

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENTAL FLOURISHING

Setting the Scene

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³ Earth.org, “Sea Level Rise Projections: 10 Cities at Risk of Flooding,” June 4, 2022, <https://earth.org/sea-level-rise-projections/>

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

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

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

The Role of Religion in Context of Environmental Concerns

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

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

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

majority (84 percent) of the world's population still maintains a religious affiliation.⁶ In 2023, the World Population Review also published similar statistics with 85 percent of the world's inhabitants adhering to a faith tradition.⁷ According to Pew, while sixteen percent of the population reported no religious affiliation, many of them acknowledged holding religious or spiritual beliefs, such as belief in God or some transcendent powers. Despite this, the study suggests that the global population of religiously unaffiliated people is declining, with only around ten percent of the world's newborns between 2010 and 2015 born to unaffiliated mothers, even though they make up sixteen percent of the global population.⁸ In contrast, Muslims are experiencing a 'baby boom,' and are expected to have nearly caught up to Christians by 2050.⁹ While social scientists have been forecasting the decline of religion because of increasing secularization, this prediction has not played out as expected. Admittedly, secularization has been on the rise in Western Europe, North America, and various countries undergoing modernization.¹⁰ However, religion has grown in prominence and number of adherents in other parts of the world.¹¹ Granted that secularization is not an impossibility in various societies, but the current state of global religion indicates that there is no sign that the *homo religiosus* is facing imminent extinction.

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

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

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

⁸ Pew, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Despite the lack of awareness or disinterest on the part of secular organizations, over the past several decades, there has been a surge in religious engagement with environmental concerns, as people have come to recognize the intrinsic link between environmental flourishing and human well-being. The involvement of religions in these issues is especially beneficial, as their contribution is both unique and valuable. According to Hans Küng, religious teachings possess an absolute nature, which is essential for encouraging commitment to solving environmental problems. Küng argued that the authoritative voice of religion can impel its adherents to follow prescribed norms unconditionally, even in cases where doing so may be contrary to their own interests.²¹ One of the advantages of religion in this context is its ability to propose a “categorical ought” that extends beyond the finite conditions of human existence, human urgencies, and even the survival of humanity itself.²² Moreover, religion serves as a guiding force, a compass for our moral and ethical sensibility, a source of inspiration for our communities, and a deep well of spiritual motivation. Throughout history, religion has been a powerful voice for social justice, driving movements that challenge inequality and oppression. From the Christian churches’ role in promoting social healing in post-genocide Rwanda²³ to the tireless efforts of religious women and men across traditions to promote environmental consciousness and stewardship, religion has been a vital force for inspiring social change.

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

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

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

²² *Ibid.*, 53.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

tent/uploads/migrated/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_dispatchno339_pap12_religion_in_africa.pdf

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Need for an Environmental Spirituality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁶ Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 32.

John Paul II⁴⁷ as well as his successors. True conversion, however, cannot take place without religious inspiration and guidance. Religions at their best inspire and infuse external acts that are consistent with authentic interior virtues ordered to the well-being of both humanity and the natural environment. In this respect, religions must undergo their own self-examination in order to adequately speak to the present context. As the Buddhist scholar monk Bhikkhu Bodhi asserted:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵² Bob Smietana, “Faith Leaders Call for Repentance and Spiritual Reformation to Address Climate Change,” *Religion News Service*, August 17, 2023, <https://religionnews.com/2023/08/17/faith-leaders-call-for-repentance-and-spiritual-reformation-to-address-climate-change/?fbclid=IwAR1Zmd0ugPfBd5TlQhJ3Zg-vbaeaUvtsU11SWWeO5tmZReGAHD7v7rr3eIE>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Approach of this Book

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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