

World Faiths and the Environment

Much of this information is taken from the Alliance of Religions and Conservation website. Further information is available on their website at:
www.arcworld.org

The Baha'i Faith

One World

'The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.' These words of Baha'u'llah summarise the Baha'i sense of world citizenship and commitment to stewardship of the earth. The oneness of humanity is, for Baha'is, the fundamental spiritual and social truth of this age. It implies a major restructuring of the world's educational, social, agricultural, industrial, economic, legal and political systems. Baha'is believe this restructuring will enable the emergence of a sustainable, just and prosperous world civilisation.

Nature reflects God

The world reflects the qualities and attributes of God, and should therefore be greatly respected and cherished. Baha'i Scriptures describe nature as an emanation of God's will.

Interconnectedness

All things are interconnected and flourish according to the law of reciprocity. This principle underlies the Baha'i understanding of the way the universe works and the responsibilities of humanity.

Science and technology

Science and technology should help humanity to live in harmony with nature. Science should be guided by spiritual principles, to preserve as much as possible the earth's bio-diversity and natural order, in a way that ensures long-term sustainability. A spiritually based civilisation in which science and religion work in harmony will preserve the ecological balance of the earth, foster stability in human population, and advance the material and the spiritual well-being of all peoples and nations.



A tree planting project undertaken by students at the Rabbani Baha'i School near Gwalior in India.

Nature is God's Will
and is its expression in
and through the
contingent world
Tablets of Baha'u'llah
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Buddhism

All beings are connected

Buddhism teaches that the idea of separateness is an illusion. The health of the whole is inseparably linked to the health of the parts, and the health of the parts is inseparably linked to the health of the whole. This means that caring for the environment begins with caring for oneself: 'When our hearts are good, the sky will be good to us,' says Venerable Maha Ghosananda of Cambodia, a founding patron of ARC.

Respect for life

Buddhist practice makes one feel one's existence is no more important than anyone else's. If one treats nature as a friend and teacher, one can be in harmony with other creatures and appreciate the interconnectedness of all that lives.



The Buddha gazes over a lotus pond in Thailand

Simplicity and moderation

Buddha taught people to live simply and appreciate the natural cycle of life. Craving and greed only bring unhappiness, since demands for material possessions can never be satisfied and people will always demand more, so threatening the environment. This is why the real solution to the environmental crisis begins with the individual.

Buddhists in Japan tell a story. The Buddha once received a donation of 500 new robes for his followers. So he considered what to do with the old ones. They would be used for bed-sheets, he decided. And the old sheets would become towels. And the old towels would be used as cleaning rags. Everything should be used and reused.

Right livelihood

According to Buddhism, the way you earn your livelihood – not killing, not stealing, not taking more than you need – all these are part of the Buddhist way of life. A livelihood that avoids harming others, such as trading in weapons, meat, alcohol or poisons – is in harmony with nature.

Christianity

Tension with creation

Christianity recognises a tension that exists between humanity's responsibility to care for God's creation, and the human tendency to rebel against God. The main Christian churches have in the past decades re-examined their teachings and practice in the light of the environmental crisis.

Christians believe that we are stewards of creation, not masters of it, with an example cited from the book of Genesis: 'The Lord God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it.'



St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology.

Commitment from the Churches

In his Encyclical Letter in 2015, 'Care for our common home', Pope Francis confirms climate change as a moral issue, pointing out that the poor suffer the most from consequences of improper care of the environment even though they have contributed the least to climate change.

For the Orthodox Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate taught in 1990 that humanity ought to perceive the natural order as a sign and sacrament of God, and that to respect nature is to recognise that all creatures and objects have a unique place in God's creation. The Orthodox Church teaches that it is the destiny of humanity to restore the proper relationship between God and the world as it was in Eden.

The Protestant Churches, speaking through the World Council of Churches in 1990, committed themselves to conserve and work for the integrity of creation both for its inherent value to God and in order that justice may be achieved and sustained.

The challenge

Christians increasingly recognise the need to repent for what harm has been done to creation. In the words of the Orthodox Patriarchate, 'This may well mean that just as a shepherd will in times of greatest hazard lay down his life for his flock, so human beings may need to forego part of their wants and needs in order that the survival of the natural world can be assured.'

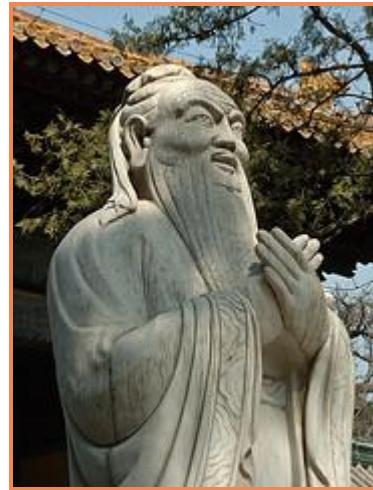
The challenge to all Christians is to discover anew the truth that God's love and liberation is for all creation, not just humanity, and to seek new ways of living that restore balance and hope of life to the endangered planet (*based on the 1995 Windsor Statements*)

Confucianism

A moral code

Confucianism is a system of thought based on the teachings of Kong Zi, Master Kong (better known in English as Confucius) who lived from 551 to 479 BC. He is revered in Chinese history for the moral code he taught, which was based on ethics, humanity and love.

"If the foundations of living are strengthened and are economically used, then Nature cannot bring impoverishment. But if the foundations of living are neglected and used extravagantly, then Nature cannot make the country rich, • " observed his follower, Xunzi, Master Zi.



Temple of Confucius,
Beijing

The golden rule

One day a disciple asked the Master: "Is there one word that should cover the whole duty of humankind?" And Confucius replied: "Fellow-feeling, perhaps, is that word. Do not do to other people what you do not want them to do to you." And this golden rule in Confucianism is key to understanding the Confucian understanding of ecology.

The notion of benevolence

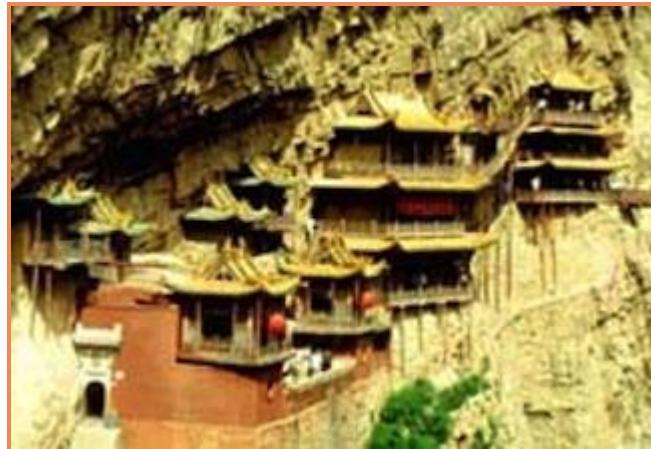
The follower of Confucianism aspires to becoming a junzi (a sage) - a morally noble person who understands what is right and behaves accordingly. Directing this morality is the principle of ren - humanity (literally 'personâ') - that should inform the relationship between people and nature, extending our filial love for parents and family to all living things. We should therefore show love and care for nature in all our dealings with it. The rewards for this moral behaviour are great, as Confucius follower Xunzi said: "Respond to it with peace and order, and good fortune will result. Respond to it with disorder, and disaster will follow."

Heaven, Earth and Humanity

Confucius taught that humanity exists in an inter-relationship between heaven and earth. 'Heaven' is seen as the guiding force, giving direction to change and progress, while 'earth' provides the natural context and seasonal changes. Humanity has a moral task to work in balance with these other two forces. Underlying and unifying this triad of heaven, earth and humanity is the notion of *qi* (pronounced chi). This is understood as the material life force of the universe that runs through all things, integrating human beings with nature and driving the continuous process of change and creativity. The Confucian understanding of the universe as a holistic unity emphasises the responsibility of every person to behave respectfully and with care to contribute to the general wellbeing of creation, acting as an orderly part of a collective effort. In this way the interests of humanity are served by looking after the interests of all of nature.

Daoism

Four main principles of Daoism guide the relationship between humanity and nature:



1. Follow the Earth

The Dao De Jing says: 'Humanity follows the Earth, the Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows what is natural.' Daoists therefore obey the Earth. The Earth respects Heaven, Heaven abides by the Dao, and the Dao follows the natural course of everything. Humans should help everything grow according to its own way. We should cultivate the way of no-action and let nature be itself.

This ancient temple hangs precariously onto the side of Heng Shan, a sacred mountain where Taoist monks meditate close to nature, and pilgrims come to pray.

2. Harmony with nature

In Daoism, everything is composed of two opposite forces known as Yin and Yang. The two forces are in constant struggle within everything. When they reach harmony, the energy of life is created. Someone who understands this point will not exploit nature, but will treat it well and learn from it. It is obvious that in the long run, the excessive use of nature will bring about disaster, even the extinction of humanity.

3. Too much success

If the pursuit of development runs counter to the harmony and balance of nature, even if it is of great immediate interest and profit, people should restrain themselves from it. Insatiable human desire will lead to the over-exploitation of natural resources. To be too successful is to be on the path to defeat.

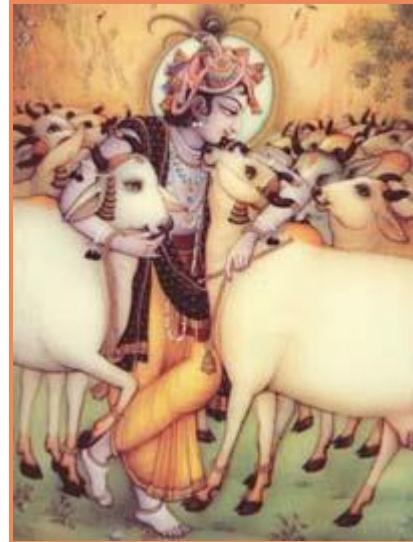
4. Affluence in bio-diversity

Daoism has a unique sense of value in that it judges affluence by the number of different species. If all things in the universe grow well, then a society is a community of affluence. If not, this kingdom is on the decline. This view encourages both government and people to take good care of nature. This thought is a special contribution by Daoism to the conservation of nature.

Hinduism

Life is sacred

All living beings are sacred because they are parts of God, and should be treated with respect and compassion. This is because the soul can be reincarnated into any form of life. Hinduism is full of stories that treat animals as divine, such as how Krishna used to herd cows, or how the monkey Hanuman was a faithful servant of the Rama. Most Hindus are vegetarian because of this belief in the sanctity of life. Even trees, rivers and mountains are believed to have souls, and should be honoured and cared for.



Krishna, who lived in the forest and herded cows, represents the highest expression of love in Hinduism.

Simple living

The virtue of a simple life has always been prized in Hindu society. Teachers, or brahmanas, are advised to live on the charity of others and not accumulate too much wealth. The most highly respected person in Hindu society is the sadhu, or sage who lives outside normal society, in forests or caves, or travels on foot from one town to another. Sadhus take pride in living simply and consuming as little as possible.

Inner peace

Hinduism stresses that true happiness comes from within not from outer possessions. This means that the search for material possessions, and the consumption of materials and energy it brings, should not be allowed to dominate life. Life's main purpose is to discover the spiritual nature and the peace and fulfilment it brings. The efforts to exploit the things of this world are considered by Hindu teachers to be a distraction from this central purpose of life.

How do Hindus care for the environment?

Hindus revere sacred rivers, mountains, forests and animals, and love to be close to nature. For example, many Hindu villages have a sacred lake, and around it a grove of trees to catch rainfall and protect the banks from erosion. The lake and its grove store rainfall to irrigate surrounding fields and supply village wells with drinking water. These lakes and groves are places of tranquillity and sanctuaries for wildlife, but in recent times the neglect of these simple techniques for gathering and protecting clean water has led to serious water shortages and advancing desertification in many parts of India.

Islam

Khalifa - trusteeship

Islam teaches that Allah created humans to be guardians of His creation. In other words, nature does not belong to us to do with as we wish, but is entrusted by Allah to our safe-keeping.

Tawheed - unity

The central concept of Islam is tawheed, or unity. Allah is unity, and His unity is reflected in the unity of humanity and nature. We must therefore maintain the integrity of the Earth, its flora and fauna, its wildlife and environment. Our responsibility is to keep balance and harmony in Allah's creation.



Women go to prayers in a mosque built with sun-baked earth in the Sudan.

Akrah - accountability

Islam teaches that we will one day be judged by Allah for how we have discharged our responsibilities following the guidance of Islam. Have we been good trustees, and have we kept nature in harmony? So there will be a day of reckoning.

Avoid waste

It is said in the Qur'an that Allah invites us to enjoy the fruits of the earth, but to avoid excess leading to waste, 'for Allah does not love wasters.'

Shariah

All these principals have been translated into practical directions for how to live, embodied in the Shariah, the laws of Islam. For example, Shariah law protects animals from cruelty, conserves forests, and limits the growth of cities.

Islamic quotations about creation

'The world is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his guardian over it,' taught the prophet Muhammad.

'No creature is there crawling on the earth, no bird flying with its wings, but they are nations like unto yourselves'. *Qur'an 6:38*

Jainism

According to the Tattvartha Sutra there are 8,400,000 species of living things – each of which is part of the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth, and is therefore precious.

Ahimsa: non-violence

This central teaching of Jainism was made famous in recent times by Mahatma Gandhi, who was greatly influenced by Jain ideas. He made ahimsa the guiding principle of his struggle for social freedom and equality. Ahimsa means more than not hurting others, it means not intending to cause harm, physical, mental or spiritual, to any part of nature, for, in the words of Mahavira: ‘You are that which you wish to harm.’



The cluster of Jain temples perched on the summit of Palitana Hill in Gujarat, India, demonstrate the Jain ideal of care and attention for nature.

Compassion

This is the positive aspect of non-violence: to practice an attitude of compassion towards all life. Jains pray that forgiveness and friendliness may reign throughout the world and that all living beings may cherish each other.

Interdependence

This ancient Jain principle teaches that all of nature is bound together, and says that if one does not care for nature one does not care for oneself.

Self-restraint

An important Jain principle is not to waste the gifts of nature, and even to reduce one's needs as far as possible. As Gandhi said, ‘There is enough in this world for human needs, but not for human wants.’

Jain quotations on the Environment

‘Lord Mahavira preached about the environment in the first book of 'Acharanga Sutra', which is accepted, as His direct words. The elements of nature were described as living beings and under the fundamental principle of AHIMSA these were to be protected in all ways - no waste, no overuse, no abuse, no polluting. If we follow these principles, then we would stop destroying our environment as well as preserve the resources that are available for all to share. If there are more resources available for all, then the poor will also get a fair share thereof’. *Quotation from R. P. Chandaria, Chairman of the Institute of Jainology*

Judaism

Humanity and Creation

The Jewish attitude to nature is based on the belief that the universe is the work of the Creator. Love of God includes love of all His creations: the inanimate, plants, animals and humans. Nature in all its beauty is created for us, and our connection to nature restores us to our original state of happiness and joy.

The Bible informs us that the earth is given to man ‘to use and protect’. But the ‘dominion’ mentioned in the Bible is not the dominion of a tyrant. God’s mercy extends to all He has created, as is written, ‘the earth is founded upon mercy’.



Fruit picking at Kibbutz Lotan in Israel

The Sabbatical Year

This is the core conservation principle in the Bible:
‘Six years shall you sow your field, and six years shall you prune your vineyard, and gather in the produce thereof. But in the seventh year shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath unto the Lord; you shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard.’
(Leviticus 25:1-5)

According to Maimonides, one of the goals of ceasing all agricultural activity is to improve and strengthen the land. Sabbath is a return to nature. The last Sabbatical observed in Israel was in 1993-94.

Altering Creation

The Bible says we must preserve the natural balance of creation. Every species was created for some purpose and should not be interfered with. ‘You shall not let your cattle gender with a diverse kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; neither shall there come upon you a garment of two kinds of stuff mingled together.’ (Leviticus 19:19)

Wasteful Destruction

Jewish teachings prohibit the destruction of anything from which humans may benefit. This applies to animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. Even in time of war, the Bible forbids the destruction of fruit-bearing trees. Sages compared the death of a tree to the departure of man’s soul from his body:

‘When people cut down the wood of a tree that yields fruit, its cry goes from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible... When the soul departs from the body, the cry goes forth from one end of the world to the other, and the sound is inaudible.’

Based on the Windsor Statements. The Jewish statement was compiled by Professor Nahum Rakover.

Paganism

Reverence for life

Paganism is very much a religion of reverence for life. Nearly all Pagans believe that Nature is sacred and understand divinity, either perceived as divine beings or in more abstract terms, to be manifest within the living world and present within every part of the cosmos, including all living beings, all the relationships between them, and all the processes of life.



Nature is Sacred

Believing that Nature is sacred, nearly all Pagans see the natural cycles of birth, growth and death observed in the world around us, and in the transitions of our own brief lives, as carrying profoundly spiritual meanings. Human beings are seen as part of Nature, woven into the great web of life along with other animals, trees, plants and everything else that is of this Earth, all of which have spiritual as well as material aspects. The living Earth itself is, to nearly all Pagans, a very visible and tangible manifestation of divinity.

Interconnectedness

To most Pagans, everything that lives contains a small spark of the Divine. We believe that, as human beings, the life in us is, in essence, the same as the life in the animals and plants with whom we share this earth. We are not ‘special’ to the universe, merely to each other. Every molecule in our bodies once formed part of other life forms and will do so again after we die. Within a Pagan worldview, everything is connected to, and influenced by, everything else. Everything that has spirit. Every identity is woven into larger patterns of belonging.

Harm None

Pagan ethics generally emphasise the responsible exercise of personal freedom in trying to live in harmony with others and with Nature. They tend to be based upon recognition of interdependence and appreciation of consequences and place strong emphasis on empathy, respect, responsibility and reciprocity – in our relationships to all of life rather than to human beings alone. Pagans use the phrase, “If it harms none, do what you will,” to sum up this apparently simple, but rather demanding approach. Many Pagans see environmental activism as a religious duty and are heavily involved in a range of Green activities and campaigns.

Nature and Worship

Pagan forms of worship seek to honour the Divine powers and bring the participants into harmony with them, to celebrate the turning of the seasons, and to mark the transitions of human life with appropriate rites of passage. Believing that religious ceremonies are best conducted outdoors, and that the finest temples need not be built by human hands, Pagans often hold ceremonies in woods, on hilltops, near standing stones, in parks or by the sea.

Science & technology

Pagans are concerned about the damage some technological developments, especially mass industrialisation, have caused to the Earth but are generally positive about science. They believe that the grave ecological problems facing our civilisation can only be dealt with through further scientific studies and more appropriate and responsible technologies.

Sikhism

The Sikh Cycle of Creation

Sikhism follows three hundred year cycles, the most recent of which finished in 1999. In 1999 the name of the next cycle, due to end in 2299, was chosen by the Sikh leaders. It is the Cycle of Creation, and the giving of this title has already led to a dramatic increase in environmental practices by Sikh temples.



The Gurdwara is often sited
beside water

Inner truth

Sikhs teach that humans create their surroundings as a reflection of their inner state, and hence the increasing barrenness of the earth reflects a spiritual emptiness within humans. The solution according to Sikhism can be found in prayer and the spirit of humility before the divine will of God.

Sanctity of nature

Sikhs cultivate an awareness and respect for the dignity of all life, human or otherwise. Such respect is fostered where one first recognises and nurtures the divine inner spark within oneself, then sees it and cherishes it in others.

The history of the Gurus is full of stories of their love for animals, birds, trees, vegetation, rivers, mountains and sky. Many Sikhs, though not all, also have a strong tradition of being vegetarian. A simple life free from conspicuous waste is the Sikh ideal – a life that stresses mastery over the self rather than mastery over nature.

Equality and service

Sikhism places a strong emphasis on equality and service. This encourages a spirit of co-operation and an equal sharing of resources. For example, the langar, or community kitchen, is maintained by the voluntary services of the community and the donation of foodstuffs by the local community.

In the Punjab, where many Sikhs are farmers, water is seen as a source of life, bringing food for humans and animals. The element of water is therefore a primary link in the interdependence of humanity and nature, to be used in a sustainable and fair way. In particular access to clean water is a focus for the community and the Gurdwara is often sited beside a water tank or a river.

Zoroastrianism

The first ecologists

Zoroastrianism claims to be the world's oldest revealed religion and also the world's first proponent of ecology, through caring for the elements and the earth.

The Zoroastrian faith enjoins the caring of the physical world not merely to seek spiritual salvation. Human beings, as the purposeful creation of God, are seen as the natural motivators or overseers of the Seven Creations. As the only conscious creation, it is humanity's ultimate task to care for the universe.

The faith endorses the caring of Seven Creations (sky, water, earth, plant, animal, human and fire), as part of a symbiotic relationship. Zoroastrianism sees the physical world as a natural matrix of Seven Creations in which life and growth are inter-dependent if harmony and perfection is to be the final goal.



Purity

The sacredness of the creations demands a greater awareness on the part of Zoroastrians, for at the end of time humanity must give to Ahura Mazda a world in its original perfect state. As an example of their concern, it is a tradition that Zoroastrians never enter a river, to wash in it or pollute it in any way. Purity of nature in their tradition is seen as the greatest good.

The Crisis

Zoroastrians in India remembered their traditional story of how, once upon a time, Mother Earth was in trouble. She asked God – Ahura Mazda – if He could send her a prince, with warriors, to stop the people from hurting her, using force. But Ahura Mazda said he could not. Instead he would send Her a holy man, to stop the people from hurting her, using words and inspirational ideas. And thus was born the prophet, Zoroaster.

Scripture texts on Faith and the Environment

Baha'i

"Ye are all the fruits of one tree, leaves of one branch"

Gleanings from the writings of Baha'u'llah

"We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us..."

Shoghi Effendi, known as "the Guardian of the Baha'i faith"

Buddhist

As the bee collects nectar and leaves without injuring the flower, or its colour or scent, so let a wise person live in community.

Dhammapada 4

Christian

'Then the angel of life showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing ... through the middle of the street in the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.'

Revelation 22: 1, 2

Hindu

"Trees are like good people who care for others.
They have to keep standing in the sun but they give shade to
others. Whatever fruits they bear they do not eat themselves,
but give them to others. How kind they are.'

Vikrama Caritam 65

Jewish

And G-d said, "Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit trees yielding fruit after its kind, whose seed is on the earth," and it was so. And the earth blossomed with grass, herbs and trees, and G-d saw that it was good.

Bereshit (Genesis) 1:9-13

Muslim

The Earth is green and beautiful, and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it. The whole earth has been created a place of worship, pure and clean. Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded. If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and humans and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is **love** on his part. Hadith.

Musnad Ahmad b.Hanbal, IV, 61, 374

Pagan

The cycles of nature are our holy days, the earth is our temple,
its plants and creatures our partners and teachers.
We worship a deity that is both male and female, a mother Goddess and father God, who
together created all that is, was, or will be.
We respect life, cherish the free will of sentient beings, and accept the sacredness of all
creation."

Edain McCoy - Wiccan Author

Sikh

Nature we see
Nature we hear
Nature we observe with awe, wonder and joy

All nature is yours, O powerful Creator
You command it, observe it and pervade within it.

Guru Granth Sahib