

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337150494>

Environmental Crisis as a Religious Issue: Assessing Some Relevant Works in the Field 1

Article · November 2019

CITATIONS

2

READS

1,232

1 author:



[Md Abu Sayem](#)

University of Dhaka

22 PUBLICATIONS 6 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A Comparative Study of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr [View project](#)



The Monotheistic Concept in Judaism and Islam: A Comparative Study [View project](#)

Environmental Crisis as a Religious Issue: Assessing Some Relevant Works in the Field¹

Md. Abu SAYEM

Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Abstract

Studies have shown that religions can play a vital role in mitigating the current environmental degradation. The present paper surveys the literature in the field and seeks to show how religiously based environmental teachings, moral guidance or ecotheological ethics are potential agents for environmental sustainability. It endeavors to relate the present environmental crisis with religious traditions so that faith communities can discern this problem more seriously as their own problem.

Keywords

Ecology, ecotheology, environmental ethics, faith communities, interfaith dialogue, stewardship

INTRODUCTION: RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Uncontrolled human activities have rapidly degraded our natural environment. Modern humans continue to exploit the natural world for their own comfort and benefit at the expense of the world as a whole.² In the present capitalistic-consumeristic world, humans are interested in short-term benefits rather than long-term benefits in terms of cost-benefit

1 This article is based on my ongoing Ph.D. dissertation project, "Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A Comparative Study of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr."

2 Arnold Toynbee, "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis: A Viewpoint," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 3, nos.1-4, (1972): 141-146.

Corresponding author

Md. Abu SAYEM: sayemwrcdu@gmail.com

analysis.³ Needless to say, if the environment is destroyed, can we continue with our comfortable lifestyle and economic affluence? Why can't we change our treatment of nature? Such human behavior cannot be reformed unless there is a deep feeling for nature. Ironically, modern science and technology are both the means of destroying the environment and the source of information on how to save it. But science and technology cannot provide the ethical or moral basis on which to save the environment. Some scientists have asked religious scholars and faith communities⁴ to retrieve or construct or reconstruct religious moral teachings in order to develop the inner consciousness needed for the sustainability of the environment. Secular scientists and scholars confess that without the cooperation of the world religions it is not possible to work for a sustainable environment. The environment has always been an issue for religions. Even religious beliefs and practices have a deep relationship with natural phenomena. No religion supports the destruction of the natural world; rather, all religions teach humans to treat the environment with respect.

Human supremacy over other creatures is recognized by religions in a very balanced way such that the natural world is not harmed by human activities, although many scholars, such as Lynn White,⁵ have criticized religions, especially Christianity, for its teaching on human supremacy as a reason for the current ecological crisis. It gives humans the license to exploit the natural environment for human interests. Some other scholars, such as Arnold Toynbee, blame monotheistic religions for eliminating the traditional veneration of the natural world, which was common practice in polytheistic and pantheistic religions.⁶ Both White and Toynbee prefer pantheism for environmental sustainability. White, however, wants to see a reformed Christianity based on St. Francis's ecological view. Contrary to White, Toynbee seems uncompromising toward the monotheistic religions.

3 Stephen B Scharper, *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

4 Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?) (Fall 2001): 9-10; See also Mary Evelyn Tucker, "The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 1 (1997): 13.

5 Lynn Townsend White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-1207.

6 Toynbee, "Religious": 141-146.

Instead, he proposes that monotheism should be replaced by pantheism for the sake of environmental preservation. Both scholars are criticized for their superficial treatment of religions on the environmental issue.⁷ In their works, neither White nor Toynbee has made any attempt to articulate the religious concept of stewardship. Consequently, their judgment about monotheistic religions seems one-sided and inadequate. Perhaps their questions might be answered in what they have overlooked in respect to religious stewardship. Apart from White and Toynbee, ecofeminist theologians such as Sally McFague⁸ have also criticized traditional Christian faith for its anthropocentric and hierarchical position. Secular environmental ethicists and activists have also voiced similar criticisms.

In response to such criticisms, religious scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr,⁹ John B. Cobb,¹⁰ the late Pope John Paul II,¹¹ and the current Pope

-
- 7 See Lewis W. Moncrief, "The Cultural Basis for Our Environmental Crisis," *Science* 170, no. 3957 (October 30, 1970): 508-512; Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 1; Kyle S. Van Houtan and Stuart L. Pimm, "The Various Christian Ethics of Species Conservation," in *Religion and the New Ecology: Environmental Responsibility in a World of Flux*, ed. David M. Lodge and Christopher Hamlin (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2006), 131-132.
- 8 See Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1975); Sallie McFague, *Modes of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).
- 9 See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man, and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1968); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 10 See John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (Texas: Environmental Ethics Book, 1972); John B. Cobb, Jr., and Charles Birch, *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Texas: Environmental Ethics Book, 1982); John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice* (Wipf and Stock, 2007); John B. Cobb, Jr., *Spiritual Bankruptcy: A Prophetic Call to Action* (Abingdon Press, 2010); Herman E. Daly, John B. Cobb, Jr., and Clifford W. Cobb, *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989/1994).
- 11 Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," *Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace 1 January 1990*

Francis,¹² among others, are trying to present religion as an influential and supportive agent and power to work for environmental sustainability. Their common response to the critics is that religions did not generate an anthropocentric view of nature; rather, it was created by European renaissance humanism and secular ideology and further strengthened by modern science and technology. Religions present a theocentric rather than anthropocentric view. In the theocentric view, humans and other creatures are seen equally as agents of God to play a specific role assigned by God himself. In this sense, humans are fellow creatures alongside nonhuman creatures of the same God. God is the center for all. But there is a certain hierarchy approved by God: humans are granted some privileges over other creatures, but this does not give humans the right to devalue and exploit the world. Religions should not be blamed for an attitude that they did not create.

From the outset of the environmental movement religious scholars, leaders, and representatives of faith-based communities have been involved in many ways,¹³ all of which bring religion into dialogue with environmental issues. Their works are very significant in regard to ecological ethics, and they should be reread and reassessed by both secular and religious environmental scholars. The present article aims to assess some of these recent works in order to justify why a rereading of some important works is crucial for the discussions at hand.

(Vatican City; Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1989).

12 Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter "Laudato Si" of the Holy Father Francis* (Vatican City, 2015), available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

13 For example, Daniel Maguire, Thomas Berry, Lynn White, Hans Küng, Tu Weiming, Eugene Hargrove, Charlene Spretnak, Steven Rockefeller, John Elder, Peter Marshal, J. Baird Collicott, David Kinsley, Roger S. Gottlieb, Harold Coward, Willis J. Jenkins, Jame Schaefer, Richard C. Foltz, Stephanie Kaza, Kenneth Kraft, David E. Cooper, Pragati Sahni, Simon P. James, Vandana Shiva, Ramachandra Guha, Emms Tomalin, Christopher Key Chapple, Jacobsend Lidke, Cornell, David Frawley, Georg Feuerstein, Brenda Feuerstein, Llewellyn Voughan-Lee, J.L. Gutt, John B. Cobb Jr., Ibrahim Ozdemir, Fazlun Khalid, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr are well known among others in researching on environment issue from faith perspectives.

RELIGIONS AS PROMOTER OF A PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL STANCE

Aimee Hope and Christopher Jones have argued that religions can be instrumental in promoting an environmentally conscious ethic by reducing consumerism and creating a balanced relationship between humankind and nature.¹⁴ Their study demonstrates the necessity of interfaith dialogue and the role of religions in forming a positive attitude toward nature and the environment.¹⁵ In their report, Muslim-Christian participants believe that they have religious obligations of stewardship to the natural world and are therefore obliged to treat creatures responsibly; otherwise, they will be accountable to God.¹⁶ The study shows that religious participants refer to nature as the creation of God, and thus it is a moral and religious duty to act as guardian for the environment. On the other hand, secular participants consider nature in the process of evolution, and thus they maintain that humans have a responsibility to coexist peacefully with other species.¹⁷ This case study states that cooperation between religions and secular institutions is necessary for creating a sustainable environment.

But the question arises: How is the cooperation between religions and secularism possible when these two ideologies are in opposition to each another? Hope and Jones do not answer this question. However, their study is partially supported by Jenkins and Chapple¹⁸ and Lai Pan-Chiu,¹⁹ who argue for the need for cooperation. Jenkins and Chapple contend that without a clear understanding of the religious dimensions in integrating ecology and society, it is not possible to properly recognize the in-depth interaction between humans and the environmental system.²⁰ In their view,

14 Aimee L.B. Hope and Christopher R. Jones, "The Impact of Religious Faith on Attitudes to Environmental Issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) Technologies: A Mixed Methods Study", *Technology in Society* 38 (2014): 57.

15 Hope and Jones, "The Impact": 57.

16 Hope and Jones, "The Impact": 57.

17 Hope and Jones, "The Impact": 58.

18 Willis J. Jenkins and C. K. Chapple, "Religion and Environment," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 36 (2011):441-463.

19 Lai Pan-Chiu, "Interreligious Dialogue and Social Justice: Cobb's Wesleyan Process Theology in East Asian Perspective," *Asia Journal of Theology* 25, no.1 (April 2011): 82-102.

20 Jenkins and Chapple, "Religion": 441-463.

humans need a proper understanding of the equilibrium between humans and the environment. Lai, in his works on environmental ethics, argues for diversified and contextual ecological ethics. He maintains that religions are diverse and different in their own ways; thus religious institutes and scholars should think through and work out their own ecological ethics.²¹

RELIGIONS AS PARTNER OF ECOLOGICAL INITIATIVES AND MOVEMENTS

Tucker and Grim have surveyed some recent initiatives between religions and ecological movements.²² They present religions as shapers of ancient cultures and potential resources for the present discourses on environmental conservation. In their view, the religious concept of stewardship can serve as an ethical foundation of managing the earth. They propose the planetary environment as a common ground for all religions to hold interfaith dialogue.²³ They note, as promoters of such initiatives, Donald Brown and McElroy, who state that the moral teachings of the world religions are crucial for persuading humans to restrain from harmful actions in the environment.²⁴ Both Tucker and Grim appreciate J. Baird Callicott's proposal to incorporate the diverse ethical foundations of different religions into environmental ethics.²⁵ In their view, therefore, religions can contribute significantly to the present environmental movement.

As the current environmental problem is so vast, it cannot be solved by any single effort; rather, it requires multidisciplinary approaches and action plans in which religions can play a significant role. This truth is reflected in some international organizations that deal with environmental problems. Tucker and Grim mention a statement released by scientists from a Global Forum held in Moscow in 1990 that requests religious leaders to

21 Lai Pan-Chiu, "God of Life and Ecological Theology: A Chinese Christian Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 65, no.1 ((2013): 67; Pan-Chiu Lai, "Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental Ethics," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 21, no.1 (2011): 5-7.

22 Tucker and Grim, "Introduction," 1-22.

23 Tucker and Grim, "Introduction," 21-22.

24 Tucker and Grim, "Introduction," 2.

25 Tucker and Grim, "Introduction," 2.

work with scientists for the cause of environmental sustainability.²⁶ In this statement, scientists declared uncontrolled human actions to be “crimes against creation.”²⁷ Two years after this conference, another statement, signed by two thousand scientists and issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists, called for immediate action to protect the environment. In this letter, scientists also asked faith communities to focus on their religious perception of nature and to highlight moral teachings that generate sympathetic attitudes toward nature.

Tucker and Grim note that religious leaders have been working on environmental issues since 1972 with the initiatives taken by United Nations and faith communities.²⁸ Initially, they were slow to respond, but later they responded swiftly. Religious leaders took part in the first environmental conference in 1972 in Stockholm organized by the United Nations. In 1975, the World Council of Churches (WCC) convened a conference in Nairobi to discuss environmental issues from a faith perspective. The Nairobi conference was followed by others: at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1979, the Vancouver Assembly in 1983, and in Canberra in 1991. Religious leaders attended the UN’s Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and called for their respective religious communities to be concerned about ecological justice and to work with others for the same purpose. Several interfaith meetings have also been organized on the same issue. Perhaps the first meeting of this kind was convened in Assisi in 1984, and another interreligious gathering took place in Vatican City in 1986. Interfaith meeting is a good way of discussing the different religious foundations of environmental ethics. With this view, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) has such a sub-branch known as the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment (IPE). The Parliament of World Religions, held in 1993 and 1999, issued major statements by the world religions on the ecological crisis and called for a global approach to address the issue from a religious perspective. The Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders (GFSPL) arranged some international meetings in Oxford in 1988, Moscow in 1990, Rio in 1992, and Kyoto in 1993, and discussed how to minimize ecological problems. An international organization called the

26 Tucker and Grim, “Introduction,” 9.

27 Tucker and Grim, “Introduction,” 9.

28 Tucker and Grim, “Introduction,” 11-19.

Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC) has been working since 1995 by embracing religions and science. As an academic discipline, religions are becoming more involved with ecological issues. For instance, Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of Religions has published a three-year (1996 to 1998) conference series, "Religions of the World and Ecology," in *Daedalus*, which eventually produced a series of edited volumes on ecology from the perspectives of different religions (for instance, *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*; *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*; *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*; *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*; *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*; *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*; *Islam and Ecology*; and *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*). Since 1998 the Forum on Religion and Ecology has done similar work by organizing seminars, rallies, and workshops.

Faith-based communities are engaging themselves with the present discourses on environmental ethics and the earth charter to protect the planetary environment. An international professional organization, the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (ISSRNC), came into being in 2005 under the leadership of Bron Taylor. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) was a direct result of the WWF's initiatives. Among religious leaders and scholars, the Dalai Lama, Rabbi Ishmar, Archbishop Bartholomew, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, John B. Cobb, the late Pope John Paul II, and the present Pope Francis are credited with religious initiatives for environmental sustainability. All these faith leaders and scholars urge world leaders to take steps necessary for reducing ecological problems. Their voices are also echoed in former UN secretary general Kofi Annan's call for a new ethics of planetary stewardship and Ban Ki Moon's agenda for "The Road to Dignity by 2030."

All these events reveal that religions have been making significant contributions in association with mainstream organizations. But problems lie in the attitude of those who are secular-minded who fail to understand religions from inside. Their misunderstanding of religions has been an obstacle to the potential of religious and secular organizations working together. Similarly, faith communities need to become more open to

working with people who are not like them. If there is a compromise between both groups, it may be possible for future collaboration.

ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN MULTIRELIGIOUS TO INTERRELIGIOUS APPROACHES

As seen earlier, since 1986 scholars of world religions have been working collectively to address environmental issues from their own religious perspectives.²⁹ The Assisi conference actually worked for an international platform of religious dialogue on the ecological crisis. Religious scholars got an opportunity to hear from scientists and environmentalists about the human-caused loss of ecological equilibrium. On the other hand, scientists and environmentalists also heard religious views of nature. Religious leaders from Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism participated in discussions and shared their religious knowledge on environmental ethics.³⁰ Ten years after the Assisi conference, a follow-up conference of religious dialogue was held at Windsor Castle in England in 1995. This time some statements from Bahai, Jainism, Sikhism, and Daoism were included. In the same year another meeting on religious dialogue was organized in Ohito, Japan, at which the participants of Shintoism and Zoroastrianism delivered the statements from their respective religious traditions. In 2011 the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs organized an “Interfaith Dialogue on a Shared Response to the Environmental Crisis” in cooperation with the United States Embassy to the Holy See and the World Faiths Development Dialogue. All these conferences, activities, and research works emphasize religious initiatives to create awareness of ecological equilibrium through a religious understanding of nature. However, if we consider 1986 as the starting point for work on environmental issues from multireligious and interreligious perspectives, we will find many scholarly works in such interrelated fields. The following discussions will survey some selected works in this field.

Eugene C. Hargrove’s edited volume *Religion and Environmental Crisis* (1986) connects religious traditions’ ecological teachings with the goals

29 Leslie Sponsel, “Lynn White Jr., One Catalyst in the Historical Development of Spiritual Ecology,” in *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The “Lynn White Thesis” at Fifty*, ed. Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 95-96.

30 Sponsel, “Lynn White,” 95-96.

of environmental ethics. This volume is a collection of eleven papers presented at a colloquium held at the University of Denver. The central thesis of this collection is that religious worldviews can contribute to the formation of environmental ethics.³¹ The contributors consider their own religious communities as environmentally friendly according to the moral teachings of their respective religious traditions. Though most of the contributions deal with the Jewish and Christian traditions, others discuss Eastern religious traditions and native religious cultures. In most cases, contributors question White's (1967) thesis; but some regard White's accusation as partially true. Hargrove's volume is a useful resource in evaluating the significant role of religions in environmental ethics. As he argues in his editorial note, while the philosophical task is analytical, religions promote revised perceptions.³² But other scholars have doubts about its implementation.³³

Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental philosophy (1989), edited by J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, is a philosophical analysis of major Asian religious and cultural traditions dealing with the relations between humans and the natural world. This anthology covers four worldviews: Chinese, Japanese, Buddhist, and Indian. The editors and contributors highlight the importance that these Asian traditions place on a harmonious relationship with nature. As modern Western societies miss this pivotal point of relationship, they suggest transplanting Asian views of nature into the Western world.³⁴ In their editorial note, Callicott and Ames expect that humans can reduce their destructive behavior toward nature by awareness of their place in the environment. Saito sees *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought* as a successful rebuttal to White's thesis because this work is one of a few works on Asian wisdom traditions that seek to rebuild the human-nature relationship.³⁵ Some may raise the question: If the claims

31 Eugene C. Hargrove, ed., *Religion and Environmental Ethics* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), xii.

32 Hargrove, "Religion," xiii.

33 Harry Yeide, Jr., Review of *Religion and Environmental Ethics*, ed. Eugene C. Hargrove, *Environmental Review* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 240-242.

34 J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, eds., *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989).

35 Yuriko Satio, review of *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, *Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no.1

of *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought* are correct, why are some of the most polluted countries and cities found in Asia? In response, the authors argue that Asian countries are now facing a global environmental problem due to the intellectual colonialization of Asia by the Western world. Despite their advocacy for the Eastern religious and cultural traditions, it seems impractical and not feasible to transplant the Eastern approaches into Western societies. Rather, they should focus on how Eastern religious and cultural traditions can help Western religious and cultural traditions to reform their approaches in favor of the humanity-nature relationship.

Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge and International Response (1990), edited by J. Ronald Engel and Joan Gibb Engel, suggests adopting ethics and religious moral teachings in environmental policies. This book is a collection of papers presented at a workshop in 1986 by participants from different religious and scientific affiliations. The contributors deal with diverse approaches to environmental ethics. Most contributors show how their respective religious traditions support an environmental ethics. Others deal with a humanistic philosophical approach to environmental problems. By focusing on the environment as a global issue, *Ethics of Environment and Development* calls for a meaningful dialogue among people of different religious traditions and secular institutions to mitigate the earth's degradation.³⁶ It is a thought-provoking attempt to present a complementary vision for a "new holistic ethic."

Charlene Spretnak's *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (1991) connects the wisdom of the past with modern scientific knowledge in terms of ecological sustainability.³⁷ In her work, Spretnak discusses Buddhism, goddess worship, Native American spirituality, and the Abrahamic faith traditions in order to retrieve cosmological foundations for a creative transformation among followers of these religious and cultural traditions. She emphasizes a consciousness of unity among all religious and cultural traditions. For this reason, she proposes cross-cultural spiritual guidelines and frameworks to illuminate the present state of understanding in regard to the humanity-nature

(February 1990): 98-99.

36 J. Ronald Engel and John Gibb Engel, *Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge and International Response* (London: Belhaven Press, 1990).

37 Charlene Spretnak, *State of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

relationship. *States of Grace* adopts a particular method: connectedness and transformation. In Spretnak's view, humans should be connected first through revitalizing the "wisdom traditions"; then their attitudes toward the natural world would be transformed to a positive and sympathetic view of the environment. She suggests transformation from the local to the global level, but she argues that any transformation should begin by taking a personal step. In *States of Grace*, Spretnak advocates "green politics" for substantial reformation in policy-making decisions to favor environmental sustainability. She also suggests decentralizing economic power so that any economic pressure can gradually be reduced by adjusting to the local environment and ecosystem. Spretnak is optimistic about an "ecological postmodernism."

Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue—An Interfaith Dialogue (1992), edited by Stephen Rockefeller and John Elder, states that the environmental crisis is a moral, religious and spiritual problem.³⁸ This work is a collection of papers presented at a 1990 Middlebury College symposium on "Spirit and Nature: Religion, Ethics, and Environmental Crisis." Principal speakers were from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Native American, and the liberal democratic tradition. Connecting the present environmental issues with their respective religious traditions and social commitments, all participants advocate the restoration of the relationship between humankind and the natural environment. By considering the environmental crisis as their respective religious or moral responsibility, the speakers propose interfaith dialogue on environmental problems. Their common goal implies that interfaith dialogue on environmental issues is necessary to revitalize the feeling and deep love for nature. In their editorial note, Rockefeller and Elder argue that the environmental crisis cannot be addressed without a clear understanding of humanity's spiritual crisis, and the spiritual transformation of humanity cannot be achieved without establishing a deep relationship between humanity and nature. World religious traditions are needed to rebuild this relationship between nature and humanity. In their view, it is possible to maintain faith and life together. Their claim, however, is criticized by Steven Bouma-Prediger, who argues that not all religious beliefs and practices are supportive of all

38 Stephen C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, eds., *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 14.

living forms.³⁹ Both Rockefeller and Elder are also somewhat critical of the roles of some institutional religions. Referring to some historical evidence, they recognize that present environmental values were shaped by the belief systems of organized religious and cultural traditions. The central focus of *Spirit and Nature* is to identify religions as a positive agent for environmental sustainability. For Rockefeller and Elder, although religious imperatives are in favor of environmental preservation, these may also create problems for the environment if they are not directed toward building the humanity-nature relationship. This task is, in their view, a great challenge for theologians and religious scholars. Michael Branch appraises *Spirit and Nature* as representing “a new cultural ethos of ecological sustainability and intergenerational responsibility,”⁴⁰ but he, too, is critical of its vision due to some religious views that are not environmentally friendly. It may be difficult but not impossible to utilize religious or theological cosmologies for ecological justice. Undoubtedly, *Spirit and Nature* connects scientific understanding of life-affirming values with religious virtues through an interfaith discussion on ecology.

Peter Marshall’s *Nature’s Web: Rethinking Our Place on Earth* (1994) examines contemporary ecological discussions. Marshall, who is critical of the previous studies, searches for alternative approaches in the Eastern religious and cultural traditions in order to mitigate the present environmental problem.⁴¹ His *Nature’s Web* also focuses on ancient religious beliefs found in Egypt, Greece, Babylon, and other places to emphasize the humanity-nature relationship. Steven Simpson criticizes Marshall for not explicitly interpreting any specific religious view of nature.⁴² Simpson argues that *Nature’s Web* covers a general orientation of some Eastern religious traditions, including the Greek and Egyptian, but he fails to tease out the insights from religious philosophy in dealing with the current

39 Steven Bouma-Prediger, review of *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Stephen C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, *Journal of Religion* 73, no. 2 (April 1993): 278.

40 Michael Branch, review of *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Stephen C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, *Environmental Historical Review* 12, no.2 (Summer 1993): 90.

41 Peter H. Marshall, *Nature’s Web: Rethinking Our Place on Earth* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

42 Steven Simpson, review of Peter H. Marshall, *Nature’s Web: Rethinking Our Place on Earth*, *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996): 106-108.

ecological issue. Marshall promotes a unified theory of environmentalism, but it seems impossible to implement in light of the differing religious worldviews. It might be better to consider contextual and community-based approaches to the environment, something that Marshall overlooks.

J. Baird Callicott's *Earth's Insights* (1994) brings out the moral guidelines of the world religious traditions for a comprehensive ecological ethics.⁴³ In Callicott's view, the ecological teachings of traditional or spiritual worldviews should be included in the current discussions of environmental ethics. *Earth's Insights* examines the intellectual resources of the sacred texts of Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Similarly, he also explores the oral traditions of Polynesia, North and South America, and Australia in order to search their understanding of the environment. *Earth's Insights* also shows how people of various cultures and traditions respond to the environmental crisis in their own ways, and how they put their ecological ethics into practice. By so doing, Callicott attempts to bring diverse environmental views to complement the current discussions of environmental ethics. Callicott proposes the postmodern scientific worldview on the basis of the scientific theory of relativity and ecology. He expects that a postmodern scientific approach can reduce the destructive activities of the mechanistic worldview. *Earth's Insights* predicts a paradigm shift toward ecological equilibrium. He argues that a postmodern scientific worldview will push humans to regard themselves as a part of nature or fellow creatures with others. It transforms the cocreatorship of the mechanistic scientific worldview to the cocreatureship of the postmodern scientific worldview. Callicott promotes a "global environmental ethics," although teachings found in various traditions of the world may differ. To justify his unified environmental ethics, he draws an analogy from humankind, which is unified as a species and yet diverse in its cultures.⁴⁴ His ethical understanding is also related to human relationship; thus, if materialistic and mechanistic worldviews are replaced by a postmodern scientific worldview, ethical guidelines should logically be formed in a unified way.

43 J. Baird Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

44 Callicott, *Earth's Insights*, 5.

Harold Coward's edited volume *Population, Consumption, and the Environment: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (1995) attempts to explore how the major world religious traditions view overpopulation and its consumption on the environment, and how faith traditions and secular institutes can work for a possible solution to this environmental problem.⁴⁵ Coward traces some practical teachings from aboriginal spirituality, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religions. As for secular ethical attitudes toward the natural world, he includes secular state policies, North-South relations, market force, status of women, and international law. The volume identifies the compatibility and inconsistency between religious and secular responses to worldwide environmental problems. In one reviewer's assessment, the contributors cannot identify a reciprocal relationship between faith traditions and secular philosophies, and Coward's conclusion also lacks the expectation of the conference's objectives.⁴⁶ The work identifies some cultural resources to shape a future of an environmentally friendly world. Contributors and the editor should be appreciated for identifying environmental crisis as a moral issue.

David Kinsley's *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in a Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1995) examines the religious dimension of the environment in connection with contemporary environmentalism.⁴⁷ Kinsley adopts a holistic view of life. Kinsley's ecological spirituality refers to the interconnectedness of biological lives and processes. Humans are an inevitable part of this natural system; they are only part of it, not master of it. The author reiterates humanity's complete dependency on all other living forms. Referring to Hinduism, he argues that such a realization requires deep contemplation using religion as a guide; otherwise, it is difficult to have such a sense of belongingness. Knut Jacobsen, however, criticizes Kinsley for not focusing on the contribution of religions to the environmental problem.⁴⁸ In Jacobsen's view, *Ecology and Religion* overlooks

45 Harold Coward, *Population, Consumption, and the Environment: Religious and Secular Responses* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

46 Iain Wallace, review of *Population, Consumption, and the Environment: Religious and Secular Responses*, ed. Harold Coward, *Canadian Geographer* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 389.

47 David Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in a Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995).

48 Knut A. Jacobsen, review of David Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality*

religious views of human supremacy over nonhuman creatures. However, Kinsley's work illuminates some human spiritual attitudes toward the nonhuman world in a way that can work for reforming the current human perception in favour of ecological sustainability.

Roger S. Gottlieb's *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (2004) points out the complex relationship between religion and the environment. Gottlieb examines the variety of spiritual responses from traditional world religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism to new forms of ecology-based spiritual movements—for example, deep ecology and ecofeminism. Gottlieb emphasizes a common platform shared by religionists and secular humanists for working together on a very common concern.⁴⁹ He sees “caring for nature” in religious moral teachings. His work is thought-provoking and ecumenical in the field of religion and ecology.

Environmental Ethics: Intercultural Perspectives (2009), edited by Ip King-Tak, gives an account of environmental ethics from different religious and cultural perspectives.⁵⁰ The volume comprises a collection of papers presented at a conference on “Environmental Ethics: An Interreligious Dialogue” held at Hong Kong Baptist University in 2005. In nine chapters the book deals with environmental ethics from Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Daoist perspectives as well as from a philosophical point of view. Robert Elliot discusses deontological theories to promote the intrinsic value of nature, arguing that a sense of profound dutifulness to the nonhuman can reduce human destructive attitudes toward nature. Gerhold Becker's primary focus is the ethics of respect for nature because nature has a moral status to be respected by humans. Ingmar Persson connects environmental ethics with consequentialist and aesthetical approaches. Y.S. Lo talks about non-egocentric and non-anthropocentric values and virtues in order to tighten environmental ethics. Relating biogeochemistry with Christian environmental ethics, Michael Northcott proposes respect for God and his creation as the foundation of environmental ethics. From an Islamic

in *Cross-Cultural Perspective*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 907-909.

49 Roger S. Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

50 Ip King-Tak, *Environmental Ethics: Intercultural Perspective* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009): 9.

point of view, Anis Ahmad emphasizes a balanced and simple lifestyle as an essential condition for a sustainable environment. Having focused on the cleanliness of the human mind, Pragati Sahni advocates a more progressive shape for Buddhist environmental ethics. Referring to the naturalness of Daoism, Jonathan Chan connects the Daoist humanity-nature relationship with environmental ethics. In his editorial note, Ip explores the present environmental problem as a burning issue on whose solution the survival of humankind is completely dependent.

In an article for the *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* entitled "Interreligious Dialogue toward Overcoming the Eco-crisis," Choi Hyun Min supports Hans Küng's Global Ethic project to address environmental problems through interfaith dialogue. In line with Hermann Dembowski and J.B. Callicott, Choi sees the present ecological issue as a crisis of perception about the environment;⁵¹ thus he emphasizes reforming these perceptions. After a brief survey of Lynn White's analysis of the Judeo-Christian position, J.A. Passmore's Greco-Christian tradition as the root of ecological crisis, and M. Northcott's identification of the agricultural revolution, market-based economic systems, and modern science and technology as contributing causes to environmental degradation, Choi locates the cause of the problem in anthropocentrism and the humanity-nature dualism. As human perception plays a pivotal role in the ecological crisis, there is an urgent need to change the present perception about nature. Choi examines the ecocentric view of nature in Aldo Leopold's land ethics and Arne Naess's deep ecology. He also criticizes ecocentric ethics for assessing the human position merely as an element of the environment and preferring a metaphysical ground to an ethical understanding to complement self-realization with intimacy with nature. However, he relates an ecocentric understanding with the Buddhist notion of no-self and Buddha-nature. Identifying some deficiencies in the Buddhist position for environmental ethics, Choi supports Bryan Norton's weak anthropocentrism, arguing that it will not be an obstacle to build a harmonious relationship with nature. Referring to Christian stewardship ethics as a responsibility that goes with being human, and the image of God as a public personality, Choi associates humans with the God-earth

51 Choi Hyun Min, "Interreligious Dialogue toward Overcoming the Eco-crisis," *International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture* 12 (February 2009): 160.

relationship. Choi's analysis promotes dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity.

An article by Elyse Rider, "Intercultural Eco-theology: Integral Vision of Healing" supports multireligious and multicultural dialogues on the ecological crisis.⁵² Referring to Tucker, Rider notes that no single religious or cultural tradition is sufficient to present a comprehensive global environmental ethics.⁵³ So, Rider argues that it would be unwise to work in isolation. It is timely and urgent to continue cooperation among academic scholars, religious leaders, community leaders, practitioners of different cultures, public agencies, members of civil societies, and so forth, in order to reduce the current environmental degradation. Noting Callicott's argument, Rider suggests that a dialogue can foster a more practical knowledge among participants to address the issue being faced by the whole world. Diversity in religions and cultures should be accepted first as a central feature of ecotheological discussions for proceeding further to environmental ethics.

An Amman-based initiative led by the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (RABIIT) conducted an interfaith dialogue among scholars of Islam and Christianity on the ecological crisis and published a booklet in 2011 entitled *Islam, Christianity and the Environment*, which explores the environmental problem from Islamic and Christian perspectives. This work is an outcome of the symposium on "Islam, Christianity and the Environment" held in September 2010 at the Baptism Site in Jordan. The symposium brought four scholars—two from Islam and other two from Christianity—to discuss how both religious traditions can contribute to the present discussions on environmental sustainability. Islamic scholar Ingrid Mattson emphasizes "the spiritual and ethical potential of Muslim people to respond to the environmental challenge."⁵⁴ As for controlling the present state of consumption, she suggests manufacturers should bear the cost of the environmental damage created by the way they produce and

52 Elyse Rider, "Intercultural Eco-theology: Integral Vision of Healing," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 15, no. 1 (2010): 11.

53 Rider, "Intercultural Eco-theology": 1.

54 Ingrid Mattson, "The Islamic View on Consumption & Material Development in Light of Environmental Pollution," in *Islam, Christianity and the Environment* (Amman: Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011), 17.

dispose of their goods.⁵⁵ Referring to some Quranic verses, another Islamic scholar, Murad Wilfried Hofman, focuses on the human relationship with animals.⁵⁶ Christian scholar Martin Arneth identifies the role of humans on earth as a shepherd over God's creatures.⁵⁷ Connecting God's creatures with salvation history, another Christian scholar, Dietmar Mieth, suggests adopting a self-limiting strategy both at the individual and the social level in order to promote respect for all forms of life.⁵⁸ Mieth relates the biblical creation story to the dynamic metaphysics of process theology to highlight the interconnectedness among God, humanity, and nature. In Mieth's view, "a creative self-realization of the human being" is essential for adopting as an environmentally friendly stance.⁵⁹ Noting the joint statement of the Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto 2008 in the appendix, the RABIIT booklet considers climate change as a spiritual question, and so calls for a collective effort of religious communities to protect the environment.

In his recent work "Ecological Theology as Public Theology: A Chinese Perspective," Lai considers ecological theology as public theology. He argues that ecological issues are public issues and are also covered by those theologians who have already dealt with some other public issues.⁶⁰ Agreeing with White's criticism to some extent, Lai also sees Christianity as a part of the historical root of ecological crisis.⁶¹ That is why he suggests adopting an apologetic approach to clarify some misunderstandings.⁶² Similarly, he invites us to consider a secular approach to ecotheological

55 Mattson, "The Islamic," 12.

56 Murad Wilfried Hofman, "The Protection of Animals in Islam," in *Islam, Christianity and the Environment* (Amman: Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011), 19-24.

57 Martin Arneth, "Basic Demands Established in the Christian Bible to Assume Responsibility for the World," in *Islam, Christianity and the Environment* (Amman: Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011), 25-38.

58 Dietmar Mieth, "Christian Conceptions of Creation, Environmental Ethics, and the Ecological Challenge Today," in *Islam, Christianity and the Environment* (Amman: Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2011), 39-86.

59 Mieth, "Christian," 82.

60 Lai Pan-Chiu, "Ecological Theology as Public Theology: A Chinese Perspective," *International Journal of Public Theology* 11 (2017): 478.

61 Lai, "Ecological": 488.

62 Lai, "Ecological": 488.

discourse.⁶³ Lai has been involved in the study of interfaith dialogue on ecological concerns for more than two decades. He is, therefore, quite familiar with different methodological approaches: exploratory, reflective, correlational, dialogical or integrating, pluralistic, and contextual approaches.⁶⁴ He appreciates the contextual approach and criticizes the monistic or universal approach to environmental ethics. Lai suggests integrating Christian ecotheology with Confucian moral teachings on nature.⁶⁵ He prefers to adopt the reconciliation method in dealing with environmental ethics based on interfaith dialogue and promotes a more cosmic and inclusive understanding of salvation. Like Tillich, Moltmann, and Cobb, Lai reinterprets the biblical creation story in an inclusive way and includes all creatures in the cosmic salvation process. Thus, he advocates the transformation of God's love of nature into humanity's love of nature. His approach to ecological ethics is well recognized and highly appreciated by other scholars. For instance, Sun Xiangchen, in his article "A New Approach to Ecological Theology in the Frame of Confucian-Christian Dialogue: On Confucian-Christian Dialogue and Ecological Concern," describes Lai's methodological approach "as an innovative contribution" to the discourse of ecotheological ethics.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY OF COOPERATION

The preceding survey shows that religions are deeply involved in environmental issues. As the environmental problem is so vast, it is wise to see how religious moral teachings and faith communities can cooperate with others to address it. We see such approach in the work of Hope and Jones. Through their case studies, they have shown how religions can promote environmentally conscious living. They have shown that every religion has its own specific ethical foundation through which it is possible to develop inner consciousness about human responsibility in the world. All

63 Lai, "Ecological": 488.

64 Lai, "Ecological": 492-494.

65 Lai, "Ecological": 495.

66 Xiangchen Sun, "A New Approach to Ecological Theology in the Frame of Confucian-Christian Dialogue: On Confucian-Christian Dialogue and Ecological Concern," *Ching Feng (New Series)* 10, nos.1-2 (2010-2011): 179-188.

religions call for protection of the environment. Even the moral teachings of ancient religions, local faith traditions, and traditional wisdom can affect human attitudes in favor of ecological equilibrium. Religion may not have the power directly to enforce its moral teachings in society, but it can influence the human mind to act appropriately.

Faith leaders and communities, therefore, should be included in any national and international bodies concerned with ecological issues. In this regard, the work of Tucker and Grim deserves special mention. They show how religions are involved in the worldwide ecological movements initiated by the United Nations and other international bodies. In their view, radical change in public policy and individual behavior is needed since religions have a crucial role to play. They have shown that religious teachings can influence personal behavior to change a society. No one can deny that the world religions can play and are playing a positive role in inculcating a sympathetic attitude to the natural world.

As the environmental crisis poses a challenge to religion, faith communities are responding to this challenge by articulating the religious foundations of environmental ethics. Admittedly, the contributions of religion to address the ecological crisis may not be sufficient in proportion to the seriousness of the crisis. Religions alone cannot provide all the solutions; nonreligious or secular institutions alone cannot solve these problems. Collaboration and combined efforts are needed. Without a concerted response, we cannot properly address the current unprecedented ecological crisis.

About author

Md. Abu SAYEM is a PhD candidate in Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong; Ernst Mach-Fellow (as a Visiting PhD Student) in Religious Studies at the University of Vienna; and Faculty Member of World Religions & Culture Department at the University of Dhaka.