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Religion and the environment

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By *Dan Smyer Yü** and *Mary Evelyn Tucker**

From the pope to the people: Emerging religious environmental movement faces challenges amid global economic pressures



Sambha | Image courtesy of Dan Smyer Yü

The one bus to the village of Sambha in northeastern Qinghai Province in China leaves in the late afternoon. The setting sun serves as a backdrop as the county bus turns off the provincial highway, and winds along a narrow road between mountainous cliffs and the bluish waters of the Machu River.

Nearing the village, the driver honks his horn a few times to warn approaching travelers, and makes one final sharp 90-degree turn allowing travelers to see the entirety of Sambha, an awe-inspiring panorama of wheat fields and diverse flora and fauna embraced by large

mountains and flowing water.

The setting created by geological forces, and cared for by centuries of human beings living in cultural and spiritual communion with the land, evokes the images of the myths of Arcadia and the Shire of the Lord of the Rings, in which self-sustainability, abundance and harmony are the essence of their eco-systems.

Just one element is missing: Young adults.

Many villagers from 18 to 45 have left to become construction workers or migrant laborers digging up wild mushrooms and tonic herbs for consumers outside the traditional Tibetan land.

And therein lies one of the greatest challenges of the modern environmental movement: The need to create a sense of urgency about the short- and long-term environmental dangers confronting the planet in the face of a global financial downturn that creates even more pressure to place a priority on economic development.

The economic miracle that has made China a financial superpower and lifted tens of millions of people out of poverty has also created such ecological havoc that many of those who can afford it are fleeing cities like Beijing, and in some cases even China itself, for healthier landscapes.

What it has not done is shaken faith in the mainstream belief in Chinese society in the primacy of economic growth as the path to happiness.

So, too, is there pressure elsewhere throughout the developing and developed world to make economic growth a priority over environmental stewardship.

Nine out of 10 respondents to the 2010 World Values survey said it is important to care for the environment. But when people were asked to identify [the most serious problem facing the world](#), 56 percent said people living in poverty and need; just 14 percent said environmental pollution.

Religious groups, with their longstanding commitments to both the divine nature of creation and human development, are uniquely positioned to help seek ways to develop public policies that balance economic needs with the protection of the planet.

And if they have been somewhat late to the modern environmental movement, religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis, with his landmark encyclical calling on the world to engage [in a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet](#), are making an impact.

In the end, there may be two key questions facing global religious communities as they seek to respond to a growing environmental crisis:

Do they have the will, and are people ready to listen?

Power of religion





Sambha | Image courtesy of Dan Smyer Yü

Nearly every religion, from Daoism, Buddhism and Hinduism to Islam, Judaism and Christianity, has a reverence for creation.

The common values that most of the world's religions hold in relation to the natural world might be summarized as reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, responsibility and renewal. The values were identified by international participants at a series of 10 conferences on global religion and ecology at Harvard University.

Yet there are clearly variations of interpretation within and between religions regarding these principles.

In Christianity and Judaism, for example, the scriptural passage in Genesis that human beings should have dominion over “every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” is viewed by religious environmentalists as meaning people have a duty to be stewards of the Earth, and not to take it as a blank check for human primacy over nature.

Religious communities also have their own external and internal conflicts over environmental politics, and the complex ethical questions involved in developing policies that promote ecological sustainability and reduce human suffering.

What is emerging, however, are signs of a global religious environmental movement that is broad-based, and committed to bringing its moral authority to bear on issues such as global warming, climate justice and sustainable development.

Consider these developments:

- Global faith leaders such as the Dalai Lama; the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew; and Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, have all spoken on behalf of the environment.
- Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* released last spring will have a lasting impact in insuring that the moral dimension of “climate justice” will be part of environmental discussions.
- Religious leaders and groups were well represented among representatives from 195 countries at the United Nations conference on climate change in Paris in December. Just as people of faith were visible in the People's Climate March in Sept 2014 in New York.
- In the U.S. alone, [more than 70 religious environmental movement organizations have been founded since 1997.](#)
- Buddhist social activists and teachers such as [Sulak Sivaraksa](#) of Thailand and Khnepos

Sodargye and Khnepo Tsultrim Lodro in the Tibetan regions of China have organized environmentally-engaged community programs throughout Southeast Asia.

There is a long way to go, however.

If we just examine our modern lifestyles and their demands on the Earth's resources, it is not too difficult to see that the 21st century continues the Industrial Revolution-era practice of the unlimited extraction of these limited resources.

While significant, the environmental statements offered by religious organizations and leaders have not often translated to action on the ground.

And each religious group in its own country faces particular challenges from the powerful social, cultural, political and economic forces promoting unfettered development.

The Chinese example offers an illustrative case study.

Ecological civilization



Sambha | Image courtesy of Dan Smyer Yü

Atheism remains official state ideology in China, but the government gave up its efforts to eradicate religion in the period of reform following the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.

A constitutional provision for religious freedom in 1982 permitted temples, mosques and churches to reopen under state supervision. Five religions are officially recognized by the state: Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (Protestant).

The pent-up demand for spiritual expression outside the state has led to stunning growth for many groups. The [2007 Chinese Spiritual Life Survey](#) found that 85 percent of the population had some form of religious belief and practice, with many practicing some forms of folk religion.

About 18 percent identified as Buddhists. From 1950 to 2010, the estimated number of Christians in China increased from 4 million to 67 million. By 2030, China is projected to have [some 225 million Protestant Christians alone](#).

But belonging to a religious group still can be costly in terms of educational, economic and political opportunities. Even greater penalties are faced by believers in groups not sanctioned

by the state, such as Catholics who remain loyal to the international Catholic Church over the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association.

Christians, overall, face obstacles in entering public policy debates due to lingering cultural attitudes associating them with Western colonialism. For their part, many Christian groups are still focused on the practicalities of building places of worship to serve a growing population amid the state's restrictive regulations.

Running an underground church does not leave much time for environmental discourse.

Buddhists and Daoists have more freedom as they are seen as a part of China's cultural history. But they, too, are limited in challenging the state's growth-driven economic policy and the rising consumerism, and the fact that Buddhists are institutionally less organized hinders their attempt to promote social causes. The attention in the nation's media to sexual and financial scandals of some monks also undermines Buddhists' credibility for making social changes.

Tibetan Buddhists, however, have been more active in promoting environmental action in China, setting up environmental organizations such as Nynambu Yultse Ecological Preservation Association and Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association. Quite a few Tibetan lamas travel in China advocating the oneness of humankind with other species and the Earth itself.

In addition, while many people in China do not view Confucianism [as a religion](#), it exerts a pervasive influence as a cultural tradition holding key values that shape attitudes toward nature. The environmental dialogue in China is drawing on many ideas from Confucianism in conferences, books, and public meetings.

What gives hope that these seeds will fall on fertile ground is the rising popular dissatisfaction with environmental problems that reach into everyday lives with suffocating smog, respiratory illnesses and the destruction of natural landscapes.

More than four in five Chinese adults said [air pollution is a very big or moderately big problem](#), the 2013 Global Attitudes Project found.

The government has taken notice. Chinese President Xi Jinping has said addressing pollution is a priority. The 2012 National Congress of the Communist Party of China made building "[ecological civilization](#)" part of the overall development plan.

The term ecological civilization is vague, and open to diverse interpretations in the public arena. This makes it possible for religious groups to be part of a coalition addressing China's environmental issues.

The larger challenge in a state still committed to continuing economic growth that has lifted tens of millions of people out of poverty is framing the conversation in a way that integrates sustainable development with the short- and long-term environmental health of Chinese society.

So in addition to scriptural or doctrinal arguments, religious environmentalists also are finding it effective to speak about traditional ecological knowledge and focus on models such as Sambha in Western China where a reverential harmony between the land has existed for more than a millennium.

Moving forward also will take humility on all sides.



Religious groups have to be careful to work in broad interfaith coalitions, and not be seen as promoting their religions or posing a threat to the state.

State officials and other key public policy leaders, many of whom have been conditioned to associate religion with superstition, need to be open to viewing religious groups as key repositories of values and trusted motivators in conveying a moral vision of the necessity of caring for the Earth.

No one is going to build a base for sweeping environmental change on their own.

Hopeful signs

The tipping point of environmental awareness that can lead to action is not just present in China.

Around the world, issues such as global warming and climate justice are becoming public priorities.

Forty-seven percent of respondents to the 2010 World Values survey said [protecting the environment should be given priority over economic growth](#), even if it causes some loss of jobs. Just 43 percent said economic growth and creating jobs should be a higher priority.

The Comparative Values Survey of Islamic Countries found similar support for environmental care relative to economic growth.

Although religions have been slow to respond and do not immediately spring to mind as catalysts for environmental action, their moral authority and institutional power gives them the ability to help effect a change in attitudes, practices, and public policies in respect to sustainability.

It is a capacity they have demonstrated in many major social movements.

For example, while the Industrial Revolution from the beginning of the 18th century has run roughshod over the environment, religious groups have played key roles in addressing its excesses.

Religious groups have been at the forefront of successful campaigns to abolish slavery, institute child labor laws and other protections for workers and in advocating for economic justice in areas from living wages to an end to workplace discrimination.

As the pope made clear in his landmark encyclical, the ethical challenges of climate change go beyond environmental damage to encompass larger issues of injustice such as the inequitable treatment of the poor and those most affected by climate change.

But, as in China, their involvement in environmental issues must be undertaken with humility. The size and complexity of the environmental problems facing the world require collaborative efforts both among global religions, and in dialogue with other key domains of human endeavor, such as science, economics, and public policy.

“We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all,” the pope declared.

And, as is the case in China, one source of hope that it is not too late to address the environmental crisis lies in the many living examples of nature that can evoke awe and wonder.



Places like Gang Rinpoche (Precious Snow Mountain) in western Tibet, the five sacred Buddhist mountains in China, Machu Picchu in Peru and Uluru in central Australia speak to both ancients and moderns as sacred sites of sublime integrity, reminding the world what is possible when humanity seeks to be in spiritual harmony with nature.

A religious-based approach to caring for the Earth is not a case of pitting concern for the environment against economic development, say Pope Francis and many other religious voices.

It is rather a case of speaking out against “a false or superficial ecology” that would dismiss the damage being done to the Earth to justify unfettered development that is unbalanced, unequal and exploitative.

“Today,” Pope Francis said in his 2015 encyclical that is now part of the canon of social teaching of the 1.3 billion-member Catholic Church, “we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

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Resources:

[Association of Religion Data Archives](#): Search for terms such as the environment, climate change and global warming to find data on environmental attitudes from among several hundred leading surveys, along with references to scholarly articles and books on religion and ecology.

[ARDA National Profiles](#): View religious, demographic, and socio-economic information for all nations with populations of more than 2 million.

[The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale](#): The forum is the largest international multi-religious project of its kind. The website offers an array of excellent resources, including an [overview of world religions and ecology](#), many key [official statements on religion and ecology](#), [bibliographies](#) of published works on global religious communities and the environment and news [articles](#) on religion and ecology.

Other Major Organizations: Leading groups on religion and ecology include [The Alliance of Religions and Conservation](#), [The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development](#), and [Green Muslims](#).

[ReligionandNature.com](#): The site features the work and projects of an international and interdisciplinary community of scholars investigating the nexus of religion, nature and culture. It is also the host site for the [International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture](#).



Articles:

Bhagwat, Shonil, Ormsby, Alison, and Rutte, Claudia, [The role of religion in linking conservation and development: Challenges and opportunities](#). The article examines relationships among secular and faith-based groups in promoting sustainable development.

Lee, Chengpang, and Han, Ling, "Recycling Bodhisattva: The Tzu-Chi movement's response to global climate change." This article traces the emergence of climate change discourse and its related practices in one of the largest and globally most influential Taiwanese Buddhist organizations – Tzu-Chi (Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Association).

Juan Li, Dajun Wang, Hang Yin, Duojie Zhaxi, Zhala Jiagong, George Schaller, Charudutt Mishra, Thomas McCarthy, Hao Wang, Lan Wu, Lingyun Xiao, Lamao Basang, Yuguang Zhang, Yunyun Zhou and Zhi Lu, [Role of Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Snow Leopard Conservation](#). Researchers investigated the role of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in snow leopard conservation in the Sanjiangyuan region in China's Qinghai Province on the Tibetan Plateau.

Jifang, Lou, [Green development to play key role in supply-side reforms](#). Chinese President Xi Jinping stresses that development must prioritize ecology for China's long-term benefits.

Books:

Grim, John, and Tucker, Mary Evelyn, [Ecology and Religion](#). This primer explores the history of religious traditions and the environment, and the emergence of religious ecology. Ultimately, Grim and Tucker argue that the engagement of religious communities is necessary if humanity is to sustain itself and the planet.

Eds: Miller, James, Smyer Yü, Dan, and van der Veer, Peter, [Religion and Ecological Sustainability in China](#). The book illuminates the diversity of narratives and worldviews that inform contemporary Chinese understandings of and engagements with nature and environment.

Smyer Yü, Dan, [Mindscaping the Landscape of Tibet: Place, Memorability, Ecoaesthetics](#). This book evaluates divergent perceptions of eco-religious practices, collective memories, and earth-inspired emotions in Tibet with emphasis on the potency of landscape. It is written for readers interested in the religious, cultural, and ecological aspects of Tibet.

Ed: Taylor, Bron, [Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature](#). The encyclopedia explores the relationships among human beings, their environments, and the religious dimensions of life. This wide-ranging work includes 1,000 entries from 520 international contributors

Eds: Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and Grim, John, [Religions of the World](#). This series of volumes arose from a 10-part conference series at Harvard University that involved the direct participation and collaboration of more than 800 scholars, religious leaders, and environmental specialists around the world.

[Ecological Civilization](#). The book is a compendium of the talks and proceedings of the International Conference on Ecological Environment this past June in Beijing. Scholars, journalists, scientists, government, religious and business leaders, from China, the U.S., and other countries addressed the environmental challenges facing China and the world—and the role of religion and traditional cultures in finding sustainable solutions

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