



**What does the study of world religions contribute to our understanding and stewardship of the environment? New movements in modern theological scholarship direct attention to the biological realm as well as the spiritual**

# The rise of ecotheology

**Valerie Brown**

**M**ost Americans today accept the premise that human activity is dramatically altering many biological processes and environmental systems. Strong scientific evidence also supports the contention that these alterations are destructive and global in scale. Despite the unease generated by this

knowledge, consensus on what to do about it is low.

Some fear that science and education *per se* may not be capable of inspiring the necessary changes in behavior; that political institutions are similarly weak; and that many economic theories actively support environmental destruction. For these people, addressing the global nature of human impact requires a belief system large enough to conceptualize on a cosmic scale. In their concern with the vastness and completeness of divinity, religions operate at this scale, yet existing religious institutions also appear too narrowly focused to grapple with environmental crisis.



Into this confusion have come several initiatives aimed at clarifying the problems and discovering solutions. In 1996 [The Economist](#) reported that the Alliance of Religions and Conservation had identified more than 120,000 religious-environmental projects around the world. Two of these are of particular interest.

In 1995, His All Holiness Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the [Eastern Orthodox Church](#), began the "Religion, Science and Environment" series.

Focusing on bringing scientists and religious leaders together to address the environmental problems in regions where most of the world's Eastern Orthodox believers live, this series has completed two symposia, and a third is being planned. In 1996, the [Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions](#) began a [series of ten conferences on religion and ecology](#) organized by Columbia alumna Mary Evelyn Tucker and her husband John Grim, both now teaching religious studies at [Bucknell University](#). A culminating conference held in New York City on October 20 and 21, 1998, included scholars of Hinduism, indigenous peoples' spirituality, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Jainism.



With such a plethora of traditions, a big question is whether a spiritual change of heart would entail the emergence of a single "environmentally correct" religious practice. Few participants in the conversation would want an affirmative answer to this question. In his remarks to the October 21 gathering, Columbia President George Rupp observed that "Pluralism within traditions testifies to the capacity for change in what remains a continuous line of development. Thus even the communities most inclined to invoke authoritative figures or texts in fact regularly take into account new data and respond creatively to the demands of novel situations." To this end, scholars of the world's major religions are re-examining their scriptures, rituals, and doctrines to bring forward those elements that support a global awareness and a changed sense of humanity's place within creation.

## A newly recognized sin

One of the strongest doctrinal statements yet by any world religious leader came in 1997 from the Ecumenical Patriarch. Speaking in Santa Barbara, the Patriarch said, "...[T]o commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands; for humans to injure other humans with disease; for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances; these are sins."

Columbia religion professor and Orthodox scholar [Alexandros Alexakis](#) says, "It sounds as if this is a kind of exceptional or non-expected alertness on the part of the Orthodox Church, but...the issue is part of a generic understanding of what a Christian should do." Orthodoxy has, he says, "preserved the early ascetic tradition of Christians" established in the early 5th century. For Orthodox Christians, a new focus on this tradition can support more environmentally responsible behavior. Western Christians are also finding doctrinal threads supporting environmental values, with particular attention being paid to replacing the rhetoric of human domination over creation in Genesis with the equally biblically-based language of human stewardship of creation.



Other religious traditions offer complementary ideas. According to Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr of [George Washington University](#), "Islam makes no distinction between the natural and the supernatural" and holds that the Qur'an was revealed to the entire living world, not just to humans. For most Native American peoples, the words "respect" and "thanksgiving" sum up the correct attitude, according to Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the [Haudenosaunee](#) (Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy). Asian religions offer additional subtle notions of balance and harmony through Taoist, Confucian, Jain, and Buddhist philosophies.

According to Mary Evelyn Tucker, the only other world religious leader to approximate the Ecumenical Patriarch's outspokenness is [the Dalai Lama](#). Columbia Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman says the Dalai Lama has a long record of environmental activism and a strong interest in bringing scientists and religionists together. He has even expressed the wish, Thurman says, to be reincarnated as a naturalist.

## The research world responds

In addition to alumni and faculty who are personally exploring the emerging

nexus of science, religion, and the environment, Columbia is developing institutional responses. The [Center for Environmental Research and Conservation \(CERC\)](#) is the core of a wide range of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional work with the [American Museum of Natural History](#), the [New York Botanical Garden](#), the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#), and the [Wildlife Preservation Trust](#). Columbia's involvement also includes the [Earth Institute](#), centered on the [Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory](#), and management of the [Biosphere 2](#) research facility in Arizona.

These efforts are not explicitly spiritual, and Thurman expresses the hope that the scientific side of Columbia's environmental work will cross-pollinate more readily with the humanistic side. A sense of the importance of spirituality appears to be growing among biologists. CERC Director [Don Melnick](#), professor in the departments of anthropology and biological sciences, notes that many conservationists have recently realized that some of the most vigorous conservation efforts around the world stem not from the sort of rational enlightened self-interest that science supports, but from a deep feeling that "the value of [these resources] is a sacred religious and cultural value." Asked whether a spiritual component is necessary for effective environmental action, Melnick says, "I don't believe there's any chance for saving natural environments without it."

In the humanities, Columbia has recently added Richard Foltz to the Columbia faculty as visiting assistant professor of religion. Foltz teaches environmental ethics, beginning with the 1999 spring term. A scholar of 16th-century India and of Islamic culture, Foltz has taught courses on world religion and the environment for several years. He observes that the study of religion and ecology "qualifies as a new field" in academia. "Ten years ago there wasn't much that had been produced that could go under that rubric, and now if you want to teach a course on religion and ecology you've got literally dozens of books to choose from," he says.

Though he is encouraged by the strong response he gets from students, Foltz believes that humanity is on a "spiral to suicide" and that the environmental discourse of academia often fails to reach a wide audience. Mary Evelyn Tucker echoes this misgiving. "We're all concerned about simply rhetorical statements or a superficial approach [that] is not going to tap into the deep spiritual reservoirs of people," she says.



Others at the October meeting in New York expressed related concerns. There are serious political and economic obstacles to a global environmental renaissance. Even among supporters of such a renaissance, concern is strong that any environmental program must also include social and economic equity.



Kenyan Greenbelt Movement founder [Wangari Maathai](#) emphasized that economic prosperity is a prerequisite to environmentally appropriate behavior and asserted that the inequities that allow privileged First Worlders to indulge every consumer whim also force the world's poor to cut down trees and pollute water supplies just to survive. [Ismail Serageldin](#), World Bank Vice President for Special Programs, coupled environmental issues with social justice, asking the New York gathering to affirm that poverty is "monstrous and unacceptable" and to see themselves as the "new abolitionists" in the drive to eliminate it.

## What does it take to move a community?

Although religious organizations have long been engaged with issues of social justice, they have been relatively slow to mobilize on environmental issues. [Maurice Strong](#), Chairman of the [Earth Council](#) and advisor to the U.N. Secretary-General and the President of the World Bank, described religious organizations at the time of the seminal 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Environment and Development as "interested but not involved," and said that not until after the environmental movement's "becalming" and "recession" during the 1980s did religions begin to actively address issues such as biodiversity, sustainable development, and climate change.

Governments have likewise made only slow and piecemeal efforts to remediate global environmental damage. Knowledge of the scale of human impact on the planet is neither widespread nor welcome among many of the world's policymakers. Since the [Rio Summit](#) in 1992, activists have been trying to win acceptance for an Earth Charter--what Maurice Strong calls "a Magna Carta with universal moral and ethical principles," emphasizing both human rights and human responsibility toward the biosphere. A 21-point draft Charter is now being circulated for comment and will be submitted for endorsement to the U.N. General Assembly at a future date.

The movement to frame environmental ethics as a spiritual problem is still in its formative stages, so assessing its ultimate social impact is difficult. Thurman believes its growing momentum will "moderate when the destruction moderates." And despite doubts about the possibility of reversing the deep changes humans have already made to the global biochemical equilibrium, many in the movement are determined to act positively. For their parting inspiration, the participants in the Religion and Ecology conference in New York heard Fordham professor emeritus [Thomas Berry](#). Berry, at age 84 considered the grandfather of the environmental ethics movement, said, "We are called to the great work: to move the human community from the terminal phase of the Cenozoic to the initial phase of the Ecozoic....We don't choose our great work...but

are given it. The powers that gave us our commission give us the ability to carry it through."

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### Related links...

- [Ecotheology Project](#), Wal Anderson, Tehomot Web, Port Willunga, South Australia
  - [Biblical Studies](#)
  - [Mohawk Nation Council of Chiefs](#)
  - [Christians in Communion with Creation: resources for eco-theology](#)
  - [Environmental Ethics Links](#), philosophy department, SUNY, Cortland
  - [Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America WWW Site](#)
  - [Interview between Robert Thurman and the Dalai Lama](#), *Shambhala Sun* (Buddhist magazine)
  - [World Religions](#)
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