sustains everything, flowing through the veins of human beings, animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and even permeating the inanimate world. *Qi* constitutes the essence of elements like air, earth, fire, and water. The Chinese character for *qi* is associated with the imagery of steam rising from rice, symbolizing its nourishing and transformative qualities. In the case of humans, our being is animated by *qi*, harmonizing our body and spirit into a unified whole, while energizing our interconnected mind and heart.[10] This holistic understanding of *qi* unifies and eliminates dualism, recognizing the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, body and mind, and matter and energy.[11]

In the classical Confucian tradition, *qi* is understood as the life force that connects all things, including the universe and humans, thus, serving to animate and nourish both nature and humanity. In the course of philosophical development, Neo-Confucian philosophers broadened the understanding of *qi* to include its role as the fundamental essence and animating power of all living things, recognizing its pervasive presence in both the material and energetic realms of the universe. From the Neo-Confucian perspective, the universe is constructed of various tiers and domains of organized *qi*.[12]

The function of *qi* is intricately tied to the interplay of the opposing yet complementary modalities of *yin* and *yang*. These fundamental interactions possess a universal influence, spanning across various domains ranging from the simplest to the most complex situations wherein celestial and earthly elements, as well as those deemed lofty or lowly, and movement and stillness, interweave in a harmonious manner. This profound duality sheds light on the intricate dynamics of transformation and transition between contrasting elements. The perpetual flux characterizing our world, with its ever-changing nature, arises from the

---

[10] Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Confucian Cosmology and Ecological Ethics," in *Living Earth Community: Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing*, ed. Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2020), 111.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Nicholas S. Brasovan, *Neo-Confucian Ecological Humanism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017), 57.

cosmic union of *yin* and *yang*. This interconnectedness among all phenomena, marked by a delicate equilibrium and mutual impact, creates a continuity that permeates the very essence of existence.[13]

In Chinese cosmology, *qi* finds expression and function through the dynamic interplay of the elemental phases called *wu xing* (Five Phases). According to this theory, *qi* interacts with the elemental forces of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. The five phases are associated with different qualities, such as wood (growth), fire (transformation), earth (stability), metal (clarity), and water (adaptability). These qualities are thought to be reflected in the physical world, as well as in human existence. The five elements interact with each other in a cyclical pattern which leads to the creation, transformation, and destruction of all things. The phases have the potential to be combined in numerous ways and metaphorically represent a wide range of aspects, including flavors and moral virtues. It is essential to emphasize that the elements should not be viewed as separate entities but rather as dynamic expressions, processes, or stages of the vital force.[14]

While the subject of *qi* and its relationship to the five elements has been greatly debated over the years, the core understanding of these concepts reveals the inseparable bond between *qi's* life force and the expressive powers of the elements in the phenomena taking place in the universe. Their interplay governs the dynamic processes of the universe, influencing the growth of natural beings and the movements of celestial bodies. Balancing *qi* and the elements is essential for well-being of human life and the natural world. It should be noted that although these concepts emerged early in Chinese history, during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), Confucian scholars took a particular interest in utilizing these natural philosophical concepts to apply to concerns of personal and social ethics.[15]

The Confucian cosmology described above reveals the profound interconnectedness of the universe and our place within it, emphasizing our intimate connection with the natural world. Recognizing this bond inspires us to seek harmony and equilibrium in our interactions with nature, understanding that the well-being of both the natural world and ourselves are interdependent. When the natural world is balanced, the harmonious flow of *qi* contributes to the vitality of all beings. Imbalance, on the other hand, leads to disharmony and suffering. This belief highlights the importance of nurturing positive relationships and pro-

---

[13] Ibid., 17.

[14] John H. Berthrong and Evelyn Nagai Berthrong, *Confucianism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 61.

[15] Ibid., 89.

moting harmony among all living and non-living entities. It reminds us of the ripple effects of our actions, influencing the well-being of ourselves and the cosmos. Self-cultivation becomes crucial in aligning our conduct with the patterns of nature, facilitating the unobstructed flow of *qi* and maintaining order in the universe.

This cosmology also facilitates the possibility of recognizing a special kinship between human beings and the myriad things in the universe. In the *Western Inscriptions,* Neo-Confucianist thinker Chang Tsai (1020 –1077) proclaimed, "Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which extends throughout the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions."[16] Chang Tsai's sentiments indicate his deep awareness of the interrelatedness of Heaven and Earth and everything in between. His ethical and moral conduct flowed naturally out of this realization. To conclude the inscription Chang Tsai affirmed, "In life I follow and serve [Heaven and Earth]. In death I will be at peace."

Ultimately, Confucian teachings emphasize the importance of cultivating a harmonious relationship with nature through ethical behavior and virtuous action. This includes respecting the natural world, conserving resources, and promoting sustainable practices that support the health and well-being of both humans and the environment. Because human beings share the same life force as nature, they can communicate with and observe happenings in nature to discern their own fate. Indeed, Chinese rulers were always keen on observing signs in nature to decipher the state of the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven represents the ultimate origin of human virtues, and the Mandate of Heaven can be discovered through conscious exploration of one's inner nature and the surrounding natural and human realms. The fulfillment of Heaven's Mandate lies in the pursuit of self-cultivation and the extension of one's virtues to benefit others and contribute positively to the world.[17] This Confucian hermeneutical-communicative perspective toward nature applied more universally implies that humanity can also discern its own future and 'mandate' by observing the various natural phenomena.[18]

---

[16] William Theodore de Bary, Irene Bloom, and Joseph Adler, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Volume 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 524.

[17] Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 46.

[18] Anthony Le Duc, "Becoming Human, Intercultural, and Inter-creational: Movements toward Achieving Ecoflourishing," *in Ecoflourishing and Virtue. Christian Perspectives Across the Disciplines,* eds. Steven Bouma-Prediger, Nathan Carson (London: Routledge, 2024).

The concept of inter-creationality within the Abrahamic religions emerges from the fundamental belief that all things in existence find their origin in God. This theological principle holds immense significance, for it affirms that the universe is not a mere result of chance or happenstance, but rather a purposeful act of divine creation. The notion of creation inherently carries profound implications of meaning, purpose, and order within the natural world. According to Pope Francis, the Judeo-Christian tradition opts for the word 'creation' rather than 'nature' to highlight "God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance" (LS 76). Rather than something to be studied and controlled, "creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion" (LS 76). Francis cautions against an excessive focus on nature, which may inadvertently reinforce a technocratic paradigm that reduces the natural world to an object of manipulation and control. This perpetuates a dualistic relationship of dominance rather than acknowledging humanity as an integral part of a divinely ordained cosmic system.

In this theocentric worldview, the artificial division between humans and non-human creation dissolves, replaced by a portrayal of all of God's creation existing in intimate connection with one another and the Creator. This perspective further implies a sense of siblinghood among all of creation, with God assuming the role of a nurturing Father/Mother to all. Islam underscores this interconnectedness by highlighting the praise and glorification of God by the entire cosmos, encompassing animate and inanimate entities alike. The Quran states, "Praising Him are the seven heavens, and the earth, and everyone in them. There is not a thing that does not glorify Him with praise" (17:44). While human praise can be demonstrated through verbal acclamations, physical gestures, or internally within one's heart, non-human beings praise God through the satisfaction in their bodily needs and contentment of their senses and faculties.[19] Therefore, everything in the universe testifies to the perfect and faultless nature of its Creator, highlighting God's incomparable excellence and deservingness of unending praise.

It is also this horizon of kinship presented by the theocentric worldview that enabled St. Francis of Assisi to look upon the sun, moon, water, air and so forth as his brothers and sisters, all joined together in intimate relationships in praise of God. In his renowned "Canticle of the

[19] Ryszard F. Sadowski and Zafer Ayvaz, "Biblical and Quranic Argumentation for Sustainable Behaviors Toward Nature," *Problemy Ekorozwoju – Problems of Sustainable Development* 18, no. 1 (2023): 161.

Creatures," Francis aimed not merely to highlight individual aspects of creation, but rather to unveil a comprehensive, interconnected vision of the universe. Within this cosmic panorama, human beings harmoniously unite with non-human creation in praise and worship of the same Creator God. The Franciscan tradition, inspired by Francis, has always recognized the moral, theological, and religious significance of creation. Creation not only mirrors and conveys the essence of God, providing insights for human understanding, but it also possesses the capacity to independently offer praise to the Divine.[20] It is no wonder that it is said that Francis declared, "If you have men who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who will deal likewise with their fellow men." Compassion toward creation can only be displayed when it is seen as much a sibling as other men and women around us.

The Judeo-Christian tradition gives further support to the notion of inter-creationality by affirming that all of creation is imbued with divinely bestowed intrinsic goodness and value. This was affirmed by various church Fathers as well as Thomas Aquinas when they reflected on God's myriad creation. Augustine of Hippo declared that all that God created *ex nihilo* in the universe "both great and small, celestial and terrestrial, spiritual, and corporeal" is good.[21] Inspired by the account of creation in the book of Genesis, Augustine asserted that whether it be a human, an ape, a mountain, a farm, the air, or the heaven with its celestial bodies, each is good accordingly. John Chrysostom shared Augustine's sentiments and argued that since God had already deemed every creature to be good, anyone who harbored a contradictory thought would be committing an "arrogant folly."[22]

Admittedly, among God's creation, not everything is pleasant or beneficial to human life. Indeed, "Among the growth springing up from the earth it was not only plants that are useful but also those that are harmful, and not only trees that bear fruit but also those that bear none; and not only tame animals but also wild and unruly ones."[23] However, the goodness of a creature does not hinge on human evaluation. Thus, any condescending utterance about the creatures which God has created, said Chrysostom, demonstrates disrespect and ingratitude to

---

[20] Keith Warner, "Franciscan Environmental Ethic: Imagining Creation as a Community of Care," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 154.

[21] Jame Schaeffer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 18.

[22] Ibid., 19.

[23] Ibid.

their Creator. Similarly, Thomas Aquinas, following in the footsteps of the church Fathers, emphasized that the ultimate source of a creature's goodness is God, who willed its existence. Aquinas taught that each creature possesses its own inherent perfection, instilled by God. Merely by existing and functioning in accordance with its divinely bestowed nature, it demonstrates its intrinsic value. Therefore, criticizing a creature for its inherent nature or way of being amounts to an insult directed at its very Creator.[24]

What has been written above unveils a profound truth: all existence originates from God, a testament to the Divine's purposeful and awe-inspiring creation. Rather than seeking to wield dominion over the world, we are beckoned to behold it as a cherished offering bestowed upon us by the Divine. By transcending the artificial chasm between humans and non-human creation, we embark on a transformative journey, discovering a deep siblinghood among all creation. Only when we attune ourselves to this sacred interconnection can we partake in a melodic symphony of praise, resonating in unison with creatures great and small as we harmonize in a hymn of adoration for the very same Creator. Thus, embracing inter-creationality calls for unity, respect, and a profound reverence for God's magnificent creation. This, in turn, leads to gratitude, compassion, and a deep sense of responsibility toward the earth and all its inhabitants.

Living Out Inter-Creationality

From the insights provided by the various systems of religious thought in the above section, we can summarize 'inter-creationality' as the concept that stresses the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities in the cosmos. It recognizes the shared bond among all forms of beings—biotic and abiotic—encompassing humans, animals, plants, other beings, and even inanimate objects. It affirms that non-human creation constitutes an essential aspect of the primary set of relationships of human life. It also underscores the significance of acknowledging the collective aspiration for flourishing. Thus, from the ethical perspective, inter-creationality calls for moral behavior on the part of human beings, fostering solidarity, empathy, compassion, mutuality, and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the entire creation.

Having established the conceptual framework of inter-creationality, our focus now shifts toward exploring its manifestation through moral virtues that govern the intricate bond between human and non-human entities. It is important to note that this enumeration does not strive to

[24] Ibid., 19-20.

be comprehensive, but rather aims to highlight essential and representative virtues that uphold inter-creationality and facilitate the dynamics inherent in this interrelationship.

Gentleness

In inter-creationality, the practice of gentleness emerges as a fundamental approach to human interactions with non-human beings. Indian religions uphold and teach the virtue of gentleness, symbolized by *ahimsa* (nonviolence), as integral to personal moral development. *Ahimsa* extends to all living beings, regardless of size or form. Among the four major Indian religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—Jainism stands out for its profound and radical interpretation and application of *ahimsa*. Jainism is rooted in the belief that every living entity possesses consciousness, and it extends this belief to certain non-living elements, particularly those considered to have a degree of vitality or subtle forms of life, while recognizing varying levels of consciousness and complexity among them. Jains are encouraged to manifest the highest degree of nonviolence in their daily conduct and adopt a vegetarian diet to minimize harm to living beings. Recognizing the presence of minute organisms in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the surfaces that we move or rest on, we assume responsibility for the harm we may cause.[25]

Within Jain ascetic tradition, there exists a rare practice of self-starvation to death, viewed as the ultimate act of *ahimsa*. This decision stems from pure motives, detachment from the physical body, and compassion for all living beings. This sacred passing is revered for its transformative potential in advancing the soul toward liberation, attainable by those who have achieved elevated levels of compassion and wisdom. These individuals willingly choose death over inflicting pain or harm, even to the tiniest creatures.[26]

In Buddhism, *ahimsa* also serves as the primary precept and unequivocally denounces the intentional harm of sentient beings as morally reprehensible. The teachings of the *Dhammapada* remind that all living beings, akin to ourselves, instinctively recoil at the mere thought of pain and hold their own lives dear. Consequently, the intentional infliction of suffering upon others is a grave injustice that cannot be justified (Dp.129-130). Buddhism advocates for the cultivation of gentleness not only in our day-to-day interactions with fellow human be-

---

[25] Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 100.

[26] Ibid., 110.

ings and animals, but also in our choice of livelihood, urging us to abstain from occupations that cause harm to others (*Anguttara Nikāya* – AN.V.177; The.242-3). Although the non-violence virtue directly applies to how we treat other sentient beings, it would be incongruous for an individual to display gentleness toward humans and animals while callously disregarding the well-being of plants and even inanimate entities. A genuinely gentle person would be expected to extend the same demeanor toward other beings such as plants and even non-living things like a historic boulder or a cave. When gentleness permeates our veins, it is displayed in our actions which affect all the things around us.

In Christianity, much like in Indian religions, gentleness holds great reverence and is considered one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Jesus himself emphasized the significance of gentleness, proclaiming that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt 5:5). The Apostle Paul echoed this sentiment, urging Christians to display their gentleness openly, recognizing it as a fundamental trait of Christian discipleship (Col 3:12). Although some may mistakenly perceive gentleness as a sign of weakness, it is, in fact, a tender strength. Jesus even described himself as "gentle and lowly in heart" when inviting people to embrace his teachings (Matt 11:29-30). Christian leaders are called to embody gentleness in their governance of the church and interactions with others (2 Tim 3:3; 2:24-25). Thomas Aquinas listed gentleness as one of the cardinal virtues, while Saint Augustine described it as the 'art of self-mastery'—an art that is often overlooked or underdeveloped.

In our modern age, plagued by environmental degradation and violence, gentleness remains an indispensable virtue. Embodying gentleness bestows upon us a precious gift that can catalyze the flourishing of our environment. It extends beyond interactions with fellow humans to encompass our treatment of all living beings. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."[27] A gentle person is mindful of their actions and intentions, avoiding physical and emotional harm to others. Indeed, the well-being of the environment is intricately connected to a human community that embraces gentleness in all its interactions. Adopting a gentle approach serves as a safeguard against negative environmental consequences, such as the loss of biodiversity caused by hunting or deforestation. By refraining from acts of violence toward living beings, we actively contribute to the intended flourishing of the environment.

---

[27] Peta, "PETA Honors Gandhi's Lifelong Commitment to Animal Liberation," https://www.peta.org/features/gandhi/

Embodying gentleness not only entails a personal commitment but also calls for a profound responsibility toward the environment and all its inhabitants, compelling us to live in harmony and recognize the inherent interconnectedness. As eloquently expressed by John Muir, the Scottish American naturalist, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."[28] Gentleness, therefore, emerges as a formidable force for the greater good, fostering personal growth and nurturing the flourishing of our beloved home planet.

Compassion

Another essential virtue to support inter-creationality is compassion. This is an emotional reaction that arises from empathy—the ability to recognize, understand, and share the thoughts and feelings of others.[29] Thus, compassion is defined as "an empathic understanding of a person's feelings, accompanied by altruism, or a desire to act on that person's behalf."[30] Compassion compels one to feel a genuine desire to offer assistance to others to alleviate their suffering in the face of trials and tribulations. Within the human community, it is an expression of kindness that stems from recognizing the shared humanity of individuals. However, in the context of inter-creationality, it is the shared reality of mundane existence characterized by vulnerability and suffering.

In Buddhism, compassion is often mentioned in the same breath with 'loving kindness,' which encompasses a whole range of positive attitudes and actions that demonstrate empathy, kindness, mercy, and solidarity with others. Loving kindness and compassion are two of the four sublime abodes along with sympathetic joy and equanimity. Loving kindness is the wish that all sentient beings, without exception, be happy while compassion is the genuine desire to alleviate the sufferings of others which one is able to feel. Buddhism emphasizes extending loving-kindness universally, promoting boundless goodwill and harmonious relationships with all beings, devoid of enmity or ill will (AN.I.183). The Buddha exhorted the faithful to exercise loving kindness to others no matter whether they are weak or strong, big or small, seen or unseen,

---

[28] John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 166.

[29] Psychology Today, "Empathy," https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy

[30] Jacinta Jiménez, "Compassion vs. Empathy: Understanding the Difference," BetterUp, July 16, 2021, https://www.betterup.com/blog/compassion-vs-empathy#:~:text=Consider%20these%20definitions%3A,creates%20a%20desire%20to%20help

near or far away. Monks are enjoined also to have loving kindness even in the face of challenges and difficulties (*Majjhima Nikāya* – MN.I.123).

Along with loving kindness, compassion is essential to one's moral perfection. In Buddhism, the pursuit of human perfection, embodied by concepts such as Buddhahood, *arhatship*, *bodhisattvahood*, and others, is achieved through a lifelong commitment to nurturing virtues like wisdom and compassion.[31] Compassion is exemplified by the Buddha himself who is said to be the "one person who arises in the world…out of compassion for the world" (AN.I.23) and continued the mission of propagating the dhamma "simply out of sympathy and compassion for living beings" (AN.II.177). Thus, as Simon P. James observed, "To be compassionate is to feel compassion for all sentient beings, human and non-human, and to act so as to alleviate their suffering."[32]

The practice of loving kindness and compassion holds a potent power to transform society and the environment in ways that are profound and far-reaching. These sublime virtues, as the Buddha so eloquently taught, are to be nurtured and cultivated by monks and laypeople alike, with the aim of extending their influence beyond the boundaries of their immediate communities, toward the entire world.[33] How could one limit their compassion and kindness solely to human beings while the destruction of rainforests and the pollution of the air and rivers harm countless living beings, both great and small?

The true implication of loving kindness and compassion, when applied to the environment, requires us to respond to all dimensions of life with sensitivity and care, and to consider the ecological balance of all aspects of nature. It is not enough to be selectively compassionate; instead, a truly compassionate person extends their loving kindness and compassion to all sentient beings and to the non-sentient environment that supports the flourishing of living beings. The virtuous dealings of such a person with the entire world reflect their high level of compassion.[34]

In Confucianism, compassion can be found in the virtue of '*ren*' (仁), which as discussed in Chapter 3 is one of the most important virtues. It is a central concept that refers to a combination of kindness, benevo-

---

[31] Damien Keown, "Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach," *Contemporary Buddhism* 8, no. 2 (2007): 101.

[32] Simon P. James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 128.

[33] Pragati Sahni, *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 120.

[34] Simon P. James, "Against Holism: Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Values* 16, no. 4 (2007): 457.

lence, and humanity toward others. It emphasizes the importance of treating others with compassion, empathy, and understanding, and is often described as the foundation of all other virtues. According to Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, people are naturally born with a sense of compassion and care for others. Compassion constitutes one of the four innate 'sprouts' that if properly nurtured and cultivated will help the person to become a more fully realized person imbued with *ren*. Just as a seed needs the right conditions of sunlight, water, and soil to grow, the sprout of compassion needs the right conditions to flourish. These conditions include a supportive environment, positive role models, and the opportunity to practice compassion regularly.

The goal of practicing kindness and compassion as part of *ren* is to create a harmonious society, where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, and where there is a sense of community and social responsibility. This virtue can also promote environmental well-being by cultivating a sense of compassion and care toward all living beings, including the natural world. Mencius wrote that virtuous persons are "benevolent toward the people" and "feel love for all things."[35] It has been stated that in Confucianism, there is no injunction to display benevolence to non-human beings for their own sake.[36] However, there are strands of Confucian thought that seem to moralize the relationship between human beings and nature. Indeed, Wang Yangming (1472–1529) proposed a perspective that sees the unity of human beings and the universe. He believed that the benevolent heart forms a connection with all things, leading to a sense of solidarity with others. Whether it's witnessing a child in danger, the suffering of animals, or the destruction of plants and even inanimate objects, our benevolence enables us to empathize and unite with them. In this perspective, the relationship between humans and nature is imbued with moral significance. Negative behaviors that harm the environment are condemned as morally wrong, while positive actions that respect the natural order are praised as virtuous. This holistic worldview embraces the idea that all people are considered siblings, and all things are seen as companions. This moral consciousness influences human awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, promoting environmental protection and emphasizing human responsibility toward the environment.[37]

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer whose thought was greatly influenced by Buddhism, remarked, "Compassion for animals is inti-

---

[35] Quoted in Xinzhong Yao, "An Eco-Ethical Interpretation of Confucian Tianren Heyi," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 9 (2014): 576.

[36] Ibid., 579.

[37] Ibid., 581.

mately associated with goodness of character, and it may be confidently asserted that he who is cruel to animals cannot be a good man."[38] The ethical outlook of religious traditions demonstrates that they can enable human awareness of the moral responsibility that human beings must have toward non-human creation. By extending our kindness and compassion to the environment, we can foster sustainable practices and protect the natural world from senseless harm. The practice of these virtues enables us to understand and appreciate the interconnectedness and value of all things, leading us to a deeper appreciation for the natural world and a desire to preserve it for generations to come.

A well-known quote that has been attributed to multiple individuals, including Chief Seattle, a Native American leader of the Suquamish and Duwamish tribes, declares, "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."[39] It is impossible to separate benevolence toward human beings from that of non-human creation, for they are intertwined and inextricable from one another. As such, our compassionate actions must encompass the whole of the environment, leaving no stone unturned in our quest for a better world.

Moderation and Contentment

Moderation and contentment are also essential virtues that buttress inter-creationality. They serve as the antidote for many social and environmental ills being experienced today. They oppose negative tendencies such as greed, excessiveness, and selfishness which are detrimental to personal spiritual progress as well as social and ecological flourishing.

There is a plethora of texts in the Buddhist Pali Canon that exhort the individual to exercise self-discipline and restraint in behavior, resisting temptation and indulgence in the senses. The *Aggañña Suttra* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (DN.III.80-98) tells a fanciful tale of the beginning of the world where as (pre)human beings went through moral degeneration, filling their hearts with greed, hatred, and envy, human lives became less and less joyful. In the beginning, the beings were luminous and weightless creatures floating about space in pure delight. However, as time passed, on earth, there appeared a sweet and savory substance

---

[38] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1903).

[39] There is no definitive source for this quote. The quote has been ascribed to various individuals, including Wendell Berry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Chief Seattle, Moses Henry Cass, Dennis J. Hall, Helen Caldicott, Lester Brown, David R. Brower, and Taghi Farvar. It has also been associated with both a Native American proverb and an Amish saying.

that piqued the curiosity and interest of the beings. They not only ate the substance, but due to greed seeping in, they ate it voraciously which led to its eventual depletion. In the meanwhile, due to endlessly feeding on the earth substance, the weightless beings eventually would not only become coarse individuals with a particular shape, but also lose their radiance. The story then goes on to tell how the natural world and human society continued to evolve in unwholesome manners as a result of the depraved actions of humanity.

This tale vividly illustrates the inherent link between human virtuousness and the state of the natural world. The absence of moderation, therefore, emerges as a catalyst for profoundly detrimental consequences, not only affecting the surrounding environment but also compromising one's personal well-being. Although Buddhism, like many religious traditions, does not advocate abject poverty, it unequivocally teaches that an excessive reliance on material possessions hampers spiritual growth. Monks, for instance, are instructed to possess no more than a robe and a bowl, a day's worth of sustenance, modest accommodations, and medicine. The Buddha encouraged his monks to steer clear of opulent indulgences such as gold, silver, extravagant beds, garlands, and other luxuries. While lay people are not subjected to the same standards, they are indeed encouraged to be moderate in their lifestyle. According to the Buddha, genuine happiness does not reside in yielding to sensory desires but rather in leading a simple life guided by wisdom and moral virtues.

Moderation is closely connected with contentment, a virtue that Buddhism greatly advocates. The Suttas consistently emphasize the importance of finding contentment in simplicity and avoiding the desire for excessive possessions. The Buddha asserted, "Bhikkhus, I do not see even a single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as contentment. For one who is content, unarisen wholesome qualities arise and arisen unwholesome qualities decline" (AN.I.13). The Buddha also extolled the virtues of a monk who remains content with the robe, alms food, and lodging he receives (AN.II.27-29). As new robes are acquired, the old ones are not simply discarded, but repurposed as coverlets. Likewise, the old coversheets are transformed into floor sheets, which in turn become foot-towels. The foot-towels are then utilized as dusters, and the old dusters find new life as floor-spreads (VN.II.291). Thus, moderation not only manifests in acquiring new possessions judiciously but is also exemplified by the resourceful utilization of existing items. In today's culture dominated by single-use plastics and fast fashion, the imperative to repurpose old items instead of thoughtlessly discarding them presents a meaningful challenge.

Contentment stands in direct opposition to non-contentment and craving (*tanhā*). *Tanhā*, characterized as a profound thirst or intense craving, plagues individuals as they tirelessly pursue the fulfillment of their self-centered desires by relying on the transient external world.[40] This unquenchable craving ultimately leads to suffering and dissatisfaction, as one perpetually seeks fulfillment in impermanent possessions, a futile pursuit. While human cravings deceive us into believing that accumulating more material wealth and possessions brings true fulfillment, Buddhism enlightens us to the fact that contentment is the ultimate treasure, transcending all worldly riches (Dp. 204). On the other hand, the destruction of all cravings is the path to overcoming all forms of suffering (Dp. 21).

Similar to the Buddha, Jesus also taught the importance of moderation and contentment. In his preaching, Jesus advised against the accumulation of transient earthly treasures that are prone to loss or theft. Instead, he directed our attention toward the cultivation of enduring spiritual treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19-21). Similarly, Luke 12:15 cautions against the perils of greed and serves as a reminder that genuine fulfillment transcends mere material possessions. These teachings not only advocate for the pursuit of inner peace and contentment but also discourage the relentless chase after worldly riches.

Expanding on the subject of moderation and contentment, Matthew's Gospel delves deeper in Chapter 6:25-34. Jesus earnestly implored his followers to place unwavering trust in God's unceasing provision for their basic needs. He warned them that undue worry regarding sustenance, nourishment, and attire was detrimental to spiritual well-being. Rather, their primary focus should center on seeking God's kingdom and righteousness, as it is through this steadfast quest that true happiness is found. Jesus emphasized the importance of relying on God's unwavering faithfulness, assuring his followers that their physical needs would be met.

The call for moderation and contentment resonates not only within the teachings of Jesus but is also echoed by the Apostle Paul. Writing to early Christians, Paul emphasized the importance of finding contentment through a harmonious balance of godliness and satisfaction. Genuine prosperity is not measured by material accumulation but by striving for holiness and finding contentment in all circumstances, recognizing the transient nature of worldly possessions (1 Tim 6:6-8). As further witness to his teachings, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul highlight-

[40] G.P. Malalasekera, "The Status of the Individual in Theravada Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West* 14, no. 2 (1964): 152.

ed his own sense of contentment in all situations, attributing his resolute strength to his relationship with Christ (4:11-13).

Collectively, these teachings encourage individuals to discover contentment and moderation through wholehearted trust in God's loving providence, rather than placing excessive emphasis on material wealth. In the Catholic Church, the biblical teachings on moderation have been reinforced by church social teachings that strongly criticize the consumer culture while simultaneously calling on the faithful as well as all people of good will to build a culture of moderation by focusing less on the material dimension of life.[41] It is essential to prioritize the pursuit of God's kingdom and righteousness, finding solace in the knowledge that God will faithfully provide for all our needs. Lasting contentment lies not in getting every color of a new shirt, one more pair of shoes for our closet already full of shoes, one more gas-guzzling vehicle for our car collection, or one more house to spend our summer vacation. Rather it is in the realization that we possess everything we truly require through the empowering strength derived from our fulfilling relationship with Christ.

The teachings of Islam also shine a profound light on the virtues of moderation and contentment. In Islamic tradition, the virtue of moderation is known as '*wasatiyya*' and finds its expression in the Quran and Hadith literature. The Quran guides Muslims to follow the path of balance and justice set by the Prophet Muhammad. *Surah Al-Baqarah*, verse 143, upholds the significance of building a just and balanced community, drawing inspiration from the exemplary life of the Prophet. Additionally, the Quran cautions against the perils of excess and extremism, as exemplified in *Surah Al-A'raf*, verse 31, which reminds Muslims to enjoy the blessings of the world in moderation without veering into extremes. Furthermore, the Hadith literature comprises numerous teachings on moderation, with the Prophet Muhammad encouraging his followers to adopt a well-balanced approach to life. Notably, he emphasized that "the best of deeds is the moderate one," underscoring the vital role of moderation in all aspects of one's actions.

Contentment holds a prominent place in Islam as well, guiding Muslims to embrace a moderate and balanced outlook on life. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes the significance of contentment and gratitude, reminding believers that material possessions and wealth are transitory and fleeting. *Surah Al-Baqarah*, verse 152, urges believers to maintain a constant state of remembrance of God and express gratitude for God's blessings. Indeed, it is gratitude that reinforces contentment because it

[41] Ryszard F. Sadowski, "The Role of Catholicism in Shaping a Culture of Sustainable Consumption," *Religions* 12 (2021): 598.

helps us to feel that what we have is already enough, or even more than we expect. In Islam, contentment extends beyond mere satisfaction with material belongings; it encompasses finding solace in one's spiritual state and accepting God's will. According to *Surah Al-Hadid*, verse 23, those who find contentment in what God has bestowed upon them will be rewarded in the hereafter.

The virtues of moderation and contentment, taught by various religious traditions, are undeniably crucial in fostering ecological balance. By curbing unnecessary loss of life and alleviating the strain on natural goods, these virtues contribute significantly to environmental sustainability. Setting limits on our lifestyles and prioritizing genuine needs over wants can reduce the impact of consumerism and commodity production on natural resources. As scholar of Buddhism Donald Swearer noted, "One chooses less so that all may flourish more."[42]

In addition to alleviating the strain on creation, embracing moderation and contentment carries a profound significance in our lives by instilling a deep appreciation for the things we already possess. In a world that ceaselessly promotes the allure of upgrading to the latest technologies and trends, it becomes all too easy to overlook the value in what we already have. It is no coincidence that in the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, gratitude is so often highlighted as an essential attitude toward God's blessings. Likewise, in the New Testament, Christians are extolled to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:18).

In Islam, gratitude (*shukr*) is considered a fundamental part of Islamic spirituality. Muslims are encouraged to express gratitude daily to God for God's blessings, and to show appreciation to others who have helped them. The Quran teaches that those who are grateful to God will receive even more blessings, while those who are ungrateful will face divine punishment. Confucius also took gratitude as a central tenet of his teachings, making it one of the aspects that undergird the practice of filial piety, which calls on individuals to show reverence and respect to their ancestors, parents, and elders. In the deeply Confucian-influenced Vietnamese culture, a proverb reminds people when they eat fruits not to forget those who have planted the tree. Another proverb admonishes one to remember the source when taking a sip of water.

The teachings of various religions serve as a poignant reminder that genuine happiness transcends material acquisition. Instead, it stems from living simply, being grateful and content for the things that we have, and always striving for greater spiritual growth. True happiness emanates from a state of well-being, inner peace, and tranquility that

[42] Donald Swearer, "Buddhist Virtue, Voluntary Poverty, and Extensive Benevolence," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 26, no. 1 (1998): 93.

cannot be found through a relentless pursuit of possessions. By adopting this disposition toward life, we not only promote our own well-being but also environmental flourishing. Research has shown that gratitude is positively associated with pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. Those who have gratitude are more likely to have a sense of responsibility toward the well-being of future generations, which in turn leads to enhanced beliefs and concern regarding climate change, strengthened pro-environmental beliefs and intentions, and increased support for positive environmental policies.[43]

When individuals feel grateful for the natural world around them, they are more likely to appreciate and respect it. This appreciation can lead to a greater desire to protect and care for the environment through behaviors such as reducing waste, conserving energy, using eco-friendly products, and using resources responsibly and sustainably. Indeed, as the Buddha implored his followers, "Of the tree in whose shade one sits or lies, not a branch of it should he break, for if he did he would be a betrayer of a friend, an evil doer. Of the tree in whose shade one sits or lies, not a leaf of it should he injure, for if he did he would be a betrayer of a friend, an evildoer" (Prov 9:3-5).

Reciprocity and Mutuality

Implicit within the concept of inter-creationality and the subsequent dealings between human and non-human creation is the principle of reciprocity. Indeed, religious systems around the world, in various ways, contain teachings that advocate this ethical norm. Because there is such a universal acceptance of it for nourishing interpersonal relationship, it shouldn't be surprising that it also holds relevance for the relationship between human beings and non-human creation.

When discussing reciprocity, the Confucian Golden Rule is often cited. The version most familiar comes from Confucius' answer to his disciple when he asked about *ren*: "Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire" (Ana., 12.2). Confucius advised his disciple to extend respect to individuals beyond their kinship group or social class, to use their own desires as a compass for treating others so that whether in public or family life, there are no conflicts to face. On another occasion in which the disciple Zigong asked for a governing principle for life, the Master answered, "It is 'reciprocity.' Do not impose upon others those things that you yourself do not desire" (Ana., 15.24).

---

[43] Stylianos Syropoulos, Hanne M. Watkins, Azim F. Shariff, Sara D. Hodges, and Ezra M. Markowitz, "The Role of Gratitude in Motivating Intergenerational Environmental Stewardship," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 72 (2020): 101517.

Because this example is often cited, there is a tendency to think that the Confucian Golden Rule is always stated in the negative. However, in the "Great Learning," there is a positive presentation of the principle, where in this case, reciprocity is applied to the situation of how rulers inculcate values into their subjects in order to morally transform the citizenry of the state. The context of reciprocity here is similar to the one in the "Doctrine of the Means" which discusses to what extent rulers can bring people into conformity with their natures.[44] Thus, in early Confucian texts, sometimes the concept of reciprocity was employed in a metaphorical sense to exemplify proper political conduct. However, in the majority of interpretations of the Analects, the Golden Rule is closely linked to the virtue of *ren*. Subsequently, later writers sought to explore the ramifications of this rule within the framework of interpersonal relationships. Primarily, *ren* was perceived as arising from innate sentiments of compassion, wherein individuals empathetically shared the suffering of others. These compassionate feelings were further nurtured and extended to encompass all individuals through the process of moral self-cultivation.[45]

In the course of philosophical development, Neo-Confucianists, under the influence of Buddhism that had arrived in China, would give the Golden Rule a more important role in the ethical system.[46] With the expanding and inclusive application of the classical expressions of Golden Rule-style statements by post-Buddhist Confucians, the role and significance of these expressions underwent a transformative process within the Chinese cultural system. As a result, the Golden Rule gained growing importance among later writers, signifying a notable change in its perceived relevance and impact within the realm of Confucian teachings. The Golden Rule as a moral principle, therefore, holds that individuals should always treat others with respect, kindness, and fairness, regardless of their social status or relationship to oneself. This mutual respect and care for others is the basis for creating a harmonious society.

In Christianity, the Golden Rule is found in Jesus' declaration in the Gospel of Matthew 7:12 (NIV): "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." This rule represents a rearticulation of the injunction to love God and love neighbor stated in the Torah of the Hebrew bible. While these prin-

---

[44] Mark A. Csikszentmihalyi, "The Golden Rule in Confucianism," in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum, 2008), 162-63.

[45] Ibid., 165.

[46] Ibid., 168.

ciples were already in the Jewish scriptures, Jesus' contribution was to make these two actions inextricable. One cannot be fulfilled without the other. Jesus' ethic of love is rooted in recognizing the transformative power of God's love which calls us to see every person in the context of God's presence, irrespective of their social, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. He exhorted his listeners to perceive others as reflections of God's presence, not as threats or mere allies. Thus, the act of loving one's neighbor, who embodies divine presence, is inseparable from loving God. It is a moral responsibility as well as an expression of faith. The Golden Rule effectively serves as a means to communicate this moral obligation.[47]

There have been attempts to label Jesus' 'positive' Golden Rule as superior to the 'negative' formulations such as the Confucian principle. To establish Jesus' uniqueness, some modern interpreters have argued that while he advocated the Golden Rule of treating others as you would like to be treated, other teachers merely emphasized refraining from doing to others what they wouldn't want done to themselves.[48] However, trying to make distinctions in this manner lacks exegetical credibility. For one, the principle stated by Jesus reflects a fundamental concept found in the Torah, its interpretation, and the broader Near Eastern culture that preceded him for many centuries.[49]

Moreover, because the injunctions were already stated in the positive form, the fact that Jesus' rearticulation of the principle is not what is distinctive here. Jesus' contribution, as stated above, is to make the elements of loving God and loving neighbor inseparable. Besides, whether stated in the positive or negative, one implies the other. As David S. Nivison observed, "If, having promised to appear this evening, I had not done so, I still would have done something, namely breaking a promise. Not doing something to another is always, under another description, doing something to that person, and conversely."[50] Thus, the ethical thrust underpinning both the positive and negative formulations is essentially identical.

The Golden Rule also finds expression in Islam. Although Islam does not contain an exact phrasing akin to the Confucian and Christian texts

---

47 Bruce Chilton, "Jesus, the Golden Rule, and Its Application," in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum, 2008), 79.

48 Ibid., 77.

49 Ibid., 78.

50 David S. Nivison, "Golden Rule Arguments in Chinese Moral Philosophy," in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bryan Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1996), 62.

regarding the Golden Rule, its scriptural sources contain numerous verses that embody the ethical essence of this principle. One such verse is from *Surah Al-Hujurat* (49:13), which states: "O people! We created you from a male and a female, and made you races and tribes, that you may know one another. The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous. God is All-Knowing, Well-Experienced." This verse highlights the importance of recognizing the inherent dignity and equality of all people, regardless of their differences. It encourages Muslims to foster mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation among diverse individuals and communities.

Muslim commentators have also pointed out that the Golden Rule is implicit in the Quran 83:1-6:[51]

> Woe to the defrauders. Those who, when they take a measure from people, they take in full. But when they measure or weigh to others, they cheat. Do these not know that they will be resurrected? For a Great Day? The Day when mankind will stand before the Lord of the Worlds?

These words serve as a warning against unfair and deceitful business practices, rebuking those who engage in dishonesty and exploitation during commercial transactions, taking more than what is rightfully due and causing harm to others. The verses stress the significance of justice and integrity, cautioning that individuals will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment, where their deeds will be documented and evaluated. Although the Golden Rule is not explicitly mentioned, one can perceive an implicit correlation between these verses and the principle of treating others with fairness, respect, and honesty, which is the essence of the rule.

Expressions of the Golden Rule can also be found in the Hadith. An oft cited verse is of Muhammad who says, "None of you believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself!" (*Sahih Bukhari*, Book 2, Hadith 12). Indeed, the Quran distinguishes between a 'Muslim,' one who outwardly professes belief and submission, and a '*Mu'min*,' one who deeply believes in God and God's revelations in their heart. This distinction implies that there are varying levels of faith, from a nominal adherence to a profound internalization of the religion. In relation to this, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, a prominent fifteenth-century hadith scholar, interpreted Muhammad's statement "None of you believes" as not implying that someone who does not follow the Golden Rule is an unbeliever, but rather indicating that their faith is incomplete. Moreover,

[51] Th. Emil Homerin, "The Golden Rule in Islam," in *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton (London: Continuum, 2008), 102.

according to Ibn Hajar, having perfect faith does not solely rely on practicing the Golden Rule but also encompasses adherence to the Five Pillars of Islam. Therefore, the Golden Rule is considered an ethical principle sanctioned by God, but it is interconnected with a broader framework of correct beliefs and actions.[52] It should be noted that since the hadith does not include the term 'Muslim,' Ibn Hajar's commentary on it primarily presents the Golden Rule as a moral principle where one genuinely wishes for others the same material and spiritual well-being that they desire for themselves.[53]

In addition to the three traditions presented here, further explorations about reciprocity can be made in other religious traditions including Hinduism, Buddhism, classical Judaism, Zoroastronism, Greco-Roman spiritual thoughts, and so on. The fact that the fundamental concept of the Golden Rule is so spread across traditions and cultures gives credibility to the claim of it being a universal ethical principle. Marcus G. Singer observed:

> The golden rule has been widely accepted, in word if not in deed, by vast numbers of greatly differing peoples; it is a basic device of moral education; and it can be found at the core of innumerable moral, religious, and social codes … The nearly universal acceptance of the golden rule and its promulgation by persons of considerable intelligence, though otherwise of divergent outlooks, would … seem to provide some evidence for the claim that it is a fundamental ethical truth.[54]

The core ethical principle underlying the Golden Rule of reciprocity across various religious traditions is treating others as one would wish to be treated. It promotes empathy, compassion, and fairness in human interactions. Regardless of specific religious teachings or cultural contexts, the Golden Rule emphasizes the importance of considering the well-being and interests of others in a manner consistent with one's own desires and needs. It encourages individuals to act with kindness, respect, and fairness toward others, fostering harmonious relationships and a more just and compassionate society.

Integral to reciprocity is the ability to understand the situation of the other. Understanding restrains us from judging others based on preconceived notions or applying unrealistic criteria to others by putting ourselves into the place of another. By understanding the situation

---

[52] Ibid., 103.

[53] Ibid., 104.

[54] Marcus G. Singer, "Golden Rule," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 365-67.

of the other, appropriate actions can be taken. Thus, reciprocity is not about applying rigid rules to interpersonal interactions but rather to have the ability to consider the feelings of the other in specific contexts as part of the deliberation on actions to take. Understanding requires imagination as part of the process of putting ourselves into the shoes of another.

Reciprocity has the potential to cultivate a spirit of mutuality within a relationship. Mutuality arises when both parties share common interests, goals, and values. In a mutually beneficial relationship, both individuals derive advantages not only from tangible exchanges but also from emotional support and companionship. Engaging in reciprocal exchanges fosters trust and cooperation, contributing to the development of a mutual bond between the parties involved. By establishing a framework of fairness and balance, reciprocity sets the groundwork for mutuality. Mutuality goes beyond a simplistic tit-for-tat mentality where one is expected to reciprocate in the same manner. When you volunteer your time to help a charity, you are not just giving your time; you are also giving your skills and expertise. The charity benefits from your help, and you benefit from the sense of satisfaction that comes from helping others. As a powerful force for good, mutuality plays a vital role in strengthening interpersonal relationships and building social bonds. It creates a sense of unity and shared purpose, leading to positive outcomes in various aspects of life. Thus, relationship based on reciprocity and mutuality is essential for fostering healthy and meaningful connections, contributing to a more harmonious world.

It must be noted here that reciprocity as a religious ethical principle has primarily been applied to human social interactions. Thus, some may argue that extending reciprocity to relationship between humans and non-human creation is too much of a stretch. Indeed, applying this norm to inter-creationality demands that the scope of the I-thou relationship must go beyond social exchanges to also include non-human beings. However, our discussion on the various religious worldviews in this book should affirm that this is entirely possible, especially when reciprocity begins with the desire to eliminate mutual suffering. As the Buddha taught, "All tremble at violence; Life is dear for all. Putting oneself in the place of others, one should not kill nor cause another to kill."[55]

Admittedly, the examination of religious traditions in their diverse and complex historical realities presents a challenge when applying their teachings, ethics, or practices to contemporary situations. While

[55] Acharya Buddharakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), sec. 130.

religions have always dealt with real-life challenges, the global environmental crisis surpasses anything humanity has faced before.[56] As a result, a straightforward application of traditional ideas to a new paradigm may be difficult. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim proposed a process comprising three methodological approaches: retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction. Retrieval involves scholarly investigation of scriptural and commentary sources to understand religious perspectives on human-earth relations. Reevaluation evaluates traditional teachings in light of their relevance to contemporary circumstances, questioning their applicability and identifying potential environmental implications. Reconstruction explores ways in which religious traditions can adapt their teachings to address current environmental challenges, often resulting in new syntheses or modifications. However, this aspect requires sensitivity to issues of representation and interpretation, as different perspectives may influence the process. Scholars and practitioners can engage in creative dialogue to navigate these phases of interpretation.[57]

By employing this process to the concept of reciprocity and mutuality, the principle can be appropriately applied to inter-creationality. Reciprocity and mutuality entail not only the avoidance of inflicting harm on each other but that both sides act to benefit each other in their respective ways. For example, human beings can choose to exercise restraint and moderation when it comes to using natural resources so as to minimize negative ecological impacts. By making conscious choices to reduce energy consumption, conserve water, practice responsible waste management, and promote the use of renewable resources, we can contribute to a healthier planet. As people endowed with mental wisdom, we can exercise prudence in shaping economic and social structures. This means making informed decisions that prioritize the long-term well-being of both humans and the environment. By doing so, we can create systems that promote durability and flourishing for all.

Exercising prudence involves considering the ecological impact of economic activities, embracing sustainable practices, and valuing renewable energy sources. In social structures, prudence entails prioritizing equity, justice, and the welfare of both humans and the natural world. By aligning our systems with resilience, justice, and respect for the environment, we can build a more inclusive and thriving world for all of creation. Moreover, as society embraces digital technology, it's vital to prioritize digital sustainability. This calls for responsible use

---

[56] Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and a Dynamic Force," in *Routledge Handbook in Religion and Ecology*, eds. Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 7.

[57] Tucker and Grim, "The Movement of Religion and Ecology," 7-8.

and development to minimize environmental harm. Energy efficiency, responsible manufacturing, extending device lifespan, and promoting environmental awareness are key. By optimizing resource consumption, implementing sustainable manufacturing practices, reducing electronic waste, and raising awareness, we can ensure a sustainable digital future.

Non-human creation, of course, cannot carry out the same mode of reciprocation, but responds in other ways that benefit human beings in our needs. For example, non-human nature benefits human beings physically by providing us with all the things we need to sustain our life—air, water, nutrition. Whether we are vegetarian or consume meat as part of our diet, everything that we intake comes from nature. Moreover, nature is a vast pharmacy, providing us with medicinal plants and herbs that have been used for centuries in traditional healing practices. Many plant species contain bioactive compounds with therapeutic properties, offering remedies for various ailments and promoting wellness. From herbal teas to natural remedies, nature's pharmacy offers a holistic approach to healthcare and can support our physical healing and recovery.

Non-human creation also benefits us emotionally and mentally. Spending time in natural environments reduces stress and promotes relaxation, creating a calming effect on our minds. The beauty and serenity of nature enhance our mood, evoking positive emotions and a sense of joy. Nature's restorative qualities help improve focus, attention, and cognitive function, while also fostering creativity and problem-solving abilities. By immersing ourselves in nature, we can cultivate a deeper sense of connection, grounding, and mindfulness, allowing us to be more present in the moment. Regular exposure to nature contributes to improved psychological well-being, reducing the risk of mental health issues and providing a space for reflection, healing, and solace.

Finally, nature provides significant spiritual benefits to human beings, nurturing and enriching our spiritual well-being. Immersing ourselves in natural environments fosters a profound sense of connection and interconnectedness with the world around us, evoking awe, reverence, and humility. Nature's beauty, grandeur, and the mysterious aspects of natural phenomena awaken a sense of wonder and transcendence, offering glimpses into something greater than ourselves. Natural settings serve as sanctuaries for inner reflection, contemplation, and solitude, providing an ideal space for deepening our spiritual practices and finding stillness. Nature's cycles, rhythms, and patterns offer inspiration, guidance, and timeless wisdom, reflecting the natural order and cycles of life. Buddhism, for example, recognizes that nature can help human beings to contemplate on the impermanence of reality. By ob-

serving and meditating on various natural processes, we can come to realize the futility of grasping on to an intrinsic self and the need to build, protect, and adorn that illusory self with impermanent things such as material goods, wealth, and power.

Inter-creationality, as a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, reframes the service between humans and non-human creation as a mutual self-offering for the well-being and flourishing of both parties. In this perspective, each entity possesses intrinsic goodness and instrumental value to the other in their unique ways of being and giving. Discussions on environmental ethics often raise concerns about humans perceiving nature solely for its instrumental value, neglecting its intrinsic worth. Resolving issues of environmental abuse and degradation requires recognizing and embracing the inherent value of nature. However, it is not a matter of favoring one type of value over the other; instead, it entails acknowledging both intrinsic and instrumental values within ourselves and non-human creation. Both humans and non-human entities are intrinsically good and instrumentally valuable to each other. Therefore, both should engage in mutual service while striving to minimize harm and promote each other's flourishing. In this perspective, intrinsic and instrumental goods are not opposing binaries but complementary aspects of a relationship where mutual service naturally arises from the affirmation of mutual goodness.

In summary, the movement toward inter-creationality represents the culmination of personal and collective efforts aimed at transcending egotistical, ethnocentric, and anthropocentric tendencies within the human community. Various religious traditions examined in this chapter offer spiritual insights that underpin this movement, both in its foundational principles and the subsequent practical actions. Religious transformation equips individuals with the moral virtues necessary to initiate and sustain inter-creationality, fostering an enduring ecological ethos. This chapter highlighted virtues such as gentleness, compassion, moderation, contentment, gratitude, and reciprocity as supportive of inter-creational relationships. However, this is not an exhaustive list, and additional virtues, including humility, prudence, a sense of responsibility, and respect, also significantly contribute to inter-creationality.

While these virtues were not extensively explored in this chapter, their relevance can be inferred from the discussion and can be found in other chapters of the book. For instance, the virtue of responsibility was extensively discussed in the chapter that delved into the teachings of Islam. Ultimately, inter-creationality as a concept finds support in religious teachings across traditions, and its practice can be reinforced through the cultivation of ethical virtues within religious frameworks. While the use of the term itself maybe more appealing and useful from

an Abrahamic religious worldview, the underlying dynamics in human-nature relationship which this concept attempts to communicate can be found across traditions. While a more inclusive terminology is desirable, the value of the shared perspectives on human-nature relationship cannot be overlooked.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION
BECOMING INTERDISCIPLINARY AND PROPHETIC

Throughout this book, I have expounded upon two pivotal and interrelated assertions. The first revolves around the notion that fostering environmental flourishing is an integral aspect of the quest for religious and spiritual self-cultivation. The second posits that individuals who have undergone profound spiritual transformation naturally find themselves engaging in meaningful, harmonious, reciprocal, and mutual relationships with others, leading to a co-creative transformation spurred by these positive dynamics. In Chapters Two to Six, I delved into the exploration of major religious traditions, seeking to unravel the intricacies of religious self-cultivation and spiritual transformation within their respective systems. Chapters Seven and Eight illustrate the essence of mutuality and collaboration, which endeavors to foster human and environmental flourishing at both individual and communal levels through the lens of interculturality and interreligious dialogue. Chapter Nine demonstrates how religious and spiritual self-transformation can transcend the confines of human interactions, extending its profound implications to encompass the cosmic level, involving all entities in the vast expanse of the universe. This radical vision embodies a profound interrelatedness and interconnectedness, the realization of which has the potential to deeply alter human perception of ourselves and the world.

In this concluding chapter, I wish to bring attention to a sobering truth: the path toward realizing religious ideals is immensely meaningful and transformative, yet it is a journey fraught with length and difficulty. Many who set foot upon this path do not reach their intended destination, and some may not even choose to embark on it at all. Moreover, even if religious and spiritual self-cultivation does occur among adherents of religious communities, addressing the pressing social and environmental concerns of our time requires collaboration and support not only from religious institutions and individuals but also from various other human disciplines and institutions. As Mahatma Gandhi noted, the "human mind or human society is not divided into watertight compartments called social, political, and religious. All act and react upon one another."[1]

---

[1] "Religion and Politics," n.d., https://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap18.htm

The process of self-cultivation teaches us a fundamental lesson: we are not solitary beings in our existential reality, nor in the construction of our lives and the shaping of our world. To be is to always be in relation to *something* in existence. Only those who have yet to undergo this transformative process fall into the illusion of individualism. They believe that the future of our world depends solely on the actions of individuals, or groups of like-minded individuals, divorced from the strength and wisdom of diverse communities. Hence, it becomes paramount for religions to adopt an interdisciplinary, dialectical, and dialogical approach to address the myriad concerns that plague our world, not least the ongoing environmental crisis. American social theorist Murray Bookchin asserted, "Until society can be reclaimed by an undivided humanity that will use its collective wisdom, cultural achievements, technological innovations, scientific knowledge, and innate creativity for its own benefit and for that of the natural world, all ecological problems will have their roots in social problems."[2] By fostering collaborative efforts that span across disciplines and are undergirded by dialogue, religions can play a pivotal role in tackling the challenges of our time. Within this chapter, I will point out specific areas where such collaborative endeavors are not merely desirable but absolutely indispensable.

Religion and Science

In May 1992, 150 religious leaders and scientists who had gathered in Washington, DC, issued a historic joint appeal for the environment. The scientists included the late Carl Sagan, a prominent scientist, author, and communicator. On the religious side, there was Thomas Berry, a Passionist Catholic priest who was widely acclaimed for his ecotheology, environmental advocacy, and cultural and religious scholarship. In the opening sentence of the statement, the signatories admitted that they belonged to groups that "for centuries, often have traveled different roads." Nevertheless, the escalating environmental crisis had brought them together "in a common endeavor to preserve the home we share." The statement goes on to declare:

> We believe that science and religion, working together, have an essential contribution to make toward any significant mitigation and resolution of the world environmental crisis. What good are the most fervent moral imperatives if we do not understand the dangers and how to avoid them? What good is all the data in the world without a steadfast

[2] Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 39.

> moral compass? Many of the consequences of our present assault on the environment, even if halted today, will take decades and centuries to play themselves out. How will our children and grandchildren judge our stewardship of the Earth? What will they think of us? Do we not have a solemn obligation to leave them a better world and to insure the integrity of nature itself? Insofar as our peril arises from a neglect of moral values, human pride, arrogance, inattention, greed, improvidence, and a penchant for the short term over the long, religion has an essential role to play. Insofar as our peril arises from our ignorance of the intricate interconnectedness of nature, science has an essential role to play.[3]

In addition to acknowledging the special contributions that each side can make, the signatories emphasized the imperative of a unified effort involving governments, businesses, and non-governmental organizations to address the environmental crisis. This joint statement holds immense significance, as it reflects a convergence of hearts and minds among individuals from historically complex sides. In reality, the relationship between science and religion isn't as complicated as it's sometimes made out to be. While the popular portrayal (at least in the West) often characterizes the link between science and religion as 'antagonistic,' this is not entirely true. Contrary to a common assumption, not all scientists are atheists or anti-religion; and many, in fact, embrace specific religious traditions or maintain private spiritual beliefs. Conversely, individuals of religious faith are just as likely to acknowledge and accept numerous scientific theories and explanations for natural phenomena.

Historically, religious institutions have played a role in scientific research and discoveries, contributing to the development of science as we know it today. Scientific research, conferences, symposiums, and journal publications continue to take place in academic institutions affiliated with various religions around the world, including at the Vatican, the central seat of the Catholic Church. Despite a perceived divergence during the Enlightenment, it is essential to acknowledge that science and religion still maintain a relationship with one another, even though defining its exact nature might be challenging. Regarding the environmental crisis, science and religion are inherently interconnected. They have both been implicated in the crisis due to philosophical approaches

[3] Brookhaven National Laboratory, Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment, "Declaration of the 'Mission to Washington,'" May 12, 1992, https://wpw.bnl.gov/schwartz/joint-appeal-by-religion-and-science-for-the-environment/

or outlooks that contribute to anthropocentric attitudes toward the natural world that result in its exploitation and degradation. The responsibility that each side bears in the environmental crisis is a topic that has been extensively discussed in environmental literature so there is no need for us to delve into it for the purpose of this book.

The environmental crisis has compelled both science and religion to confront their respective roles in contributing as well as finding a solution to the crisis. Albert Einstein said, "Those who have the privilege to know have the duty to act, and in that action are the seeds of new knowledge." Indeed, scientists and religious leaders, though in vastly different ways, are respected by people in part because of how much they know. And what better way than putting that knowledge to caring for our common home? The environmental crisis has provided an opportunity to recognize the symbiotic relationship between these two fields and the unique strengths each brings to the table. Religion cannot simply criticize the scientific view of nature as an object for investigation, manipulation, and control. It must also acknowledge that resolving the environmental crisis necessitates accepting the critical role of scientific expertise. Fortunately, this is no longer a controversial matter. Across various traditions, religious leaders have come to the agreement that addressing the environmental crisis requires understanding the evidence as made available through scientific investigations and consensus.

The openness in religious attitude toward science is clearly evident in the declarations by various religions regarding climate change, one of the pressing ecological issues of our time. In a statement titled "The Time to Act Is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change" (2015), a significant portion of the statement is devoted to citing scientific evidence of climate change. The signatories affirmed the overwhelming scientific consensus that human activity is driving environmental breakdown on a global scale. They also referred to scientific evidence and reports from organizations such as the IPCC, United Nations, European Union, and International Union for Conservation of Nature in understanding and addressing climate change. And they supported targets that had been proposed by the scientific community.[4]

References to scientific evidence also constitute a significant part of the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change (2015) in which the first section of the statement is largely a summary about the state of the world's climate based on scientific findings. The statement also affirms, "We note that the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (UNEP, 2005),

[4] Yale University, "A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change," May 14, 2015, https://fore.yale.edu/files/buddhist_climate_change_statement_5-14-15.pdf

backed by over 1300 scientists from 95 countries, found that 'overall, people have made greater changes to ecosystems in the last half of the 20th century than at any time in human history… these changes have enhanced human well-being, but have been accompanied by ever increasing degradation (of our environment).'"[5]

Likewise, in the preparation process for the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis and his collaborators consulted extensively with scientists. The act of listening to the scientific community and presenting information based on scientific consensus is reflected in the very first chapter of the encyclical. Here the pope wrote, "A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system" (LS 18) and that "a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity" (LS 19). In the 2023 exhortation *Laudate Deum*, which Francis considers the second part to *Laudato Si'*, he not only presented a summary of the climate change crisis with updated scientific facts but also rejected individuals and groups who "have chosen to deride these facts" by citing "allegedly solid scientific data, like the fact that the planet has always had, and will have, periods of cooling and warming," or claiming that "intermittent periods of extreme cold regularly occur" (LD 6-7). No doubt by incorporating sound scientific evidence into his teachings on ecology, Pope Francis can demonstrate clear interconnections between empirical scientific knowledge and religious and spiritual values. Commentators have observed that Pope Francis' encyclical has contributed significantly to the global dialogue between science and religion by increasing its visibility and efficacy.[6]

It goes without saying that essential as science is, neither Pope Francis nor any religious leader would advocate science to be the sole approach to addressing the environmental crisis. Otherwise, there would not be any need for a discipline called religious environmentalism. However, the dynamic interchange between science and religion, characterized by their distinct approaches to comprehending reality, can foster a rich and fruitful dialogue for both domains. Religion needs the concrete grounding evidence provided by science, and science needs the support of religion in order to translate dry scientific propositions into moral and spiritual imperatives to be carried out by people of faith.

---

[5] "Islamic Declaration on Climate Change," ARRCC, https://www.arrcc.org.au/islamic_declaration

[6] Mary E. Tucker and John Grim, "The Movement of Religion and Ecology," in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, eds. W. Jenkins, Mary E. Tucker, and John Grim (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), Kindle edition.

As religious leaders across traditions have consistently maintained, no matter how many technical solutions science may propose, they will prove unsustainable in addressing the profound issues plaguing our world if humanity loses its moral direction. Without the great motivations that inspire harmony, sacrifice, and compassion toward others, any technological advancement becomes inadequate (LS 200).

Prominent scientists such as Thomas Lovejoy, E.O. Wilson, Jane Lubchenco, Peter Raven, and Ursula Goodenough understand that religious and cultural values play important roles in addressing environmental concerns. Holmes Rolston III asserted that science and religion need to enter into dialogue on the matter of the environment because there are fundamental human concerns that are relevant to both spheres. "Both science and religion are challenged by the environmental crisis, both to re-evaluate the natural world and to reevaluate their dialogue with each other. Both are thrown into researching fundamental theory and practice in the face of an upheaval unprecedented in human history, indeed in planetary history."[7]

Just as the all-encompassing reality of the environmental crisis has compelled religious leaders to incorporate scientific terminology into their articulation on the subject, we have seen scientists who do not adopt traditional theistic worldviews speak of the need for caring for the planet with a vision of the sacred. In the early 1990s, a group of scientists including Stephen Jay Gould, Hans Bethe, Stephen Schneider, and Carl Sagan issued a statement which contained the following sentiment:

> As scientists, many of us have had profound personal experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment should be infused with a vision of the sacred.[8]

It is heartening to see that the dialogue between science and religion related to environmental concerns has continued over the years. This was evident in the Joint Appeal signed by religious leaders across traditions and scientists in October 2021 in a meeting titled "Faith and Science: Toward COP26." In the Executive Summary, it is stated:

---

[7] Holmes Rolston III, "Science and Religion in the Face of the Environmental Crisis," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology,* ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 376.

[8] Quoted in C.L. Harper, "Religion and the Environment," *Journal of Religion and Society*, Supplement Series 3 (2008): 20.

> Today, after months of dialogue between faith leaders and scientists, we come together united to raise awareness of the unprecedented challenges that threaten our beautiful common home. Our faiths and spiritualities teach a duty to care for the human family and for the environment in which it lives. We are deeply interdependent with each other and with the natural world. We are not limitless masters of our planet and its resources. Multiple crises facing humanity are ultimately linked to a crisis of values, ethical and spiritual. We are caretakers of the natural environment with the vocation to care for it for future generations and the moral obligation to cooperate in the healing of the planet. We must address these challenges using the knowledge of science and the wisdom of religion. We must think long-term for the sake of the whole of humanity. Now is the time to take transformative action as a common response.[9]

Indeed, it would be considered hypocritical for scientists and religious leaders to be unable to engage in dialogue when both claim that everything in the universe is interconnected. Science, through its empirical observations, has noted interconnectedness within the smallest ecosystems on earth as well as within the cosmic web. Astrophysicist and science communicator Neil DeGrasse Tyson remarked, "We are all connected; To each other, biologically. To the earth, chemically. To the rest of the universe atomically."[10] Religious reflection and contemplation have also yielded similar insights. In a poem titled "Please Call Me by My True Names,"[11] the late Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh described the various ways that he is present in the world—in a tiny bird still being nurtured in a nest, in a frog swimming in a pond, in a malnourished girl in Uganda. One of the verses reads:

> Look deeply: every second I am arriving
> to be a bud on a Spring branch,
> to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
> learning to sing in my new nest,

---

[9] United Nations Climate Change, "World Religious Leaders and Scientists Make Pre-COP26 Appeal," October 5, 2021, https://unfccc.int/news/world-religious-leaders-and-scientists-make-pre-cop26-appeal

[10] Quoted in The Daily Shifts, August 27, 2021, https://www.thedailyshifts.com/blog/the-best-neil-degrasse-tyson-quotes-to-increase-brainpower

[11] Thich Nhat Hanh, "Please Call Me by My True Names," 2004, https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/poem-please-call-me-by-my-true-names/

to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

One of the points that the poem wishes to communicate is that in this vast web of life, we are all interconnected, and our shared responsibility to each other transcends the limitations of labels and past experiences. Embracing the journey of self-discovery, we realize that we have the potential to transform ourselves into something new, breaking free from any constraints that may hold us back. Indeed, life is a tapestry of intertwined experiences, where joy and pain walk hand in hand. We come to understand that one enriches the other, and both are integral to our growth and understanding. Instead of fearing pain, we acknowledge it as an essential part of our existence, guiding us to learn and evolve. At the heart of a fulfilling life lies compassion, recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings. With a compassionate perspective, we cultivate peace and happiness. We refrain from judging others, understanding that each individual has their unique journey, and we honor and respect their path.

Scientific investigations and religious contemplation converge in affirming that in the grand order of existence, all threads and filaments are intricately woven together. When we delve into this profound realization, we embark on a journey of awakening. We become aware of the consequences of our actions, for each choice we make sends ripples through the delicate fabric of life. As we gaze upon the interconnectedness of all things, we gain insight into the consequences of our missteps, but also discover the path to redemption and restoration. Acknowledging this truth, we embrace a sense of shared responsibility, recognizing that our actions are not isolated but impact the well-being of the whole ecosystem.

The poet Maya Angelou said, "We need joy as we need air. We need love as we need water. We need each other as we need the earth we share."[12] In this journey of collective guardianship, science and religion understand that the seeds they sow must be nurtured together. They cannot act alone because they are fundamentally responsible to care for one another, not as people of religion and people of science, but as people of a common home. And they in turn care for that very home which they share and so will the generations that come after them.

[12] Quoted in Wake Forest University, https://env.wfu.edu/

Engaging with Communicators

Over the years, religion and science have developed a collaborative relationship, addressing not only environmental concerns but numerous other issues. However, both face a significant obstacle in their efforts—the crisis of communication. Certain groups with vested political and economic interests, particularly those tied to industries affected by climate change mitigation, have actively undermined the reality of the environmental crisis.[13] These groups have been accused of deliberately spreading misinformation to create doubt about climate change.[14] Their tactics include funding disinformation campaigns and supporting individuals and think tanks that disseminate misleading information about climate science. They cherry-pick data, presenting selective studies that appear to contradict the overwhelming scientific consensus, while ignoring the vast body of evidence supporting climate change.[15] They also promote individuals lacking scientific credentials as supposed experts to question the validity of climate science.[16]

Another strategy involves creating controversy by exaggerating uncertainties within the scientific community and portraying the issue as a subject of intense debate. In fact, a comprehensive study of thousands of peer-reviewed scientific papers published since 2012 found that over 99 percent of the authors agreed that climate change was caused by human activities.[17] These vested interest groups also attempt to shape media narratives, influencing coverage to give disproportionate attention to dissenting views or present a false balance on the topic. For instance, a media study conducted by Public Citizen in 2019 revealed that during the first half of the year, 86 percent of climate change discussions on the conservative American network Fox News were dismissive

---

[13] Jeff Turrentine, "Climate Misinformation on Social Media Is Undermining Climate Action," NRDC, April 19, 2022, https://www.nrdc.org/stories/climate-misinformation-social-media-undermining-climate-action

[14] R.J. Brulle, "The Climate Lobby: A Sectoral Analysis of Lobbying Spending on Climate Change in the USA, 2000 to 2016," *Climate Change* 149, no. 3 (2018): 289-303.

[15] Rachel Schraer and Kayleen Devlin, "COP26: The Truth Behind the New Climate Change Denial," *BBC*, November 17, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/ science-environment-59251912

[16] David Biello, "Climate Expertise Lacking Among Global Warming Contrarians," *Scientific American*, June 22, 2010, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/climate-expertise-lacking-among-global-warming-contrarians/

[17] Mark Lynas, Benjamin Z. Houlton, and Simon Perry, "Greater Than 99% Consensus on Human-Caused Climate Change in the Peer-Reviewed Scientific Literature," *Environmental Research Letters* 16 (2021): 114005.

of the climate crisis.[18] Moreover, some of these groups exploit societal divisions to hinder collective action on climate change. They frame the issue as ideological or partisan, thereby impeding meaningful dialogue and cooperation.[19] Consequently, despite the strong scientific consensus on the human impact on climate change, the spread of misinformation and the involvement of political interests have led to divisions in North America, particularly in the USA.[20]

The widespread use of social media and digital communication technology has intensified the problem of climate change misinformation and disinformation, causing concern among experts about its impact on people's attitudes and actions. This reality can lead to serious consequences, such as delaying necessary actions to address climate change and move toward a sustainable future. According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a significant portion (69 percent) of climate change denial on social media originates from just ten websites, which fund their campaigns through revenues from Google ads.[21] Digital platforms allow false information to spread rapidly and go viral, reaching a massive audience before corrections can be made. The algorithms used by these platforms prioritize content based on users' interests, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce existing beliefs and make it difficult to correct misconceptions.[22]

Additionally, social media can exacerbate polarization and tribalism, as individuals align their views based on political or ideological affiliations, hindering constructive conversations. The influence of fake accounts and bots further amplifies misinformation and disinformation,

---

[18] Public Citizen, "Climate Change Denial Dominates 86% of Fox News Climate Segments," August 13, 2019, https://www.citizen.org/news/climate-change-denial-dominates-86-of-fox-news-climate-segments/

[19] Damian Carrington, "The Four Types of Climate Denier, and Why You Should Ignore Them All," *The Guardian*, July 30, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/30/climate-denier-shill-global-debate

[20] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). "Climate change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability," 2022, https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-repor t-working-group-ii/, 1931.

[21] Center for Countering Digital Hate, *The Toxic Ten: How Ten Fringe Publishers Fuel 69% of Digital Climate Change Denial*, November 2, 2021, https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/211101-Toxic-Ten-Report-FINAL-V2.5.pdf, 3.

[22] Michele Travierso, "Measuring Magnetism: How Social Media Creates Echo Chambers," *Nature*, February 23, 2021, https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-021-00019-4

giving the impression of widespread support for climate change denial.[23] With limited fact-checking and credibility assessment, users find it challenging to discern reliable information from falsehoods. Vested interest groups also take advantage of targeted advertising to deliver tailored false information to receptive audiences. Social media's role in amplifying contrarian voices and drowning out authoritative sources, such as reputable climate scientists, adds to the complexity of the issue. Addressing the problem of climate change misinformation and disinformation on social media requires concerted efforts from platforms, users, and experts to promote accurate information, critical thinking, and responsible sharing.

Amidst the troubling reality of climate change misinformation/disinformation, a critical responsibility falls upon scientists, religious leaders, and other authoritative figures to cultivate informed public awareness. The resounding message from the IPCC's 2022 report echoes the consequences of misleading information propagated by vested interests, which distorts perceptions of climate risks and hampers crucial climate adaptation planning and execution. Regrettably, this obstruction has stifled our ability to take effective climate action, necessitating immediate countermeasures to dispel falsehoods and rally unified public support in confronting the pressing challenges of climate change.[24]

A necessary corrective action that must be taken involves elevating science communication.[25] The field of climate science can be intricate and technical, making it challenging for the general public to comprehend. At times, communicators resort to jargon and obscure terms, further deepening the divide between experts and non-experts, resulting in confusion and disinterest. Although scientific uncertainties are inherent in research, emphasizing them excessively overshadows the robust consensus on human-caused climate change. This approach has allowed climate change skeptics to exploit the situation, sowing seeds of doubt and casting shadows of disagreement among scientists.

Furthermore, uncertainties inadvertently foster the perception that climate change is a far-off problem, clouding the urgency to take immediate action. Convincing people who otherwise have more immediate preoccupations of the long-term consequences of inaction and the imperative for prompt solutions becomes an arduous endeavor. As evident from my conversations with undocumented migrant workers in Thai-

---

[23] Corbin Hiar, "Twitter Bots Are a Major Source of Climate Disinformation," *Scientific American*, January 22, 2021, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/twitter-bots-are-a-major-source-of-climate-disinformation/

[24] IPCC, 1931.

[25] Ibid.

land, their primary concern revolves around securing stable employment and avoiding run-ins with the Thai police, leaving little room for environmental worries. For many of them, environmental care is reserved for the better-off who can afford to preoccupy themselves with social concerns.

In the face of these formidable challenges, scientists must join forces with communication experts to disseminate their research and discoveries in a lucid and accessible manner to the broader audience. This can be accomplished through a diverse array of channels, such as public talks, articles, videos, and active engagement on social media platforms. In this digital age, utilizing social media responsibly and skillfully is of paramount importance. Effective communicators should harness the power of social media platforms to share accurate information, interact with the public, and confront false information head-on. By maintaining a strong presence on social media, they can reach younger generations and those who might not otherwise access traditional media outlets.

Furthermore, scientists can collaborate with media outlets catering to religious audiences, fostering more informed and balanced coverage of climate change subjects. In this case, the communication done by scientists who are also religious adherents may be especially helpful because they are not speaking as outsiders but as members of the faith themselves. They may be able to contextualize scientific concepts and information in language that is accessible and comprehensible to specific religious worldviews. Moreover, their espoused faith can lend a sense of credibility to the religious audience as experts who are genuinely interested in the religious community's well-being. Thus, these individuals can become effective bridges between the religious community and science in general, and climate science, in particular.

In reality, brilliant scientists excel in their research but may lack the skills to effectively communicate their findings to the public, thus hindering a comprehensive understanding of their work. Recognizing that not every scientist is inherently proficient at communication, it becomes imperative to engage in interdisciplinary collaborations with communication experts for the efficient transmission of knowledge. By making climate science more intelligible and relatable, these concerted efforts can counter the confusion stirred by false information and empower the public to make well-informed decisions.

Hence, forging alliances with science communicators, journalists, and media organizations is essential to shield the public from environmental misinformation and disinformation. Collaborating with religious and secular communicators, scientists can ensure accurate and evidence-based presentations of climate change issues. This partnership has the power to bridge the gap between the scientific community and

the broader public, guaranteeing that reliable information reaches far and wide. Given that a significant portion of the population adheres to religious faiths, the role of religious communicators in accurately and effectively addressing environmental concerns becomes paramount.

Religious leaders, in this regard, can make meaningful contributions by presenting scientific knowledge using language that is both scientifically accurate and easily comprehensible, while remaining relevant and consistent with the ethical and spiritual worldview of their followers. Communicating climate change and ecological matters within religious contexts should not be a mere regurgitation of scientific facts. Rather, it ought to be adapted to the spiritual nuances inherent in each religious system. This approach ensures that religious devotees perceive environmental issues not just as secular and social challenges, but as deeply imbued with religious and ethical significance.

By harmonizing good science with spirituality, we can foster a more profound understanding and engagement with environmental issues within and across diverse religious communities. According to Carl Sagan, "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality."[26] In his book *Ideas and Opinions*, Einstein asserted, "The further the spiritual evolution of mankind advances, the more certain it seems to me that the path to genuine religiosity does not lie through the fear of life, and the fear of death, and blind faith, but through striving after rational knowledge."[27] While it may be argued how much science can shape spirituality, it is undeniable that scientific knowledge, when properly employed, can greatly enhance our religious understanding, ethical convictions, and subsequent moral actions. The fact that the multiple climate change declarations by religious communities mentioned in this book have made use of scientific knowledge demonstrates the need to eliminate unnecessary divides and opt for collaboration in order to elucidate profound spiritual principles that define human existence, indeed the existence of the universe itself. Together, through the fusion of scientific expertise, religious insights, and effective communication, we can pave the way toward a more enlightened and conscientious approach to addressing the environmental challenges of our time.

---

[26] Quoted in Bobby Azarian, "Why Carl Sagan Believed That Science Is a Source of Spirituality," Big Think, February 9, 2023, https://bigthink.com/thinking/why-carl-sagan-believed-that-science-is-a-source-of-spirituality/

[27] Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1954), 49.

Engaging with Policymakers

In the work of environmental communication, the presence of disruptive actors, though few in number, can cause widespread damage. Hence, cross-disciplinary collaboration emerges as an essential means to confront the multifaceted challenges of climate change. Scientists and religious leaders should initiate conversations that transcend their traditional domains, delving into social, economic, and ethical dimensions. Such comprehensive dialogues can facilitate a profound understanding of climate change's devastating effects on societies and communities. As scientists contribute their wealth of factual information to the discourse, emphasizing the strong consensus within climate science and acknowledging inherent uncertainties, religious leaders offer unique insights rooted in their faith traditions. They accentuate the moral call to environmental stewardship, viewing the care of our planet as an imperative woven into the fabric of ethical living and intergenerational justice.

Toward this aim, it is essential to engage with policymakers. According to Pope Francis, while personal commitment and conversion when it comes to caring for the environment is essential, we "cannot deny that it is necessary to be honest and recognize that the most effective solutions will not come from individual efforts alone, but above all from major political decisions on the national and international level."[28] However, one of the most significant conundrums of the ecological crisis is the challenge of obtaining sufficient political will from national leaders and policymakers. Traditionally, political will is defined as the willingness of a governmental body to utilize its available institutional capacity in implementing necessary and appropriate policies, all while being fully aware of the impending consequences.[29] The environmental crisis presents governments worldwide with enormous challenges, as they must juggle between national interests and environmental sustainability. Oftentimes, the environment loses out. Ansel Adams, photographer and environmentalist, once lamented, "It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the environment."[30]

The problem of climate change, according to *The Economist*, is the "hardest political problem the world has ever had to deal with. It is a

---

28 Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, no. 69.

29 Lawrence Woocher, "Deconstructing 'Political Will': Explaining the Failure to Prevent Deadly Conflict and Mass Atrocities," *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 12 (2001): 182.

30 Quoted in David Sheff, "Anselm Adams," 2013, https://archive.is/ah7i5, (saved from http://davidsheff.com/article/ansel-adams/). The article was originally published in 1983.

prisoner's dilemma, a free-rider problem and the tragedy of the commons all rolled into one."[31] Brian Spak outlined the following assessment of the difficulties involved:

> People today bear the costs to mitigate the greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change, but future generations, by and large, experience the benefits. Likewise, local or national communities incur the cost to reduce emissions, but the benefits are realized globally. In addition, developed countries are responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions that exist in the atmosphere, but developing countries will be most impacted by climate change. The large developing countries, though not responsible for the lion's share of emissions in the atmosphere, will nevertheless need to reduce their emissions in the future to avoid catastrophic climate change. Some of the countries, particularly those with territorial claims to mineral rights in Arctic seabeds, that stand to benefit from some level of climate change, are also among the biggest emitters. Finally, high per-capita GDP correlates strongly with high per-capita emissions, and no large country has ever experienced lasting economic growth without simultaneously increasing emissions.[32]

It is because of these and other difficulties that despite over six decades of attempting to address environmental problems, we have made little progress. Brian Cox contended that the pace of scientific and engineering advancements in a civilization could outstrip the development of political institutions capable of effectively managing them.[33] This concern echoes the sentiments of renowned biologist and naturalist, Edward O. Wilson. The two-time Pulitzer Prize-winner once remarked, "The real problem of humanity is the following: We have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions and god-like technology. And it is terrifically dangerous, and it is now approaching a point of crisis overall."[34]

---

[31] "Getting Warmer," *The Economist,* December 3, 2009, http://www.economist.com/node/14994872

[32] Brian Spak, "The Success of the Copenhagen Accord and the Failure of the Copenhagen Conference," 2010, https://www.american.edu/sis/gep/upload/Brian-Spak-SRP-Copenhagen-Success-and-Failure.pdf

[33] Michael York, "'Religion and the Environmental Crisis.' Ecotheology – Sustainability and Religions of the World." *IntechOpen* (2023): 1-22 (17). doi:10.5772/intechopen.104002, 17.

[34] Quoted in Vanessa Bates Ramirez, "It's Not Too Late to Replace Toxic Tech with Humane Technology," Singularity Hub, March 14, 2022, https://singularityhub.com/2022/03/14/its-not-too-late-to-replace-toxic-tech-with-humane-technology/

To ensure that human institutions can effectively respond to the immense challenges of our time, scientists and religious leaders must actively engage with political leaders. Their role is vital in providing evidence-based guidance and advocating for climate change mitigation and adaptation measures. By clearly communicating the urgency of the issue and the consequences of inaction, they can significantly influence policy decisions at local, national, and international levels. Thus, scientists and religious leaders must constantly put forth to political leaders as well as those who wield power on the national and international stage the question that has been articulated by Pope Francis: "What would induce anyone, at this stage, to hold on to power, only to be remembered for their inability to take action when it was urgent and necessary to do so?" (LD 60) Policymakers often seek the counsel of credible experts and influential community leaders. Both scientists and religious leaders can fulfill this essential role in their unique ways.

In addition to engaging with policymakers, they can also work to foster a more informed public. This includes collaborating with others to promote education initiatives and media literacy programs that teach people how to critically evaluate information, recognize misinformation/disinformation, and identify credible sources. Moreover, advocating for the integration of climate change and environmental topics into school curricula can effectively instill awareness and knowledge from an early age. Empowering the public with quality education and technological proficiency is essential in navigating the vast sea of information and identifying credible sources regarding climate change. By uniting their efforts, scientists, policy makers, and religious leaders have the potential to steer our civilization toward a more responsible and sustainable path. This ensures that the legacy we leave behind for future generations is one of harmony, wisdom, and environmental stewardship.

Religion and the Prophetic Voice

In this final chapter, my aim is not to delve into an extensive discussion of how religion should interact with other fields and disciplines. I believe the above paragraphs suffice to demonstrate that religious and secular institutions must actively collaborate to effectively tackle climate change and other environmental issues, as well as all human concerns in our interconnected world. Given the complexities of our modern era, there is no room for condescension or aloofness toward one another. Each institution holds a unique and vital role in promoting human and environmental flourishing on all fronts. As I conclude this book, I wish to emphasize one final contribution that religions can make to the

world. It extends beyond environmental matters to encompass all aspects of human and environmental well-being. This contribution lies in the role of engaging in dialogue with a prophetic voice, in other words, a *prophetic dialogue*.

Dialogue as a communicative act is a natural part of human life. According to Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth."[35] Therefore, it is essential to develop the ability to engage in respectful and productive dialogue if we want to succeed in our lives. Further, since life is not a continuous series of conflicts or debates, but an effort to build meaningful co-creative relationships, dialogue should be seen as a way to recognize and accept the other person's identity by being willing to listen, learn, and collaborate with dialogue partners.[36]

How can dialogue be prophetic? Dialogue becomes prophetic when it is not simply an exchange of information from a neutral, disinterested position. For people of religion, in particular, dialogue participants enter the conversation from their own faith perspectives. The Society of the Divine Word, a Catholic religious missionary congregation which has advanced the notion of prophetic dialogue, asserted, "We witness to God's love by sharing our own convictions boldly and honestly, especially where that love has been obscured by prejudice, violence, and hate. It is clear that we do not dialogue from a neutral position, but out of our own faith. Together with our dialogue partners, we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way our dialogue can be called prophetic."[37] Indeed, each religious dialogue partner will enter the conversation with other religious and non-religious dialogue partners with their own convictions and faith stemming from their religious beliefs.

Nonetheless, engaging in prophetic dialogue doesn't entail a narrow focus on personal ideas, but rather a willingness to listen and connect with the realities at hand. A true prophet remains committed to their community and the world, understanding that speaking prophetically requires being rooted in the lived experiences of the people. The prophetic voice must not come from an outsider but from someone genuinely invested in the community's well-being and the common good. Proph-

---

[35] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 293.

[36] Michael Amaladoss, "Identity and Harmony: Challenges to Mission in South Asia," in *Mission in the Third Millennium*, ed. Robert Schreiter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 34.

[37] Society of the Divine Word, *General Chapter Documents*, 2000.

ets boldly and precisely express their message, sometimes even with indignation—not out of opposition but unwavering support for the people. Their tone may convey anguish, but it does not stem from hatred or condescension. Instead, it reflects a profound concern for the lives of those they advocate for.

Speaking Forth

The prophetic message can take various forms, including both words and deeds. According to Stephen Bevans, there are two types of prophetic communication—'speaking forth' and 'speaking out' or 'speaking against.'[38] Speaking forth has the power to energize people toward positive attitudes and actions, inspiring hope for the future. Walter Bruggemann noted, "It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order. Energizing is closely linked to hope. We are energized not by that which we already possess but by that which is promised and about to be given."[39]

Prophetic energizing is vital to break free from the notion that real change is unattainable. Many of us are co-opted into believing that change merely involves rearranging existing patterns. The prophet, however, challenges this managed outlook and sparks a yearning for genuinely new futures.[40] More importantly, everyone has a part to play in that future. As the young Mexican environmental activist Xiye Bastida said, "A vibrant, fair, and regenerative future is possible—not when thousands of people do climate justice activism perfectly but when millions of people do the best they can."[41] Beyond fostering hope, the prophet can energize people to embrace repentance for sin, find courage in the face of oppression, and resist the destructive forces of death. Their transformative impact goes beyond surface-level change, inspiring profound shifts in attitudes and actions.

Regarding environmental concerns, energizing prophetic communication involves embracing dialogue partners from diverse backgrounds, such as scientists, policymakers, grassroots organizations, and indigenous peoples. Their expertise, knowledge, wisdom, and influence are

---

38 Stephen Bevans, "Witness and Proclamation as Prophetic Dialogue," in *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,* ed. Indunil J. Kodithuwakku (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), 245-55.

39 Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 14.

40 Ibid.

41 Quoted in Wendy Becktold, "'All We Can Save' Is the Big Tent Approach to Climate Activism We Need," *Sierra*, December 5, 2020, https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/all-we-can-save-big-tent-approach-climate-activism-we-need

crucial in addressing environmental concerns. Cultivating openness toward these stakeholders entails welcoming diverse perspectives and recognizing their potential contribution to society and the world. For instance, while modern technology has harmed the environment in many ways, advancements in digital technology and artificial intelligence offer opportunities for sustainable resource management. Through data collection, environmental monitoring, smart energy management, and climate modeling, AI can help us make better choices for the planet. Additionally, AI can aid in conservation efforts, precision agriculture, waste management, and ecosystem restoration, further bolstering environmental initiatives.

In addition to embracing the expertise and knowledge of the scientific community, religion can also play a significant role by highlighting the wisdom of indigenous peoples and local communities. Religion has the unique capacity to reach all people, from urban to rural, from the nearest cities to the farthest recesses of the globe. Indigenous wisdom is widely acknowledged as valuable in addressing environmental concerns, but more needs to be done in fully harnessing this invaluable source of knowledge. Collaborating with and respecting the insights of indigenous communities can pave the way for more practical and effective solutions.

Another aspect of energizing communication involves collaborating with individuals and institutions to take concrete actions for the environment. Throughout this book, I have explored specific ways in which religious institutions have joined forces with other stakeholders to promote environmental flourishing. There are numerous avenues for collaboration, including advocacy and lobbying, educational initiatives, environmental conservation projects, sustainable business investments, local community awareness campaigns, and the establishment of glocal partnerships. Interreligious dialogue allows faith actors to find common ground and shared values on environmental stewardship, leading to joint initiatives that transcend religious boundaries. Engaging with scientists and experts enables religious leaders to incorporate scientific knowledge into their teachings and environmental efforts, enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of their messages on environmental care. Lay religious adherents, who often possess expertise in various fields, can contribute significantly to environmental causes when encouraged and supported by religious leaders. By partnering with environmental NGOs and non-profits, religious communities can pool resources and support sustainability and conservation projects. Advocating for environmental policies and legislation empowers religious communities to influence policymakers and prioritize environmental concerns.

In addition to the various forms of collaboration mentioned above, religious communities can actively encourage corporate social responsibility by collaborating with businesses to promote eco-friendly practices and invest in environmentally responsible projects. This partnership involves advocating for sustainable business models, reduced carbon footprints, and green initiatives to align with ethical values. Global climate action events provide an opportunity for faith actors to raise awareness and advocate for urgent climate change action. By embracing grassroots organizations, religious communities support local environmental efforts and gain insight into community-level challenges, fostering a more connected and practical approach to environmental care. Educational programs and outreach empower religious followers to adopt environmentally conscious behaviors and contribute meaningfully to environmental causes. Collaborating with diverse stakeholders creates a united front, combining efforts from scientists, policymakers, NGOs, businesses, and community organizations, emphasizing shared responsibility, and driving effective environmental solutions.

An important aspect of prophetic energizing communication in environmental care involves religious leaders and institutions leading by example and inspiring greater environmental awareness and responsibility. Within their own operations, religious organizations can implement sustainable practices, such as reducing energy consumption, recycling, and using eco-friendly materials for construction. Embracing renewable energy sources like solar or wind power further showcases their commitment to clean energy and sustainability. By visibly integrating renewable energy solutions, religious institutions send a powerful message of environmental responsibility to their communities.

Religious leaders themselves can model environmentally conscious behavior by embracing simple living, eco-friendly transportation, and minimalistic lifestyles. When they practice what they preach, they gain credibility and authenticity, enhancing their ability to influence positive change. When individuals witness their religious leaders actively living out environmental values, they are more likely to be motivated to adopt similar attitudes and behaviors, creating a ripple effect of positive environmental action within the community.

Speaking Out

The second type of prophetic content is 'speaking out' or 'speaking against.' This entails criticizing, not in a scolding or reprimanding manner, but "so as to cut through the numbness, to penetrate the self-

deception"[42] in order to arrive at a more profound reality governed by the Ultimate. In this task, the prophetic voice aims to find ways to help the people "confront the horror and massiveness of the experience that evokes numbness and requires denial."[43] "The prophet must speak evocatively to bring to the community the fear and the pain that individual persons want so desperately to share and to own but are not permitted to do so."[44] The prophetic message underscores the notion that death becomes evident through disconnection, deprivation of heritage, seeking fulfilment through futile means, and the "ultimate consumerism" is "consuming each other."[45] In addition, the prophet articulates a sense of unease with the prospect of things coming to an end, the collapse of our self-imposed constructs, the systems of inequality and oppression that perpetuate at the expense of others, and the unsettling practice of exploiting the vulnerable by "eating off the table of a hungry brother or sister."[46]

From this communicative stance, religious leaders and institutions must challenge the pervasive contemporary technocratic mindset and scientism that aim to sideline them as legitimate dialogue partners. In *Homo Deus*, Yuval Noah Harari downplayed the role of religion in the context of scientific progress. While acknowledging religion's historical contributions, Harari claimed that religions have become more passive than active catalysts in the face of technological advancements championed by other movements. Harari's perspective aligns with the belief that religions no longer contribute actively to scientific development, and that their narratives clash with modern scientific knowledge. However, this portrayal overlooks the significant contributions of religions. They continue to exert a meaningful influence on scientific discovery by providing a supportive framework for human advancement. Many religious institutions globally serve as centers of cutting-edge research, demonstrating their active engagement in scientific development.

The perceived conflict between science and religion is largely a Western-centric dilemma, as McGrath noted, and overlooks the collaborative relationship seen in non-Western cultures like India,[47] where the vast majority espouse a religious faith. In addition, the Catholic Church embraces scientific discoveries as complementary to its teachings, not

---

42 Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination,* 45.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Alister E. McGrath, *Science and Religion: A New Introduction* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, ^{3}2020), 9.

as opposing forces. Scientists from diverse religious backgrounds draw inspiration from their faith while conducting research. Religion's capacity for critical reflection and contemplation enriches the understanding of the social and spiritual implications of scientific progress. The Catholic Church has a tradition of supporting scientific inquiry and maintains its commitment to research and dialogue. The influence of religious beliefs on scientists should not be underestimated, especially in shaping decisions on technological progress and its societal impact.

According to Pope Francis, religion has a responsibility to challenge the 'technocratic paradigm,' a worldview that prioritizes efficiency and productivity over human dignity and the common good. This paradigm reduces nature and humans to mere objects for exploitation, resulting in environmental degradation, marginalization, and the erosion of values. Francis called for a transformative shift toward a holistic and sustainable approach that prioritizes human well-being and the planet over narrow economic interests (LS 106-109).

Furthermore, religion must firmly oppose scientism, an ideology that limits understanding the world to only scientific methods and discoveries, dismissing other forms of knowledge like ethics, philosophy, and spirituality. Science cannot unravel all existential questions or replace alternative sources of knowledge like personal experiences, intuition, cultural traditions, and spiritual insights. To combat scientism and technocracy, religion must collaborate with scientists and philosophers who appreciate diverse forms of knowledge and inquiry. Engaging in dialogue and cooperation with these individuals can challenge scientism's dominance and foster a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to understanding reality and addressing current issues.

Second, critical prophetic communication requires religion to actively call for change in technological, social, and scientific development that perpetuates unjust structures. While new developments bring benefits, they also carry inherent risks that demand careful consideration. They can worsen social hierarchies, intensify economic inequality, and exacerbate disparities in political power. Religion must advocate for social justice and confront inequality, prioritizing ethical considerations and the common good. Through prophetic dialogue, religion engages with stakeholders in science, technology, and policymaking, shedding light on the ethical, social, and environmental implications of innovations. The goal is to raise collective awareness and promote developments that uphold the dignity and well-being of all individuals, particularly those marginalized or disadvantaged. By leveraging its moral authority, religion plays a critical role in advocating for policies that address the negative impacts of technological progress. This includes bridging the digital divide, providing access to education and training, and ensuring that

technology aligns with principles of human dignity and environmental sustainability.

Finally, critical prophetic communication entails that religion holds individuals, organizations, or institutions accountable for social and technological innovations that are unethical and harmful to the environment and humanity. The rapid technological advancements have significant environmental impacts,[48] such as high energy consumption in data centers leading to greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. E-waste from discarded gadgets poses a threat to the environment and human health. The production and infrastructure of technology also contribute to environmental damage, including deforestation and air pollution. Promoting digital sustainability[49] is crucial to minimize the negative impact of digital technologies. Religion must actively raise its prophetic voice by pointing out death-dealing violations, calling for accountability by offenders, and denouncing unethical technological innovations that compromise human dignity and the environment.

Prophetic communication, whether 'speaking forth' or 'speaking out,' can inspire positive attitudes and actions, instilling hope, and confronting injustices. Bold and precise, it unveils new realities against the old order. Coupled with concrete actions, prophetic communication helps to ensure that social and technological advancements align with moral principles as well as promote societal and environmental flourishing.

Diverse Prophetic Voices

In the past and present, numerous prophetic religious voices have spoken out on environmental care. This book highlights some of them, including Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Pope Francis, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Fazlun Khalid, Mary Evelyn Tucker, Tu Weiming, and Thich Nhat Hanh, among other influential figures. Yet, there are countless others whose names might not immediately come to mind. One such voice is Rabbi Arthur Waskow, an activist, author, and founder of the Shalom Center in the US. The Shalom Center is recognized as a prophetic advocate within Jewish, multireligious, and American communities. It actively addresses critical issues such as the challenges of overwork in American society, the imperative for global environmental healing, efforts toward Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the potential

---

[48] Geneva Environment Network, "Data, Digital Technology, and the Environment," November 25, 2021, https://www. genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/data-digital-technology-and-the-environment/

[49] Rebellion Research, "What Is Digital Sustainability?" July 24, 2021, https://www.rebellionresearch.com/what-is-digital-sustainability

threats posed by resurgent militarism and unchecked top-down corporate influence.[50]

Another prophetic religious figure is the Gyalwang Drukpa, the revered spiritual leader of the Drukpa Lineage in Tibetan Buddhism and the founder of the international humanitarian organization Live to Love. The Gyalwang Drukpa has shown a profound commitment to environmental conservation, particularly in the Himalayan region. Understanding the critical importance of preserving the delicate ecosystems of the Himalayas, he has taken proactive steps to lead by example and inspire positive change. One of his remarkable initiatives involves leading tree-planting campaigns aimed at reforesting and restoring degraded areas in the Himalayas. By mobilizing both monastic communities and local residents, these efforts have made significant strides in reversing deforestation and mitigating the impacts of climate change in the region. For his relentless dedication to "create compassion into action," the Gyalwang Drukpa was honored with the prestigious Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Award from the United Nations in September 2010.[51] His tireless efforts in environmental care have solidified him as a prominent voice in the global movement for ecological preservation and spiritual stewardship, resonating with people around the world.

A notable voice in the Muslim community is Nana Firman, who is an environmental advocate with several decades of experience, specializing in urban sustainability and green economy strategies.[52] Firman has served as the Muslim outreach director for GreenFaith, a prominent global multi-faith environmental network. Within the American Muslim community, her proactive involvement in promoting eco-friendly practices is showcased through her initiation of noteworthy projects, such as the Green Mosque Project. Firman's exceptional dedication to climate activism has earned her prestigious recognition, including being honored as a White House 'Champion of Change' by President Barack Obama and receiving the esteemed Alfredo Sirkis Memorial Green Ring Award from former Vice President Al Gore. Similar to numerous religious voices, Firman views ecological concerns not merely as an envi-

---

[50] American Friends of Combatants for Peace, "Rabbi Arthur Waskow," n.d., https://afcfp.org/our_team/rabbi-arthur-waskow/

[51] PR Newswire, "Mexico City Legislative Assembly Honours Indian Buddhist Spiritual Head – The Gyalwang Drukpa," July 25, 2014, https://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/mexico-city-legislative-assembly-honours-indian-buddhist-spiritual-head---the-gyalwang-drukpa-268600502.html

[52] TED, "Nana Firman Wants to Unite the World Behind a Commitment to Sustainability and Environmental Justice," https://www.ted.com/speakers/nana_firman

ronmental problem but as a moral and ethical imperative that demands action on behalf of vulnerable communities worldwide.[53]

It is important to recognize that alongside religious prophetic voices, there are many other prophetic figures from the past and present who do not take an explicit religious stance. Remarkable individuals such as Rachel Carson, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Wangari Maathai, Jane Goodall, and Vandana Shiva exemplify this broader prophetic role. There are also young people who contribute their prophetic voices as they represent the generations who will inherit the good and the bad that the present generation leaves them. They include Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, Nyombi Morris, Licypriya Kangujam, Xiye Bastida, Lesein Mutunke, Luisa Neubauer, Autumn Peltier, Daniel Koto Dagnon, Qiyun Woo, and Greta Thunberg. These young voices hail from various countries throughout the world.[54] Though they may not promote a specific religious perspective, their words and actions are no less prophetic in their ability to challenge prevailing systems, mobilize for genuine change, and uphold a long-term perspective of things to come. Thunberg asserted, "Avoiding climate breakdown will require cathedral thinking. We must lay the foundation while we may not know exactly how to build the ceiling."[55]

In both secular and religious spheres, diverse voices within every tradition exhibit prophetic characteristics in their manner of communication and the essence of their message. Their prophetic expressions offer hope in the face of despair, joy amid suffering, courage in the presence of fearful threats, and awakening from the slumber of indifference. Rooted in a sense of moral duty and a commitment to confronting injustice, they are willing to risk their own safety to prioritize truth, justice, and the well-being of others. Embracing a countercultural stance, these creative individuals present an alternative vision of a just society, challenging systems of oppression and advocating for positive change. Their prophetic words and actions resonate across generations, inspiring transformative shifts in attitudes and shaping the course of history.

As we grapple with the ongoing ecological crisis with its myriad dimensions, it will do us well to channel these voices, both from the past and present, toward the concerns of the future, in order to advocate for

---

[53] The White House, "Champions of Change," https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/champions/climate-faith-leaders/nana-firman

[54] Olivia Lai, "10 Young Climate Activists Leading the Way on Global Climate Action," Earth.org, August 12, 2022, https://earth.org/young-climate-activists-leading-the-way-on-global-climate-action/#

[55] Greta Thunberg, Speech to MPs at the Houses of Parliament, *The Guardian*, April 23, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/23/greta-thunberg-full-speech-to-mps-you-did-not-act-in-time

positive developments, address injustices, and promote ethical considerations in social advancements. We can take inspiration from these prophetic figures who raise their voices and take actions not to be antagonistic, divisive, or condescending but to be dialogical, collaborative, and respectfully challenging. By implementing this mode of engagement, religious leaders, the faithful, and indeed all people of goodwill can actively contribute to shaping a future that aligns with their respective beliefs, enriches human lives, promotes environmental flourishing, and serves the common good.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Acharya Buddharakkhita. *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985.

Ahrabi-Fard, Iradge. *Implications of the Original Teachings of Islam for Physical Education and Sport*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Minnesota, 1974.

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

Alliance of Religions and Conservation. "Indonesian Clerics Issue Fatwa to Protect Endangered Species." March 5, 2014. http://www.arcworld.org/newseb86.html?pageID=689

Allianz. "The Environmental Cost of Corruption." August 3, 2020. https://commercial.allianz.com/news-and-insights/expert-risk-articles/esg-risk-briefing-3-2020.html

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

Almirzanah, Syafaatun. "God, Humanity and Nature: Cosmology in Islamic Spirituality." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): a6130. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6130

Amaladoss, Michael. "Identity and Harmony: Challenges to Mission in South Asia." In *Mission in the Third Millennium*, edited by Robert Schreiter, 25-39. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.

Aman, Ayah. "First Climate-Related Fatwa Prohibiting Environmentally Harmful Practices Issued in Egypt." *Al-Monitor*, October 26, 2022. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/first-climate-related-fatwa-prohibiting-environmentally-harmful-practices-issued

American Friends of Combatants for Peace. "Rabbi Arthur Waskow." n.d. https://afcfp.org/our_team/rabbi-arthur-waskow/

Aminrazavi, Mehdi. "God, Creation, and the Image of the Human Person in Islam." In *The Concept of God, the Origin of the World, and the Image of the Human in the World Religions*, edited by Peter Koslowski, 95-111. Springer, 2001.

Ansari, Mohammed Tadeeb. "8 Health Benefits of Fasting." *Islamicity*, March 3, 2023, https://www.islamicity.org/77276/8-health-benefits-of-fasting/

Arrieta Kenna, Ruairí. "Almost 90% of Americans Don't Know There's Scientific Consensus on Global Warming." *Vox*, July 6, 2017. https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2017/7/6/15924444/global-warming-consensus-survey

Avis, William. "Role of Faith and Belief in Environmental Engagement and Action in MENA Region." K4D, May 19, 2021. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/16719/1005_Role_of_faith_and_belief_in_environmental_engagement.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Azarian, Bobby. "Why Carl Sagan Believed That Science Is a Source of Spirituality." *Big Think*, February 9, 2023. https://bigthink.com/thinking/why-carl-sagan-believed-that-science-is-a-source-of-spirituality/

Bakar, Marina Abu, Ahmad Khilmy Abdul Rahim, and Che Zuina Ismail. "The Application of Maslahah in Islamic Finance and Banking Products & Fatwa Resolutions in Malaysia." *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government* 27, no. 1 (2021): 2793-2810.

Baker, Ilyas. "The Flight of Time, Ecology and Islam." In *Islam and the Environment*, edited by Harfiyah Abdel Haleem, 75-86. London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998.

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky's Book." In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited by Caryl Emerson, 283-302. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Barnhill, David Landis. "Relational Holism: Huayan Buddhism and Deep Ecology." In *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, 77-106. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001.

Bartholomew I. Address at the Environmental Symposium, Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, November 8, 1997. https://apostolicpilgrimage.org/the-environment/-/asset_publisher/4hInlautXpQ3/content/address-of-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-/320088109.html

— Message at the International Conference on Ethics, Religion, and Environment, University of Oregon, April 5, 2009.

Becktold, Wendy. "'All We Can Save' Is the Big Tent Approach to Climate Activism We Need." *Sierra*, December 5, 2020. https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/all-we-can-save-big-tent-approach-climate-activism-we-need

Bekoff, Mark. "Redecorating Nature: Reflections on Science, Holism, Community, Humility, Reconciliation, Spirit, Compassion, and Love." *Human Ecology Review* 7, no. 1 (2000): 59-67.

Bender, Frederic. *The Culture of Extinction*. New York: Humanity Books, 2003.

Berthrong, John H., and Evelyn Nagai Berthrong. *Confucianism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000.

Bevans, Stephen. "Witness and Proclamation as Prophetic Dialogue." In *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, edited by Indunil J. Kodithuwakku, 245-55. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022.

Bhikkhu Bodhi. "A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence." *Access to Insight*, 1994. http://www.accessto insight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/response.html

— "Self-Transformation." *Access to Insight*, 1998. https://www.ac cessto insight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_16.html

— *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1998.

— trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Second edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003.

— trans. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Complete Translation of the Anguttara Nikāya*. Annotated edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012.

— "Message for a Globalized World." *Buddhist Publication Society Newsletter*, n.d. http://www.vipassana.com/resources/bodhi/globa lized_world.php

Bhikkhu Nanamoli, trans. *The Middle Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995.

— trans. *Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga* (The Classic Manual of Buddhist Doctrine and Meditation). Fourth edition. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010.

Biello, David. "Climate Expertise Lacking among Global Warming Contrarians." *Scientific American*, June 22, 2010. https://www.scienti ficamerican.com/article/climate-expertise-lacking-among-global-warming-contrarians/

Bilay, Zo. "The Characteristics of Violent Religious Nationalism: A Case Study of Mabatha against Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar." *Journal of Human Rights and Peace Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022): 89-110.

Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6, edited by Clifford Green. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005.

Bookchin, Murray. *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990.

Bouta, Tsjeard, S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, and Mohammed Abu-Nimer. *Faith-Based Peace-Building: Mapping and Analysis of Christian, Muslim, and Faith-Based Actors*. The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2005.

Brasovan, Nicholas S. *Neo-Confucian Ecological Humanism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2017.

Brookhaven National Laboratory. Joint Appeal by Religion and Science for the Environment, "Declaration of the 'Mission to Washington,'" May 12, 1992. https://wpw.bnl.gov/schwartz/joint-appeal-by-religion-and-science-for-the-environment/

Bruggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.

Brulle, R.J. "The Climate Lobby: A Sectoral Analysis of Lobbying Spending on Climate Change in the USA, 2000 to 2016." *Climate Change* 149, no. 3 (2018): 289-303.

Bsoul, Labeeb, Amani Omer, Lejla Kucukalic, and Ricardo H. Archbold. "Islam's Perspective on Environmental Sustainability: A Conceptual Analysis." *Social Sciences* 11 (2022): 228. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11060228

Bucknell, Roderick S. *Reconstructing Early Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Buddhadasa. "A Notion of Buddhist Ecology." Thai Buddhism, n.d. http://www.thaibuddhism.net/Bud_Ecology.htm

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

Cadingpal, Brandon Billan. "*'Tengaw'* Observance: Implications of the Kankanaeys' COVID-19 Response for the New Normal." In *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*, edited by Anthony Le Duc, 217-39. Bangkok: ARC, 2022.

Cain, Brian. "How Technology Embodies Our Alienation from Nature." *Medium*, June 7, 2022. https://medium.com/illumination-curated/how-technology-embodies-our-alienation-from-nature-bf3525a35bb

Callicott, J. Baird. "La Nature est morte, vive la nature!" *Hastings Center Report* 22, no. 5 (September/October 1992): 16-23.

Campbell, Elisa K. "Beyond Anthropocentrism." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 19 (1983): 54-67.

Carrington, Damian. "The Four Types of Climate Denier, and Why You Should Ignore Them All." *The Guardian*, July 30, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/30/climate-denier-shill-global-debate

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

Castro, Ricardo Gonçalves. "Interculturality and Ecology." In *Becoming Intercultural: Perspectives on Mission,* edited by Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD, and Christian Tauchner, SVD*,* 266-80. Sankt Augustin/New Delhi*:* Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut/ISPCK, 2021.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

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

Center for Countering Digital Hate. "The Toxic Ten: How Ten Fringe Publishers Fuel 69% of Digital Climate Change Denial," November 2, 2021. https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/211101-Toxic-Ten-Report-FINAL-V2.5.pdf

Center for International Environmental Law, The Center for Biological Diversity, Earthworks. "Formosa Plastics Group: A Serial Offender of Environmental and Human Rights (A Case Study)." October 2021. https://www.ciel.org/plastic-human-rights

Chan, Wing-tsit, trans. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Chapple, Christopher K. "Animals and the Environment in the Buddhist Birth Stories." In *Buddhism and Ecology*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, 131-48. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Chen, Y.L. "Conceptual Metaphors for '*Xin*' in Confucianism Based on '*Xin*' in the Four Books." Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Culture, Education and Economic Development of Modern Society (ICCESE 2018), Advances in Social Science, Edu-

cation and Humanities Research. https://doi.org/10.2991/iccese-18.2018.106

Cheng, J. Yo-Jud, and Boris Groysberg. "Research: What Inclusive Companies Have in Common." *Harvard Business Review* (2021). https://hbr.org/2021/06/research-what-inclusive-companies-have-in-common

Chilton, Bruce. "Jesus, the Golden Rule, and Its Application." In *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, 76-87. London: Continuum, 2008.

Chittick, William C., ed. *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*. Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2007.

Christo, Cyril. "Let's Stop Putting a Bullet Through the Heart of the World While We Still Have One." *Changing America*, February 25, 2021. https://thehill.com/changing-america/opinion/540479-lets-stop-putting-a-bullet-through-the-heart-of-the-world-while-we/

Cornwall Alliance. "A Renewed Call to Truth, Prudence, and Protection of the Poor." May 1, 2009. https://cornwallalliance.org/2009/05/a-renewed-call-to-truth-prudence-and-protection-of-the-poor/

— "Protect the Poor: Ten Reasons to Oppose Harmful Climate Change Policies, 2014." https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/protect-the-poor-ten-reasons-to-oppose-harmful-climate-change-policies/

— "An Open Letter to Pope Francis on Climate Change." April 27, 2015. https://cornwallalliance.org/anopenlettertopopefrancisonclimatechange/

Corpuz, Jeff Clyde G. "Religions in Action: The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Public Health* (Oxf) 43, no. 2 (June 7, 2021): 1-2.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mark A. "The Golden Rule in Confucianism." In *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, 157-69. London: Continuum, 2008.

CSIS. "Deforestation Hits Home: Indigenous Communities Fight for the Future of Their Amazon." December 19, 2020. https://journalism.csis.org/deforestation-hits-home-indigenous-communities-fight-for-the-future-of-their-amazon/

Cua, A.S. "Virtues of *Junzi*." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2007): 125-42.

Dalai Lama. *My Tibet*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1990.

— *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Putnam, 1999.

— *Dalai Lama on the Environment: Collected Statements, 1987–2007*. India: Environment and Development Desk, TPI, 2017.

Deardorff, Darla. "Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States." *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10, no. 3 (2006): 241-66.

— and Lily Arasaratnam-Smith, eds. *Intercultural Competence in Higher Education: International Approaches, Assessment and Application*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

de Bary, Wm. Theodore, et al. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.

Dhal, Pravat. "The Future of Religion: Human Life – Education – Spirituality." *Religion and Social Communication* 20, no. 1 (2022): 123-42.

Dietz, Gunther. *Multiculturalism, Interculturality and Diversity in Education: An Anthropological Approach*. Münster: Waxmann, 2009.

Dulles, Avery. "Revelation." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/revelation

Durante, Chris. "The Green Patriarch and Ecological Sin." *Public Orthodoxy*, September 3, 2021. https://publicorthodoxy.org/2021/09/03/green-patriarch-and-ecological-sin/

Earth.org. "Sea Level Rise Projections: 10 Cities at Risk of Flooding." June 4, 2022. https://earth.org/sea-level-rise-projections/

Eaton, Charles Le Gai. "Islam and the Environment." In *Islam and the Environment*, edited by Harfiyah Abdel Haleem, 43-54. London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998.

Einstein, Albert. *Ideas and Opinions*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1954.

Fathi, Muhammad. "Cherish Your Wife: The Prophet's Way – 10 Hadiths," *AboutIslam*, 13, 2023. https://aboutislam.net/shariah/hadith/hadith-collections/cherish-your-wife-the-prophets-way-10-hadiths/

Fearon, Patricia Andrews, Friedrich M. Götz, Gregory Serapio-García, and David Good. "Zero-Sum Mindset & Its Discontents." *The*

Global Policy Forum, 2021. https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/publications/zero-sum-mindset-and-its-discontents

Feng Youlan. "*Xin yuanren*" (New Origins of Humanity). In *Six Books of Feng Youlan in the 1930s and 1940s*, Vol. 2, 626-49. Shanghai: Eastern Chinese Normal University Press, 1996.

Ferré, Frederick. "Personalistic Organicism: Paradox or Paradigm?" In *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, edited by Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey, 59-74. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Fox, Warwick. *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1990.

Fuller, Paul. "The Narratives of Ethnocentric Buddhist Identity." *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 20 (2018): 19-44.

Geneva Environment Network. "Data, Digital Technology, and the Environment." November 25, 2021. https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/data-digital-technology-and-the-environment/

Gertz, Emily. "Infographic: Scientists Who Doubt Human-Caused Climate Change." *Popular Science*, January 10, 2014. https://www.popsci.com/article/science/infographic-scientists-who-doubt-human-caused-climate-change

"Getting Warmer." *The Economist*, December 3, 2009. http://www.economist.com/node/14994872

Gittins, Anthony J. *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015.

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

Grey, William. "Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 4 (1993): 463-75.

— "Environmental Value and Anthropocentrism." *Ethics and the Environment* 3, no. 1 (1998): 97-103.

Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames. *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987.

Hamilton, Alistair. "Humanism and the Bible." In *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, edited by Jill Kraye, 100-17. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Hargrove, Eugene. "Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value." In *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, edited by Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III, 175-90. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.

Harper, C.L. "Religion and Environmentalism." *Journal of Religion & Society*, Supplement Series 3 (2008): 5-26.

Hasrat, Mohammad Hussain. "Over a Century of Persecution: Massive Human Rights Violation Against Hazaras in Afghanistan." *Kabul Press*, May 15, 2019. https://www.kabulpress.org/article240586.html

Hawkins, Bradley K. *Buddhism*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999.

Hayward, Tim. "Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem." *Environmental Values* 6, no. 1 (1997): 49-63.

Hiar, Corbin. "Twitter Bots Are a Major Source of Climate Disinformation." *Scientific American*, January 22, 2021. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/twitter-bots-are-a-major-source-of-climate-disinformation/

Holder, John J. "A Suffering (but Not Irreparable) Nature: Environmental Ethics from the Perspective of Early Buddhism." *Contemporary Buddhism* 8, no. 2 (2007): 113-30.

Homerin, Th. Emil. "The Golden Rule in Islam." In *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, 99-115. London: Continuum, 2008.

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

Hunt, D., S. Dixon-Fyle, S. Prince, and K. Dolan. *Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters*. McKinsey and Company, 2020. https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/diversity%20and%20inclusion/diversity%20wins%20how%20inclusion%20matters/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters-vf.pdf

Hurn, Brian J., and Barry Tomalin. *Key Thinkers in Cross-Cultural Communication*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

"**I**nterfaith Declaration on Climate Change." 2009. https://interfaithdeclaration.org/index.html

Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/about-us-2/

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. "Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability." https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-ii/

International Confucian Ecological Alliance (ICEA). "Confucian Statement on the Environment." July 2013. https://interfaithsustain.com/confucian-statement-on-the-environment/

Ip, P.K. "Is Confucianism Good for Business Ethics in China?" *Journal of Business Ethics* 88, no. 3 (2009): 463-76. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10 551-009-0120-2

"Islam and the Nature of the Universe." IslamOnline.net. https://islamon line.net/en/islam-and-the-nature-of-the-universe/

"Islamic Declaration on Climate Change." ARRCC. https://www.arrcc.org. au/islamic_declaration

Ives, Christopher. "Resources for Buddhist Environmental Ethics." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 20 (2013): 541-71.

Jakes, Lara. "Myanmar's Military Committed Genocide Against Rohingya, U.S. Says." *The New York Times*, March 21, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/us/politics/myanmar-genocide-biden.html

James, Simon P. *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004.

— "Against Holism: Rethinking Buddhist Environmental Ethics." *Environmental Values* 16, no. 4 (2007): 447-61.

Janssens, Louis. *Personne et société. Théories actuelles et essai doctrinal*. Gembloux: Ducolot, 1939.

Jiménez, Jacinta. "Compassion vs. Empathy: Understanding the Difference." BetterUp, July 16, 2021. https://www.betterup.com/blog/compassion-vs-empathy#:~:text=Consider%20these%20definitions%3 A,creates%20a%20desire%20to%20help

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

Kasselstrand, Isabella, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun. *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023.

Keown, Damien. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

— "Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach." *Contemporary Buddhism* 8, no. 2 (2007): 97-112.

Khalaf-Elledge, Nora. "'It's a Tricky One' – Development Practicioners' Attitudes Toward Religion." *Development in Practice* 30, no. 5 (2020): 660-71.

Khalid, Fazlun. "Islam, Ecology, and the World Order." In *Islam and the Environment*, edited by Harfiyah Abdel Haleem, 16-31. London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998.

Kimball, Charles. *When Religion Becomes Evil*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002.

Kisala, Robert. "Formation for Intercultural Life and Mission." *Verbum SVD* 50, no. 3 (2009): 331-45.

Knutsen, Carl Henrik, Andreas Kotsadam, Eivind Hammersmark Olsen, and Tore Wig. "Mining and Local Corruption in Africa." *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2 (2017): 320-34.

Kolbert, Elizabeth. "Where Have All the Insects Gone?" *The New Yorker*, October 25, 2021. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/11/01/where-have-all-the-insects-gone-e-o-wilson-silent-earth

Kumar, Ashwani, Muneer Ahmad Malla, and Anamika Dubey. "With Corona Outbreak: Nature Started Hitting the Reset Button Globally." *Frontiers in Public Health* 8 (September 2020): 1-10.

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

Lai, Olivia. "10 Young Climate Activists Leading the Way on Global Climate Action." Earth.org, August 12, 2022. https://earth.org/young-climate-activists-leading-the-way-on-global-climate-action/#

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

Lancaster, Lewis. "Buddhism and Ecology: Collective Cultural Perceptions." In *Buddhism and Ecology*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams, 3-20. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Lau, D.C., trans. *The Book of Mencius*. London: Penguin Books, 1970.

Le Duc, Anthony. "Becoming Human, Intercultural, and Intercreational: Movements toward Achieving Ecoflourishing." In *Ecoflourishing and Virtue: Christian Perspectives Across the Disciplines*, edited by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Nathan Carson. London: Routledge, 2024.

Lee, Shui Chuen. "The Possibility of a Global Environmental Ethics: A Confucian Proposal." n.d. https://in.ncu.edu.tw/phi/teachers/lsc/docs/The%20Possibility%20of%20a%20Global%20Environmental%20Ethics%20A%20Confucian%20Proposal.pdf

Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. London: Oxford University Press, 1949.

Li, Baoyu, Jesper Sjöström, Bangping Ding, and Ingo Eilks. "Education for Sustainability Meets Confucianism in Science Education." *Science & Education* (June 2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-022-00349-9

Long, Jeffery D. *Jainism: An Introduction*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

Love, Thomas T. "Theravada Buddhism: Ethical Theory and Practice." *Journal of Bible and Religion* 33, no. 4 (1965): 303-13.

Luzbetak, Louis. *Church and Cultures*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.

Lynas, Mark, Benjamin Z. Houlton, and Simon Perry. "Greater Than 99% Consensus on Human-Caused Climate Change in the Peer-Reviewed Scientific Literature." *Environmental Research Letters* 16 (2021): 114005.

Maiti, Rashmila. "Fast Fashion and Its Environmental Impact." Earth.org, May 21, 2023. https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/#

Malalasekera, G.P. "The Status of the Individual in Theravada Buddhism." *Philosophy East and West* 14, no. 2 (1964): 145-56.

Malay Mail. "Perlis Fatwa Committee Bans Act of Polluting Environment." March 1, 2016. https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/03/01/perlis-fatwa-committee-bans-act-of-polluting-environment/ 1071077

Maritain, Jaques. *True Humanism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.

— "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times." *The Review of Politics* 1, no. 1 (1939): 1-17.

Mathews, Freya. *The Ecological Self*. Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble Books, 1991.

McGrath, Alister E. *Science and Religion: A New Introduction*. Third edition. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020.

McIntyre, Lee. *Post-Truth*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018.

McShane, Katie. "Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism: Why Should We Care?" *Environmental Values* 16, no. 2 (2007): 169-85.

Muir, John. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.

Müller, Friedrich M. *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution with Two Essays of False Analogies, and the Philosophy of Mythology*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1873.

My Islam. "Best Islamic Quotes about Family (Importance of Family Ties)." https://myislam.org/islam-quotes-family/

Nadeau, Randall L. *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Nan Tien Institute. "What is Humanistic Buddhism?" https://www.nantien.org.au/en/buddhism/knowledge-buddhism/what-humanistic-buddhism

Naseef, Abdullah Omar. "The Muslim Declaration on Nature." In *Islam and the Environment*, edited by Harfiyah Abdel Haleem, 12-14. London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*. London: Mandala, 1990.

— "Sacred Science and The Environment Crisis: An Islamic Perspective." In *Islam and the Environment*, edited by Harfiyah Abdel Haleem, 118-37. London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 1998.

— *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*. Pymble, NSW: Perfectbound, 2002.

— "Religion and the Environmental Crisis." In *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by William C. Chittick, 29-38. Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc., 2007.

Nguyen, vanThanh. "Biblical Foundation for Interculturality." *Verbum SVD* 54, no. 1 (2013): 35-47.

Nivison, David S. "Golden Rule Arguments in Chinese Moral Philosophy." In *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Phi-*

losophy, edited by Bryan Van Norden, 59-76. Chicago: Open Court, 1996.

Norden, Bryan Van. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Norton, Bryan G. "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism." *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984): 131-48.

Nouwen, Henri. *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2009. Kindle version.

Nyanaponika Thera. *The Roots of Good and Evil: Buddhist Texts Translated from the Pāḷi*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008.

Nyanatiloka. *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1997.

Ogbonnaya, J. *African Catholicism and Hermeneutics of Culture: Essays in the Light of African Synod II*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014.

Oldenberg, Hermann, and Richard Pischel, eds. *Vinaya Piṭaka*. Vol. IV. London: PTS, 1879-1883.

— trans. *Therigatha*. London: PTS, 1966.

O'Malley, John W. "How Humanistic Is the Jesuit Tradition?: From the 1599 Ratio Studiorum to Now." In *Jesuit Education 21: Conference Proceedings on the Future of Jesuit Higher Education*, edited by Martin R. Tripole, 189-201. Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 2000.

Omar, A. Rashied. "A Muslim Response to Pope Francis' Environmental Encyclical *Laudato Si'*." *Contending Modernities*, December 17, 2015. https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/field-notes/a-muslim-response-to-pope-franciss-environmental-encyclical-laudato-si/

Oxford Reference. "Engaged Buddhism." http://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095751887;jsessionid=62F8D1C0C163FB26CB1342C9414A7C8C

Ozalp, Mehmet. "Caring for God's Creation: An Islamic Obligation." ISRA, April 2021, 2023. https://www.isra.org.au/2021/04/caring-for-gods-creation-an-islamic-obligation/

Pan-Amazon Synod. Final Document, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*. 2019. http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.pdf

Pasquini, Giancarlo, Alison Spencer, Alec Tyson, and Cary Funk. "Why Some Americans Do Not See Urgency on Climate Change." Pew Research Center, August 9, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/08/09/why-some-americans-do-not-see-urgency-on-climate-change/

Patel, Kasha. "2023 Is on Track to Be the Hottest Year on Record." *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/08/08/2023-is-track-be-hottest-year-record/

Payutto, Prayudh. "Buddhist Solutions for the Twenty-First Century." 1994. http://www.thawsischool.com/old/dhamma_English/pdf/P.%20A.%20Payutto%20in%20English %20for%20Web/Buddhist%20Solutions%20for%20the%20Twenty%20First%20Century.pdf

— *Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Conditionality*. Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994.

— *Buddhadhamma*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995.

— *Thai People and Forest* (คนไทยกบั ป่า). Bangkok: Karomwichakan, 2010.

Pennington, Jonathan T. *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Penguin Books, 2017.

PETA. "PETA Honors Gandhi's Lifelong Commitment to Animal Liberation." https://www.peta.org/features/gandhi/

Peterson, Keith R. *A World Not Made for Us: Topics in Critical Environmental Philosophy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020.

Pew Research Center. "Why America's Nones Left Religion Behind." August 24, 2016. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/

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

Phan, Peter C. "Being Religious as Being Interreligious." (2011). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrSCMZu47HM

— "Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue at Vatican II. Some Rethinking Required," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education* 42, Article 5 (2012). http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol42/iss1/5

Pietrzak, Daniel. "Interculturality and Internationality: A Utopia or a Constructive Tension for a Franciscan Missiology." 2016. Paper

given at the International Missionary Congress OFMConv, Cochin, India.

Plumwood, Val. "Wilderness Skepticism and Wilderness Dualism." In *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, 652-90. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. "Dialogue and Proclamation." 1991. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html

Pope Benedict XVI. Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry, April 24, 2005. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html

— *Caritas in Veritate*. 2009. http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

Pope Francis. "World Day of Peace Message 2014." Vatican. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvii-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html

— *Laudato Si'*. 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

— *Fratelli Tutti*. 2020. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

— General Audience Address, April 22, 2020. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_ 20200422_udienza-generale.pdf

— Speech at the VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, Kazakhstan. September 14, 2022. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220914-kazakhstan-congresso.html

— *Laudate Deum*. 2023. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.pdf

Pope John Paul II. *Redemptor Hominis*. 1979. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html

— "World Day of Peace Message 1990." https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_ mes_ 198912 08_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.pdf

— *Centesimus Annus*. 1991. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html

— *Veritatis Splendor*. 1993. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.pdf

— *Evangelium Vitae*. 1995. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.pdf

— General Audience Speech, January 17, 2001. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_ 20010117.pdf

Pope Paul VI. *Populorum Progressio*. 1967. http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html

Pratchett, Terry. *Small Gods*. HarperCollins e-books, 1994.

Pretty, Jules, and Sarah Pilgrim. "Nature and Culture." *Resurgence and Ecologist Magazine* (September/October 2008). https://www.resurgence.org/ magazine/article2629-nature-and-culture.html#:~:text=NATURE %20AND%20 CULTURE%20converge%20in,a%20change%20in% 20the%20other

PR Newswire. "Mexico City Legislative Assembly Honours Indian Buddhist Spiritual Head – The Gyalwang Drukpa." July 25, 2014. https://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/mexico-city-legislative-assembly-honours-indian-buddhist-spiritual-head---the-gyalwang-drukpa-268600502.html

Psychology Today. "Empathy." https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/empathy

Public Citizen. "Climate Change Denial Dominates 86% of Fox News Climate Segments." August 13, 2019. https://www.citizen.org/news/climate-change-denial-dominates-86-of-fox-news-climate-segments/

Punnadhammo Mahāthero. *The Buddhist Cosmos: A Comprehensive Survey of the Early Buddhist Worldview*. Neebing, ON: Arrow River Forest Hermitage, 2018.

Qazadstan Tarihy. "Congress of World Leaders and Traditional Religions." August 8, 2013. https://e-history.kz/en/e-resources/show/13450/

Ramirez, Vanessa Bates. "It's Not Too Late to Replace Toxic Tech With Humane Technology." Singularity Hub, March 14, 2022. https://singularityhub.com/2022/03/14/its-not-too-late-to-replace-toxic-tech-with-humane-technology/

Rebellion Research. "What Is Digital Sustainability?" *Rebellion Research*, July 24, 2021. https://www.rebellionresearch.com/what-is-digital-sustainability.

"Religion and Politics." n.d. https://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap18.htm

Richardson, Amy. "5 Biodiversity Lessons from Dr Jane Goodall." The Future Forest Company, April 3, 2023. https://thefutureforestcompany.com/2023/04/03/5-biodiversity-lessons-from-dr-jane-goodall/

Ritchie, Angus, and Nick Spencer. *The Case for Christian Humanism: Why Christians Should Believe in Humanism, and Humanists in Christianity*. London: Theos, 2014.

Robra, Martin. "Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto 2008." *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 2 (2010): 242.

Rolston Holmes III. "Nature and Culture in Environmental Ethics." In *Ethics: The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, edited by Klaus Brinkmann, 151-58. Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999.

— "Value in Nature and the Nature of Value." In *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, edited by Andrew Light and Rolston Holmes III, 143-53. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

— "Science and Religion in the Face of the Environmental Crisis." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology,* edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 376-97. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Rumi Forum. "Peter C. Phan: Being Religious as Being Interreligious." YouTube, July 2, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrSCMZu47HM

Sadowski, Ryszard F. "The Role of Catholicism in Shaping a Culture of Sustainable Consumption." *Religions* 12 (2021): 598.

— "Roots of (and Solutions to) Our Ecological Crisis: A Humanistic Perspective." *Ecological Civilization* 1, no. 1 (2023): 1(1), 10001. https://doi.org/10.35534/ecolciviliz.2023.10001

— and Zafer Ayvaz. "Biblical and Quranic Argumentation for Sustainable Behaviors Toward Nature." *Problemy Ekorozwoju – Problems of Sustainable Development* 18, no. 1 (2023): 152-63.

Sahni, Pragati. *Environmental Ethics in Buddhism: A Virtues Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Sangharakshita, trans. *Dhammapada: The Way of Truth*. Tra edition. Cambridge: Windhorse Publications Ltd., 2013.

Sarkissian, Hagop. "Ritual and Rightness in the Analects." In *Dao Companion to the Analects* (Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy), edited by A. Olberding. DOI 10.1007m8-94-007-7113-0_6, 95-116

Savelyeva, T. "Vernadsky Meets Yulgok: A Non-Western Dialog on Sustainability." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 5 (2017): 501-20.

Sawyer, John. "Introduction." In *Ecological Civilization*, edited by J. Sawyer and D. Jin. Beijing: Pulitzer Center, 2015. Kindle edition.

Schaefer, Jame. *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009.

— "Converting to and Nurturing Ecological Consciousness – Individually, Collectively, Actively." *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*, 2018. https://epublications.marquette.du/theo_fac/680

Schaeffer, J.-M. *La fin de l'exception humaine*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010.

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

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The Basis of Morality*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1903.

Schraer, Rachel, and Kayleen Devlin. "COP26: The Truth Behind the New Climate Change Denial." BBC, November 17, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-59251912

Schumacher, E.F. *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. London: Blond & Briggs, 1973.

Schweiker, William. "Humanity before God: Theological Humanism from a Catholic Perspective." Martin Marty Center Web Forum, 2003. https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/102003/Schweiker%20essay.pdf

Shedlock, Karen, and Stephanie Feldstein. "At What Cost?: Unravelling the Harms of the Fast Fashion Industry." Center for Biological Diversity, 2023. https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/pdfs/Unravelling-Harms-of-Fast-Fashion-Full-Report-2023-02.pdf

Sheff, David. "Anselm Adams." 2013, https://archive.is/ah7i5

Shirazim, Naser Makarem. "Question 98: Is Man Superior to Angels?" Islam.org. https://www.al-islam.org/philosophy-islamic-laws-naser-makarem-shirazi-jafar-subhani/question-98-man-superior-angels

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

Singer, Marcus G. "Golden Rule." *Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 365-67. New York: Macmillan, 1967.

Sivaraksa, Sulak. *The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century*. Asheville, NC: Koa Books, 2009.

Slingerland, Edward, trans. *Confucius. Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003.

Smietana, Bob. "Faith Leaders Call for Repentance and Spiritual Reformation to Address Climate Change." *Religion News Service*, August 17, 2023. https://religionnews.com/2023/08/17/faith-leaders-call-for-repentance-and-spiritual-reformation-to-address-climate-change/?fbclid=IwAR1Zmd0ugPfBd5TlQhJ3Zg-vbaeaUvtsUl1SWWeO5tmZReGAHD7v7rr3eIE

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions.* New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009.

Snell, Robin Stanley, Crystal Xinru Wu, and Hong Weng Lei. "Junzi Virtues: A Confucian Foundation for Harmony Within Organizations." *Asian Journal of Business Ethics* 11 (2022): 183-226.

Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1990.

Society of the Divine Word. *General Chapter Documents*, 2000.

Spak, Brian. "The Success of the Copenhagen Accord and the Failure of the Copenhagen Conference." 2010. https://www.american.edu/sis/gep/upload/Brian-Spak-SRP-Copenhagen-Success-and-Failure.pdf

Spradley, James. "Ethnography and Culture." In *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, 14th edition, edited by J.

Spradley and D.W. McCurdy, 6-12. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2012.

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

Stammer, Larry B. "Harming the Environment Is Sinful, Prelate Says." *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 1997. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-nov-09-mn-51974-story.html

Stanislaus, Lazar. "Interculturality in the Post-Pandemic World." In *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond,* edited by Anthony Le Duc, 50-70. Bangkok: ARC, 2022.

— and Christian Tauchner, eds. *Becoming Intercultural: Perspectives in Mission*. Sankt Augustin/New Delhi: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut/ISPCK, 2021.

— and Martin Ueffing, eds. *Intercultural Living*. Sankt Augustin/New Delhi: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut/ISPCK, 2015.

Stein, Jeff, and Michael Birnbaum. "The War in Ukraine Is a Human Tragedy. It's Also an Environmental Disaster." *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/13/ukraine-war-environment-impact-disaster/

Streng, Frederick. *Understanding Religious Life*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1984.

Sumner, William G. *Folkways*. New York: Ginn, 1906.

Survival International. "How Will We Survive?" n.d. https://assets.survivalinternational.org/documents/1683/how-will-we-survive.pdf

Swearer, Donald. "Buddhist Virtue, Voluntary Poverty, and Extensive Benevolence." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 26, no. 1 (1998): 71-103.

Sweet, William. "Jacques Maritain." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. 2022. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/maritain/

Syropoulos, Stylianos, Hanne M. Watkins, Azim F. Shariff, Sara D. Hodges, and Ezra M. Markowitz. "The Role of Gratitude in Motivating Intergenerational Environmental Stewardship." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 72 (2020): 101517.

Tarmizi. "The Concept of Maslahah According to Imam Al-Ghazali." *Jurnal Al-Dustur* 3, no. 1 (2020): 22-29.

Taylor, Paul W. "The Ethics of Respect for Nature." In *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, edited by Andrew Light and Rolston Holmes III, 74-84. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

TED. "Nana Firman Wants to Unite the World Behind a Commitment to Sustainability and Environmental Justice." https://www.ted.com/speakers/nana_firman

Tertullian. *Apology*, 39, trans. S. Thelwall, *Early Christian Writings*. http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian01.html

The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders. "10 Spiritual Principles for Climate Repentance." https://climaterepentance.com/the-spiritual-principles/

The Elijah Interfaith Institute. "The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders." https://elijah-interfaith.org/about-elijah/the-elijah-board-of-world-religious-leaders

The International Dialogue Centre. *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue: Bridging Differences and Building Sustainable Societies*. Vienna: KAICIID, 2021.

The White House. "Champions of Change." https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/champions/climate-faith-leaders/nana-firman

The World Counts. "Negative Environmental Impacts of Tourism." https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/consumption/transport-and-tourism/negative-environmental-impacts-of-tourism

Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Path of Compassion: Writing on Socially Engaged Buddhism*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988.

— "Please Call Me By My True Names." 2004. https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/poem-please-call-me-by-my-true-names/

— "Statement on Climate Change for the United Nations, 2014." Plum Village. https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/thich-nhat-hanhs-statement-on-climate-change-for-unfccc/

Thompson, K.O. "The Archery of 'Wisdom' in the Stream of Life: 'Wisdom' in the Four Books with Zhu Xi's Reflections." *Philosophy East & West* 57, no. 3 (2007): 330-44.

Thunberg, Greta. Speech to MPs at the Houses of Parliament. *The Guardian*, April 23, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/23/greta-thunberg-full-speech-to-mps-you-did-not-act-in-timeNature, February 23, 2021, https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-021-00019-4

Tillich, Paul. *Theology of Culture*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Toelle, Stephanie C., and Victor W. Harris. "Are You Marrying Someone from a Different Culture or Religion?" University of Florida/Dep. of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, September 27, 2018. https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FY1337

Travierso, Michele. "Measuring Magnetism: How Social Media Creates Echo Chambers." *Nature*, February 23, 2021. https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-021-00019-4

Treisman, Rachel. "The Last Member of a Tribe in Brazil Has Died, Pulling Indigenous Rights into Focus." NPR, August 30, 2022. https://www.npr.org/2022/08/30/1119939392/last-member-uncontacted-tribe-dies-brazil#:~:text=Press-,'Man%20of%20the%20Hole%2C'%20the%20last%20member%20of%20his,rights%20are%20on%20the%20ballot

Tu, Weiming. *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985.

— "The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World." *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 243-64.

— "Spiritual Humanism." Speech given at Hangzhou International Congress, "Culture: Key to Sustainable Development," May 15-17, 2013, Hangzhou, China.

— "Ecological Implications of Confucian Humanism." n.d. Retrieved from http://msihyd.org/pdf/19manuscript_tu.pdf

Tucker, Mary Evelyn. "Confucian Cosmology and Ecological Ethics." In *Living Earth Community: Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing*, edited by Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, 109-19. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2020.

— and John Grim. "Series Foreword." In *Buddhism and Ecology*, edited by M.E. Tucker and D.R. Williams, xi-xii. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

— "The Movement of Religion and Ecology: Emerging Field and a Dynamic Force." In *Routledge Handbook in Religion and Ecology*, edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, 3-12. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Turrentine, Jeff. "Climate Misinformation on Social Media Is Undermining Climate Action." NRDC, April 19, 2022. https://www.nrdc.org/stories/climate-misinformation-social-media-undermining-climate-action

UN Environment Programme. "The Toxic Legacy of the Ukraine War." UN Environment Programme News and Stories, March 8, 2023.

https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/toxic-legacy-ukraine-war

— "Why Faith and Environment Matters." https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment-programme/faith-earth-initiative/why-faith-and-environment-matters

UNESCO. "Interculturality." https://en.unesco.org/creativity/interculturality

— "We Need to Talk: Measuring Intercultural Dialogue for Peace and Inclusion." https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382874

United Nations. "World Interfaith Harmony Week." https://www.un.org/en/observances/interfaith-harmony-week

United Nations Climate Change. "World Religious Leaders and Scientists Make Pre-COP26 Appeal." October 5, 2021. https://unfccc.int/news/world-religious-leaders-and-scientists-make-pre-cop26-appeal

US Department of State. "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Thailand." https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/thailand/#:~:text=Section%20I.-,Religious%20Demography,Muslim%2C%20and%201.2%20percent%20Christian

Varanasi, Lalji 'Shravak'. "Buddha's Rejection of the Brahmanical Notion of Atman." *Communication & Cognition* 32, no. 1/2 (1999): 9-20.

Vatican. "Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics." June 10, 2002. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration.html

Vatican II. *Gaudium et Spes*. 1965. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

"Vietnam Blames Toxic Wastewater from Steel Plant for Mass Fish Deaths." *The Guardian*, July 1, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/01/vietnam-blames-toxic-waste-water-fom-steel-plant-for-mass-fish-deaths

Wahab, Muhammad Zarunnaim, and Asmadi Mohamed Naim. "The Reviews on Sustainable and Responsible Investment (SRIs) Practices According to Maqasid Shariah and Maslahah Perspectives."

Etikonomi 20, no. 2 (2021): online. https://doi.org/10.15408/etk.v20i2.18053

Walshe, Maurice, trans. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikāya*. Second edition. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.

Walter, Nicolas. *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998. Kindle edition.

Wang, Y.Q., Q.G. Bao, and G.X. Guan. "Trustworthiness (*xin*, 信)." Springer. 2020. https://doi.org/10. 1007/978-981-15-2572-8_9

Warner, Keith. "Franciscan Environmental Ethic: Imagining Creation as a Community of Care." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 143-60.

Warren, Mary Anne. *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things*. London: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Wenger, Karin. "Bangkok Is Sinking but so Are Other Southeast Asian Megacities." Global Geneva, April 1, 2020. https://global-geneva.com/bangkok-is-sinking-but-so-are-other-southeast-asian-megacities/#:~:text=Bangkok%3A%20A%20city%20sinking%20at,by%20the%20Chao%20Phraya%20River

White, Lynn Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-07.

Wikipedia. "Cornwall Alliance." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornwall_Alliance

— "Religions for Peace." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religions_for_Peace

Williams, Dilys. "Shein: The Unacceptable Face of Throwaway Fast Fashion." *The Guardian*, April 10, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2022/apr/10/shein-the-unacceptable-face-of-throwaway-fast-fashion

Williams, Ollie A. "118 Private Jets Take Leaders to COP26 Climate Summit Burning Over 1,000 Tons of CO2." *Forbes*, November 5, 2021. https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliverwilliams1/2021/11/05/118-private-jets-take-leaders-to-cop26-climate-summit-burning-over-1000-tons-of-co2/?sh=79a1a2f453d9

Windish, Ernst, ed. *Itivuttaka*. London: PTS, 1889.

Woocher, Lawrence. "Deconstructing 'Political Will': Explaining the Failure to Prevent Deadly Conflict and Mass Atrocities." *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 12 (2001): 179-206.

Woods, P.R., and D. Lamond. "Junzi and Rushang: A Confucian Approach to Business Ethics in a Contemporary Chinese Context." Presented at the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference. Wellington, New Zealand. December 7-9, 2011. https://www.anzam.org/wpcontent/uploads/pdf-manager/623_ANZAM2011-434.PDF

World Council of Churches. "Ecumenical Patriarch Calls for Solidarity in the Protection of Creation." August 31, 2017. https://www.oikoumene.org/news/ecumenical-patriarch-calls-for-solidarity-in-the-protection-of-creation

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

"World Religious Leaders and Scientists Make Pre-COP26 Appeal." UN Climate Change, October 5, 2021. https://unfccc.int/news/world-religious-leaders-and-scientists-make-pre-cop26-appeal

World Wildlife Fund. "Bhutan: Committed to Conservation." https://www.worldwildlife.org/projects/bhutan-committed-to-conservation

Yale University. "A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change." May 14, 2015. https://fore.yale.edu/files/buddhist_climate_change_statement_5-14-15.pdf

Yao, Xinzhong. *An Introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

— "An Eco-Ethical Interpretation of Confucian Tianren Heyi." *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 9 (2014): 570-85.

York, Michael. "'Religion and the Environmental Crisis.' Ecotheology – Sustainability and Religions of the World." *IntechOpen* (2023): 1-22. doi:10.5772/intechopen.104002

Zhang, Xuezhi, and Min Wu. "From Life State to Ecological Consciousness: On Wang Yangming's 'Natural Principles of Order within the Realm of Liang Zhi.'" *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 1, no. 2 (2006): 222-36.

In our contemporary world, the pursuit of both human and environmental well-being is a top priority amidst ongoing societal conflicts and escalating ecological challenges. Across diverse religious and spiritual traditions, voices have consistently emphasized that these issues are deeply rooted in the human spirit. We must address these profound spiritual concerns, as they stand in the way of our collective desire for social harmony and ecological flourishing. Drawing on the age-old wisdom of four major religious traditions – Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity – this book presents a unique perspective on how the practice of religious self-cultivation can pave the path to a more just and sustainable future. The author proposes that genuine hope for both humanity and the environment lies in the endeavor of individuals to authentically cultivate and transform themselves. Through a humanistic and relational approach, the book shows how religion can help us to develop the vision, wisdom, and virtues needed to address the significant challenges of our time. This book is valuable reading for anyone who is interested in the intersection of religion, environmentalism, and humanism.

Anthony Le Duc,
a member of the Society of the Divine Word, is the Executive Director of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication at St. John's University, Thailand. He also serves as the chief editor of the Center's peer-reviewed *journal, Religion and Social Communication*, and lectures in the Faculty of Christian Studies at Saengtham College, Thailand. Le Duc's extensive writings cover religious environmentalism and the intersection of religion with contemporary issues such as digital development and migration.

ISSN 0562-2816
ISBN 978-3-87710-563-4
34,90 €