

THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND ENVIRONMENTALISM: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

As the global environmental crisis intensifies, religious communities are increasingly aligning their spiritual principles with environmental activism. This article explores the intersection of faith and ecological stewardship across diverse religious traditions, focusing on evangelical Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In the U.S., the Evangelical Climate Initiative, led by Pastor Joel Hunter, frames environmental action as a biblical imperative, resonating with evangelical communities. In Hinduism, movements like the Bishnoi community's tree-protection efforts and the Swadhyaya Parivar's dharmic ecology teachings emphasize the sacredness of nature. Buddhist traditions, particularly in Southeast Asia, integrate environmentalism into their spiritual practices, such as tree ordination ceremonies and community-led conservation initiatives. Through these examples, the article demonstrates how faith-based movements are addressing ecological challenges, mobilizing followers to act on the moral, spiritual, and ethical responsibility to protect the planet.

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In the face of growing environmental challenges, religious communities worldwide are increasingly mobilizing to address ecological issues, viewing environmental stewardship as a moral, ethical, and spiritual duty. Faith-based environmentalism is gaining momentum across different religious traditions, from evangelical Christianity in the United States to Hinduism in India and Buddhism in Southeast Asia. These movements reflect a shared understanding that protecting the Earth is not only a social responsibility but a sacred obligation.

EVANGELICAL CLIMATE INITIATIVE

One of the most influential faith-based environmental movements is the Evangelical Climate Initiative, launched by Pastor Joel Hunter in 2005. Hunter, pastor of a 12,000-member megachurch in Central Florida, framed human-caused global warming as a violation of the biblical commandment to protect God's creation. His message, focused on "creation care," deeply resonated with evangelical communities. Hunter's campaign distributed over 200,000 pamphlets nationwide, urging pastors to engage their congregations in environmental action.

The initiative gained considerable support, with 86 evangelical leaders signing on between 2006 and 2008, and over 100 more joining in the following year. Even 45 members of the Southern Baptist Convention, traditionally conservative on such issues, endorsed the movement. Politically, evangelical environmentalists forged connections with the Republican Party, and environmental concerns became part of the broader platform of grassroots political movements like the Tea Party. The movement highlighted the importance of protecting God's creation and linked it to broader political engagement.

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND "SHRINKING THE FOOTPRINT"

Across the Atlantic, the Church of England has also been proactive in addressing environmental concerns. In 2005, the General Synod initiated the "Shrinking the Footprint" campaign, aimed at reducing the energy consumption of churches throughout England. The Bishop of London, Dr. Richard Chartres, led the campaign, which involved providing dioceses with audit packs to assess their energy use and encouraging congregations to reduce their environmental footprint.

The Church of England embraced digital resources to minimize paper usage, and environmental discussions became a central part of the church's outreach. Earth Day, observed on June 5th, served as a focal point for the church's environmental efforts. The campaign reflected the Church of England's growing recognition of the moral imperative to act on climate change, as well as its commitment to integrating sustainability into its operations.

HINDUISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Hinduism has a long tradition of environmental reverence, deeply rooted in its sacred texts. According to Pankaj Jain in an article for HuffPost titled Hindu Environmental Teachings, Hinduism emphasizes the divinity of nature, with the Earth revered as a goddess who must be treated with respect. Concepts such as Pancha Mahabhutas—the five elements of nature (space, air, fire, water, and earth)—highlight the interconnectedness of all living things.

One of the most notable examples of Hindu environmentalism is the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, India. The Bishnoi have a centuries-old tradition of protecting nature, most famously demonstrated in 1730 A.D., when 363 community members, including a woman named Amrita Devi and her three daughters, sacrificed their lives to prevent trees from being cut down for an imperial palace. This act of martyrdom reflects the Bishnoi's deep commitment to preserving the environment, a core principle of their sect, founded by Saint Guru Jambheshwar in 1485. The community's 29 principles emphasize non-violence, biodiversity preservation, and environmental conservation.

Another significant Hindu environmental movement is the Swadhyaya Parivar, founded by Guru Pandurang Athavale in 1954. This devotional movement promotes dharmic ecology, which links Hindu teachings with ecological responsibility. Athavale's teachings view the universe as a family, with trees and animals considered sacred. The Swadhyaya Parivar encourages followers to practice non-violence toward all living beings and to view the Earth as a sacred entity. Trees are particularly revered, with their ability to absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen compared to Lord Shiva's act of drinking poison to save the gods.

BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Buddhism, particularly in Southeast Asia, also emphasizes environmental stewardship. Buddhist ethics are deeply intertwined with concepts like karma (the moral law of cause and effect) and ahimsa (non-violence). The 14th Dalai Lama has spoken extensively about how the law of karma underscores the need for responsible environmental action, as every action has consequences for both the individual and the planet.

In Thailand and Cambodia, Buddhist monks have been at the forefront of environmental activism. Practices such as "tree ordination" ceremonies, in which trees are symbolically wrapped in monks' robes to protect them from being cut down, have been widely adopted as a way to promote forest conservation. In Cambodia, Venerable Bun Saluth founded the Monks Community Forest, a conservation project that covers 65,000 hectares of land and aims to reduce deforestation and land degradation.

In Thailand, environmental pilgrimages known as Dhamma Yeitra (Dhamma walks) have been used to raise awareness about ecological issues. These walks, inspired by both Buddhist and Gandhian principles, serve as peaceful protests against environmental destruction. For example, the first Dhamma walk in 1996 was organized to raise awareness about the deteriorating condition of Songkhla Lake in southern Thailand, an important ecological and socio-economic resource.

CONCLUSION

From evangelical megachurches in the U.S. to Hindu sects in India and Buddhist monks in Southeast Asia, religious communities are increasingly embracing environmentalism as an expression of their faith. These movements underscore the interconnectedness of spiritual practice and ecological stewardship, offering a powerful framework for addressing the global environmental crisis. By viewing the Earth as sacred and recognizing the divine in all living things, faith-based initiatives are fostering a global movement that aligns spirituality with sustainability. These initiatives not only call for action but provide a moral and ethical foundation for protecting the planet for future generations.

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