

Environmental Ethics across the World Religions

1. The natural world has value in itself and does not exist solely to serve human needs.
2. There is significant ontological continuity between human and non-human living beings, even though humans do have a distinctive role. This continuity can be felt and experienced.
3. Non-human living beings are morally significant, in the eyes of God and/or in the cosmic order. They have their own unique relations to God and their own places in the cosmic order.
4. The dependence of human life on the natural world can and should be acknowledged in ritual and other expressions of appreciation and gratitude.
5. Moral norms such as justice, compassion, and reciprocity apply (in appropriate ways) both to human beings and to non-human beings. The well-being of humans and the well-being of non-human beings are inseparably connected.
6. There are legitimate and illegitimate uses of nature.
7. Greed and destructiveness are condemned. Restraint and protection are commended.
8. Human beings are obliged to be aware and responsible in living in harmony with the natural world, and should follow the specific practices for this prescribed by their traditions.

Source: Kusumita Pedersen, "Environmental Ethics in Interreligious Perspective," in *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Sumner Twiss and Bruce Grelle (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), 281.

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Problems and Promise of Religions: Limiting and Liberating

Contrasting Characteristics of Religions

What might be the contribution of religions to the long-term flourishing of the Earth community? If Earth's life support systems are critically endangered, as the *Millennium Ecosystems Assessment Report* suggests, if climate change is diminishing the prospect of a sustainable future, as the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* observes, and if species are going extinct, as the *Convention on Biodiversity* notes, should not religions be engaged? How might religions contribute to our present search for creating mutually enhancing human–Earth relations? What of their problems and their promise matter in an era when humans have so radically changed the face of the planet that geologists call our period the anthropocene?²

It is important to ask at the outset where the religions have been on environmental issues and why they have been so late to participate in solutions to ecological challenges. Have issues of personal salvation superseded all others? Have divine–human relations been primary? Have anthropocentric ethics been all-consuming? Has the material world of nature been devalued by religion? Does the search for otherworldly rewards override commitment to this world? Did the religions simply surrender their natural theologies and concerns with exploring purpose in nature to positivistic scientific cosmologies? In beginning to address these questions, we still have not exhausted all the reasons for religions' lack of

attention to the environmental crisis. Although the reasons may not be readily apparent, they clearly require further exploration and explanation. It may well be the case that the combined power of science, technology, economic growth, and modernization has overshadowed traditional connections to nature in the world religions.

Examples from the past and present make clear that religions have both conservative and progressive dimensions; that is, they can be both limiting and liberating. They can be dogmatic, intolerant, hierarchical, and patriarchal. Or they can demonstrate liberating and progressive elements through compassion, justice, and inclusivity. They can be oriented to both otherworldly and this-worldly concerns—escaping into pursuit of the afterlife or affirming life on Earth.³ They can be politically engaged or intentionally disengaged, illustrating the complex and contested nature of religion itself. They may invoke a higher spiritual power while still wielding immense political influence. Religious leaders may preach simple living while their institutions have significant material wealth. The nature of religion is complex and often ambiguous, especially in its institutional forms. Moreover, human failings have often led to disillusionment with religions. It is abundantly evident that religious leaders and followers have not always lived up to their highest aspirations.

However, in examining the varied characteristics of religions as liberating and limiting, both historically and at present, one observes that these characteristics are often more dynamically interwoven than rigidly separate. For example, being bound by tradition, religions have been the source of dogmatism and rigidity. They may favor orthodox interpretations of beliefs and practices. On the other hand, they can show flexibility and transformation over time, as with the Reformation in the sixteenth century that gave rise to Protestantism or with Vatican Council II that occasioned deep institutional changes in the Roman Catholic Church. The ambivalence of religions toward modernity has led to both the resistance and the embrace of change. Such resistance has contributed to the rise of contemporary fundamentalism in many parts of the world. Thus, some religious practitioners reject changing social and sexual values. However, openness to change has caused some traditions to advocate justice for the poor and oppressed, as in the work of Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, Buddhist Tzu Chi, and Green Crescent.⁴

Many adherents of religions have become embroiled in intolerant and exclusive claims to truth. Sometimes this has given rise to violence or religious wars, as in the Crusades from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries and the Thirty Years' War in Europe (1618–1648). At the same time,

religious traditions have taught peace, love, and forgiveness, even though imperfectly realized. The New York-based organizations Religions for Peace and the Temple of Understanding have been committed for more than 40 years to promoting peace through religious cooperation and dialogue.⁵ The particularist claims to truth in the Abrahamic traditions have contributed to conflicts between Jews, Christians, and Muslims historically and at present. Although intolerance is not absent in East Asia, exclusive truth claims are rare because interaction and syncretism between religions are so common. For example, in Ming China (1368–1644) the phrase “the three traditions are one” was used to describe the mutually enhancing syncretism of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. This idea extends into the contemporary period across East Asia. In modern Japan one comes of age with a Shinto ritual, practices Confucian ethics in the family and society throughout one's life, and is buried with a Buddhist funeral.⁶

Although most religions have been hierarchical and patriarchal, in the last century they have been increasingly responsive to demands for equity, fairness, and justice. Much more still needs to be done for full inclusivity with regard to issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation. This is especially the case with religious teachings in certain traditions regarding women's roles and reproductive health. However, the expansion of human and civil rights has been an achievement of the last one hundred years, spurred by both secular and religious concepts of justice. Religions have been able to effect change as they participated in this expansion. Now the challenge is to extend this sense of responsibility and inclusivity not only to other humans but also to nature itself.

Religions are often seen as having otherworldly preoccupations, namely concern with salvation in heaven or in an afterlife. Using this logic, some would argue that exploitative treatment of the world is insignificant. These religious practitioners even suggest that degrading the environment hastens the end of Earth and the return of a transcendent paradise.⁷ Other religious groups have actively denied the critical nature of environmental problems or rejected the science of climate change.

However, most religions value this world and have rituals that weave humans into the rhythm of natural cycles. This is a dimension of what we would describe as religious ecology. The incarnational and sacramental dimensions of various religions illustrate this-worldly emphases and concerns. That is, Christianity centers on a belief of divine entry into material reality both in the historical person of Jesus and in the Cosmic Christ embedded in the universe. Hinduism has a similar understanding

with the idea of *avatar* in figures such as Krishna, an incarnation of the supreme deity, Vishnu. Confucianism and Daoism in East Asia have a strong affirmation of this world, for example in the metaphysics and practices of *ch'i* (*qi*), or life force.⁸ *Ch'i* is cultivated in the body movements of *t'ai chi* (*taiji*) and *chi gong* (*qigong*) and in the healing practices of traditional Chinese medicine. Most religious traditions have developed sacramental sensibilities in which material reality mediates the sacred. This is evident in the use of water for baptism and oil for anointing the sick. Moreover, offering food and flowers and lighting incense and candles are widespread sacramental practices in the world religions. Such affirmation of material reality is a critical component of our valuing nature.

The role of religion in relation to political power is complicated and highly contested. Religions have often been invoked for destructive or grandiose political ends. During World War II, the Japanese government used Shinto to legitimize their nationalist ideology and the sacrifice of kamikaze pilots. Similarly, after years of severe persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church, Stalin called on ecclesiastical authorities to support the "Great Patriotic War" against Germany. Religions themselves have wielded political power for less than noble ends and often with violent results. This is evident historically in religious wars and with various fundamentalisms present in the world today. The role of politically conservative Christians has been especially pronounced.⁹ The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is influential in India, as is the Likud Party in Israel.¹⁰

Yet we can also invoke the powerful examples of nonviolent change, as with Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), who was influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. Tolstoy understood the Christian imperative to live more simply as a call to a personal asceticism, particularly for the affluent. In addition, Tolstoy's pacifism and nonviolence were inspired by a desire for peace as he understood the Gospels. In this quest, his influence extended to Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) (figure 1.1) and Martin Luther King (1929–1968). Gandhi also drew on the *Bhagavad Gita* in Hinduism, on *ahimsa* in Jainism, and on the Christian Gospels for his understanding of nonviolence. Similarly, Martin Luther King studied Gandhi, as well as the Christian tradition, in developing his own form of nonviolence. Both Gandhi and King were able to effect political and social change with the spiritual power of their convictions and with the example of their own lives when confronted with violence, hate, and derision. Demonstrations of nonviolent protests were evident in 2011 with the "Arab Spring" and the "Occupy" movement, which highlighted

alienation caused by lack of political voice and striking social and economic inequities around the world. Both of these movements manifest the fluid and hybrid character of nonviolent action.

Moreover, there is an emerging movement of religious communities who are participating in transformative social change based on principles of environmental justice. For example, the United Church of Christ



Figure 1.1 Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948); © Copyright GandhiServe

Commission for Racial Justice published the first statement on environmental justice in 1987, called *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*.¹¹ The Sierra Club has documented many of these efforts in a report called *Environmental Justice and Community Partners*.¹² They are trying to assist in the creation of new attitudes and practices for the flourishing of the Earth community. This is the challenge to which world religions can make a constructive contribution along with environmentalists and secular humanists working toward a sustainable future.

Many people outside the institutional religions share moral values and spiritual attitudes toward the environment. This includes a broad range of environmentalists, nature writers, artists, musicians, secular humanists, and others. Such values and attitudes are more common than has been previously recognized. Indeed, E. O. Wilson and Stephen Kellert claim that *biophilia*, or affiliation with the natural world and its biodiversity, is intrinsic to humans.¹³

In summary, we need to acknowledge the problems and the promise of religions as their perspectives and values are integrated into the academic field of environmental studies and the public force of environmentalism. Within academia it is becoming clear that cultural, ethical, and religious worldviews must be included in the study of environmental issues. This is because historically religions have had ecological dimensions in the ways they ground human communities in the rhythms of nature. This is what we are calling *religious ecology*. An understanding of the roles of religious ecologies is resurfacing with some intensity in an era when religions were thought to be diminishing with the rise of secularization.

The Persistence of Religions

This brief overview of the problems and promise of religion brings us to a consideration of its persistence in the modern period despite the apparent secularization of Western societies. After World War II, secular humanism grew in Western Europe along with the philosophies of existentialism, postmodernism, and deconstruction. Religions were perceived to be ideological, outdated, ineffective, or oppressive. In short, many came to feel that the deleterious aspects of religions had surpassed their achievements. Moreover, there was a widespread assumption among some European and American academics that religions would wither away as modernity brought the benefits of intellectual enlightenment, economic growth, and technological progress.¹⁴ Rationality would replace religion; God was proclaimed to be dead.¹⁵ In this view, sociologists of religion predicted both rejection of religions in secular societies and adaptation by

the religions themselves to secularization.¹⁶ This was influenced by Max Weber (1864–1920), who recognized the disenchantment of the modern world through loss of the mythic dimensions of religions.

However, contrary to this thesis regarding the promise of secularization, interest in religion has not declined.¹⁷ For example, the prohibition of religion under Communist regimes did not lead to its demise as many had predicted. Rather, it has flourished in Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989 and in China since religious freedom was established in 1981. Moreover, fundamentalisms around the world (Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Hindu) are stronger than ever in the face of the challenges of modernity.¹⁸ The search for exclusive claims to truth is a response to the relativism of secular values.

The 1979 Iranian revolution signaled for many a turning point regarding the role of Islam in politics and society. With the overthrow of the secular political leader, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and the return to Iran of the religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, an Islamic Republic was established under *shari'a* law.

In the Christian West some of the groundwork for this resurgence of religion as neo-orthodoxy was laid in part by Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968). He rejected both Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment's rational understanding of scriptures and institutional religion. Barth reaffirmed the transcendence of God and the exclusive truth of Christianity. He regarded its biblical scriptures as the primary source of revelation. Thus, other sources of revelation, such as nature, were ignored.¹⁹

Religion in its various forms, then, has proven to be persistent and forceful despite the increasingly rapid spread of modernization and industrialization around the world. Noted contemporary philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor are exploring the implications of this phenomenon. Taylor has acknowledged that the modern secular age is not simply an era of unbelievers. Instead, our contemporary period offers a pluralism of options, which are steadily widening. This results in the emergence of hybrid and fluid identities so that the secular and the religious are not exclusive categories but often mutually interpenetrating.²⁰

In recent years, in his lectures and writing Habermas has stated emphatically that philosophy cannot afford to ignore religion. He cites the limitations of the Enlightenment in its singular reliance on reason. The result in the modern period, he observes, is that practical reason is experiencing its own deficiencies in adequately responding to "a modernization threatening to spin out of control." His suggestion is that "enlightened

reason unavoidably loses its grip on the images [symbol], preserved by religion, of the moral whole—of the Kingdom of God on earth—as collectively binding ideals.” He further notes that such reason “no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake, in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven.”²¹

Habermas is deeply concerned that the moral grounds for transforming the economic globalization that is devouring Earth’s ecosystems are unavailable or inadequately stated in secular philosophy alone. He is keenly aware that something important is missing in our efforts to halt the social and ecological ills engulfing the planet. The rational appeal to justice, to enlightened self-interest, or even to the well-being of future generations does not alone seem to have had a significant effect or traction. Religious sensibilities, symbol systems, and ethical concerns are also needed in all their diversity. We will briefly mention some aspects of religious diversity in their historical, dialogical, and ecological forms.

Diversity of Religions

Our understanding of world religions has increased exponentially since the rise of the study of the history of religions in the late nineteenth century.²² Consequently, even how we define religion has expanded. Although the field of history of religions in its early phases has been criticized as sometimes being orientalist and as imposing patterns of interpretation from a Western perspective, its long-range contributions have been indispensable to the understanding of the diversity and complexity of world religions.²³ Several types of diversity can be identified within religions. By appreciating such diversity we can also recognize that the response of religion to environmental concern will be immensely varied around the planet because these traditions are far from univocal.

First, there is *historical, cultural, and theological diversity* within religious traditions that developed over time in different geographic contexts. For example, there are important variations in Judaism between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements, in Christianity between Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox denominations, and in Islam between Sunni and Shiite groups. Hinduism has a great variety of schools of thought and practice, ranging from dualism, separating the divine from creation, to nondualism, or monism of unity between creation and the divine. In addition, even in the yogic schools of Hinduism there are practices that are devotional (*bhakti*), intellectual (*jnana*), and physical (*hatha*) that accentuate cultural and theological differences. Moreover, Buddhism arose

in India and spread to Southeast Asia and north across the Silk Road through Central Asia to China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet over a thousand-year period. This geographic expansion gave rise to strikingly different cultural and religious expressions of Buddhist thought and practice across Asia. This same variation is true for Islam, which spread from the Arabian Peninsula to Central and South Asia and North Africa. Islam in Saudi Arabia today is quite different from what has developed over time in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world.

Second, there is *dialogic and syncretic diversity* within and between religious traditions. This point does not override the historical and cultural diversity but adds another level of complexity. Interactions between traditions, through trade and dialogue, can lead to new syntheses of religions. This economic and religious exchange often results in new religious expressions that can be described as syncretic, the commingling of religions, or hybrid, the fusion of religions into new forms. Such creative expressions occurred in Celtic Christianity and in the Americas when Indigenous peoples adapted Christianity into local settings, such as the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico. In East Asia there is an ongoing dialogue between Confucians, Daoists, Buddhists, and Indigenous practitioners that has resulted in various kinds of syncretism. In Japan Buddhist temples manifest this hybridity, for example, with the Shinto gateways (*torii*) placed at the entrance.²⁴ Moreover, because of such syncretism, new religious movements such as Kurozumikyō and Shinji Shumetkai have flourished in Japan since the nineteenth century.

Third, there is *cosmological and ecological diversity* within and between religions. Religious traditions develop unique narratives, symbols, and rituals to express their relationships with the cosmos as well as with local landscapes.²⁵ These are what we would call religious cosmologies and religious ecologies. In Daoism and Confucianism religious cosmology celebrated the interpenetration of the microcosm of the self with the macrocosm of the universe that found expression in both intellectual thought and embodied practice. For example, the Celestial Masters School in Daoism perceived the body as an energetic network of breathings-in and breathings-out that expresses basic dialogical patterns of the cosmos.²⁶ In understanding this process, individuals open themselves to the inner meditative landscape that represents a path of organic unity with the cosmos. Similarly, in Confucianism humans cultivate themselves in relation to the cosmos, linking the virtue of humanness or love (*ren*) to the fecundity of the natural world (*sheng-sheng*). “*T’ ai chi* movements align the practitioner with the natural and celestial world. In Vedic Hinduism the

identity of an individual with the "great person" of the universe is evident in the *Mahapurusa* hymn. Also, Hindu yogic meditational practices can bring a practitioner into alignment with the sun, moon, stars, and elements.²⁷ All these are examples of religious cosmologies.

Ecological diversity is evident in the varied environmental contexts and bioregions where religions have developed over time. For example, Jerusalem and Israel are in a larger sacred bioregion where three religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have both shaped and been shaped by the environment. However, the formulation and expression of symbol, rituals, laws, and communal life within these religions in relation to urban, piedmont, hill country, and desert settings of the bioregion are historically quite different.²⁸ Among Indigenous peoples, interactions with the environment not only were a significant basis of their religious practices but were themselves highly differentiated. For example, the Kurok, Hoopa, and Yurok peoples of northern California recognized particular spiritual presences in sacred mountains, from the foothills to the summit, that determined where a person was sent for a vision quest.²⁹ These complex interactions illustrate that religions are not static in their impacts on the environment. Rather, throughout history they have interacted in myriad ways with natural settings. These are what can be called religious ecologies based on varied worldviews, ritual customs, and ethical practices.

Selected Perspectives on Nature in the World Religions

For the most part, the worldviews associated with the Western Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have created a dominantly human-focused morality. Because these worldviews are largely anthropocentric, nature is often viewed as being of secondary importance. This is reinforced by a strong sense of the transcendence of God above nature. On the other hand, there are rich resources for rethinking views of nature in the covenantal tradition of the Hebrew Bible,³⁰ in sacramental theology, in incarnational Christianity, and in the vice-regency (*khilafa Allah*) concept in Islam. The covenantal tradition draws on the legal agreements of biblical thought that are extended to all of creation.³¹ Sacramental theology in Christianity underscores the sacred dimension of material reality, especially for ritual purposes. Incarnational Christianity proposes that because God became flesh in the person of Christ, the entire natural order can be viewed as sacred.³² The concept in Islam of humans as vice-regents of Allah on Earth suggests that humans have particular privileges and responsibilities regarding creation.³³

In Hinduism, although there is a significant emphasis on performing one's *dharma*, or duty in the world, there is also a strong pull toward *moksha*, or liberation from the world of suffering, or *samsara*. To heal this kind of suffering and alienation through spiritual discipline and meditation, one turns away from the dynamic world of change (*prakriti*) to a timeless world of spirit (*purna*). Yet at the same time, there are numerous traditions in Hinduism that affirm particular rivers, mountains, or forests as sacred. Moreover, Hindu theology engages the world as a creative manifestation of the divine in the concept of *lila*, the creative play of the gods. This same tension between withdrawal from the world and affirmation of it is present in Buddhism. Certain Theravada schools of Buddhism emphasize withdrawing in meditation from the transient world of suffering (*samsara*) to seek release in *nirvana*. On the other hand, the Zen gardens in East Asia express the fullness of the Buddha-nature (*tathagatabhya*) in the natural world. In recent years, socially engaged Buddhism has been active in protecting the environment in both Asia and the United States.³⁴

The East Asian traditions of Confucianism and Daoism remain, in certain ways, some of the most life affirming in the spectrum of world religions.³⁵ The seamless interconnection between the divine, human, and natural worlds that characterizes these traditions has been described as an anthropocosmic worldview.³⁶ There is no emphasis on radical transcendence above the world, as there is in the Western tradition.³⁷ Rather, there is a religious cosmology of a continuity of being stressing the dynamic movements of nature through the seasons and the agricultural cycles. This organic cosmology is grounded in the philosophy of *ch'i* (material force), which provides a basis for appreciating the profound interconnection of matter and spirit. To be in harmony with nature and with other humans while being attentive to the movements of the *Dao* (Way) is the aim of personal cultivation in both Confucianism and Daoism.³⁸

However, it should be noted that these nature-affirming worldviews have not prevented environmental degradation (such as deforestation) in parts of East Asia in both the premodern and the modern periods. In the premodern period centralized governments sanctioned the exploitation of resources, often unaware of ecological limits. In the modern period this degradation is caused by the rapid rate of modernization, driven by population explosion, increased consumption, and the need for new energy sources. In both cases the disjunction between religious ideas about nature and the use of nature is evident. It is also important to note the undermining of Confucianism in the twentieth century, especially

its conscious destruction during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) under Mao Zedong (1893–1976).

In a similar vein, Indigenous peoples, while embracing religious cosmologies, have in some instances caused damage to local environments through such practices as swidden agriculture.³⁹ This kind of farming can be sustainable under traditional conditions with fewer people and with subsistence rather than market economies. In more recent times, this ecological degradation is often caused by pressure from neocolonial and multinational intrusions for extractive industry. It is also caused by changing patterns of human migration resulting from climate change. Nonetheless, most Indigenous peoples have religious ecologies in which environmental ethics are embedded in their worldviews. This is evident in the complex reciprocal obligations surrounding life taking and resource gathering that mark a community's relations with the local bioregion. The religious views often seamlessly interwoven into Indigenous lifeways involve respect for the sources of food, clothing, and shelter that nature provides.⁴⁰ Gratitude to the Creator and to the spiritual forces in creation is at the heart of most Indigenous traditions. The ritual calendars of many Indigenous peoples are carefully coordinated with seasonal events such as the sounds of returning birds, the blooming of certain plants, the migrations of animals and fish, and cosmological events such as the shift of the constellations and the changes of the moon.⁴¹

The Force of Religious Environmentalism

The perspectives of the world religions on nature have given rise to new movements of religious environmentalism that are now evident around the world. This illustrates that religions are flexible, able to change from within and to spark change from without. Religions are not simply static institutions with fossilized traditions, despite caricatures by antireligionists and others. They have inspired movements for social change, as the Quakers did in the nineteenth century with the abolitionist movement. In the nineteenth century Catholic social teachings addressed workers' rights, drawing on Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891). With regard to women's rights, Katherine Bushnell (1856–1946) and others challenged readings of the Bible that denigrated women. From the 1960s the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led the movement for civil rights for African Americans. Indigenous peoples have also marshaled their religious symbol systems to oppose colonial rule, such as the Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya and in the Cargo cults of Papua New Guinea. Moreover, the massive demonstrations against dam building have

been led by the Kayapo in Brazil and by the Mapuche in Chile. In each case, as the ethical issues became more evident, shifts in attitudes and behavior occurred.

This is the promise as religions enter their ecological phase, bringing to light the moral dimensions of the environmental crisis. In the last dozen years every major religious tradition has developed statements on the environment; eco-justice offices have been organized, and both clergy and lay people are becoming more active.⁴² In the Christian community, the World Council of Churches has been working on issues of "peace, justice, and the integrity of creation" for several decades.

Many of these Christian communities are also addressing climate change.⁴³ The Evangelical community has been speaking out on the adverse impact of climate change on the poor.⁴⁴ The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew organized a symposium in Greenland in 2009 to highlight the effects of melting glaciers. In 2001 the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a statement on global warming, titled *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*.⁴⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis I, Katharine Jefferts Schori, and other religious leaders have spoken about climate change as a critical moral issue.⁴⁶ The Interfaith Power and Light movement in the United States has sparked thousands of churches and synagogues to change their light bulbs, conduct energy audits, and reduce their carbon footprints.⁴⁷

Religious environmentalism is evident in the numerous statements and resistance movements of indigenous peoples around the world. This is apparent in the "Fraser River Declaration" and the "Calgary Statement of Solidarity" among First Nations peoples protesting the efforts of the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia in Canada to transport tar sands oil in pipelines across their territories. Similarly, the "Idle No More" movement that began in Canada "revolves around Indigenous Ways of knowing rooted in Indigenous Sovereignty to protect water, air, land and all creation for future generations."⁴⁸

What is striking is that scientists and policymakers are encouraging the involvement of religious communities in environmental issues. This began more than two decades ago with the *Joint Appeal on Religion and Science* in 1991 and the Union of Concerned Scientists' *Warning to Humanity* in 1992.⁴⁹ The first declares that "the cause of environmental integrity and justice must occupy a position of utmost priority for people of faith." It continues: "We pledge to take the initiative for interpreting and communicating the theological foundations for the stewardship of creation in which we find the principles for environmental action." The

latter announces, "A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated." This statement concludes with a call for moral response: "A new ethic is required—a new attitude toward discharging our responsibility for caring for ourselves and for the earth." More statements have ensued that seek to foster cooperation between science and religion in the service of the larger Earth community.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Religions can no longer be dismissed as irrelevant in environmental discussions, nor can they be seen as ineffective. More than 90 percent of the world's peoples have an affiliation with a religious community, whether nominally or in practice. There are billions of religious adherents around the world; indeed, there are more than a billion Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Confucians, respectively (see figure 1.2 for further detail). Religions are the largest nongovernment organizations in the world and have significant institutional resources, infrastructure, and financial assets. They claim allegiances that transcend differences of race, class, gender, and nationality. The United Nations Environment Programme has recognized this potential for decades and has been working with religious communities since 1987.⁵¹

But it is not only for pragmatic or instrumental reasons that religions are important players in environmental issues. There is moral force and spiritual energy at the heart of these traditions, which can contribute to long-term solutions to our complex environmental problems. For millennia religions have fostered worldviews, symbol systems, ethical teachings, and ritual practices in religious ecologies that have the potential to inspire human imagination and evoke human energy for life-enhancing transformation. Such inspiration and evocation are now being harnessed for environmental and social change; moreover, they hold the promise of long-lasting transformation.

As wellsprings of cultures and civilizations, religions have historical experience in articulating sacred-human relations, guiding human affairs, and orienting human-Earth interactions. Religions are repositories of knowledge about these three dimensions of human experience. In this work we focus on the third dimension, human-Earth interactions. In this respect, religions have functioned as religious ecologies that situate humans in the dynamic world of nature. Because of their evocation of symbolic consciousness, they have enduring influence in shaping cultural

values and attitudes toward nature and toward other humans. Religious ecologies are thus critical in the transition to a sustainable future at this juncture in the life of the planet.⁵² As many would agree, the transformation of attitudes and values is a missing link in creating ecologically concerned cultures at present and into the future. To understand this potential more fully, we will explore the nature of religious ecology. But first let us turn to the broader question: What is religion?