

## Faith for Earth

### Background

The UN Environment Foresight Briefs are published by UN Environment to, among others, highlight a hotspot of environmental change, feature an emerging science topic, or discuss a contemporary environmental issue. The public is thus provided with the opportunity to find out what is happening to their changing environment and the consequences of everyday choices, and to think about future directions for policy.

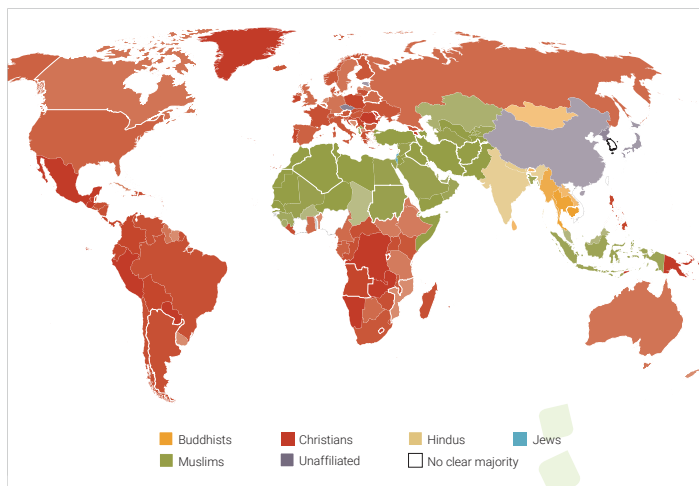
### Introduction

*"As stewards of God's creation, we are called to make the earth a beautiful garden for the human family. When we destroy our forests, ravage our soil and pollute our seas, we betray that noble calling."*

Pope Francis Speech, Manila, Philippines, 18 January 2015

Typically discussed in the news media as a scientific, environmental or political issue, global warming is being reframed as a moral and spiritual issue by religious leaders – most notably by Pope Francis (Francis 2015).

Faith leaders from many other traditions are speaking out on the issue of climate change as well, including Evangelical Christians, Muslims, Episcopalians, and Jews. Interdenominational organizations, such as Interfaith Power & Light, are serving as forums for collaborative efforts on the environment (Roser-Renouf et al., 2016)



Majority Religion, by Country (Grim et al., 2012). Countries are coloured according to the majority religion. Darker shading represents a greater prevalence of the majority religion

When *Laudato si'* was published in 2015, it greatly heightened interest and focus on environmental concerns. Pope Francis address to "every person living on this planet" declared that "climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, and political.... and it represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day" (Francis 2015). The Pope has forcefully argued that climate change results from over-consumption, is fuelled by greed, and that its impacts fall disproportionately on the world's poor (Francis 2015).

In many societies across the world, religion provides an important lens for understanding human worldviews, attitudes and behaviour regarding major issues such as social and environmental change (Kaplan 2010). This is

so because a majority of people of the world identify with one form of religious tradition or another (Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013).

At the same time, inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue converge on a few insights, among them that of nature as sacred, and the rights of nature, both of which are shared by most organized religions and indigenous peoples, and many natural scientists (UNEP 2016).

### Why is this issue important?

Religion plays a significant role in the understanding and shaping of attitudes, opinions and behaviours including for management and use of the environment and natural resources (UNEP 2016; Carlisle and Clark 2017).

Many faiths from around the world have called on believers to incorporate ecological care into their religious life for the sake of the planet (Lewis 2014).

Some commentators have even argued that religion offers a culture of care that is more sustainable than that of consumption-driven capitalism (Lewis 2014). To several religions, nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and therefore demands reverent care (Taylor 2010).

Utilizing the agility of these beliefs in addressing climate change, energy conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity, and reforestation, among others, in collaboration with key scientific, economic, public policy, and education partners is crucial for sustainable development (UNEP 2016; Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013).

## What are the findings?

*“Our common home is being pillaged, laid waste and harmed with impunity. Cowardice in defending it is a grave sin.”*

Pope Francis Speech, Santa Cruz, Bolivia, 9 July 2015

Prior research has described evangelical Protestants (especially those from Western traditions) as hostile toward environmentalism, but this traditional stance, however deeply rooted, is being challenged (Billings and Samson 2012). Scholars in religion and ecology began important explorations of the ecological influence of the world’s religions in the 1960s, which led to the emergence in the 1990s of the disciplinary field of religion and ecology (Jenkins and Chapple 2011). More recently, environmental organizations have increasingly allied with faith communities such that faith-based environmental groups have multiplied, and ecologically oriented scientific and professional societies have begun to organize religion–ecology groups (Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013). One notable outcome has been the “vast support for environmental stewardship among key evangelical leaders” (Simmons 2009).

Members of religious communities participate in a broader alliance of scientists, policy makers, and non-governmental organizations to influence the direction of social–ecological change (Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013). As a result, links between religion-based environmental values and scientific and public-policy disciplines continue to evolve, and religious scholars, spiritual leaders, and laity can facilitate this process (Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013).

In 2004, the National Association of Evangelicals, an umbrella association of 53 evangelical Protestant denominations in the USA with a combined membership of about 30 million produced a position statement advocating more resources to combat environmental degradation, global warming and to promote environmental sustainability (Djupe and Gwiasda 2010).



The Association justified the need to address warming due to Christians’ God-given dominion over the world and their moral responsibility as stewards of the Earth.

Lundberg (2017) reports that in 2014, the 14 bishops of the Church of Sweden published “A letter from the Bishops on the climate” where they state that “now it is time for science, politics, business, culture and religion—all of them expressions of the dignity of mankind—to cooperate. The climate challenge is existential and spiritual, since it touches upon the very basic conditions of human life: What is the role of the human in creation? What responsibility do we have for those who are far away?” There is a growing interest and awareness in the Church of Sweden concerning climate impact and sustainability. The environment is deeply taken into consideration and is becoming an integral aspect of Church life.

The Muslim community approach to the environment is based upon the intended role for humans in this world – and that is of “stewards of the earth.” Stewardship of the earth is supported by several verses in the Quran especially in the light of the environmental degradation that unchecked greed and thoughtless exploitation of resources have brought about (Serageldin 1989).

Muslim Faith-based Organizations (FBO) are relatively newer entrants into the scene of international development. The Kuwaiti International Islamic Charitable Organization has recently raised almost 40 million USD from Zakat for Syrian refugees (UNEP 2016). Driven by ideas of pan-Islamic solidarity, many organizations focus exclusively on Muslim countries and populations. But their religious identity arguably also gives them greater access to areas that are difficult for secular organizations to enter or influence. For example, fishermen in Zanzibar only stopped using dynamite when Islamic Relief spent time teaching about the Qur’anic precepts about stewardship of the Earth (UNEP 2016).

Hinduism, which has the third largest followers after Christianity and Islam, contains numerous references to the worship of the divine in nature in its Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Sutras and its other sacred texts. Millions of Hindus recite Sanskrit mantras daily to revere their rivers, mountains, trees, animals and the earth.

The diverse theologies of Hinduism suggest that:

- The earth can be seen as a manifestation of the goddess and must be treated with respect.
- The five elements – space, air, fire, water and earth – are the foundation of an interconnected web of life.
- Dharma – often translated as “duty” – can be reinterpreted to include our responsibility to care for the earth.
- Simple living is a model for the development of sustainable economies.
- Our treatment of nature directly affects our karma (or the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual influence the future of that individual).

Buddhism has close tie with the earth and teaches people to overcome the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion, which induce all large-scale human destruction of our planet. In a Buddhist point of view, the control of human being’s endless demand from the earth should be a crucial aspect of pursuit for the human wellbeing in

the modern world. The Buddha taught five precepts for everyday life:

- (i) do not harm any living creature
- (ii) do not take more than you need
- (iii) do not act thoughtlessly,
- (iv) do not steal, be generous in giving
- (v) do not lie. Buddhist teachers draw upon these precepts, particularly the first three, to explain the importance of conservation (Arc 2018b).

Daoism (or Taoism) is a native religion with almost 2000 years history in East Asia and has its unique view on the indivisible relationship and connection between human and the earth. "Dao", which literally means the "Way", or more precisely the way of heaven, earth and humanity, embodies the central value of Daoism.

According to the fundamental Daoist scripture "Tao Te Ching", humanity follows the earth, the earth follows the heaven, heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows what is natural. Daoism also teaches about harmony with nature and that insatiable human desire will lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources. The belief encourages both government and people to take good care of nature. In this sense, Daoism is regarded as a religion with an inherent nature of environmentalism (Arc 2018b).

Some indigenous beliefs also have their unique view on the earth. The indigenous groups deem the earth as the mother of human beings and should be treated as a fundamental and rights bearing entity. As such, the well-being of "Mother Earth" predicts physical, mental, emotional and spiritual longevity of indigenous peoples.

Faith-based organizations are highly networked and are viewed as being trustworthy to achieve on-the-ground results in a timely manner and wherever needed (UNEP 2016). The importance of Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) has long been recognized at state level with some governments establishing formal partnerships with them. For instance, the American government established a


dedicated office of Faith Based Activities as far back as 2001 (Vidal 2001).


FBOs are also sustainable institutions and, in recent years, policymakers have begun to look to these faith-based organizations to play a greater role in strengthening environmental conservation and natural resources management. Back in 1993, congregations, denominational organizations, and other faith-based organizations represented the third largest component of the non-profit sector in the U.S., after health and education. Registered congregations with more than US\$5,000 in annual revenue numbered about 350,000; and collectively, their estimated yearly expenditures exceeded US\$ 47 billion (Vidal 2001, Berman 2010).


In September 2015, faith leaders, representing 24 belief traditions from around the world, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Shintoism, declared in Bristol, United Kingdom, their support in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNEP 2016).




The influence of FBOs

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**8%** of the habitable land surface (Palmer & Moss, 2017)
- 


TV and Radio stations more than the whole of European Union (Palmer & Moss, 2017)
- 


**5%** all commercial forests (Palmer & Moss, 2017)

Produces more books and publications than any other network (Palmer & Moss, 2017)
- 


**50%** per cent of schools worldwide (UNICEF, 2012)


America's market for religious investment products has grown by more than **3,500%** (MacDonald, 2007)
- 

Contributions to health services ranges from **4.1%** in Angola to **44%** in Rwanda (Kagawa, Anglemeyer, & Montagu, 2012)
- 

**50%** of all sponsors of housing for the elderly developed by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (Vidal, 2001)
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**64%** of schools in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2012)

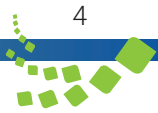
Faith-based mutual funds, grew from about **\$500 million** to more than **\$17 billion** (MacDonald, 2007)
- 

**10%** of the world's total financial institutions (Palmer & Moss, 2017)
- 

**14%** of Community Development corporations (CDCs) (Vidal, 2001)

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## What has/is being done?

UN Environment has been engaging with faith-based organizations for many years, recognizing the prominent role that they can play in the implementation of the 2030 agenda. They are well placed to explore the root causes of environmental problems, and to express the values that speak to the heart.

### The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC)

The Alliance of Religions and Conservation was founded in 1995 and works with 12 faiths and their networks worldwide that embrace 85% of the world's population or 5 billion people (ARC, nd). Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism are working in countless ways to care for the environment. For instance, in Tanzania the Sacred Gift model used Islamic teachings to halt destruction of the marine ecosystem by the local fishing communities (ARC, 2011). In November 2017, a global movement aimed at shifting billions of dollars of faith-based investments into initiatives supporting sustainable development and the environment was launched in Switzerland (ARC 2018).

### Interfaith Partnership for the Environment (IPE)

Founded in 1986 as part of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment was created to initially inform North American congregations about the serious environmental problems facing life on Earth. The group deals with a range of ecological issues, including climate change and wildlife conservation. Its members are clergy, politicians, and other civic leaders.

### Engaging Faith-Based Organisations to the Sustainable Development Goals

In November 2017, the UN Environment launched a global initiative to strategically engage with faith-based organizations, toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and fulfilling Agenda 2030. The Strategy focuses on mobilizing faith-based

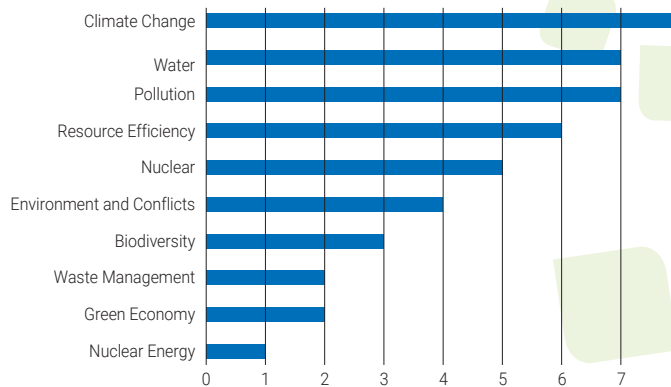


*Craig Jessop / Shutterstock.com*

investments in supporting SDGs implementation while greening their assets and providing the needed knowledge for effective messages of faith leaders with decision makers and the public. The strategy was discussed with 40 participants from 20 organizations representing eight faith congregations during the UN Environment Assembly (Dahl 2017).

### Environmental Priorities

as identified by participants at the Environment Consultation with Faith-based Organizations on 30 November 2017 (UNEP 2016)



### Interfaith Rainforest Initiative

The Interfaith Rainforest Alliance was launched in Oslo, Norway in June 2017. The Alliance brings moral attention and spiritual commitment to ending tropical deforestation (IRI, 2017). Partners in the initiative include Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI), Rainforest Foundation Norway, GreenFaith, Parliament of the World's Religions, Religions for Peace, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Yale University's Forum on Religion and Ecology, Parliament of the World's Religions, Religions for Peace, REIL Network and the World Council of Churches.

### Benefits of a Faith for Earth Engagement

The networks of faith-based organizations and faith leaders do cross continents and political boundaries making it not only viable but also a practical means to achieve sustainable development.

Tapping into the spiritual wealth of people and their beliefs will accelerate people's engagement, and the organizational drive to contribute. Mobilizing the financial assets and practices of faith-based funding institutions responds directly to the Addis Ababa Action Agenda for financing sustainable development.

**Major challenges**

UN organizations have been working with faith-based organizations and religious leaders and have come across some challenges. One of the most important challenges is building trust around the common objectives.

The trust issue can be bridged by agreeing with faith-based organizations on common grounds where all meet in principle on the need to protect the creation and ensure the duty of care by all. The coupling of environmental sustainability and duty of care can be the corner stone for a common vision that enhances the role of religion and culture in achieving sustainability.

- Gender issues and women’s involvement might be sensitive to some of the faith-based organizations. Efforts are needed to partner with those FBOs that are open to cooperate and collaborate with other faiths based on human rights-based approach. Some basic principles for engagement should be established and made clear to all partners in a transparent manner.
- It is critical to create a momentum for interfaith collaboration on common issues and an adequate balance representing all major faiths. Such an effort will minimise a silo approach while working with faith-based organizations at local, national, regional and international levels.

- It might be perceived by some that engaging with faith-based organizations is merely a mechanism for delivery of projects’ objectives. Organizing global policy and collaboration dialogue fora should therefore be encouraged. This require creativity and innovation in addressing policy issues, identifying environmental concerns at the local level, and creating a network of faith-based citizen scientists for monitoring environmental trends.
- An integrated approach should facilitate the integration of religious and cultural values to ensure inclusive green and transformative development informed by faith-based values and behaviours to achieve sustainable consumption and production. The integrated approach can promote innovative nature-based solutions, respect for traditional and indigenous knowledge and cultural diversity, and the exercise of environmental stewardship and duty of care.
- Some faith-based organizations are deemed to be associated with promoting violent actions towards other beliefs and have been financing terrorist activities. A careful review of such faith-based organizations should be done as part of the due diligence.



**What are the implications for policy?**

**Involve the youth in faith dialogues**

Global environmental priorities do resonate with the public to a certain extent, however, approaches need to consider what is directly relevant to them daily. The language spoken by scientists must be translated into a language understood by faith followers and with simple policy statements for local and regional authorities. Likewise, religious scriptures would need to be identified to demonstrate linkages with scientific findings on the protection of nature as well as scientific findings that reinforce scriptures.

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