

## INTRODUCTION: RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE OBSERVATIONS OF RELIGION AND ECOLOGY

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### **Origin Stories: How Did This Work Arise?**

**I**n the early 1990s, when we first began to think of what we as historians of religions might contribute to our environmental challenges, it was becoming clear that the spiritual depth and moral force of religions could facilitate lasting changes. As students of Indigenous religions (John) and East Asian religions (Mary Evelyn) we saw great potential in these traditions for understanding and promoting broadened ecological sensibilities. We were not scientists or policy experts, lawyers or economists who were already working on environmental problems and shaping environmental studies departments. We knew that raising the question of environmental roles of religions in these departments would be difficult, but we did not realize the full dimensions of this challenge.

Now, some thirty years later, we can see that secular academia was quite skeptical of allowing religions into discussions on the environment. Nor could environmental scientists and policy makers acknowledge that religions might effectively contribute to values and behavioral change necessary to shifting our destructive behavior toward ecosystems. It is only now, as environmental crises proliferate, that this possibility is being recognized. Our work at Bucknell, Harvard, Berkeley, Princeton, and Yale was challenging due to the rigorous split between science and religion that is difficult to overcome. Notable exceptions to this have been leading scientists such as Ed Wilson at Harvard, Peter Crane at

Yale, Elinor Sterling at the American Museum of Natural History, Tom Lovejoy at the Smithsonian, Jane Lubchenco at Oregon State University, and Peter Raven at the Missouri Botanical Gardens, who have been steadfast supporters of this work.

The critique of religion experienced from skeptical positivistic scientists is still present. We share some of the concern, namely that religions have their problems, as is evident historically and at present. But religions also have shown their promise in contributing to the moral force of change in issues such as abolition of slavery and the extension of civil rights. That is the hope that the environmental movement will grow from, including the ethical component in making the shift toward a viable future for people and the planet.

Now we are beginning to see openings in which science understands there are multiple ways of managing ecosystems, for example, that include traditional environmental knowledge (TEK). Moreover, change is happening as the next generation of students and faculty understands that religion, ethics, and culture need to be included in solutions to environmental problems. That may be because some eighty-five per cent of the world's people identify as religious. Their influence as leaders and members of institutions and communities is substantial. They have significant educational, financial, social, and political influence that can be used for transformation toward the wellbeing of the Earth community.

With the help of many other scholars and environmentalists, a new field of study in academia and a moral force for change in society was born. While there was no academic field of study in 1995, there are now more than thirty graduate programs in religion and ecology in North America, and three of them are PhD programs. Moreover, there are hundreds of grassroots engaged projects and interfaith efforts that embody the moral force of religion and ecology. Greenfaith is the leading international interfaith activist organization fostering a moral response to the climate emergency and other key environmental challenges. EcoPeace Middle East brings the Abrahamic religions into environmental issues in that region, especially regarding water. On a worldwide level there is now \$40 trillion in the divestment movement from oil and gas and 40% of that is from religious communities. Moreover, environmental justice, which arose out of religious communities in the 1980s, is now integrated in academic programs as well as grassroots environmental movements.

Religion and ecology arose from early contributions of many people. A noteworthy beginning was a conference at Middlebury College and the resulting book and film. This was called *Spirit and Nature - Why the Environment is a Religious Issue: An Interfaith Dialogue*. The book was edited by Middlebury professors Steven Rockefeller and John Elder who organized the conference. This was published by Beacon Press in 1992 and the noted journalist Bill Moyers made a film of the conference released in 1991.

The original premise of our work in religion and ecology is that we need to identify environmental ethics from the world's religions that arise from particular cultural contexts. In other words, such ethics will be different in Asia than in the West or among Indigenous traditions. This is what we began to explore as we



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convened two “consultations” on Buddhism and Confucianism in the spring of 1996 at Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR). These consultations were recognized as innovative at CSWR and thus we were encouraged by Larry Sullivan, the CSWR director, and Martin Kaplan, a trustee of the Kann Rasmussen Foundation, to continue this research. The Kann Rasmussen Foundation was a key supporter, joined by the Germeshausen Foundation, as well as funding agencies connected with individual religions. We organized a series of eight more conferences on Religions of the World and Ecology from 1996-1998.<sup>1</sup> The papers from these conferences were published in a book series from Harvard (1997-2004). It was the Islamic scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who encouraged us to establish an academic field of religion and ecology as he had begun this work with publications in the 1960s.

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<sup>1</sup> For information on this series of conferences and the books resulting from them, see “Religions of the World and Ecology Conference Series, Harvard 1996-1998,” Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology (FORE), <https://fore.yale.edu/Event-Listings/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Conference-Series/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Archive>.

We concluded the series with three culminating conferences in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and New York City.<sup>2</sup> These began with one from September 17-20, 1998, on “Religion, Ethics, and the Environment: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue,” at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, where E.O. Wilson and Thomas Berry were part of the discussions.<sup>3</sup> On October 21st, at a daylong meeting at the United Nations in New York we announced the formation of the Forum on Religion and Ecology.<sup>4</sup> The next day we gathered 1000 people for a conference on The Search for a New Ecological Balance at the American Museum of Natural History.<sup>5</sup> There the noted journalist, Bill Moyers, interviewed leading religious scholars as well as scientists, policy makers, educators, and economists on the ethical dimensions of religion and ecology.

### **Defining Religion, Worldviews, and Cosmovisions**

This overview will begin by reflecting on religion, worldviews, and cosmovisions, and then point toward the contributions religions are making toward addressing our environmental challenges, including climate change. Religions have been late in coming to this issue but are now engaging in more effective ways in solutions to environmental problems. That is not to ignore the problematic dimensions of institutional religions, but to suggest that a broadened vision of religion beyond those boundaries is necessary.

Religions connect humans with a divine presence or numinous forces to undertake self-transformation and community cohesion within cosmological and natural contexts. The diverse manifestations of religion can be understood as a means whereby a sense of wholeness and meaning may be generated, while acknowledging the limits and suffering of the human condition. Religions include cosmological stories, symbol systems, ritual practices, ethical norms, historical processes, and institutional structures that transmit a view of the human as embedded in a world of meaning and responsibility, transformation, and celebration. As such, they bond human communities with a numinous presence and can assist in forging intimate relations with the broader Earth community within the context of a life-generating universe.

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<sup>2</sup> Videos from these conferences are available on the FORE website at <https://fore.yale.edu/Events/Religions-of-the-World-and-Ecology-Conference-Series-Harvard-1996-1998/UNAMNH-Culminating>.

<sup>3</sup> The conference program and list of speakers is available on the FORE website at <https://fore.yale.edu/Event-Listings/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Conference-Series/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Archive-11>.

<sup>4</sup> Details of the conference are available on the FORE website at <https://fore.yale.edu/Event-Listings/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Conference-Series/Religions-World-and-Ecology-Archive-0>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The well-documented environmental crisis has made it increasingly clear that human values and behavior are crucial for the survival and flourishing of all life forms on Earth. Religion, ethics, and spirituality are contributing to the shaping of a vibrant future along with the natural and social sciences. Indeed, more comprehensive worldviews and cosmovisions of the interdependence of life are being recovered within religions, along with an ethical responsiveness of the need to care for life for future generations.

Such interrelational worldviews are also being formulated in evolutionary stories, with multiple narrations drawing on scientific and humanistic modes of knowledge. Our teacher, the cultural historian Thomas Berry, described this in 1978 as a new cosmological story.<sup>6</sup> Our multimedia project Journey of the Universe,<sup>7</sup> inspired by his ideas, is an example of an evolutionary narrative for ecological engagement. It consists of a film, book, a series of twenty conversations, and three online Coursera courses titled “Journey of the Universe: A Story for Our Times.”<sup>8</sup>

The exploration of worldviews and cosmovisions as they are both constructed and lived by religious communities is the work of religion and ecology scholars who attempt to discover formative and enduring attitudes regarding human-Earth relations. There are many examples of diverse ecological worldviews in religions. Buddhism sees humans as interdependent with the dynamic forces of nature and the cosmos. Similarly, Confucianism and Daoism affirm nature’s changes as the source and expressions of the Dao, with which humans may participate and harmonize their lives. The Western monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam view the seasonal cycle of nature as an inspiration for the challenges of human life. Among Indigenous elders and scholars, the term cosmovision locates nature as the locus for encountering the cosmological power of the sacred, such as kami for Shinto practitioners in Japan, manitou among Great Lakes Native Americans, and mana among Polynesian peoples.

Certain distinctions need to be made between the particularized expressions of religion identified with institutional or denominational forms of religion and those broader worldviews and cosmovisions that animate and articulate such expressions. By worldviews and cosmovisions we mean those ways of knowing, embedded in symbols and stories that find lived expressions, consciously and unconsciously, in the material aspects of particular cultures.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Berry, “The New Story,” *Teilhard Studies* 1 (Winter 1978).

<sup>7</sup> See the website of Journey of the Universe for a description of the film and related media at <https://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> For information about the courses and to enroll, see <https://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/online-courses>.

In this perspective, worldviews arise from, and are formed by, human interactions with natural ecosystems. Consequently, one of the principal concerns of religions in many communities is to describe the emergence of local geography as a realm of the sacred. This is evident, for example, with mountains such as Wutai and Emei in China, rivers such as the Ganges and Yamuna in India, cities such as Jerusalem, Rome, and Mecca, and cosmogonies among Indigenous peoples, such as the Hopi creation myth of coming up into this Fourth World.<sup>9</sup> Worldviews and cosmovisions generate rituals and ethics, ways of acting, that guide human behavior in personal, communal, and ecological exchanges. Religions have also helped people to celebrate elemental gifts of nature, such as air, water, and food, which sustain life.

### **Retrospective Observations**

The creative tensions between humans seeking to transcend the anguish of the human condition, and at the same time yearning to be embedded in the harmonies of the world, are part of the dynamics of the world's religions. Christianity holds the promise of salvation in the next life, as well as celebration of the incarnation of Christ as a human in the world. Similarly, Hinduism holds up a goal of liberation (moksha) from the world of suffering (samsara), while also highlighting the ideal of devotion to a god acting in the world, such as the god Krishna, or the goddess Durga. Indigenous traditions also manifest such creative tensions, but broadly considered do not move toward radical transcendence. For example, among the Navajo/Diné of the American Southwest, the Holy People, or Yei, come from beyond the human realm and yet reveal themselves in the inner forms of the natural world.

This realization of creative tensions leads to a more balanced understanding of the possibilities and limitations of religions regarding environmental concerns. Many religions retain orientations toward personal salvation outside this world; at the same time, they may foster commitments to social justice, peace, and ecological integrity in the world. Historically, religions have contributed to social change in the past and now they are doing this for environmental protection and climate action. An example of this is the Govardhan Ecovillage outside of Mumbai in India where we held a conference in December 2017.<sup>10</sup> The tensions within religion were also evident in the conference on the Yamuna River that we

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<sup>9</sup> See Jay Jotlewski, "The Hopi Prophecy and the Emergence of the Fourth World. Northern Arizona Living.com, December 17, 2024, <https://northernarizonaliving.com/the-hopi-prophecy/>.

<sup>10</sup> Information on this conference is available on the FORE website at <https://fore.yale.edu/event/Hinduism-and-Ecology-Towards-Sustainable-Future>.

organized in January 2011,<sup>11</sup> where the contradictions between the river as sacred and yet polluted stand out.

There are new alliances emerging that are joining social and environmental justice around the world. This has dynamic expressions in a variety of minority communities in the United States, including Indigenous, African American, and Latina. In alignment with these “eco-justice” concerns, religions are formulating integrated environmental ethics that include humans, ecosystems, and other species. A series we have edited at Orbis Books called “Ecology and Justice” has some thirty books in it, including Thomas Berry’s *Christian Future and the Fate of Earth* and Brian Swimme’s *Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*. Religions are active on climate issues such as the transition to alternative energy, away from fossil fuels. We organized one of the first conferences on this issue and published the results in *Daedalus* in 2001. This was titled “Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?”

Many others have helped lead this engaged work in religion and ecology and climate. These include the National Religious Partnership on the Environment, GreenFaith, Interfaith Power and Light, Earth Ministry, Faith in Place, and Blessed Tomorrow in the United States. The academic organization International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture has been critical in shaping the field of religion and nature. In Britain, the Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC) was an early leader and the European Forum for the Study of Religion and the Environment has advanced scholarly research.

### **Science and Religion: Appeals for Action**

Despite years of skepticism, now many scientists acknowledge the role of religious communities for encouraging a broadened environmental ethics from diverse traditions. This acknowledgement provides an interesting background reflection on the tensions between religion and science. From the Enlightenment standpoint of the sciences, religions became suspect because the institutional power of religions controlled the dialogue. And sciences felt religion spoke from a metaphysical standpoint that was unverifiable. Religions were suspicious of science because of the reductive turn in which all reality was explained as a mechanistic materialist process. In this sense, the transcendent and immanent realms of the sacred that are so central to religious positions were not recognized by the scientific community.

Now, in the contemporary period, we are beginning to see some rapprochement between science and religion due to the recognition of the

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<sup>11</sup> Information on this conference is available on the FORE website at <https://fore.yale.edu/Event-Listings/Yamuna-River-Conference>.

profound ecological crises we are facing, as well as an openness to multiple ways of knowing. Religion has tended to dismiss empirical science when it becomes a dominant worldview instead of simply a method. Now historians of science are recognizing that the imaginative character of symbolic consciousness plays a role in the methodology of scientific research and discovery. Religions also see that science is providing the data and discoveries that are making the larger cosmological story of the universe available for broader understanding. While these tensions remain, many scientists and religionists are actively engaged in dialogue to address environmental challenges.

Cooperative efforts between religion and science have emerged over the last forty years around the environmental crisis. Two key documents were issued in the early 1990s. One is “Preserving the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion.”<sup>12</sup> A second is “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity,”<sup>13</sup> which was signed by over 2000 scientists, including more than 200 Nobel laureates. This document states, “A new ethic is required—a new attitude towards discharging our responsibility for caring for ourselves and for the earth.” Other key documents have built on this call. The Earth Charter, inspired by the UN Earth Summit in 1992 and released in 2000<sup>14</sup> brings ecosystems science, eco-justice, and peace together in an evolutionary framework. The 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*,<sup>15</sup> is a comprehensive religious statement integrating environmental science with the “Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor.” This phrase is the title of a book by the liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, published in 1997 in the Ecology and Justice Series from Orbis Books.

Response to these appeals has continued and expanded. Strong voices advocating religious responses to environmental issues date from over half a century ago. For example, Walter Lowdermilk, who in 1940 called for an Eleventh Commandment of land stewardship, and Joseph Sittler, who in 1954 wrote an essay titled “A Theology for the Earth.” Likewise, since the 1960s the

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<sup>12</sup> “Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion,” (Appeal, Global Forum, National Religious Partnership for the Environment, Moscow, January 1990),

<https://fore.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Preserving%20and%20Cherishing%20the%20Earth.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> “1992 World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity,” Union of Concerned Scientists, July 16, 1992, updated February 4, 2022, <https://www.ucs.org/resources/1992-world-scientists-warning-humanity>.

<sup>14</sup> Earth Charter, Earth Charter International, [https://earthcharter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/earthcharter\\_english.pdf](https://earthcharter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/earthcharter_english.pdf), and “History,” Earth Charter International, <https://earthcharter.org/about-the-earth-charter/history/>.

<sup>15</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Encyclical Letter, May 24, 2015, Vatican, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html).

Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr has called for a renewed sense of the sacred in nature that draws on perennial philosophy. Lynn White's 1967 essay in *Science* on "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis"<sup>16</sup> sparked controversy over his assertion that the Judeo-Christian tradition has contributed to the environmental crisis by devaluing nature. In 1972, the process theologian John Cobb published a book titled *Is It Too Late?* underscoring the urgency of environmental problems and calling Christians to respond.

### **Responses of Religions to Environmental Crises**

Religious communities, realizing the climate emergency and biodiversity loss along with the failure of nation-states to act resolutely on the environmental polycrisis, are highlighting the complexity of the living Earth community and growing commitments to preserve and celebrate it. For example, Indigenous peoples formulated the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth in 2010,<sup>17</sup> which enhances the ongoing work of the Indigenous Environmental Network. Building on this perspective the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI) was formed in 2017 with Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI), Rainforest Foundation Norway, UNEP, and interreligious organizations, such as the Forum, which is a founding partner. It brings together Indigenous peoples with other religious communities, especially Christianity and Islam, for protection of rainforests in Latin America, Africa, and Indonesia. Religions have held interreligious dialogues for several decades, witnessing to their common concern for both people and the planet. In this spirit, we have organized interreligious panels on religion and ecology at the Parliament of the World's Religions (Chicago 1993, Cape Town 1999, Barcelona 2005, Melbourne 2009, Salt Lake City 2015, Toronto 2018, and Chicago 2023). We have also participated in Buddhist-Christian dialogues and Confucian-Christian dialogues on religion and ecology.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) created a Faith for Earth Coalition in 2019, promoting value-based perspectives on environmental sustainability. This has been skillfully led by Iyad Abumoghli. We assisted with the UNEP publication in 2020 of the book *Faith for Earth: A Call to Action*

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<sup>16</sup> Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, No. 3767, (March 10, 1967). A viewable copy of this article is available at <https://www.uvm.edu/~gflomenh/courses/ENV-NGO-PA395/articles/Lynn-White.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (from the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, Cochabamba, Bolivia, April 22, 2010), <https://www.garn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ENG-Universal-Declaration-of-the-Rights-of-Mother-Earth.pdf>.

which was edited by Kusumita Pederson.<sup>18</sup> The Forum had supported the printing and distribution of fifty thousand copies of an earlier version of this in 2001.

In November 2023 the Muslim Council of Elders along with Faith for Earth convened the “Global Faith Leaders’ Summit on Climate Action”<sup>19</sup> to bring a moral urgency regarding the climate emergency to the UN COP 28 in Dubai. We participated in this pre-conference in Abu Dhabi organized by Iyad Abumoghli and colleagues.

Several major international religious leaders have spoken out on environmental and climate challenges. The Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama, and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn, have spoken on the universal responsibility the human community has toward the environment and all sentient species. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew has sponsored symposia on water which have brought together scientists, religious leaders, civil servants, and journalists. Pope Francis has become a key spokesperson on climate and environmental justice issues. Bishop William Barber, co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign in the United States, has emerged as a leading spokesperson for social and environmental justice.

### **Emerging Field and Moral Force of Religion and Ecology**

Within this global context, the field of religion and ecology has emerged in academia over the last three decades. The Forum was brought to Yale University from Harvard at the invitation of the then dean of the Yale School of the Environment, Gus Speth. He had a strong background in law and policy and founded the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the World Resources Institute (WRI), in addition, lead the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). After those many years of public service, he felt that there was sufficient environmental science, policy, economics, law and technology. However, he observed that the moral force and ethical values were missing to move toward a sustainable and flourishing future. Thus, Speth helped create a joint degree program between the Yale School of the Environment and the

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations Environmental Program and the Parliament of World Religions, *Faith for Earth: A Call to Action*, United Nations Environmental Programme, 2020, <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/33991/FECA.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. This was an update of *Earth and Faith: A Book of Reflection for Action*, which was published by UNEP in 2001 and is available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/earth-and-faith-book-reflection-action>.

<sup>19</sup> Information on this summit is available on the FORE website at <https://fore.yale.edu/news/A-Historic-Global-Faith-Leaders-Summit>.

Divinity School with social scientist, Stephen Kellert (YSE) and ethicist, Margaret Farley (YDS).

In addition to teaching in this joint program, we have created with Tara Trapani a comprehensive Forum website.<sup>20</sup> This has sections on world religions and Indigenous traditions that includes statements, sacred texts, bibliographies, media, and engaged grassroots projects. Sam Mickey has developed Spotlights,<sup>21</sup> an engaging podcast series of interviews. Elizabeth McAnally edits the Forum monthly newsletter and maintains the website. We have created six online Coursera classes in Religions and Ecology: Restoring the Earth Community<sup>22</sup> with the help of Yale graduates Anna Thurston and Sam King.

Over the last several decades there has been a widespread emergence of the moral force of grassroots religious environmentalism in communities around the world. This includes restoration of forests and fisheries, as well as major efforts to support environmental justice in areas of pollution, such as Louisiana's Cancer Alley, due to oil refineries. This moral force is especially evident in protests against oil companies, banks, and insurance firms invested in fossil fuels. Religious communities have also worked closely with Faith Action on the UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).<sup>23</sup>

### **Key Questions and Shared Values**

This work in religion and ecology is animated by several key questions. Theoretically, how has the interpretation and use of religious texts and traditions contributed to human attitudes regarding the environment? Ethically, how do humans value nature and thus create moral grounds for protecting the Earth for future generations? Historically, how have human relations with nature changed over time, and how has this change been shaped by religions? Culturally, how has nature been perceived and constructed by humans, and conversely, how has the natural world affected the formation of human culture? From a socially engaged perspective, in what ways do the values and practices of a particular religion activate mutually enhancing human-Earth relations? It is at this lively interdisciplinary intersection between theoretical, historical, and cultural research and engaged scholarship that the field of religion and ecology is still emerging.

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<sup>20</sup> Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, <https://fore.yale.edu/>.

<sup>21</sup> For information on and access to archives of these podcasts, see <https://fore.yale.edu/blogs/entry/1632823481>.

<sup>22</sup> For information about these course and to enroll, see <https://fore.yale.edu/Resources/Yale-Coursera-Online-Courses>.

<sup>23</sup> For information on the action being taken by religious communities, see [Faith Action on the UN SDGs](#).

Values embedded in religious perspectives on the environment provide viable alternative views of Nature versus approaching it simply as resources or ecosystem services to humans. The Harvard conference series, and research that came out of those gatherings, identified shared values of the world's religions in the service of the environment. These include: reverence for the Earth and its profound ecological processes; respect for Earth's myriad species and an extension of ethics to include all life forms; reciprocity in relation to both humans and nature; restraint in the use of natural resources combined with support for effective alternative technologies; redistribution of economic opportunities more equitably; responsibility of humans for the continuity of life; and restoration of both humans and ecosystems for the flourishing of life.

While there have been many obstacles to the realization of these religious values, they are beginning to intersect with other approaches to environmental problems from the perspectives of science, economics, law, policy, and technology. These values constitute a means for understanding the dynamic moral force of religious environmentalism and leadership that is growing around the world.

### **Prospective Directions**

One movement going forward in our work these last few years is the unfolding of Ecological Civilization in China.<sup>24</sup> A key goal of this movement is: Moving from an industrial society with unlimited economic growth that is destroying land, air, and water to an ecological civilization that provides a basis for the well-being and health of both people and the planet. Many individuals and groups in China are trying to find the next stage beyond rapid industrialization and unsustainable development, which has brought massive economic growth, but has also caused widespread biodiversity loss, climate upheavals, and intense pollution with public health consequences. Similar efforts are being made in Western countries under the rubric of sustainability.

Ecological Civilization implies a paradigm shift toward an ecocentric worldview, rather than an anthropocentric worldview. This involves drawing on philosophical and religious traditions for shaping a broader environmental ethics and transformative action. The Chinese are reviving their own traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism for ecological wisdom.

While Ecological Civilization is having traction on many levels of Chinese society, especially in education, its implications and efficacy needs to be explored more fully in environmental policy, law, and NGO work. Building and implementing ecological civilization in a systemic and practical manner has been

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<sup>24</sup> See "Ecological Civilization," FORE, <https://fore.yale.edu/Ecological-Civilization>.

discussed for several decades and has been in the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party since 2012.<sup>25</sup> It is our assumption that this aspiration is a vital component of responding to social and ecological challenges. For, in addition to environmental science, policy, law, economics, and technology, a robust shift of values and culture is needed for systemic long-term changes.

We acknowledge the work of many people in this area, in China and in the West. This includes Pan Yue who published an article in 2006 titled “On Socialist Ecological Civilization,” which helped to establish the foundations for this idea. Pan was Vice-Minister of State Environmental Protection Administration from 2003-2016. Since 2022 he has been director of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (NEAC). We have met with him several times in Beijing, as he is keen on promoting Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism for environmental ethics in China. This is complementary to what we were doing with the Harvard conferences.

In the West since 2006 there have been annual conferences on Ecological Civilization in Claremont, California. These have been convened by the Whitehead-inspired Center for Process Studies and the Institute for Postmodern Development of China (IPDC) under the leadership of John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, Zhihe Wang, Meijun Fan, and Philip Clayton. We have hosted the Chinese scholars from these conferences at Yale several times. Zhihe Wang has helped to establish some thirty-six Process Studies Centers at Chinese Universities. In 2015 Philip Clayton and Andrew Schwartz co-founded the Institute for Ecological Civilization (Eco-Civ).

## **Conclusion**

The study of religion and ecology has made significant progress as an academic field and a moral force over the last three decades. There is much more to be done as the Earth gets hotter and drier, as well as wetter and more unpredictable. Indeed, as these problems grow, there is emerging attention in psychological and chaplaincy work to address eco-anxiety and climate grief.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, diverse expressions of eco-spirituality are appearing that acknowledge the therapeutic character of human-Earth interactions with forests, landscapes, and biodiversity. Novel theories of “differentiated sentience” and a “living cosmos” bridge scientific research with attention to plant and animal signaling,

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<sup>25</sup> Ben Parr and Professor Don Henry, “China Moves toward Ecological Civilization,” Australian Institute of International Affairs, August 26, 2016, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/china-moves-towards-ecological-civilisation/>.

<sup>26</sup> See “Eco-Anxiety Resources,” FORE, <https://fore.yale.edu/Resources/Eco-anxiety-Resources>.

consciousness, and agency. These explorations of realities, understood as sacred, take place in the context of diverse “spiritualities,” often apart from the institutionalized space of organized religions.

As horizons of religion and ecology shift and relocate religious language and terminology, so also roles and understandings of religious personalities are in flux. Such fixed images of priest and prophet, rabbi and imam, sage and sramana, shaman and seer also fade and reappear in novel expressions, responding to our environmental pressures, collapses, and possibilities. Just as entrepreneurs attempt to refocus the doom and gloom expectations of environmental catastrophes into opportunities for alternative ecological technologies and professions, so also ecological insights open new visions of humans in right relationship with a flourishing Earth. Even Thomas Berry, whose prophetic voice lamented the loss of land and biodiversity as “revelatory voices of the Earth,” could dimly see an “Ecozoic Age” in which humans interacted with Earth processes for the flourishing of the many life forms. No doubt the growth of religion and ecology arises out of both the realization of our problematic devastation of the Earth, as well as the promise of more restorative and nourishing ways of human becoming.