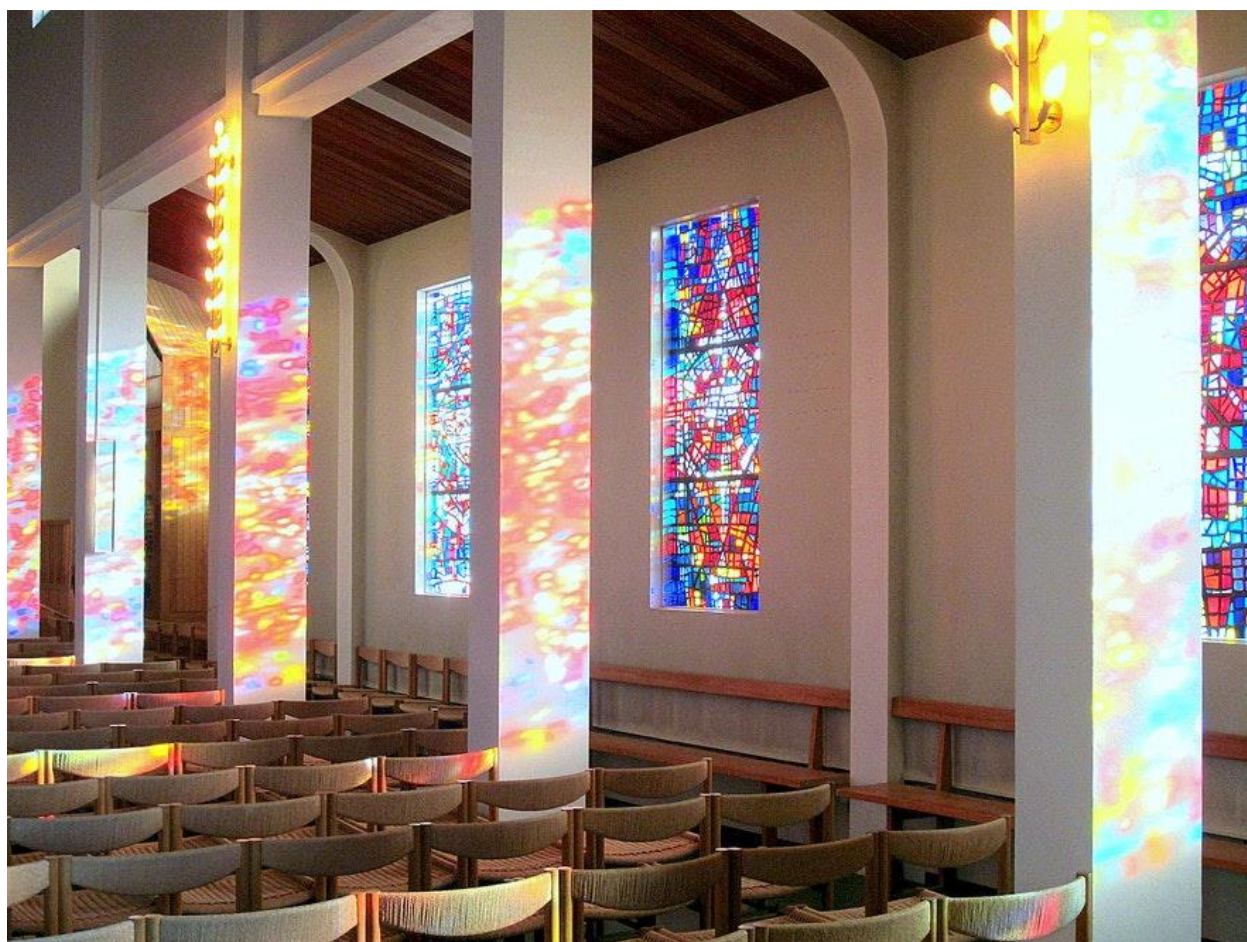# The Role of Faith, Values and Ethics in Strengthening Action for Nature and Environmental Governance

Table of content

This concept report was prepared by Faith for Earth Initiative in support of the efforts of the Government of Iceland to put forth a new resolution during UNEA 5.2 2

I.   Introduction

> *"Often we forget that protecting nature, is not only about us, we also have a moral duty to protect and use wisely the planet, its bounty, and every living being on it."*
>
> (Inger Andersen, Faith for Nature: Multi-Faith Action, 2020)

There are three overarching environmental challenges: climate change, ecosystem degradation and pollution. As this triple crisis continues to deteriorate our planet, it is evident that human activity and behavior towards the environment must change. Transitioning to more sustainable consumption and production practices is of paramount importance and efforts towards sustainable development must be truly global in nature. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals provide a guiding blueprint but to achieve them requires input from the full spectrum of global society. This demands that new stakeholders are rallied and empowered to engage in environmental action, policymaking, and governance. This includes faith actors, who have long been on the peripheries of secular multinational organizations, despite their tangible contributions in core areas of sustainable development and the immense influence faith continues to have throughout the world. Notably, and this is the primary focus of this paper, faith-based organizations share intrinsic notions of moral responsibility and human rights with multilateral organizations such as the UN, with their work grounded in strong spiritual ethics. The UNFPA notes that even seemingly secular organizations are "guided by values and ideologies, not always made transparent" and often originating in religious principles and values (UNFPA, 2014).

Religious beliefs and practices have existed throughout all phases of history, frequently contributing to human development and thus the role of religion cannot be sidelined at this most crucial juncture in human history. In particular, spiritual and sacred beliefs are often a main driver of cultural values, environmental perspectives, social inclusion, political engagement and economic prosperity, all of which intersect with contemporary environmental challenges that require holistic approaches to address them. Religion is ideally equipped for this given its permeating influence in all areas of life and that faith is the analytical lens through which many view the world. Therefore, this paper argues that it is imperative that faith actors be actively integrated in environmental governance and that their invaluable contributions be recognized and institutionalized in a global UN resolution.

A.   Background

1. Belief systems, including culture, ethics, and religion, hold immense sway over both individual behaviors, and societal norms and laws. These same systems also influence humans' interaction with, and perception of the environment. This makes them important factors in environmental governance and galvanizing action, as ascertained in previous UN environmental policy. The documents highlighted in the following section (religious and interfaith statements and declarations) are instrumental in the nexus of environmental policy and belief systems and they form an important backdrop in advancing environmentally conscious agendas that include belief systems.

2. One of the most prominent forms of belief systems is religion, the focus of this concept paper. Over 80% of the global population identify with a religion (Pew Research Center, 2017). Furthermore, religion has a significant influence on personal behavior choices and attitudes, making religion a powerful tool for promoting environmental action (Pew Research Center, 2017). Numerous

declarations from diverse faith groups illustrate the potential impact of a unified global faith position and perspective that favors robust environmental policies.

Religious and Interfaith statements

3. Over the last twenty-five years, every religious tradition has made significant statements on the importance of valuing nature and engaging in positive ecological action. These statements which include the environment and climate change can be seen in the sections on each religious tradition on the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology website, which holds an almost comprehensive collection of these faith-based statements. [1] In addition, engaged projects of religious environmentalism and extensive bibliographies can also be viewed. It should be noted therefore, that the following list of religious and interfaith statements is a non-exhaustive one, and rather seeks to introduce some of the various proclamations which cemented the importance of religion in discussing nature.

4. In 2003, the World Jewish Congress released a Jewish Faith Statement. Building off the biblical expression "For the Earth is Mine", the statement notes how there is a balance between the protection of humanity and nature and implores people to protect the environment (Alliance of Religions and Conservation, 2003). The statement asserts that any solution to environmental crisis must be based upon economic, social and moral considerations.

5. In a similar statement to the global community in 2006, the Unitarian Universalist Association published a Statement of Conscience. This statement also called upon the foundations of the religion itself, citing the 7th principle of Unitarian Universalism, "respect for the independent web of all existence of which we are a part" (Unitarian Universalist Association, 2006). Using this principle, the statement links human rights to climate change under the framework of every life having value. Further expanding on the close relation between the religion and environment, the statement includes a "pledge to ground our mission and ministries in reverence for this earth", which focuses on technological ways to reduce emissions such as an increased focus on renewables, as well as advocating educational methods and tree planting.

6. This trend of religious declarations relating foundations of their belief system to environmental stewardship is further seen by the statements on climate change expressed by the Sikh and Catholic communities. The Sikh statement suggests that serving the planet can act as a form of Seva, the Sikh practice of selfless service (Interfaith Power and Light, 2014). This idea of environmental action as Seva is then expanded upon to include specifics such as reducing personal carbon footprints, recycling, eating sustainable foods, practicing sustainable agriculture, investing in renewable energy sources, and making Gurdwaras (Sikh sites of worship) themselves eco-friendly. Referencing similar environmental actions, the message by Pope Francis states that, "there is a clear, definitive and ineluctable ethical imperative to act" (Zenit, The World Seen From Rome, 2014).[2] Pope Francis then goes on to express his hopes that at future climate negotiations, "there is a dialogue permeated by this culture and by the values that it holds: justice, respect and equity". What both these statements continue to demonstrate is how vital and influential the considerations of values are in governance, particularly when considering the environment. Furthermore, the Declaration for an Awakened Kinship, at the Religions for the Earth conference at Union

---

[1] The Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, https://fore.yale.edu
[2] Zenit, The World Seen From Rome (2014), Pope's Message to UN Convention on Climate Change, https://zenit.org/2014/12/11/pope-s-message-to-un-convention-on-climate-change/

Theological Seminary, declares a commitment of religious communities to join the urgent global conversation about climate change and speak on behalf of the voiceless[3].

7. Following these 2014 declarations, in 2015 the Bahá'i International Community released a statement to the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris. In this statement, the community advocates for a more balanced relationship between people of the world, and the planet (Baha'i International Community, 2015). Additionally, it calls for increased collective action to address the environment crises, as well as a redefined relationship between human behavior and sustainability objectives with a more values-based approach.

8. The Hindu Declaration on Climate Change, 'Bhumi Devi Ki Jai' was also released in 2015 and echoes the calls from the other religious statements to consider the climate crisis from a moral and values-based approach to develop a more comprehensive response. Specifically, the declaration relates the concept of dharma to ecological well-being when it quotes, "The Mahābhārata (109.10) tells us, "Dharma exists for the welfare of all beings. Hence, that by which the welfare of all living beings is sustained, that for sure is dharma." Building upon the religious values of the Hindu tradition, the declaration goes on to suggest specific methods such as reducing energy consumption and following a vegetarian diet as ways to help the planet.

9. Similarly, the 2015 Islamic Declaration on Climate Change issued a call for "all Muslims, wherever they may be, to tackle the root cause of climate change, environmental degradation, and the loss of biodiversity, following the example of The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)". This declaration again reiterates that the root cause of these issues lies in human activities and behavior.

10. The 2016 Buddhist Statement on the Climate Crisis established a connection between Earth and the Buddha's teachings. Recognizing that Paris 2015 was not enough, the statement relates the second of the Five Precepts of Buddhism, "not to steal", to the climate emergency. Humanity must not steal the lives and resources of other living beings by viewing them as merely serving people's needs (Soto Zen Buddhist Association, 2016). Additionally, the statement includes five action items including protecting the green of the Earth, not wasting water, not wasting energy, keeping the air clean and co-existing with nature.

11. In addition to religious statements on climate change and environmental stewardship, a great many publications on environmental ethics, including religious ethics, have played a vital role in promoting environmental action for at least four decades.[4]

12. Some religions have included environmental ethics in their literature in addition to climate change statements such as the 2013 *Environmental Ethics in Islam*. In this publication, the six principles of Islamic ethics are related to environmental actions people can take (Iner, 2013). Some of these suggested actions based on ethics include minimizing waste, conserving water and respecting all creatures.

13. The 2014 publication by Achim Steiner former executive director of UNEP, *Towards an Inclusive "Green Economy": Rethinking Ethics and Economy in the Age of the Anthropocene* connects green initiatives to strategies for reducing poverty and hunger (Steiner, 2014). This connection brings ethics into the conversation regarding the environment and lays the foundation for the concepts of

---

[3] https://centerforearthethics.org/resources-legacy/declaration-for-an-awakened-kinship-with-the-earth/
[4] Extensive bibliographies can be found at the website of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. In addition, a focus on Ecojustice publications and action can be found on this link: https://fore.yale.edu/Ecojustice

"human capital" and "natural capital", which are described as necessities for responsible economic growth in the age of the Anthropocene. An ethical lens is thus applied to questions of socio-economic development.

14. The Earth Charter is a widely endorsed global civil society declaration finalized in 2000 that seeks to form a "sustainable global society grounded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace" (The Earth Charter, Preamble, 2016). It was drafted by one of the broadest consultative processes ever conducted and builds upon past milestones such as the 1982 Nairobi declaration, the 1987 Brundtland report and the 1986 Assisi Declarations. The formation of the Earth Charter commission in 1997 reaffirms the importance of environment in ethics and sets the stage for additional policies linking the two (Bird et al., 2016).

15. The 8th Council of Islamic Ministers of the Environment held in Rabat in 2019 adopted a "Strategy for the Activation of the Cultural and Religious Roles towards the Protection of the Environment and the Achievement of Sustainable Development in the Islamic World". The strategy reiterated the importance of adopting religious values when addressing the myriad of environmental issues based on humans' moral responsibility as vicegerents of the creator on Earth.

16. The Faith for Earth Initiative, in 2020, published 'The Role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Galvanizing Nature Based Solutions'. This publication builds upon past UN environmental ethics related documents such as the 1982 World Charter for Nature, the 1997 UNEP Seoul Declaration on Environmental Ethics, and the 2000 Millennium Declaration (Abumoghli and McCartney, 2020). Acknowledging the anthropic causes of climate change, as well as the limits of technology-based solutions, the publication promotes behavioral science and ethics-based solutions to the climate crisis. The paper describes "nature-based solutions" and outlines how faith-based organizations can engage with such strategies on a large scale under the concept of a common environmental ethic (Abumoghli and McCartney, 2020). Such a common ethic is the shared belief by religions that nature should be preserved, and that environmental destruction will be catastrophic for all creatures. The publication draws upon ideas of nature-based solutions, as well as common ethics to offer a range of recommendations including leveraging religious institutions to mobilize social networks, strengthening interfaith collaboration in the field of the environment, and engaging with religious leaders through UNEP.

17. The 2020 Globalance handbook is a publication that speaks to the nexus of development and the environment, through the lens of virtue. The document states, "transformation needs also the personal ethical conviction and inner spiritual motivation" (Stuckelberger and von Weizacker, 2020). This statement, among others highlights the necessity for ethics and other belief systems to be considered when addressing current disbalances in development, particularly in a post-covid world context.

18. In addition to publications building a precedent of considering ethics in environmental governance, decisions and strategies, a series of UN resolutions also recognize different forms of belief systems as valued contributors to the discussion on environmental policy. All these resolutions acknowledge the inherent inequality that lies at the heart of many environmental issues, with social and economic underpinnings, emphasizing that the challenges also have moral, as well as environmental, ones.

Relevant UN Resolutions

19. The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) *Resolution 4.10, Innovation on Biodiversity and Land Degradation* addresses the 2030 Agenda by stressing the immense challenges of desertification, land degradation and ecosystem loss. The resolution recognizes climate change as

a major source of these issues and notes the disproportionate impact on the poor, Indigenous communities and women. This resolution calls for member states to increase commitments, implement voluntary targets and undergo assessments as well as encourage private-sector involvement and UNEP support. It also calls for the application of NBS for the sustainable and resilient coexistence of humans and wildlife to improve livelihoods and embed values of environmental protection amongst communities.

20. UNEA *Resolution 4.17, Promoting Gender Equality and the Human Rights and Empowerment of Women and Girls in Environmental Governance*. This is an example of ensuring that critical social issues, informs environmental policy initiatives. The resolution draws upon the 2030 agenda and resolutions from the UN Human Rights Council and Rio Conventions to show that women and other vulnerable populations are at greater risk because they are more exposed to environmental hazards, high stress environments, increased rates of poverty, low access to health care. The resolution asserts that women as a group are a largely untapped potential in enacting policy changes. This implies that there is both a moral imperative and practical dimension to include women and other marginalized groups in spaces they are often absent, capture the invaluable contributions they can make in this field. The resolution calls for states to prioritize gender policies and inform UNEA of their progress. Additionally, the resolution calls for UNEP to collect data and collaborate with other UN agencies to further the agenda of increased gender representation in environmental policy as well as placing a higher priority on vulnerable populations. Essentially, the resolution clarifies that social and ethical issues are intertwined with environmental policy and offers actions to integrate the two, furthering both agendas. Something similar using belief systems to inform environmental actions would further increase the potential of effective environmental policy.

21. UNEA Resolution 4.18, The Poverty and Environment Nexus relates the idea of "natural capital" to poverty as many people depend directly on land for their livelihoods and natural resources can be viewed as a social good, even as a human right. This resolution also calls for increased involvement of women in environment issues, in addition to increased access to sustainable sources of energy and innovation.

22. An example of a resolution that effectively uses religion as the basis for action from UN member states is the UN Human Rights Council's 2008 *Resolution 7/19, Combating Defamation of Religions*. This resolution calls upon past events such as the 2005 World Summit Outcome, which emphasized states responsibility to respect human rights, as well as a declaration adopted at the 34th session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers condemning Islamophobia. Using these, as well as a call from the President of the General Assembly in March 2006 noting that, "there is need for dialogue and understanding among civilizations, cultures, and religions." The resolution calls for states to adopt initiatives that promote cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue. The resolution also uses the established issues surrounding religious defamation to request the High Commissioner for Human Rights to submit a study that complies with relevant legislation. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that this resolution was passed with some level friction as some viewed it as prioritizing religious rights over human rights, which in certain instances are contradictory.

23. UN Human Rights Council's Resolution 16/18, *Combating Intolerance, Negative Stereotyping and Stigmatization of, and Discrimination, Incitement to Violence and Violence Against, Persons Based on Religion or Belief,* was adopted in 2011 and represents an important step forward in international efforts to confront intolerance based on religion or belief. The Istanbul Process was subsequently set up as the dedicated mechanism following up the implementation of the 16/18 Resolution action plan.

24. The various General Assembly resolutions on the *Rights of Indigenous People* (starting in 1991) also provide valuable guidance about the role of belief systems in leveraging environmental policy. The recent 2020 resolution (A/75/475) begins by affirming the past resolutions on the topic and recalling the outcome document that asserts the UNs duty to protect Indigenous people's rights. It also expresses concerns regarding COVID-19 and increased xenophobia and racism resulting from the pandemic. This resolution further notes that the General Assembly reaffirmed the importance of Indigenous peoples' religious and cultural sites. Further, the resolution recognizes indigenous knowledge as a method to combat climate change and promotes the inclusion of Indigenous people in decision making processes.

25. The 1992 General Assembly *Resolution 47/135, Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to the National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities* similarly focuses on human rights and the necessity of both member states and UN agencies to contribute to creating a more just world. This resolution reaffirms the UN charter's commitment to human rights and takes inspiration from Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that entered into force in 1976 to affirm the rights of people belonging to minorities. The resolution stipulates that States are to take measures to offer opportunities for minorities to practice their own religion and culture and speak their own languages. This focus on protecting culture and religion indicates their importance in society and reaffirms the need to use culture and/ or religion to help inform environmental policy ideas.

26. The *Resolution 65/5* adopted in 2010 by the General Assembly as part of the World Interfaith Harmony Week is recognizing "the imperative need for dialogue among different faiths and religions to enhance mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people" and recalling "with appreciation various global, regional and subregional initiatives on mutual understanding and interfaith harmony".

27. In 2018, the UN General Assembly adopted *Resolution 72/277, Towards a Global Pact for the Environment*, under which an open-ended working group was established to consider a technical and evidence-based report identifying and assessing possible gaps in international environmental law and environment-related instruments with a view to strengthening their implementation (UNEP 2021, Implementation of General Assembly 73/333). This led to the approval of a set of recommendations endorsed by *Resolution 73/333* addressing among other things the strengthening of environmental law and governance.

28. The Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development (UN-IATF) was established in 2010 as a "platform for knowledge exchange and management, capacity building, system-wide guidance and oversight regarding engagement with faith-based and faith-inspired civil society