

ABOVE NATURE

Faith for Earth

Text Satya S. Tripathi

- ◆◆◆ *Science and religion are often thought of as being at odds. But the two seem to agree on the intrinsic value of ecosystems and biodiversity.*

Ta Prohm Temple enveloped with snaking roots and vines in Siem Reap, Cambodia

HEALTHY AND RESILIENT ECOSYSTEMS – the foundation of all life on land and below water – are now threatened like never before.

Human activities such as pollution, unsustainable use of land and sea, the exploitation of organisms, climate change, and the invasion of alien species are leading to the decline and degradation of natural ecosystems at an unprecedented scale. Climate scientists urge the world to make a paradigm shift, and to live more sustainably within the regenerating threshold of nature.

This is also acknowledged by many religions. From Buddhism and Christianity to Hinduism and Islam, they all recognise that we must protect the environment and treat Nature with respect and care. The holy texts and spiritual teachings highlight the intrinsic value of nature and the

inherent need to treat all species with respect. Pope Francis, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued a joint statement ahead of the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, better known as COP26. “We call on everyone, whatever their belief or world view, to endeavour to listen to the cry of the Earth and unfortunate people, examining their behaviour and pledging meaningful sacrifices for the sake of the earth which God has given us,” they urged.

▼ Deforestation – to obtain food, fuel, and construction materials – contributes to climate change, soil erosion, flooding, and problems for indigenous communities

The current, global trend is the pursuit of material wealth. Nature is seen as an extractive resource that humans can consume for their benefit. This commodification of Nature leads to environmental destruction through the consumption of raw materials that come from the natural environment such as wood, oil, and gas. Unfortunately, the lack of empathy and respect for Nature is a product of the last century.

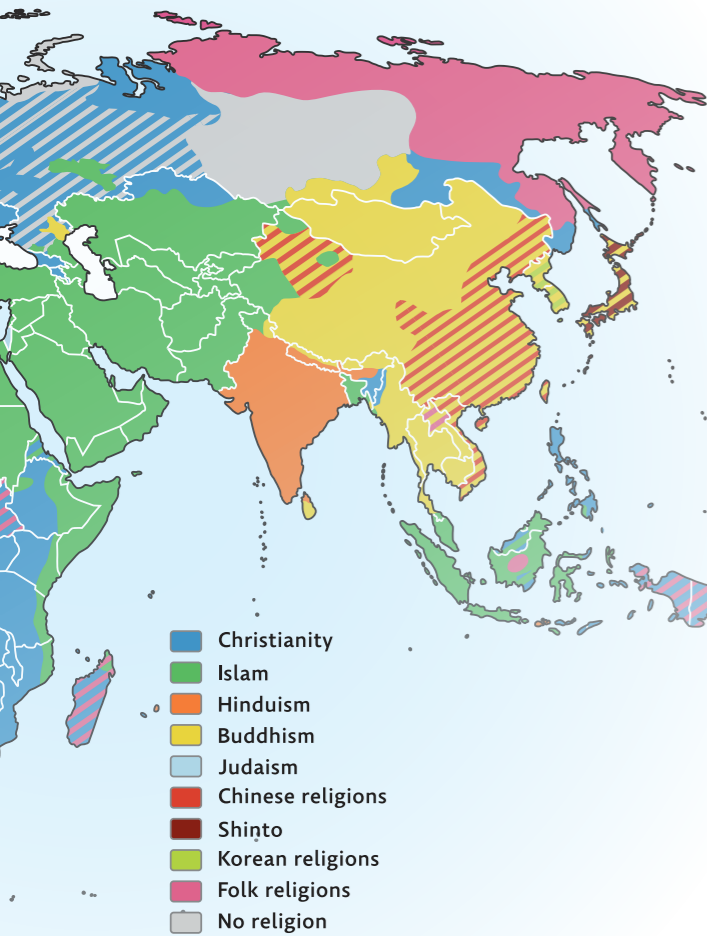
A 2020 study by Columbia University, USA, has investigated the link between environmental challenges and religion. They have found that nations whose populations are more religious tend to use fewer natural resources. This suggests

that the people in these countries might be more mindful of their environment, implying that religion can influence people’s view of Nature.

“We call on everyone, whatever their belief or world view, to endeavour to listen to the cry of the earth and of people who are poor, examining their behaviour and pledging meaningful sacrifices for the sake of the earth which God has given us.”

- His Holiness Pope Francis, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew





Religions of Asia as illustrated on the map of Asia

RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN ASIA

Asia is the birthplace of many religions. Islam and Hinduism are the largest religions in Asia with approximately 1.2 billion worshippers each. Other prevalent religions in Asia include Buddhism and Christianity.

Hinduism and Buddhism both originate from the Indian subcontinent. The two religions are poles apart but they do share the basic concept of reincarnation – a philosophical concept that living beings can be reborn. In Hinduism and Buddhism, life can take on different forms, creating continuity and connection between human life and other living things such as Nature and animals. All life is considered to be equal, whether they are human, insect or animal.

Christianity and Islam agree that Nature was created by a God. God created the order of the natural world, and all living beings are God’s creatures. These two religions believe that God has given humans a special responsibility to take care of all life.

Hinduism

Hinduism is deeply rooted in Nature. The sacred texts reference the beauty of Nature such as animals, mountains, rivers, and trees. The natural world is considered to be a part of humanity; it is something that does not exist outside of us but within us. Hinduism believes in environmental protection, and many faith-driven organisations promote sustainable development and environmental conservation.

“Wise utilise three elements variously, which are varied, visible and full of qualities. These are water, air, and plants or herbs. They exist in the world from the very beginning. They are called as Chandamsi meaning “coverings available everywhere”.”

- Atharvaveda, the fourth Veda; a large body of Hindu religious scripture



Buddhism

Reincarnation as a concept shows that conservation and responsibility for the future are important. A Buddhist’s actions in their present life will impact the future. This is an idea close to sustainable development and the corresponding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

“As a bee – without harming the blossom, its colour, its fragrance – takes its nectar and flies away: so should the sage go through a village.”

- Dhammapada IV, Puppavagga: Blossoms, 49



Christianity

There are about 100 verses in the Bible that mention the protection of the environment. Worshippers are expected to have environmental responsibility and be considerate of their actions that might affect future generations. While not mentioned in the Bible, greed is considered to be one of the seven deadly sins, according to teachings in the spheres of Christianity.

“The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small – and for destroying those who destroy the Earth.”

- Revelation 11:8



Islam

The Qur’an mentions the protection of the environment, with its worshippers bearing a responsibility to take care of Allah’s creation: the Earth. Islam also forbids the overconsumption of natural resources (Qur’an 7:31, 6:141, 17:26-27, 40:34), with the Qur’an also listing wasteful consumption (Isrāf) as the 32nd greatest sin.

“Do not strut arrogantly on the Earth. You will never split the Earth apart nor will you ever rival the mountains’ stature.”

- Qur’an 17: 37



AGREEMENTS AMONG ASIA'S RELIGIONS

The four major religions in Asia have similar spiritual messages regarding Nature and the environment. Spirituality, religion, and respect for Nature are umbilically linked.

Religion and spirituality can offer us guidance to restructure the way we see and use Nature both in terms of the well-being of our planet and ourselves. In religious and spiritual traditions, we find that we cannot be greedy. We have the responsibility to minimise our impact on the environment, and more importantly, the Earth. Humanity should stop treating Nature as a mere resource for exploitation, personal use, or enjoyment, and take into account the consequences of their actions on the future of people, the planet, and Nature.

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People from the four major religions praying



Images: Shutterstock

5 OVERLAPS IN MAJOR RELIGIONS



The natural world has value and does not only exist to serve humanity



Greed and destructiveness are unacceptable



The dependence of humanity on nature should be acknowledged and appreciated



There are acceptable and unacceptable uses of nature



Humans should live in harmony with nature and should follow specific practices described by their religious and spiritual traditions



Mission East Asian National Support (MEANS)

TAKE ACTION!

Members of Plant with Purpose hard at work

To fulfil Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, interreligious and intercultural conversations should be promoted so that we can learn from each group. There are plenty of initiatives by faith-based organisations that contribute to the SDGs that call for action.

Many faith-based organisations have also been engaged in ecological restoration, conservation, and environmental protection, while also tying these initiatives to equity issues and local livelihoods. For instance, the Christian non-profit organisation, Mission East Asian National Support (MEANS), has started a disaster risk reduction project, Plant with Purpose, in the Philippines to combat commercial logging. "Trees are an important part of the quality of life – environmentally, culturally and economically," reads MEANS' mission "Your help and the communities that will be involved will leave a legacy of trees, an appreciation of the value of green-cover, and strong community partnerships for future generations."

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS EXPLAINER

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 interlinked global goals designed to be a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all". The SDGs were introduced in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and aim to be achieved by 2030.



OUR SHARED FUTURE

We can no longer say that we cannot understand sustainability and environmental stewardship: it has been an ancient tradition and belief of the world's major religions. Science has shown us that unsustainable choices lead to ecological disasters. Religion and spirituality can offer ethical guidance on how to respect Nature and minimise our impact on the Earth. Try to think of nature as something equal to you, or that is a part of you: protect it, take care of it, and give back!

Faith-based organisations deliver great work and contribute to protecting nature, people, and the planet. It is important to recognise them as key stakeholders in our fight for a sustainable world. ♦ AG

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