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**Fighting climate change:
Human solidarity in a divided world**

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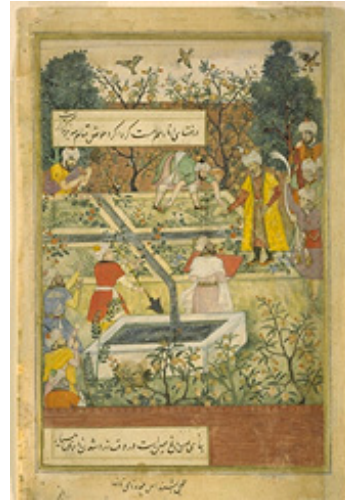
**For God's Sake, Do Something!
How Religions Can Find Unexpected Unity Around
Climate Change**

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FOR GOD'S SAKE, DO SOMETHING!

How religions can find unexpected unity
around climate change



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Overview

This paper aims to reveal the common ground shared by the world's major religions in their approaches to environmental issues in general, and climate change in particular. It begins with an analysis of the three major Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and then examines Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and indigenous cosmologies. For each religion, the paper considers the evidence for an environmental ethic within its beliefs and teachings, and highlights statements from religious leaders and organisations that explicitly address climate change. The conclusion draws together the underlying themes and principles that unite the world's major religions in their thinking about climate change and the planet's ecological future. Despite some differences between religions (some are more anthropocentric while others are more biocentric), there is general agreement on four key points: human-induced climate change is real and needs to be tackled now; the problem of climate change has partly resulted from human greed and a culture of over-consumption; by damaging the environment humans have sinned or acted immorally in the eyes of God or the cosmic order; and religious believers have a religious responsibility to take action. Thus while we live in a world in which it is far more common to speak of religious conflict than religious harmony, the common ground between religions on climate change provides unexpected potential for religious cooperation and mutual understanding. However, the lack of practical action to date on climate change by many religions makes it difficult to endorse the claim that God is Green.

INTRODUCTION

'In a world where matters of faith seem so often and so tragically to divide us, there is no issue that aligns us more deeply than our shared dependence upon and sacred responsibility to this tiny planet, enfolded within its fragile atmosphere, spinning in the vastness of time and space.'

Rabbi Warren Stone, founding chair of the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Committee on the Environment, 'A Jewish Response to Climate Change', January 2007¹

Across the world's major religions there is an increasing awareness of the dangers of climate change and the urgent need to confront the problem. In an era in which we are far more accustomed to thinking and talking about religious conflict than religious harmony, the crisis of climate change provides unexpected potential for religious cooperation and mutual understanding.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the common ground shared by the world's major religions in their approaches to environmental issues in general, and climate change in particular. It begins with an analysis of the three monotheistic major Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and then examines Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and indigenous cosmologies. For each of these it addresses the following questions:

- What evidence is there of an environmental ethic within the beliefs and teachings of the religion?
- How is the religion's approach to the environment and climate change reflected in statements from religious leaders and organisations?
- In what ways is it similar to and different from other religions in its approach to the environment and climate change?

The paper concludes by drawing together the underlying themes and principles that unite the world's major religions in their thinking about climate change and the planet's ecological future. It also highlights the lack of practical action to date on climate change by many religions. A compilation of the faith statements used in the paper appears in the Appendix.

There are several reasons why it is important to discover the common ground on climate change amongst religions:

- Religions can play a major role in raising public consciousness about climate change, just as they have done in the past on issues such as the need for international debt relief for poor countries.
- Religions are able to mobilise millions of people to take action, as has been seen through human history, for instance in the struggle against slavery and the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- Building global coalitions to tackle climate change requires bringing together not only governments and business, but also the constituents of civil society, which includes religious organisations.
- Developing greater religious cooperation and unity around climate change may be a basis for strengthening interfaith dialogue and collaboration to help solve problems of religious conflict in other spheres, thereby acting as an antidote to the clash of civilizations that we seem to be willing into existence through our tendency to focus on differences rather than similarities.²

A few caveats are necessary before embarking on the analysis. First, I will focus primarily on the beliefs and teachings of different religions rather than the practices of their institutions or believers. Obviously practices often conflict with principles, yet the main purpose here is to discover the principles that unite religions. Second, I will highlight those principles or beliefs that demonstrate an ecological sensitivity without extensively discussing those that seem to conflict with such a sensitivity. Clearly religions, like individuals, are replete with inconsistencies. Third, I will not explicitly discuss the positions of the various religions on social justice for the poor, even though this is of relevance to issues such as raising funds for adaptation to climate change in developing countries. There is already a vast literature on the shared beliefs amongst different religions with respect to helping the poor, and also on the subject of religion and development.³ Fourth, it can be difficult to clarify religious thinking on contemporary ecological issues such as climate change because they are not explicitly addressed in traditional scriptures. Climate change is a new problem faced by religions, and the positions of various religions and sects on such ecological issues are based on the reevaluation and interpretation of traditional texts and beliefs.⁴

CHRISTIANITY

In 1967 the historian of technology Lynn White published a famous article on 'The Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis' in which he argued that Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism, were the main culprits responsible for environmental degradation. Taking the story of creation in Genesis as his starting point, he accused Christianity (particularly its Western form) of being 'the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen' and of promoting the idea that 'no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes'. By destroying Pagan animism (in which every tree, river and animal had its guardian spirit) 'Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'. Combined with the Christian emphasis on perpetual progress, this was a recipe for ecological disaster.⁵ White's work was consistent with a long sociological tradition evident in the writings of Max Weber and Richard Tawney which argued that the rise of Protestantism from the sixteenth century was a fundamental basis for the development of capitalism, and its associated exploitation of natural resources and culture of over consumption.⁶

Christian ecologists have been defending themselves against White's accusations ever since. Adherents of the broad range of Christian groups and churches have attempted to demonstrate a strong environmental ethic within Christianity (although Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox believers sometimes differ in the texts they use to do so). A summary of some of the most important teachings or beliefs is as follows.

Ecological thinkers in the Christian tradition frequently point out that the Bible's mention of man having 'dominion' over the earth is not a form of domination but rather a form of stewardship, where man is charged with respecting and preserving God's creation.⁷ While admitting that nature cannot be worshipped in and of itself (which would be paganism), Christian ecologists emphasise that it is possible to see signs of God's omnipotence and benevolence in the beauty of the natural world. They point out that the covenant made after the Flood is not only with Noah (and his descendents) but with 'all flesh' or 'every living creature', and that there are ideas of conservation in the Old Testament, such as that humans and animals should rest on the seventh day of each week, and also every seven years, allowing the land to rejuvenate.⁸ They draw on texts in the New Testament with environmental significance, for example when Jesus says 'consider the lilies of the field', in addition to the sayings of Paul on the responsibility of humans to alleviate suffering in the non-human world.⁹ Many Christian ecologists look to figures such as St Francis of Assisi, who displayed a sensitivity to animals, birds and all natural life. For Catholics, it is important that, in 1979, Pope John Paul II proclaimed St Francis as the heavenly patron of those who promote ecology.¹⁰

There has been some reluctance from Christian leaders to make explicit statements on the need to tackle climate change. The current and previous Pope, for example, have generally spoken about 'ecological crisis' and the importance of 'protecting the natural environment' rather than the problem of 'climate change' or 'global' warming'. However, a representative of the Vatican recently made direct reference to climate change in a call for 'ecological conversion':

'The world needs an ecological conversion so as to examine critically current models of thought, as well as those of production and consumption...It is the Holy See's hope that opportunities like [making the Kyoto protocol fully operational] may favor the application of an energy strategy which is both global and shared in the long term, capable of satisfying short- and long-term global energy needs, protect human health and the environment, and establish precise commitments that will effectively confront the problem of climate change.'

Statement by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Holy See's permanent observer to the United Nations, October 2006¹¹

Statements on climate change have also emerged in the wider Catholic community. In 2001 US Roman Catholic Bishops issued a statement on ‘Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good’, which called for the need to preserve ‘God’s creation’, and have since produced further statements on climate change.¹²

The normally conservative Evangelical leaders in the US have also, after initial reluctance, accepted that human-induced climate change is real and must be tackled immediately:

‘For most of us, until recently, [climate change] has not been treated as a pressing issue or major priority. Indeed, many of us have required considerable convincing before becoming persuaded that climate change is a real problem and that it ought to matter to us as Christians...As American evangelical Christian leaders, we recognize both our opportunity and our responsibility to offer a biblically based moral witness that can help shape public policy in the most powerful nation on earth, and therefore contribute to the well-being of the entire world...Claim 1: Human-induced climate change is real. Claim 2: The consequences of climate change will be significant, and will hit the poor hardest. Claim 3: Christian moral convictions demand our response to the climate change problem. Claim 4: The need to act now is urgent.’

‘Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action’, January 2006, signed by 90 US Evangelical leaders¹³

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual head of the world’s 300 million Orthodox Christians, has discussed the need to curb our ‘excessive consumption’ to help tackle environmental degradation.¹⁴ Finally, a statement issued by the Christian World Council of Churches (WCC) reads as if it had been made by a development agency campaigning on adaptation funding for developing countries:

‘The poor and vulnerable communities in the world and future generations will suffer the most [from climate change]...The rich industrialised nations use far more than their fair share of the atmospheric global commons. They must pay that ecological debt to other peoples by fully compensating them for the costs of adaptation to climate change. Drastic emission reductions by the rich are required to ensure that the legitimate development needs of the world’s poor can be met.’

‘Climate Justice for All: A Statement for the World Council of Churches to the High-Level Ministerial Segment of the UN Climate Conference in Nairobi’, November 2006¹⁵

Across the Christian spectrum there is now a clear consensus and acceptance of the urgent need to tackle climate change, and those who dissent are becoming increasingly marginalized.

ISLAM

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a prominent scholar of Islamic approaches to ecology, has argued that most Muslims (along with non-Muslims) are walking through our current ecological crisis ‘like sleepwalkers’, and that ‘this sleepwalking by the majority is taking place despite the powerful and persuasive spiritual teachings of Islam about the natural world and the relation of human beings to it’.¹⁶ He points out several reasons why Islam has been relatively slow to respond to climate change and other environmental problems. First, ‘the governing classes of the Islamic world have their eyes only on emulating the West when it comes to the question of science and technology’, and this science and technology has ‘devastating environmental consequences’. Second, migration from rural to urban areas has resulted in many Muslims losing their connection with the natural landscape. Third, traditional scholars (*ulama*), who are the custodians of Islam, have failed to address environmental issues in their efforts to promote Islamic teachings, partly due to being more focused on preserving the integrity of Islam from attacks from outsiders and opponents.¹⁷

The primary sources of Islamic teaching about the natural environment are the Qur'an, the collections of *hadiths* (stories about the Prophet) and Islamic Law (*al-Shari'a*), in addition to Sufi texts and the Islamic arts. Islamic ecological thinkers and scholars emphasise that in the Qur'an, the cosmos itself is God's first revelation and the natural world, including trees, mountains and animals, are emblems or signs (*āyāt*) of God. Like in the Christian textual tradition, creation is sacred but not divine, for divinity belongs to God alone. But there is a clearer emphasis in the Koran than in the Bible that non-human creatures have a direct relation with God. Human beings must respect and pay what is due (*haqq*) to animals, and even rivers: 'the rights of creatures were given by God and not by us'.¹⁸ Because humans are part of nature, the doctrine of 'self-injury' (*ẓulm*) implies that to destroy the balance of the natural world is to destroy oneself.¹⁹ In the books of *hadith*, the Prophet encouraged the planting of trees and showing kindness to animals. There is also strong opposition to wastefulness and unnecessary destruction of nature to satisfy greed. Islamic Law has numerous injunctions to protect and guard water, forests and other community resources.²⁰ With respect to water in particular, Islam contains the egalitarian ethic that water must be shared equally, with the ecological consequence that no living creature (including animals) can be deprived of water if it is available.²¹ The earth and its natural resources must be preserved for the welfare of future generations, an idea that also appears in Christianity.²² Finally, an overarching ecological idea in the Qur'an is that God announced he would create a vicegerent (*khalifa*) on earth, with human beings as his servants (*ibād*), acting as custodians or guardians of the entire natural world.²³ This may be the clearest meeting ground for Christianity, Islam and Judaism, for the idea of being a custodian closely resembles the Christian and Jewish concept of stewardship. Scholars of Islamic ecotheology point out that there are a few fundamental differences in approaches to the environment in Sunni and Shi'a thought.²⁴

All this adds up to a potentially strong environmental ethic that is a basis for an Islamic approach to tackling climate change. Due to the decentralised and fragmented nature of Islamic authority in different countries, where there are multiple centres of leadership, it is difficult to find statements that represent a general position within Islam on ecological thinking and climate change. However, the World Muslim League has issued an Islamic Faith Statement on ecology that says, 'Humanity is the only creation of Allah to be entrusted with the overall responsibility of maintaining planet Earth in the overall balanced ecology that man found'.²⁵ In a statement highly critical of the Australian government's failure to act on climate change, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils has said the following:

'God entrusts humans to enjoy the bounty of nature on the strict condition that they take care of it and preserve it...Unrestricted exploitation and destruction of nature have produced unimaginable climatic changes. Polar ice is melting, threatening low-lying countries. As most of the world is enduring high temperatures and lack of rain, shortage of water is becoming a world problem and is affecting the production of food grains...None of the [necessary changes] will happen unless there is a shift away from growth economics and the concept of profit above everything. Time is running out. Unfortunately there is no sign of awakening in sight. People of religion must forget their theological differences and work together to save the world from climatic ruin.'

Statement from the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, December 2006²⁶

Such statements are evidence that climate change is slowly emerging as an issue in Islamic thought, and that it may be coupled with a rejection of Western consumerism and neoliberal economics.

JUDAISM

Some of Judaism's deepest beliefs are consistent with environmental protection. As in Christianity, 'the natural world manifests the presence of order and wise design' but nature should never be worshipped for its own sake.²⁷ According to Hava Tirosh-Samuels, since the Middle Ages, Jewish theologians have made it clear that while human beings are given a privileged place over animals, man's creation in the image of God entails responsibility for the whole of creation. Human beings thus have no licence to subdue and exploit the non-human world, and must act as stewards over the earth.²⁸ As an ecological statement from the World Jewish Congress makes clear, 'the 'dominion' mentioned in the Bible...is not the dominion of a tyrant'.²⁹ In the Talmud and other rabbinical sources, the biblical injunction of 'do not destroy' covers all objects that may be of potential benefit to man, including the physical environment.³⁰ Finally, many commandments in the Torah concern the preservation of trees and arable land, the conservation of water and the protection of animal welfare.³¹

However, there are elements within Judaism at odds with the development of a profound environmental ethic. In rabbinic Judaism, the exclusive study of the Torah and the acts that follow from it imply a distance between humans and the natural world, and admiration of nature 'distracts the believer from God's revealed Torah' (evident, for instance, in Mishnah Avot 3:7).³² The East European Hasidic tradition, which emerged in the eighteenth century, has strong links to the natural world through the idea that the divine spark exists in all created beings, not just humans, yet the spiritualising emphasis in Hasidism can serve to separate believers from nature.³³ Moreover, environmental issues have generally been of marginal concern to Jewish thinkers because, over the past half-century, the physical and spiritual survival of the Jewish people has taken precedence over the survival of the planet.³⁴

Despite these problematic areas, Jewish religious leaders, particularly those in the United States, are displaying an increased responsiveness to the problem of climate change. A resolution of the Central Conference of American Rabbis places emphasis on the moral obligation to future generations:

*'We have a solemn obligation to do whatever we can within reason to prevent harm to current and future generations and to preserve the integrity of creation with which we have been entrusted. Not to do so when we have the technological capacity – as we do in the case of non-fossil fuel energy and transportation technologies – is an unforgivable abdication of our responsibilities.'*³⁵

A forceful statement comes from Rabbi Warren Stone, who was quoted at the beginning of this paper:

'An ancient Jewish midrash teaches that when God took Adam around the Garden of Eden and showed him its magnificence and splendor, God spoke to him saying, 'If you destroy it, there is no one else besides you!' Those words ring mightily today, for the very future of life, as we know it is at stake. I fervently believe that climate change, with the destruction that is wreaking our fragile, sacred earth, has become the most profound religious issue of our times. Like Adam, we have been warned and cannot plead ignorance; like Adam, will we fail to heed God's words?'

Rabbi Warren Stone, founding chair of the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Committee on the Environment, 'A Jewish Response to Climate Change', January 2007³⁶

Rabbi Stone is an activist as well as a thinker (he has taken part, for instance, in public protests against oil drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge). Although he may be something of a radical within his religious tradition, other Rabbis and Jewish organisations around the world are following his lead and taking a strong stand on climate change.

BUDDHISM

In contrast to the general anthropocentrism of the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism provides a more biocentric view of the world. The idea of the interconnectedness of all living things is central to Buddhism, and loving-kindness and compassion are extended not only to people and animals, but also to plants and the earth itself.³⁷ Buddhist environmentalists assert that a mindful awareness of the universality of suffering, which is at the core of Buddhist teachings, 'produces a compassionate empathy for all forms of life'.³⁸ The ideas of *karma* and rebirth provide a link between human and other life forms not found in Christianity, Islam or Judaism, as it is possible for a human to transform into a bird or a tree in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.³⁹ According to the Dalai Lama, the belief in reincarnation helps generate a concern for future generations and the survival of the planet.⁴⁰ The practice of non-violence (*ahimsa*) applies to all sentient beings, human and non-human. The Buddha also commended frugality and asceticism as virtues in their own right, acting as a counter to materialist consumption and the exploitation of natural resources. All this contributes to the basis for a profound environmental ethic within Buddhist teachings.

Buddhism has been criticised for promoting inner spiritual searching and retreat from the world above engagement with worldly matters and the structures of power and oppression. However, the emergence of 'engaged Buddhism' (represented in the writings of the Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh) has provided an impetus for Buddhist action on environmental issues and climate change.⁴¹ This has been particularly apparent since the 1990s in Thailand, where Buddhist monks have taken an active role in the protection of the environment. These 'ecology monks' (*phra nak anuraksa*) have felt compelled to address environmental issues as an element of their religious duty to help alleviate suffering.⁴² Additionally, the focus on the interconnectedness of all forms of life in Buddhism has provided an inspiration for many thinkers and activists in the deep ecology movement engaged with climate change, such as Joanna Macy and Gary Snyder.

Prominent Buddhist teachers have displayed explicit awareness of the climate crisis. This is evident, for instance, in the following prayer from a Tibetan Buddhist lama:

'There is a frightful danger the world's reaches/ Will become a great wasteland. May these coming/ Dangers be fully pacified, and sublime/ Good fortune and happiness spread all round.'

From a Global Warming Prayer by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, a reincarnate lama in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism⁴³

In addition, an international Buddhist statement on ecological issues reads:

'Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential. By living simply one can be in harmony with other creatures and learn to appreciate the interconnectedness of all that lives... By starting to look at ourselves and the lives we are living we may come to appreciate that the real solution to the environmental crisis begins with us.'

Joint international Buddhist faith statement, 2003⁴⁴

This statement is representative of the tendency within Buddhist ecology to emphasise a personal rather than a policy approach to tackling environmental problems, and to stress the importance of simple living in harmony with the environment.

HINDUISM

Hinduism shares with Buddhism (and Jainism) the core beliefs in reincarnation, non-violence and asceticism which, as already indicated, contain the basis for an environmental ethic.⁴⁵ A distinctive aspect of Hinduism is that the array of myths about the origins of creation tend to conceive of the universe 'as a living organism, a vast ecosystem, in which each part is inextricably related to the life of the whole'.⁴⁶ This biological worldview is the foundation of an ecological sensibility in the Hindu tradition. Hindu writers on the environment frequently refer to the Artha Veda, in which the Earth appears as a goddess and is the mother of all humans.⁴⁷ Unlike in Christianity, Islam or Judaism, in Hinduism there is no prohibition against 'worship' of the natural world, such as water, trees and rivers, and cows have a special place as a sacred animal. Both the Varaha Purana and the Vishnu Dharmottara say that someone who plants trees will not go to hell.⁴⁸ In an international statement on ecology and the Hindu faith, Swami Vibudhesha Teertha has written that 'this generation has no right to use up all the fertility of the soil and leave behind an unproductive land for future generations', providing a foundation for cross-generational justice.⁴⁹ Ecological thinking in Hinduism has also drawn on the thought of Gandhi, particularly his emphasis on non-violence with respect to all forms of life, and simple living in harmony with the environment.⁵⁰ One of the remaining ecological challenges of Hinduism, however, is that Bhū-Devi/Prithvi (the Earth Goddess) is less important than Sri/Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune.⁵¹

Hinduism has been an inspiration for environmental action. Temples, often famous for their sacred groves, have been at the forefront of the Indian reforestation movement through the instigation of major tree-planting projects.⁵²

What have Hindu thinkers and religious leaders said about environmental degradation and climate change? An important statement comes from a prominent figure in the Hindu reform movement, Swami Agnivesh:

'When there is a lack of rain a threat of earthquake or volcano, poverty, or oppression the religious man or woman will pray to God for help. The fact is that we as human beings have created the oppression and the poverty; we have contributed to the lack of water and climate change. Why should we leave it up to a God who has given us this beautiful creation and the wisdom to sustain it, to fix what we, in our refusal to act upon this wisdom, have broken. The only way forward is to take responsibility.'

Swami Agnivesh, President, World Council of Arya Samaj (Hindu reform movement), 2005⁵³

His words reflect the beliefs of religious people from every faith that humans have a religious and moral responsibility to tackle the climate crisis.

CONFUCIANISM

To date there has been little published research on the ecological ethics that can be drawn from Confucianism.⁵⁴ Thus the specification of a Chinese ecological vision is a somewhat speculative exercise. The foundation of this vision may be the idea that the universe is a single living entity composed of a primal 'material force' or *chi'i*. Humans have a distinctive yet not isolated place in this cosmic system, for there is unity between Heaven, Earth and Humanity. For Neo-Confucianists the purpose of self-cultivation is 'to form one body with the universe'.⁵⁵ Yet on closer inspection there is a strong anthropocentric element to the traditional Confucian approach: self-cultivation leads individuals to expand their heart and mind beyond themselves in concentric circles to include family, community, nation and finally all of humanity.⁵⁶ Empathy thus appears to be limited to human beings. However, there are some more inclusive elements of Confucian thought. The idea of benevolence or love (*jen*) encourages an obligation to nurture the well-being

of all things. Similarly, the Confucian ideal of moderation, and attaining balance, harmony and equilibrium in all things, is a basis for preserving and respecting the earth's natural environment.⁵⁷

INDIGENOUS COSMOLOGIES

Some 300 million people around the world are adherents of indigenous 'religions', although these may be better understood as belief systems about the origins and nature of the cosmic order.. The great diversity of these cosmologies makes it difficult to generalise about their environmental vision or thinking on climate change. The public image of indigenous cosmologies having a strong ecological element does, however, seem to be accurate in reality. For instance, Native American belief systems tend to describe natural entities as having equal worth to human beings, and humans enter covenants with non-humans for their mutual benefit. Violence against an animal (eg. through hunting) necessitates a spiritual act of reciprocation to restore the balance of existence.⁵⁸ The creation myths of indigenous cosmologies frequently draw the human and non-human world into unity. For example, the Sioux holy man Black Elk said, 'Is not the sky a father, and the earth a mother, and are not all living things with feet and roots their children?'⁵⁹ In the Popul Vuh, the indigenous Mayan book of the dawn of life, human beings are described as being made from maize.⁶⁰ Given the depth of this unity it is unsurprising that many modern ecological movements have sought inspiration from indigenous cosmologies and traditions.

CONCLUSION

This paper has only been able to touch briefly on the world's major religions and has not discussed the environmental approaches prevalent in many other forms of religious thought. For instance, the reverence for nature in American transcendentalism (represented in the writing of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson) has contributed to the respect for wilderness in American culture and political activism to protect it.⁶¹ Significant responses to climate change have emerged in the deep ecology movement and the Quaker community, while for many people Jainism and Paganism provide models of respectful relations between the human and non-human world.

Overall, how much common ground is shared by the world's major religions in their approaches to environmental issues in general, and climate change in particular?

With respect to the environment in general, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that most religions display a significant environmental ethic in their beliefs and teachings. The religions examined tend to share the following ideas:⁶²

- The natural world has value in itself and does not exist solely to serve human needs.
- Humans are an integral part of the natural world, and are dependent upon it for their survival.
- The natural world, including animals and plants, is a sacred creation of God or the cosmic order, and humans have a special duty to respect and conserve it, including for future generations.
- Moral norms such as justice, compassion and reciprocity apply both to human beings and to non-human beings.
- Greed and destructiveness are to be condemned while restraint and protection are to be commended.

It is more difficult to specify what the major religions share with respect to confronting climate change in particular. As noted earlier, climate change is a modern problem that is not addressed in traditional scriptures. However, as cited above, the leaders and representative organisations of various faiths have made statements on the subject, based on their interpretations of texts and teachings. There is, in general, common ground on the following points:

- Human-induced climate change is real and needs to be tackled now.
- The problem of climate change has partly resulted from human greed and a culture of over-consumption.
- By damaging the environment humans have sinned or acted immorally in the eyes of God or the cosmic order.
- Religious believers have a religious responsibility to take action.⁶³

Despite the common positions, there are some fundamental differences between religions, particularly that the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) tend to have a more anthropocentric view of the world than biocentric religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, where humans, animals and plants are on a more equal footing. Yet this should not necessarily be seen as a difficulty for developing a strong multi-faith response to climate change. In public policy debates, responses to climate change (both in terms of mitigation and adaptation) are increasingly framed as an issue of human survival rather than the survival of plants, animals or rivers *per se* (which has been a traditional focus of environmentalism since the 1970s). The

discussion now is how to limit the suffering of both future human generations and the lives of those people most vulnerable to climate change today (primarily poor people in developing countries). In this sense, the division between anthropocentrism and biocentrism may be less problematic, as all religions are united in their desire to mitigate human suffering.⁶⁴

Although we live in an era where there is far more talk of religious conflict than religious cooperation or harmony, the shared thinking on ecology and climate change is evidence of an unexpected and profound unity across the world's major religions. In fact, there seems to be more consensus amongst these religions than can be found amongst national governments on the issue of climate change. By implication, more effort should be made to build religious coalitions and conversations on climate change across national boundaries as a way of strengthening international action to tackle the crisis.

Returning to the statement on climate change from the World Council of Churches quoted in the section on Christianity, it argues that the planet's rich industrialised countries must compensate poor communities for the costs of adapting to climate change and must drastically reduce carbon emissions 'to ensure that the legitimate development needs of the world's poor can be met.'⁶⁵ The importance of this statement is that it combines an environmental ethic with an ethic of social justice for the poor. Both these ethics exist within the fundamental beliefs and teachings of most of the world's major religions. It is essential that they be combined to generate a powerful multi-faith response to tackling climate change. This will be the most effective way of harnessing the extraordinary potential of religion to raise public consciousness and mobilise people to bring about the profound social, economic and political changes that the climate crisis demands.

This paper has focused on the belief systems rather than the practices of the world's religions. I would like to finish with some brief comments on the prospects for religious action on climate change.

Clearly there are a growing number of examples of religious leaders and organisations making a practical effort to confront climate change. In February 2007 the Bishop of London publicly pledged not to take any flights for a year to reduce his carbon footprint.⁶⁶ As noted in this paper, Rabbi Warren Stone has protested against oil drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge and Hindu temples are playing a vital role in reforestation projects in India. Moreover, development organisations with religious affiliations or origins, such as Tearfund (a UK-based Christian charity), have begun campaigning on climate change.

Yet there remains a worrying lack of action to date from many major religions. For example, neither the Roman Catholic Papacy nor important Muslim imams have made significant efforts to ensure that their institutions and brethren reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. So, what are the main obstacles preventing religious action on climate change?

- **Vested interests**

Religions may have economic or political interests that mitigate against taking action on climate change. For instance, it is likely that the Vatican's vast investment portfolio includes shareholdings in oil, coal and car manufacturing companies, which could act as a deterrent to making climate change a key issue. (Confirming such possibilities is extremely difficult due to the secretive nature of the Vatican finances.)⁶⁷ This problem resembles one that arose in the eighteenth century, when the Church of England's ownership of Caribbean sugar plantations using slave labour was an obstacle to it supporting abolition of the slave trade.

- **Sectarianism**

All major religions are encumbered by divisions, which can prevent the emergence of action on climate change. For example, although 90 evangelical leaders in the US signed a joint statement on climate change in January 2006, in March 2007 25 evangelical conservatives issued a public letter criticising the strong stance on global warming by the Washington Policy Director of the National Association of Evangelicals. They argued that greater emphasis should be placed on the sanctity of life, sexual abstinence and the integrity of marriage.⁶⁸

- **Organisational inertia**

Religions are often extremely bureaucratic and hierarchical in their organisation, and display an inherent conservatism. As a result they have a general tendency to respond slowly to changing social, economic and political contexts. Within Christian institutions, for instance, there have been prolonged struggles to ordain women priests and sanction homosexual relationships despite the acceptance of gender equality and same-sex relationships in broader Western culture. It is thus not surprising that it is taking time for religions to become converted to the new cause of climate change. For those religions that are relatively decentralised in their organisation (e.g. Hinduism) it is difficult for them to devise a common policy position on issues such as climate change.

- **Conflicting beliefs and values**

Religions contain beliefs and values that conflict with action on climate change. The Catholic Church's stance on birth control, for instance, would make it an unlikely supporter of population control measures that might help a country reduce its long-term carbon emissions. In addition, religious believers may find that their non-religious values trump their religious ones. In China, a Confucian or Taoist belief in moderation and respect for nature does not appear to be strong enough to hold back the growing middle class from frenzied consumerism that contributes to environmental degradation. In India, the fact that the Ganga (Ganges) River is sacred to Hindus has not saved it from industrial and other forms of pollution.⁶⁹

As a result of these obstacles that are preventing religious action on climate change, it may be some time before it is justifiable to endorse the claim that God is Green.

Roman Krznaric
April 2007

APPENDIX: A COMPILATION OF FAITH STATEMENTS APPEARING IN THIS PAPER

Christianity

‘The poor and vulnerable communities in the world and future generations will suffer the most [from climate change]...The rich industrialised nations use far more than their fair share of the atmospheric global commons. They must pay that ecological debt to other peoples by fully compensating them for the costs of adaptation to climate change. Drastic emission reductions by the rich are required to ensure that the legitimate development needs of the world’s poor can be met.’

‘Climate Justice for All: A Statement for the World Council of Churches to the High-Level Ministerial Segment of the UN Climate Conference in Nairobi’, November 2006⁷⁰

‘For most of us, until recently, [climate change] has not been treated as a pressing issue or major priority. Indeed, many of us have required considerable convincing before becoming persuaded that climate change is a real problem and that it ought to matter to us as Christians...As American evangelical Christian leaders, we recognize both our opportunity and our responsibility to offer a biblically based moral witness that can help shape public policy in the most powerful nation on earth, and therefore contribute to the well-being of the entire world...Claim 1: Human-induced climate change is real. Claim 2: The consequences of climate change will be significant, and will hit the poor hardest. Claim 3: Christian moral convictions demand our response to the climate change problem. Claim 4: The need to act now is urgent.’

‘Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action’, January 2006, signed by 90 US Evangelical leaders⁷¹

‘The world needs an ecological conversion so as to examine critically current models of thought, as well as those of production and consumption...It is the Holy See’s hope that opportunities like [making the Kyoto protocol fully operational] may favor the application of an energy strategy which is both global and shared in the long term, capable of satisfying short- and long-term global energy needs, protect human health and the environment, and establish precise commitments that will effectively confront the problem of climate change.’

Statement by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Holy See’s permanent observer to the United Nations, October 2006⁷²

Islam

‘God entrusts humans to enjoy the bounty of nature on the strict condition that they take care of it and preserve it...Unrestricted exploitation and destruction of nature have produced unimaginable climatic changes. Polar ice is melting, threatening low-lying countries. As most of the world is enduring high temperatures and lack of rain, shortage of water is becoming a world problem and is affecting the production of food grains...None of the [necessary changes] will happen unless there is a shift away from growth economics and the concept of profit above everything. Time is running out. Unfortunately there is no sign of awakening in sight. People of religion must forget their theological differences and work together to save the world from climatic ruin.’

Statement from the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, December 2006⁷³

‘Humanity is the only creation of Allah to be entrusted with the overall responsibility of maintaining planet Earth in the overall balanced ecology that man found’.

Islamic Faith Statement from the World Muslim League, 2003⁷⁴

Judaism

‘An ancient Jewish midrash teaches that when God took Adam around the Garden of Eden and showed him its magnificence and splendor, God spoke to him saying, ‘If you destroy it, there is no one else besides you!’ Those words ring mightily today, for the very future of life, as we know it is at stake. I fervently believe that climate change, with the destruction that is wreaking our fragile, sacred earth, has become the most profound religious issue of our times. Like Adam, we have been warned and cannot plead ignorance; like Adam, will we fail to heed God’s words?’
*Rabbi Warren Stone, founding chair of the Central Conference of American Rabbis’ Committee on the Environment, January 2007*⁷⁵

‘We have a solemn obligation to do whatever we can within reason to prevent harm to current and future generations and to preserve the integrity of creation with which we have been entrusted. Not to do so when we have the technological capacity – as we do in the case of non-fossil fuel energy and transportation technologies – is an unforgivable abdication of our responsibilities.’
*From a resolution adopted at the 111th Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, March 2000*⁷⁶

Hinduism

‘When there is a lack of rain a threat of earthquake or volcano, poverty, or oppression the religious man or woman will pray to God for help. The fact is that we as human beings have created the oppression and the poverty; we have contributed to the lack of water and climate change. Why should we leave it up to a God who has given us this beautiful creation and the wisdom to sustain it, to fix what we, in our refusal to act upon this wisdom, have broken. The only way forward is to take responsibility.’
*Swami Agnivesh, President, World Council of Arya Samaj (Hindu reform movement), 2005*⁷⁷

‘Hinduism is a religion that is very near to nature...A life without contribution toward the preservation of ecology is a life of sin and a life without specific purpose or use...This generation has no right to use up all the fertility of the soil and leave behind an unproductive land for future generations.’
*Swami Vibudhesha Teertha, Visva Hindu Parishad, 2003*⁷⁸

Buddhism

‘There is a frightful danger the world's reaches/Will become a great wasteland. May these coming/Dangers be fully pacified, and sublime/Good fortune and happiness spread all round.’
*From a Global Warming Prayer by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, a prominent reincarnate lama in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism*⁷⁹

‘Buddha taught that respect for life and the natural world is essential. By living simply one can be in harmony with other creatures and learn to appreciate the interconnectedness of all that lives...By starting to look at ourselves and the lives we are living we may come to appreciate that the real solution to the environmental crisis begins with us.’
*Joint international Buddhist faith statement, 2003*⁸⁰

Indigenous religions

‘Is not the sky a father, and the earth a mother, and are not all living things with feet and roots their children?’
*Native American holy man Black Elk*⁸¹

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NOTES

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¹ 'A Jewish Response to Climate Change', 2/1/7, http://www.planetsave.com/ps_mambo/Independent_News/Opinion/A_Jewish_Response_to_Climate_Change_200701028280/.

² An example of this tendency is that a Google search for the phrase 'religious conflict' brings up 543,000 pages, whereas a search for 'religious cooperation' lists only 26,000, 'religious unity' 89,000, and 'religious harmony' 141,000. The searches were conducted on 20/2/7 using the 'exact phrase' function.

³ See, for instance, the over 400 bibliographic references on religion and development compiled by the Danish Institute for International Studies at http://www.diis.dk/graphics/CDR_Publications/cdr_publications/library_paper/lp-98-1.htm.

⁴ Tucker and Grim 2001, 16-17.

⁵ White 1967, 1205.

⁶ Weber 1958; Tawney 1980.

⁷ McDaniel 1993, 73-5.

⁸ Ruether 2000, 604-611; Pedersen 1998, 261.

⁹ Pedersen 1998, 266.

¹⁰ John Paul II (1990); McDaniel 1993, 72.

¹¹ This statement was delivered to the Second Committee of the 61st session of the U.N. General Assembly, on sustainable development and ecology. See

http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Justice_and_peace/JPO_news/catholic_social_teaching_news.php.

¹² <http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/international/globalclimate.htm>.

¹³ <http://www.christiansandclimate.org/statement>.

¹⁴ 'Encyclical of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew for the day of the protection of natural environment', September 1, 2006, <http://www.oikumene.org/index.php?id=2512>.

¹⁵ <http://www.oikoumene.org/index.php?id=2640>.

¹⁶ Nasr 2003, 85.

¹⁷ Nasr 2003, 87-93.

¹⁸ Nasr 2003, 96-7; Pedersen 1998, 268.

¹⁹ Hay 2001, 157.

²⁰ Nasr 2003, 97-99.

²¹ Haq 2001, 168.

²² Pedersen 1998, 269.

²³ Haq 2001, 147; Pedersen 1998, 269.

²⁴ Afrasiabi 2003, 289.

²⁵ Palmer and Findlay 2003.

²⁶ 'Common Belief: Australia's Faith Communities on Climate Change',

<http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/COMMON%20BELIEF%20-%20Australian%20statements.pdf>

²⁷ Tirosh-Samuels 2001, 101; Pedersen 1998, 259.

²⁸ Tirosh-Samuels 2001, 102.

²⁹ <http://www.interfaithpower.org/TDSjewish.CCAR.htm>. See also the discussion in Pedersen (1998, 263-4).

³⁰ Tirosh-Samuels 2001, 102, 106.

³¹ Pedersen 1998, 263.

³² Tirosh-Samuels 2001, 103.

³³ Tirosh-Samuels 2001, 115.

³⁴ Tirosh-Samuels 2001, 99.

³⁵ From a resolution adopted at the 111th Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, March 2000, <http://www.interfaithpower.org/TDSjewish.CCAR.htm>.

³⁶ 'A Jewish Response to Climate Change', 2/1/7,

http://www.planetsave.com/ps_mambo/Independent_News/Opinion/A_Jewish_Response_to_Climate_Change_200701028280/.

³⁷ Swearer 2001, 227.

³⁸ Swearer 2001, 226.

³⁹ Pedersen 1998, 270.

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- ⁴⁰ <http://www.dalailama.com/page.77.htm>.
- ⁴¹ Swearer 2001, 234-5. See also Hanh (1987).
- ⁴² For a list of sources on this topic, see http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion/buddhism/projects/thai_ecology.html.
- ⁴³ <http://www.rinpoche.com/globalpryr.html>.
- ⁴⁴ This statement is from representatives of Engaged Buddhism in Europe, Cambodian Buddhism, Ladakhi Buddhism and Vietnamese Buddhism. See Palmer and Finlay (2003).
- ⁴⁵ Pedersen 1998, 270.
- ⁴⁶ Diana Eck quoted in Pedersen (1998, 273).
- ⁴⁷ Pedersen 1998, 273.
- ⁴⁸ Narayanan 2001, 187.
- ⁴⁹ Palmer and Finlay (2003).
- ⁵⁰ Pedersen 1998, 274.
- ⁵¹ Narayanan 2001, 198.
- ⁵² Narayanan 2001, 188-190.
- ⁵³ <http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/mfc/pdf/symposium20005/swami%20agnivesh.pdf>.
- ⁵⁴ Some of the following statements are also relevant to Taoism which, according to many scholars, is so closely related to Confucianism 'that they can be regarded as two aspects of a single religious culture'. See Pedersen (1998, 276).
- ⁵⁵ Pedersen 1998, 276.
- ⁵⁶ Weiming 2001, 254.
- ⁵⁷ Weiming 2001, 251.
- ⁵⁸ Pedersen 1998, 279.
- ⁵⁹
- <http://www.theregenerationproject.org/mfiles/Major%20Religious%20Leaders%20&%20Orgs%20on%20GW%20and%20Enviro.pdf>
- ⁶⁰ Tedlock 1996.
- ⁶¹ Nash 2001, 84-95.
- ⁶² The following points have been adapted, with some changes, from Pedersen (1998, 281).
- ⁶³ The second and fourth commonalities are stressed by Rabbi Warren Stone. See http://www.planetsave.com/ps_mambo/Independent_News/Opinion/A_Jewish_Response_to_Climate_Change_200701028280/.
- ⁶⁴ Some scholars believe, in any case, that the division between anthropocentric and biocentric religions has been overdrawn (Pedersen 1998, 254).
- ⁶⁵ 'Climate Justice for All: A Statement for the World Council of Churches to the High-Level Ministerial Segment of the UN Climate Conference in Nairobi', November 2006, <http://www.oikoumene.org/index.php?id=2640>.
- ⁶⁶ <http://environment.guardian.co.uk/climatechange/story/0,,2008211,00.html>.
- ⁶⁷ In a recent investigation by Mark Dowd for a Channel 4 television documentary in the UK, a Vatican Cardinal was asked: 'Does the Vatican have investments in the coal and oil industries and if so, given the urgent nature of the global warming issue, would it be prudent to revise such investments?' The (somewhat enigmatic) written reply was: 'I do not know whether the Holy See has investments in the coal and oil industries.' See <http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk/vatican-climate.htm>.
- ⁶⁸ <http://www.edition.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/03/14/evangelical.rift/index.html>.
- ⁶⁹ As Narayanan points out, there is a 'Hindu conviction that rivers like Ganga are so inherently pure that nothing can pollute them'. On the Hindu reverence for rivers, see Narayanan (2001, 191-4, 199).
- ⁷⁰ <http://www.oikoumene.org/index.php?id=2640>.
- ⁷¹ <http://www.christiansandclimate.org/statement>.
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- ⁷⁴ Palmer and Findlay 2003.
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- ⁷⁶ <http://www.interfaithpower.org/TDSjewish.CCAR.htm>.
- ⁷⁷ <http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/mfc/pdf/symposium20005/swami%20agnivesh.pdf>.
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⁸⁰ This statement is from representatives of Engaged Buddhism in Europe, Cambodian Buddhism, Ladakhi Buddhism and Vietnamese Buddhism. See Palmer and Finlay (2003).

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