



# REIMAGINING THE HUMAN- ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

## Religion and the Environment

Dr Iyad Abumoghli



UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY  
Centre for Policy Research

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This paper forms part of the volume *Reimagining the Human-Environment Relationship* for Stockholm+50. This curated collection of ideas captures, interrogates, and elevates alternative paradigms of the human-nature relationship – existing and new, and from various disciplines and societies – creating a space to recast our relationship with the environment and inform future policymaking.

## About the Author

**Dr Iyad Abumoghli** is Founder and Director of the Faith for Earth Initiative and has more than 35 years of experience with international organizations, the private sector, and scientific institutions. Dr Abumoghli is currently the Lead Principal Advisor on Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations at the UN Environment Programme. Previously, Dr Abumoghli held several leading positions including the Regional Director and Representative of the UN Environment Programme in West Asia, Director of Knowledge and Innovation at the UN Development Programme's Regional Office for the Arab States, Senior Environment Advisor at UNDP's Sub-Regional Resource Facility in Beirut, Global Practice Manager for the Energy and Environment Group in New York, Assistant Resident Representative of the UN Development Programme in Jordan.



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## Introduction and Background

Today's dominant global development model is characterized by its reliance on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the main measure for development and growth. This model presumes that economic growth will bring development to the people and offer better opportunities and livelihoods. This approach overlooks the qualitative aspect of development and disregards the fact that resources needed for growth have both economic and sustainability value, ignoring the natural limits of the Earth's offerings and of ecosystem health, to which the health and survival of humans is inextricably linked. Advocates of such a paradigm claim that advancement in technology will be able to overcome such resource limitations.<sup>1</sup> However, such innovation to maintain an inherently destructive development paradigm is not a competent solution to address our global crises.

The functioning of this development model requires continuous energy supplies to produce more products, yet the main source of energy is finite, fossil-based, and fuelling climate change.<sup>2</sup> Unsustainable industry is driving this economic growth, while the by-products of these production systems are costly in terms of exceeding planetary resource limits, greenhouse gas emissions, loss of biodiversity, and degradation of ecosystems. This is in addition to the inextricably linked impacts on human health and livelihoods, as well as on conflict and resources-based wars.<sup>3</sup> This development paradigm has taken us to the age of the Anthropocene, defined as the period during which human activity has had the dominant impact on the life on Earth. The human behaviours characteristic of this "take-make-dispose" era are those of over consumption and production, exploits that preserve the continued economic growth held above all else.

With its primary focus on economic growth, this development paradigm ignores the cultural and spiritual value of nature and environmental rights. The spiritual and inspirational value of nature drives societal motives and respective behaviours to live in harmony with nature and to protect it for present and future generations. The cultural and spiritual significance of nature has been defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as: "the spiritual, cultural, inspirational, aesthetic, historic and social meanings, values, feelings, ideas and associations that natural features and nature in general have for past, present, and future generations of people – both individuals and groups."<sup>4</sup>

The Stockholm Conference in 1972 paved the way for more attention to be focused on international environmental law. Before that date, only a dozen multilateral agreements existed, while most governments lacked national environmental policies.<sup>5</sup> By Rio+20 in 2012, hundreds of multilateral and bilateral environmental agreements had been signed. Surprisingly, there are 61 treaties related to the atmosphere; 155 to biodiversity; 179 related to chemicals and waste; 46 to land conventions; and 196 conventions that are broadly related to issues dealing with water, and many others.<sup>6</sup> However, the implementation and enforcement of these Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) have been less promising. These customary strategies of environmental governance produced and employed within our current system have brought insufficient changes in global behaviour towards the environment.

The implementation of MEAs face a wide range of challenges that are shaped by and reflective of the broader faults of our dominant economic model. Some of these challenges include competing requirements between environmental agreements and trade or economic agreements, a global economic agenda promoted by developed countries that make it difficult for poor countries to meet

environmental requirements, commitment issues where countries sign global agreements but do not ratify them or integrate them into local law, leadership that promotes nationalism that reflects a weakness in the global environmental governance, and the lack of integration between relevant agreements being administered by different organizations. These global challenges require unified, and unifying, solutions.

On the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN in 2020, Member States agreed that: “our challenges are interconnected, across borders and all other divides” and that “we need an equally interconnected response, through reinvigorated multilateralism and the United Nations at the centre of our efforts.”<sup>7</sup> The global environmental governance system thus needs to be recalibrated to cope with these challenges. Multilateralism remains our only option if we are to achieve the 2030 Agenda and face our common global crises. It is well recognized that, to achieve this global Agenda, new approaches to sustainable development must engage and partner with a wide range of stakeholders.

Business as usual is not an option. Reliance on the same voices and approaches within the same system will inevitably yield the same insufficient outcomes. As stated in *Our Common Agenda*: “Now is the time to re-embrace global solidarity and find new ways to work together for the common good.”<sup>8</sup> These challenges to the global environmental governance system cannot be adequately addressed if we do not solve the underlying cause of these systemic challenges, which includes the lack of a system of values, ethical approaches, spiritual, and moral responsibility of nations, institutions, organizations, and individuals. The ethical aspects of environmental problems and the values-based voices that ground and interpret these issues need to become included and made much more central in public discussions and in policymaking as religion, ethics, values, and practices deeply influence everyday life.

Working for people and the planet, Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) contribute substantial assistance to society, especially in developing countries.<sup>9</sup> As original community organizers, providers of human care and counsellors of human destiny, FBOs are in many cases the longest or even the only and first responding development and humanitarian-focused organizations present in a remote community or area.<sup>10</sup> FBOs and religious groups, although often excluded as formal actors within the public sphere, are also key in providing public services such as education, welfare, and healthcare services in developing countries. For example, more than 50 per cent of educational institutions around the world are owned by faith institutions.<sup>11</sup>

Within the following discussion, both the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development (UN-IATF) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP)’s Faith for Earth, define FBOs as referring to a non-profit organization that is associated with or inspired by religion and that its values are based on its faith or belief,<sup>12</sup> and religious actors as being religious States, international organizations, and non-State entities that assume the role of interpreting religion and claim a ‘special’ legitimacy anchored in tradition.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that there is a difference between a religion and a faith as faith is the full trust in someone or something including, but not limited to, religions and religious figures, while religion is a structured system of belief, usually associated with rituals and sacred scripts.<sup>14</sup>

Religion is a paramount social institution and enmeshed within the daily activities of most of the population. Spiritual values derived from religions do not only influence people’s behaviours, but also affect social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity. Importantly, faiths and

religions consider Earth and its resources as sacred, where religious scripts emphasize people's responsibility to utilize these resources with care and with next generations in mind.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, acknowledging and including these beliefs and integrating value systems within dominant discourse is crucial to achieving sustainable development that is framed for, and can mobilize, the population we seek to address.<sup>16</sup>

Faith actors possess significant powers that influence societies at all levels. The first of these powers is the power of convincing and convening. Faith actors, and the communities that they gather and inform, are present in every corner of the world, from religious leaders providing spiritual guidance to FBOs providing humanitarian assistance. The convincing power relies on the sacred scripts of religions that speaks to the hearts of faith followers. The far-reaching social networks as well as the moral concepts and doctrines practiced and preached by religious actors are powerful factors through which religion plays a principal role in influencing environmental attitudes and behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

The second power is the economic power of religious institutions. Religious organizations are the fourth largest group of investors in the world.<sup>18</sup> These institutions own houses of worship, schools and educational institutions, health care centres, and large infrastructure projects. In fact, religious institutions own more than 7 per cent of the global land surface and the volume of their total assets under their management is estimated as being trillions of US dollars.<sup>19</sup>

As a result of this growing appreciation of the importance of faith actors in environmental and human development, during the World Interfaith Harmony Week in 2010, the UN General Assembly formally recognized the central role religions can play in addressing global issues through adopting resolution 65/5. This recognition highlighted: "the imperative need for dialogue among different faiths and religions to enhance mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the UN-IATF was established in 2010 as a "platform for knowledge exchange, capacity building, system-wide guidance and oversight regarding engagement with faith-based and faith-inspired civil society actors."<sup>21</sup> Then, in 2017, UNEP established the Faith for Earth Initiative to provide a platform for religious leaders to engage in policy dialogue, green faith assets, and provide a bridge between sciences and religions.

## The Planetary Crisis and Religions

Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the global pandemic are jeopardizing global socioeconomic well-being while also seriously undermining the progress made in the past six years in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>22</sup> Other environmental issues remain of concern to the global community including water shortages, droughts, conflicts and disasters, unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, among others.

While there is strong evidence in each of the religious scripts or practices that nature is intrinsically related to the very being of people,<sup>23</sup> the linkages between religious and faith messages and the importance of protecting the environment are often underacknowledged or not practiced. However, religions determine individual and collective identities, thus affecting cultural norms and behaviours of followers. For example, throughout history, communities provided sacrifices and waged wars in the name of religion. However, religions also have enforced positive moral behaviour through compassion and unity of purpose and destiny.<sup>24</sup>

## Religions and Environmental Issues

Environmental care within major religions and faith traditions is expressed and understood in various ways. For some religions, climate change is a testament to humanity failing to live up to their ordained role as stewards of the Earth. For others, it represents proof of a world in disharmony, while for others it represents a lack of reverence towards the divinity within nature. However, adherents of these religions and faith traditions bear witness to the immense threat that climate change represents, a threat that must be overcome for the sake of humanity and all living beings we share Earth with.

While differences exist between various religions and their relationship with the natural world, there are important similarities in their common care for creation. One key point of convergence is the notion that the natural world has inherent value and does not only exist to serve the needs of humans. Importantly, what is bestowed with value is more likely to be treated with care and respected, engendering behaviour that is conducive to a sustainable future.<sup>25</sup>

World religions, indigenous traditions, and newer forms of alternative spiritualities can inspire ecological action and a deeper relationship with the Earth and all its beings, and have been working to do so.<sup>26</sup> The religious perspectives they offer, based on modern interpretations of ancient traditions, can spur people toward conservation of biodiversity. To secure a sustainable future not only for their followers and communities, but for the whole of humanity and nature, some religious leaders have been employing the strategy of reinterpreting sacred texts considering present environmental concerns to provide a values-based platform upon which to translate and advocate eco-activism and biodiversity conservation to inspire shifts towards these pro-environmental behaviours.<sup>27</sup> Faith and religious-spiritual traditions hold crucial potential for realizing the global socioecological transformation to sustainability envisioned in the 2030 Agenda. This includes exceptional partnership opportunities between faith traditions and decision-makers.

Religions continue to evolve and respond to emerging global issues as they historically have. Many religions state the need to strike a balance between individual prosperity and society's good and that what the Earth offers should be equally shared between living beings. Religious virtues, like the avoidance of excess, is often central, with humans seen as responsible stewards of their natural environment. Therefore, in religious teachings there is a clear implication to live within one's means and adopt a sustainable lifestyle,<sup>28</sup> lessons that can be leveraged in grounding and promoting pro-environmental behaviour among individuals in their everyday lives.

While forwarding these positive sacred messages conducive to sustainable development, religions also dissuade against the negative forces rife in our world today and can play a constructive role in promoting the peace and security necessary for a sustainable future on Earth. Faith messages conveyed by the scriptures, that can be swiftly employed and are understood by and speak to the value-systems of laypeople, can support resolving or avoiding disputes in conflict-affected regions. For example, emphasizing and employing faith-based concepts of redemption and forgiveness can support significant dispute resolution, post-conflict reconciliation efforts, and provide resources to benefit societies' resilience when integrated into conventional strategy by leveraging personal value systems that inform individual behaviour and decision-making. Moreover, religious teachings warning against greed, can also be leveraged in efforts to minimize resources related conflicts. The commitment of religions to tackle ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice and to promote behaviours

towards the common good is at the heart of building an ethic of global and local citizenship, leading to harmony among civilizations and solutions for sustainability.

The inclusion of religious and indigenous leaders in global environmental governance and policymaking is therefore essential. While FBOs are strong institutions and have demonstrated relevance to development around the world, major groups and stakeholders' groups of the UN still do not identify them as such. According to Agenda 21, these major groups include farmers, women, scientific and technological community, children and youth, indigenous people and their communities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, local authorities, and non-governmental organizations.<sup>29</sup> As such, FBOs have been trying to find their way to engage in policy dialogue at the UN as part of the NGO designation. While this might be somewhat effective, it fails to leverage the unique and influential powers of faith actors and the perspectives of spiritual and moral responsibilities to environmental governance brought about by religions. Thus, faith actors, despite their significance, remain underempowered within the margins of dominant discourse and global policy formulation. Including faith actors and introducing faith and religious values and ethics in the decisions and resolutions of the relevant environmental governance bodies would make decisions not only integrate social, economic, and environmental considerations, but also individual and organizational moral responsibilities, a reformulation necessary to make the global shifts in humanity required for sustainable development.

### *Religions' Limited Capacity to Engage*

Generally, there have been a lack of tailored capacity-building efforts to empower FBOs as well as faith and religious actors to connect religious beliefs to environmental goals.<sup>30</sup> It is essential, therefore, to strengthen the common ground focus and identify where the role of each religion is mutually supporting the other in their quest to bring these issues to the heart of global discussions and local action. FBOs, unified in their common care for nature, could be excellent partners when they are empowered and engaged toward achieving common objectives and included as a unified force within the policy space. In their own pursuit of advancing shared objectives and cooperative action under the Sustainable Development Goals platform, international organizations have launched a variety of programmes and initiatives at the global, regional, and local levels. All these efforts can benefit from the participation of faith actors in their implementation, utilizing their convincing and convening power and value-based system.

## **The Role of Faith, Values, and Ethics in Global Environmental Governance**

The role religious actors have played in development has stemmed from the fact that spiritual beliefs and religious values connect religions with nature and are drivers of social inclusion, human dignity, and prosperity.<sup>31</sup> While international development agendas use data and science to justify their development goals, religions use their spiritual values and religious ethics as a lens to view human destiny in this world. Therefore, there is substantial room for complementarity between the secular and the religious approaches. Thus, it is imperative that faith actors be actively and entirely integrated in environmental governance and that their invaluable, equally informed contributions be recognized and institutionalized in the global UN setting.

Environmental ethics, as a set of norms governing how humans behave towards natural resources, has retracted in the face of our growth system based on overconsumption and production and quick economic gains. With consecutive industrial revolutions, including technological progress, globalization, free markets and trade agreements, the mechanization of agriculture, and the proliferation of urban centres, societies and individuals have become more detached from their natural environment due to its routine objectification, commoditization, and divestment of all life and integrity.<sup>32</sup> Facing the multitude of development challenges accrued through this growth paradigm requires systemic change. “We need a new kind of society including a revised economic framework to reassign economics to its appropriate status as a subject of a larger system, not its cent[re].”<sup>33</sup> Thus, facing our global crises requires rethinking and reimagining the development paradigm and subsequent human behaviours towards the environment by integrating a new environmental ethic based on universally shared values.

This stewardship responsibility, like other faith-based values taught and passed on over millennia, is intergenerational, asserting a duty of care towards a healthy planet for this generation and future ones who will otherwise inherit a gravely ailing planet. Consequently, this will require abandoning the current material-based global economy and prioritizing the health of the people and the planet over economic wealth. Religious values and teachings and the reintegration of these into all spheres of life and into all levels of governance can play an important role in helping people revive their connection with nature and overcome current attitudes and behaviours laden with greed and apathy component within our “take-make-dispose” lifeway.

### *Towards a Universal Ethical Approach*

Unifying approaches to a universal ethical approach does not mean unifying belief systems. On the contrary, building on the diversity of religions and taking strength and lessons from one another will enrich this collective environmental ethic toward the one goal of living in harmony with nature. Interfaith and intrafaith collaboration on such a universal ethical system would bring together the diverse perspectives religions offer to ground and guide a new way of living. Intrinsically related to environmental benefits for people and the planet is strengthening the peaceful coexistence and prosperity of societies. For this, the understanding, cultivation, and integration of universally shared values, such as environmental stewardship and human rights, is needed to overcome debilities of ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice and build an ethic of global and local citizenship towards a sustainable future.

Concepts like stewardship in Abrahamic religions, interdependence in Buddhism and Hinduism, and Dharma in Hinduism demonstrate collective responsibility and duty of care. Ahimsa in Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism represents the ethic of not causing harm to other living things, which aligns with nonviolence and compassion in Abrahamic religions. Moderation, humility, and avoiding greed or excess, Wasateyyah and Mizan in Islam, resonate with the Middle Way in Buddhism and living simply and with respect for the cycle and balance in nature. This is the same among interconnectedness and symbiotic interdependence of all life in Christianity and Jainism, Pancha Mahabhutas echo Karma in Hinduism and interdependence in Buddhism. To continue still, reverence, care, and carefulness in Christianity, Judaism, and Taqwā in Islam mirror and bolster Ishavasyam in Hinduism.

There are many other ethical religious principles that are not only shared between religions but also resonate well with contemporary environmental principles. Recognizing common and differentiated responsibility in Islam, for example, corresponds to the understanding that not all parties are equal as contributors or victims of environmental degradation, a mainstay of climate justice. Of equal importance, principles of solidarity and cooperation with all peoples and nations as a universal nature of humanity central within Christianity and Islam, among others, and equate to the same fundamental principles of multilateralism in global development.

Achieving the sustainable development goals requires innovative solutions that integrate and disseminate these morals, values, and behaviours conducive to environmental care. Recognizing and leveraging the points of religious convergence in environmental ethics, as above, can provide a platform for a shared vision for humanity and nature and practical behavioural change towards environmental sustainability. Indeed, it is culture and religion that have been regarded by scholars as principal determinants of human behaviour, behavioural change, and moral responsibility.<sup>34</sup>

### *Institutional Behavioural Change Potential*

The positive relationship between religiosity and pro-environmental behaviour has gained the attention of scholars working within the field of religious ecology and beyond due to its principal relevance to current sustainable development efforts.<sup>35</sup> As our leading environmental problems are directly related to human activities, large-scale shifts in the mindsets, behaviours, and consumption patterns of human beings are required to construct an ecological civilization and secure a sustainable future. Integral to these universal shifts, as throughout human history, religions play a principal role in informing cultural norms and providing moral guidance that ultimately shape the attitudes and behaviours of their followers.<sup>36</sup>

Because of their convening, convincing, and economic powers, religious institutions and actors remain among the best positioned to inspire these shifts within the population. Religious and spiritual leaders represent powerful voices in every corner of the world with enormous impact on local communities, framing a care for nature in faith-based values to be translated and heard within the hearts of their followers, comprehended, and legitimized within their established belief systems. This framing by faith leaders is key to cultivating pro-environmental behaviour and a common environmental ethic as it is: “small changes to the way a message or a choice is framed that can have an enormous impact on the decisions we make and the actions we take.”<sup>37</sup>

It is well documented that psychological structures, such as beliefs and values, can encourage people to behave in ways that reduce climate change.<sup>38</sup> In fact, individual actions, activism, donation, and environmentalism are influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and norms, as demonstrated by the frameworks from the “theory of planned behaviour” and “value-belief norm theory of environmentalism.”<sup>39</sup> These two dominant theoretical models of the social-environmental perspective root environmental behaviour in the attitudes, beliefs, and norms of individuals and theoretically ground the demonstrated impact of religious belief systems on human behaviour and its subsequent environmental outcomes. The research linking religious beliefs to environmental behaviour is rich and growing. To draw on but one of these efforts, a cross-country study rigorously measuring the effect of religion on pro-environmental intention and behaviour employed multiple indicators and used around 213,000 observations from 91 countries and five waves of World Value Survey covering 1989-2014 to establish the robust positive relationship between religion

and environmental behaviour through such measures as environmentally-focused donation and advocacy.<sup>40</sup>

A good example of the impact of religions in changing societal behaviour as well as institutional responses is the Islamic Fatwa (judgment based on Islamic principles). For example, the Indonesian Islamic Council issued a Fatwa in 2016, which considered causing forest fires a sin. Some 65 per cent of damaged peatland has since been restored through the collaboration of the national government, the Islamic Council, and other NGOs.<sup>41</sup>

Another example is based on the Islamic principle of conserving water. A nationwide initiative in Jordan led by the Ministry of Water and the Ministry of Religious Affairs aimed to change people's perspectives of the ethical use of water. When the project started, 60 per cent of the people believed that water they receive is their own and they are free to use it the way they want. By the end of the project, 92 per cent of local communities considered this behaviour as unethical.<sup>42</sup>

An example of institutional and structured engagement by religious institutions that can mobilize faith followers and the international community at large, based on a combination of religious teachings and scientific evidence, is the pioneering programme of the Catholic Laudato Si' movement (*Laudato Si: Care for Our Common Home*). This movement emerged from the environmental encyclical issued by Pope Francis in 2015 just before the Paris Agreement.<sup>43</sup> The Laudato Si movement aims to mobilize the behavioural change potential of Catholics and the international community. The Dicastery for Integral Human Development launched several initiatives including the Laudato Si Action programme in *A Journey Towards Full Sustainability in the Holistic Spirit of Integral Ecology*.<sup>44</sup> With an ambitious plan of engagement, this action programme hopes to engage cities, houses of worship, schools, hospitals, businesses, and other sectors over the next seven years to achieve clear commitments and tangible results.

While Christianity is followed by 2.3 billion people, Islam is the second largest religion with an estimated 1.8 billion followers as of 2015.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the role of Islamic institutions in promoting Islamic-based approaches to environmental protection would hold immense value in mobilizing behavioural change and environmental action. The Al-Mizan movement, facilitated by the UNEP Faith for Earth Initiative, was initiated in 2019 after the conclusion of the eighth ministerial conference of the ministers of the environment of the Islamic nations, which adopted a strategy for engaging with faith actors on environmental issues.<sup>46</sup> In a consultative process, the *Al-Mizan: Covenant for the Earth* document was shared with more than 350 Islamic and international organizations for review.<sup>47</sup> Expected to be adopted by the ninth conference of the ministers of the environment of Islamic nations in 2022, Al-Mizan presents a holistic Islamic approach based on Islamic ethics, values, and practices in addressing the environmental crisis of today.

Apart from these two global movements engaging Christians and Muslims, there is no other institutional work by other major religions to bring forward such approaches. For example, Hinduism and Buddhism are two major religions in terms of followers, representing more than 1.6 billion people. The Vedas and the Tripitaka sacred texts and scriptures and the general value principles of both religions can be harnessed in a structured way to mobilize more than 20 per cent of the human population.

Other interfaith organizations can also contribute through their institutions in catalyzing pro-environmental shifts in attitudes and behaviours and mobilizing collective actions by faith followers. However, important structured and concrete engagement strategies should be developed to ensure inclusion in mainstream development dialogue. The Parliament of the World's Religions' *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* expanded in 2018 to include a Fifth Directive on "Commitment to a Culture of Sustainability and Care for the Earth," an interfaith movement structured on ethics in environmental governance.<sup>48</sup> Having been adopted by more than 200 spiritual leaders in 1993, the novel fifth declaration may be grounded in the teachings of religions sharing a universal stance on the inherent dignity and value of nature.

### *Religion and Scientific Potential*

Science is clear about climate change, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity. Conventions, environmental rule of law, and other national and international policies and agreements are based on such scientific evidence.<sup>49</sup> When the international community discusses environmental issues such as climate change, they refer to the IPCC's scientific findings or when discussing ecosystems and biodiversity, they refer to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). This is the conventional practice within other environmental priority areas. However, it has become increasingly recognized that "science is not the only way of knowing and understanding our relationship with nature."<sup>50</sup> For religious institutions and religious actors, their main reference is religious scripture, traditions, or practices that have existed for thousands of years. Demonstrative of the dynamism of religions is evolving and adapting to the day, however, religious leaders have been calling on their followers and institutions to listen to what the scientists are saying. Both science and religion use their different approaches to explain our relationship and interaction with nature. Both, for example, agree that climate change and other environmental calamities are caused by humans' behaviour and overconsumption patterns.

Science, now, ought to follow suit to and equally consider and integrate alternative ways of knowing into relevant environmental findings. Maximizing the convergence of two global powers, the power of religion and the power of science, towards green and transformative development requires bridging the common understanding between environmental sciences and religions with a sustainable development model grounded in both scientific understanding and faith-based values.

Although more pertinent than ever to our global development efforts, the relationship between science and religion is not a new area of intrigue. Studying this relationship began in the 1960s, with scholars challenging the idea of a divide between science and religion.<sup>51</sup> Many scholars saw that religious and scientific cultures were split and therefore they could never dialogue.<sup>52</sup> Others reasoned for dialogue and understanding.<sup>53</sup> To a large extent, we do not yet have a dialogue that is integrated and that considers the methods and models of the two different approaches.

Science and religions can converge in their common understanding on environmental issues, but that requires productive collaboration between scientists and religious scholars. Some religious actors, especially on the local level and in countries of the Global South, do not have easy access to global knowledge and scientific evidence related to environmental challenges. Thus, close links to scientists and more accessible scientific knowledge is needed to promote synergies between religion and science, as well as to create new collaboration opportunities.<sup>54</sup> Optimistically, over the past 20 years, we have seen leadership in establishing these ties by some scholars, not necessarily

faith leaders, but scholars specialized in religious studies from different institutions such as the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, Harvard, Ohio State University, Oxford, and many others. However, these centres of excellence target academics and not policymakers and, thus, have had limited penetration in global development efforts.

From the other side, there is a dearth in connecting available scientific evidence to religious perspectives, spiritual and moral responsibilities of humans towards the environment. Integrating science with religious worldviews, texts, and ethics can contribute to environmental solutions that ground scientific findings around nature and sustainable living into a language that is valued, understandable, and actionable by most of the population.

Moving forward, education is a common connector that brings religions and sciences together. On one side, education based on facts and evidence is essential in changing environmental behaviour.<sup>55</sup> From the other side, religious teachings are also essential in changing behaviours and in shaping attitudes. The opportunity here is to agree on a common value and evidence-based education system, an educational system guided by empirical methods of environmental understanding as well as a system of values, ethical approaches, and spiritual and moral responsibilities generative of eco-morality and eco-justice.

What is needed is the creation of a religion-science consortium to bring together theologians, scholars, scientists, and environmentalists to bridge the knowledge gap between environmental and natural sciences and religions and religious studies as related to environment and ecology and to explain the relationship between human behaviour and sustainability.

## Potential of Stockholm+50

Article 1 of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration stated: “Man is both creature and molder of his environment, which gives him physical sustenance and affords him the opportunity for intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth.”<sup>56</sup> Fifty years ago, the international community, addressing environmental issues, collectively connected human growth to moral and spiritual growth. However, during the following 50 years, the actual direction has moved away from this intrinsic relationship and towards more materialistic living based on greed and apathy.

Stockholm+50 is a golden opportunity to rectify this path and move the world into an ethical and moral one that truly respects not only “man” as a creature, but also as a part of a larger community of other creations. Without decisive action, humanity is risking losing its last best chance to rectify this broken relationship and create a resilient future based on ethical and moral development paradigm. Five elements are centre stage at Stockholm+50: regeneration, recovery, rebalance, renewal, and reimagination. These five elements should be supported by other ones that bring out the spiritual meaning and behavioural approaches in living in harmony with nature including: **reconciliation** between man and the creation; **recognition** of the moral values in shaping our consumption and production patterns; **rediscovering** the moral and spiritual roots of humanity and human rights; and **resetting** our mindsets away from human superiority to human humility. Addressing these additional and complementary elements jointly by scientists and religious scholars would significantly advance the global goal of behavioural change and place greater pressure on national governments to act. The following is a description of how that might work in practice.

## *Reconciliation Between Humans and Nature*

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, said: “Humanity is waging war on nature - and accelerating erosion of life on Earth.”<sup>57</sup> The anthropogenic root causes of environmental challenges are the weapons used in this war through greed in mining natural resources and apathy in our consumption and production patterns. People’s lives are being lost to pollution, cities are being destroyed by severe climate events, and biodiversity is facing the threat of extinction. This war must stop, and humans need to come to terms and reconcile with nature. This does not mean abandoning development gains and technological advancements, but it means living in harmony with nature and respecting planetary boundaries. This will require adopting a new development paradigm, one that includes natural and social capitals in the accounting balances of nations for their growth and not how much money they have made, one that is founded on a system of values, ethical approaches, spiritual, and moral responsibility.

In practice, religious followers can lead the way by reconciling with the ethics and values of their religions and beliefs as related to their attitude towards nature. There is also a need to reconcile with religious institutions in building trust, encouraging engagement, and in providing collaborative approaches. Eco-justice, climate justice, natural justice, and the human right to a healthy environment, inextricably intertwined with faith-values, are all the characteristics of this reconciliation. Making peace with nature requires everyone to play a role in transforming the human relationship with nature into one that is sustainable for generations to come.

## *Recognition of the Moral Values in Shaping our Consumption and Production Patterns*

Sustainable consumption and production leads to ensuring efficiency and improving productivity, safeguarding the finite resources of the planet, and respecting access rights of future generations to a healthy environment. In practice, that requires a drastic reduction in global food waste, substantially increasing efficiency in the sustainable use of natural resources, winning the war against pollution, transitioning businesses to green economy and production, informing citizens of their rights to a healthy environment through environmentally certified products, and adopting nature-based solutions.

Ethical and moral consideration of consumers in making informed choices when purchasing products is not only an individual responsibility, but a joint responsibility to be held together with regulating governments, producing businesses, and consumer protection agencies. Religions and religious institutions are best placed to support this moral transformation based on religious values and ethics engraved in their teachings and scriptures.

## *Rediscovering the Moral and Spiritual Roots of Humanity and Human Rights*

The underlying philosophy of international human rights is centuries old and is manifested in religions.<sup>58</sup> Some religions instituted the relationship between humans and nature based on the understanding that humans were created as stewards and not owners of nature. In 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted resolution 48/13 that calls for a human rights-based approach to conserving and restoring natural spaces.<sup>59</sup> This means governments, institutions, businesses, and individuals are responsible for ensuring the rights of people to a healthy environment when deciding on their national economic, social, and environmental development.

Religious philosophies emphasize respecting nature and define the relationship between human intelligence, behavioural change, and emotional approach towards one another.

International human rights law ought to be explained not merely as products of Western evolution, but also as those enshrined in spiritual beliefs and religious values. There is a need to produce a universal doctrine of principles building on religious values towards nature. While civilizations before us had many challenges to struggle through, our civilization can be the one that brings these challenges to an end with the advancement in technology and the unprecedented tools we have including Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things. However, even these tools will require a moral compass.

### *Resetting our Mindsets Away from Human Superiority to Human Humility*

The call for humility, that is central to most major religions, can play a crucial role in environmental policy. The age of the Anthropocene is evidence of humans' contemporary perception of their superiority over all other living and non-living elements of nature. Limitless extraction of natural resources, careless generation of waste, and the skyrocketing carbon release into the atmosphere are only a few examples of how the current development paradigm considers natural resources as only existing for human consumption. Some who are against pollution and environmental degradation see it from an angle of eco-anthropocentrism, that justifies dominance over natural resources and living things if it does not do harm to other humans. However, science is telling us that there are 8.7 million species living on Earth and humans are only one of those species.<sup>60</sup> Complementarily, religions tell us that we are among many divine creations.

In some religions, the divine has instated a day of rest not only for humans, but also for natural resources to regenerate.<sup>61</sup> This contradicts the justification for humans' exploitative dominion over all other living things and is in fact an act of abnegation as submitting that humans have limits and do not possess absolute powers.<sup>62</sup> Humility is to appreciate the nature around us and to be mindful of the interconnectedness between all elements living on Earth. Mindfulness promotes empathy and clarification of values that lead to sustainable behaviour.

### *Our Best Last Chance*

Since we are reaching the tipping point of climatic changes and natural degradation, it is incumbent upon us to do deep soul searching as we gather as an international community for Stockholm+50. Maintenance and tweaking our destructive development paradigm are not competent solutions. What we need is a **destructive reconstruction** that boldly question the status quo. We need to start from where we need to end; a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment where current and future generations will live in peace and enjoy prosperity. We need a future where young people are empowered to take the lead, where gender inequality is something from the past, and where no one is marginalized.

Imagine a religious pilgrimage to a sacred site: rich and poor, men and women, children and adults all moving towards one goal. Religions can bring people together. Interfaith and intrafaith collaboration and understanding is as essential as multilateralism. Nationalism is selfish but also ineffective in dealing with the current challenges. Advancing a common vision of our shared values is vital if we want to live in prosperous societies. A new socioeconomic and environmental contract

is needed to govern our relationships with one another and with nature. We need an empowered UN system that works for all and that is trusted and governed by global principles. Religious diversity of values should be the basis for a universal value-based structure of coexistence. A shared consciousness of our global interdependence must help us define the global commons that support life on Earth.

Faith, values, and ethics are instrumental in influencing behavioural change and are invaluable in efforts to prevent, halt, and reverse environmental issues. Increasing recognition of ethics, faith, and spirituality in environmental governance is key. Creating a platform where religious leaders, youth movements, policymakers, and scientists work together is essential to create meaningful environmental policies that capitalize on the power of values, ethics, and religion. UNEP's Faith for Earth Coalition is a key example of its work in mobilizing faith action and catalysing efforts from all around the globe to build momentum towards a better future for people and the planet. This should culminate in the adoption of a global resolution, integrating and institutionalizing the role of faith actors in environmental governance.

### *Faith-Based Economic Paradigm*

While faith-based investment corporations and bodies are globally the fourth largest investors,<sup>63</sup> they lack the necessary knowledge to invest in environmentally responsible projects. The absence of knowledge on the potential positive impact that FBOs can bring is a lost opportunity to influence investment for sustainable development. The existing value system of religions related to socioeconomic and environmental responsibilities can pave the way for financial systems that are aligned with the principles of sustainable financing, placing equal emphasis on the ethical, moral, social, and religious dimensions to enhance equality for the good of the whole of society. Collectively, investment by religious institutions is estimated to be trillions of dollars. In the United States alone, religious giving represented around 32 per cent of the USD 335 billion donated in the country in the past decade.<sup>64</sup> Some FBOs and religious business owners have adopted policies to encourage corporate social responsibility, incorporating environmental and social services and human rights-based programmes. Divesting away from environmentally unsustainable investments is a new trend by religious institutions, decarbonizing assets and making investments more climate friendly in the process.

The convening, convincing and economic powers of religions remain the most notable powers on the planet in driving social values and behaviour. Today, we urgently need significant changes in values and behaviours, not only on environmental governance but at large, to reach a sustainable future. No organizations are better positioned to harness such changes than value-based ones. What is needed is an inner reflection on faith values and the agglomeration that religions bring based on the relationship of their scriptures and tradition to environmental sustainability. Harnessing these powers is the ideal opportunity to draw in and act for a greener, better, prosperous, and sustainable future.



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